

Evidently, the glass is still half *fool*...

The latest campaign to get Americans to drink their tap water purports to be kinder and gentler to the environment. Yet groundwater contamination and chemicals added to municipal reserves continue to worry consumers, while a Harvard study linking fluoride to bone cancer in boys has muddied the waters even further.

August 11, 2007

Sixty Minutes veteran Andy Rooney is famous for going off on tirades about life's little pet peeves. During his broadcast July 6th, Rooney claimed bottled water was no better and maybe worse than drinking straight from the tap. It's certainly a position shared by many, but the 88-year-old commentator strayed onto dangerous ground when he suggested that women were largely responsible for tons of empty plastic bottles clogging our nation's landfills.

To prove his point, he dispatched a cameraperson over to Good Morning America to film

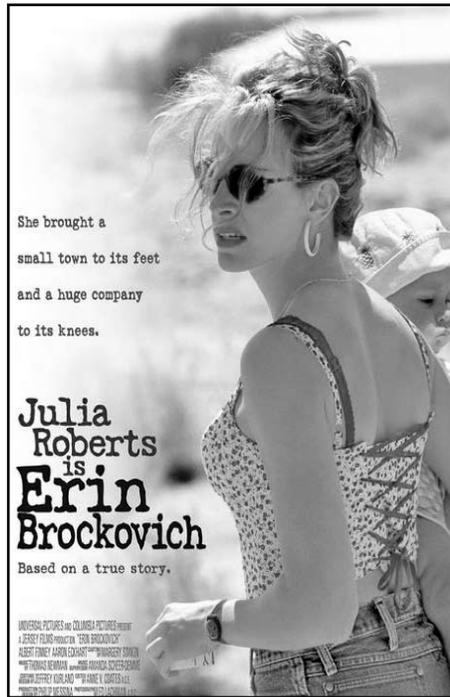


Photo: Columbia Pictures

Not so feeble-minded. Legal assistant Erin Brockovich, played by Julia Roberts in the hit film, discovered that drinking water in Hinkley, California was contaminated with hexavalent chromium. Her lawsuit on behalf of over 600 cancer victims was settled in 1996 for \$333 million. Similar suits were filed in Willits and Kettleman Hills.

shots of bottled water on the desks of female office workers. Rooney said the bottles represent a modern-day equivalent to Snoopy's security blanket. By contrast, male employees are far more likely to drink from the hallway water fountain.

So spake the dean of news trivia.

Like talk show host Don Imus' racially charged putdown of the Rutgers women's basketball team last spring, the insinuation of women's feeble-mindedness and childish behavior was hard to miss. Moreover, Rooney's comments ushered in a news cycle proclaiming that bottled water amounted to an environmental ca-

lamity. Reporters from print and broadcast media were coming out of the woodwork with the same message: that the untold amounts of oil and energy required for transporting pricey bottled water products had contributed to global warming. Following the cue of their CBS elder statesman, many argued that the water that comes out of your faucet actually tastes better and may be healthier.

How much of that latter argument is supported by the facts, however, remains about as murky as the water Erin Brockovich tested more than a decade ago in Hinkley. Claims of safe and healthy municipal water supplies around the United States appear to defy continuing revelations about pesticides and even rocket fuel seeping into the groundwater, and hundreds of industrial and household chemicals that are routinely showing up in rivers and streams. According to the World Health Organization, 90 percent of all cancers today can be traced to carcinogens like the ones found in solvents and other manmade products.

For its part, the Environmental Protection Agency has been under fire since 2001 for its efforts to weaken the Safe Drinking Water Act, as well as legislation regulating the disposal of toxic waste.

Some citizen groups are taking no chances. The nonprofit National Resources Defense Council, which counts actor/director Robert Redford as one of its backers, posts the following caution on its website: "Scientists estimate that each year up to 7 million Americans become sick from contami-

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nated tap water, which can also be lethal. Pollution, old pipes and outdated treatment threaten tap water quality."

Yet none of these concerns have figured into the recent debate pitting tap water against bottled. Less than 24 hours after the airing of Andy Rooney's deprecating Sixty Minutes salvo, ABC News devoted several minutes of its half hour nightly World News broadcast to the subject. "With every sip, are you actually hurting the environment?" anchor Dan Harris asked before cutting to images of plastic bottles piling up at a garbage dump.

In the segment, ABC correspondent Eric Horng interviewed Michael Kossa-Rienzi, general manager of the popular Berkeley restaurant Chez Panisse, which has removed bottled water from its menu. Horng also recounted conservation efforts by local government officials, including San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom, who recently banned bottled water purchases by city agencies.

More recently, both ABC and CBS reported the decision by Pepsico Corporation to re-label its Aquafina Purified Water as originating from a "Public Water Source". A spokesman explained that while the product originates from a municipal water supply, it undergoes several steps of filtration, including reverse osmosis, to remove contaminants.

Neither report mentioned that purified water is not the same as spring water, which many other companies sell. Products like Calistoga, Arrowhead and Crystal Geyser use water from springs, typically situated in protected watershed areas outside of cities and away from farmland. Distilled water is a third type of bottled

water available in stores, but is not recommended for drinking because key minerals have been removed.

Several other brands of bottled water are imported. Last spring, water from places like Fiji and Italy were blasted by anti-bottle activists who bemoaned the distance such imports traveled. The nonprofit Corporate Accountability International has launched a campaign called Think Outside

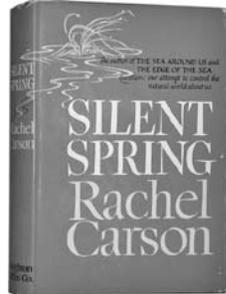
the Bottle, urging consumers to reject fancy marketing ploys and go back to drinking from their water faucets at home and work.

"What we've realized is that shipping water from Italy and then trucking it to our restaurant is a pretty extravagant and somewhat wasteful thing," Chez Panisse's Kossa-Rienzi told National Public Radio in March.

The remark prompted Jeff Poor of the Business & Media Institute to write, "While that sounds noble, everything in Chez Panisse, from the furnishings to the tablecloths and the menu items, required energy and natural resources to ship to the restaurant."

Poor also argued that the world-renowned eatery "features many extravagant selections of wine imported from France and the aforementioned Italy. If you do the math, a bottle of wine is much more environmentally unfriendly to ship."

In its July 9th segment, ABC News offered a "mere eight second rebuttal" to its pro-active stance in support of tap water consumption, according to Poor. In that rebuttal, a beverage industry spokesman offered that the plastic is recyclable, while bottled water's



Rachel Carson's book **Silent Spring**, which exposed the dangers of DDT and other herbicides, was a runaway bestseller in 1962, spawning the environmental movement. Villified by the chemical industry as an "hysterical woman", she died of breast cancer at 56.

portability provides a convenience to consumers. John Sicher, who publishes *Beverage Digest*, reiterated the claim to *Reuters*, exclaiming, "Try walking up [New York's] Third Avenue on a hot day and getting a glass of tap water."

Environmental groups generally dispute the idea that plastic bottles are recyclable and believe nearly three-quarters of them are ending up in landfills. According to Jennifer Clary, a water policy analyst for Clean Water Action, bottled water companies are also not required to make their testing results public.

"You can find out what's in your tap water but you can't find out what's in your bottled water," she says. Clean Water Action supports a bill in the California Senate, S.B. 220, which will mandate that companies publish their test findings.

In general Clary said she assigns good marks to municipal water supplies, including the one that delivers drinking water to San

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Francisco. Toxic nitrates and arsenic in Central Valley groundwater remain a problem, she notes, forcing low-income residents in that region to divert their meager incomes to bottled water purchases.

On another front, activists warn that if control of water rights passes out of government hands and into the those of corporations - it has in many foreign countries already - the cost of staying hydrated could become an income issue for all Americans.

Mixed Messages about Water Safety

In June, Mayor Newsom co-sponsored a resolution with Salt Lake City Mayor Ross "Rocky" Anderson and Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak at the U.S. Conference of Mayors, calling for a study to assess the environmental impact of millions of empty water bottles on municipal garbage collection.

"For a long time, I've viewed [bottled water] as a huge marketing scam," Anderson told the *Chicago Tribune*.

In Manhattan, New York-Health Commissioner Thomas Frieden is working with the city's environmental protection department on a \$700,000 marketing campaign to urge residents to drink the city's tap water, which originates in the Catskill Mountains.

"Cool. Healthy. Clean. Zero sugar. Zero calories," one poster reads, according to the *Tribune* article. "NYC Water. Get your fill."

About 85 percent of San Francisco's drinking water comes from spring snowmelt flowing into the Hetch-Hetchy Reservoir, which is near Yosemite. While Newsom describes the water as pristine, chemicals used to disinfect it during its long trip down to the Bay Area have raised concerns

for at least one watchdog group in the last few years.

In 2002, the National Resources Defense Council rated the quality of the tap water here as "Poor". The NRDC pointed to higher than acceptable levels of trihalomethanes (toxic by-products of chlorine), and recommended that the city "make major water treatment and infrastructure improvements to address its water quality problems."

In November of that year, California voters passed Proposition 50, a \$3.4 billion bond measure to clean up state waterways and finance upgrades such as those the NRDC suggested. The S.F. Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC) has since undertaken an overhaul of its 167 miles of pipeline, including

repairs to air valves and blow-off structures to eliminate the possibility of contaminants entering the water supply. According to information on its website, the agency has completed more than half of the needed upgrades throughout the system.

A change in the way utilities disinfect their water supplies also greatly reduced the amount of trihalomethanes beginning in 2004. Most treatment facilities nationwide have switched from chlorines to chemical compounds known as chloramines.

It hasn't exactly been a seamless transition. This July, the *Washington Post's* Carol Leonnig reported that many utilities found the chloramines inadequate in kill-
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ing microbes and were still flushing periodically with high doses of chlorines.

Measurements conducted by the nonprofit Environmental Working Group in May detected chlorine levels in steep excess of EPA standards throughout the District of Columbia. Local officials dismissed those findings, arguing that a temporary spike in trihalomethanes did not constitute a threat to public health.

As if that weren't enough to rattle consumers' nerves, Leonnig added ominously, "Some studies suggest chloramines are creating more toxic kinds of chlorine by-products, few of which have been thoroughly studied."

Like other utilities, the SFPUC now routinely posts the following warning about its water: "Some people may be more vulnerable to contaminants in drinking water than the general population. Immuno-compromised persons such as persons with cancer undergoing chemotherapy, persons who have undergone organ transplants, people with HIV/AIDS or other immune system disorders, some elderly, and infants can be particularly at risk from infections. These people should seek advice about drinking water from their health care providers."

Despite such disclaimers (including the one on the NRDC website), Corporate Accountability International has accused companies like Nestle and Pepsico of unnecessarily disseminating false claims of tap water impurity in order to sell their products. Gordon Bennett, a member of the executive committee of the San Francisco Bay chapter of the Sierra Club, was quoted in a recent press report asserting that "there's nothing wrong with tap water." He noted, "In many cases, the quality coming out of the tap is equal to or better than bottled."

A lesser known danger surrounding the use of plastic bottles (and plastics in general) concerns the leaching of a substance called bisphenol-A (BPA). BPA is a hormone disruptor that mimics estrogen and has been linked to miscarriages and birth defects. For that reason, experts recommend that consumers avoid using Nalgene baby bottles and other forms of polycarbonate, which is designated #7. Because plastic breaks down quickly, other types of water bottles should not be re-used and all plastic coverings should be removed from food before microwaving. Most drinking water bottles have the designation #1 and do not contain BPA.

The Question of Fluoridation

Long an issue of debate among scientists and environmentalists, fluoride is added to many municipal water supplies as a means of controlling tooth decay. Critics of the practice argue that the so-called "fluoride" is actually fluorosilicic acid, a toxic by-product of manufacturing scrubbed from fertilizer-manufacturing smokestacks in Florida and shipped cross-country in rubber-lined

tanks. It is not, they contend, the same as the mineral fluoride that occurs in nature.

Fluorosilicic acid is responsible for fluoridosis (which darkens children's teeth) and has been traced to brittle bones, thyroid problems, asthma, skin ulcers, and cancer. Arguing that poor children will be rendered "dental cripples" without it, most local governments permit the acid to be dripped into their municipal water supplies.

All Bay Area customers receive water that's flouridated, according to the SFPUC. Clary of Clean Water Action said it hasn't generated much debate locally.

In 2005, meanwhile, the chairman of the Harvard Dental School's Oral Health Policy & Epidemiology Department was accused of suppressing a study that demonstrated a link between fluoride and osteosarcoma, a bone cancer that affects mostly boys.

An internal ethics investigation exonerated Chester Douglass, who is a longtime consultant for Colgate, of any conflict of interest. Shortly after the decision, Douglass donated \$1 million for construction of a new dental wing at Harvard. ♦

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About Water Filters

Source: NRDC.org

Household water filters generally fall into one of two categories: point-of-entry units, which treat water before it gets distributed throughout the house; and point-of-use units, which include countertop filters (e.g. filter pitchers), faucet filters, and under-the-sink units. Some filters use more than one kind of filtration technology. As a general rule, look for filters labeled as meeting NSF/ANSI standard 53 and that are certified to remove the contaminant(s) of concern in your water. While the NSF certification program is not flawless, it does provide some assurance that at least some claims made by the manufacturer have been verified. For many people, an activated carbon filter bearing NSF Standard 53 certification will filter out most pollutants of concern. But if you've got perchlorate, a rocket fuel ingredient, in your water, for example, a simple countertop filter won't do the job. The list below will help you determine what type of filter will work best for you.

Activated Carbon Filter

How it works: Positively charged and highly absorbent carbon in the filter attracts and traps many impurities. *Used in:* Countertop, faucet filters and under-the-sink units. *Gets rid of:* Bad tastes and odors, including chlorine. Standard 53-certified filters also can substantially reduce many hazardous contaminants, including heavy metals such as copper, lead and mercury; disinfection byproducts; parasites such as Giardia and Cryptosporidium; pesticides; radon; and volatile organic chemicals such as methyl-tert-butyl ether (MTBE), dichlorobenzene, trichloroethylene.

Cation Exchange Softener

How it works: "Softens" hard water by trading minerals with a strong positive charge for one with less of a charge. *Used in:* Whole-house, point-of-entry units. *Gets rid of:* Calcium and magnesium, which form mineral deposits in plumbing and fixtures, as well as barium and some other ions that can create health hazards.

Distiller

How it works: Boils water and recondenses the purified steam. *Used in:* Countertop or whole house point-of-entry units; can be combined with a carbon filter. *Gets rid of:* Heavy metals such as cadmium, chromium, copper, lead and mercury, arsenic, barium, fluoride, selenium, sodium.

Reverse Osmosis

How it works: A semipermeable membrane separates impurities from water. (This filtration technique wastes a substantial amount of water during the treatment process.) *Used in:* Under-the-sink units; often in combination with a carbon filter or UV disinfection unit. *Gets rid of:* Most contaminants, including certain parasites such as Cryptosporidium and Giardia; heavy metals such as cadmium, copper, lead and mercury; and other pollutants, including arsenic, barium, nitrate/nitrite, perchlorate and selenium.

Ultraviolet Disinfection

How it works: Ultraviolet light kills bacteria and other microorganisms. *Used in:* Under-the-sink units, often in combination with a carbon filter and sediment screen. *Gets rid of:* Bacteria and parasites; class A systems protect against harmful bacteria and viruses, including Cryptosporidium and Giardia, while class B systems are designed to make non-disease-causing bacteria inactive.