

Reader's Forum: Plastic bottles don't make water safe

March 6, 2008

The article "Drop the Bottle, Hit the Tap" from the Dad's Weekend edition, received a response on Monday, Jan. 28 in a letter titled "Group Opposing Bottled Water Uses Bad Facts and Assumptions." The letter asks, "Would someone please enlighten me as to the necessity of getting bottled water removed from campus?" First, I'll give some background, and then my perspective.

I don't believe the article even came near implying that we should all risk our health and drink putrid water for the sake of reducing the waste associated with bottled water. Having your water in a disposable plastic bottle is not what makes it safe or taste good. Alternatives include ordering water-cooler service to your home and filling a reuseable container each day, having a professional set up a water-purification system on your tap, or using a manual filter from the store.

The bottom line is, billions of people tossing one or two plastic bottles a day, 365 days a year should alarm us all because plastic just doesn't go away and very little of it (only 3 to 5 percent of all plastics) actually gets recycled. Most water bottles are #1 plastic and require a new "virgin" layer of plastic to be considered safe to use as food containers, thus nurturing the growth of the overall plastic dilemma. World production of plastic dramatically increased over a short 30 years, from about 15 billion tons in 1975, to 60 billion tons in 1990, to 120 billion tons in 2005. There are no signs the trend will decline, and the impact of the production has yet to be realized. Furthermore, discarded plastic doesn't always end up in a landfill; it ends up in rivers and streams or out at sea baking in the sun and eroding to fine pieces.

Venturing through the North Pacific subtropical gyre during summer 1997, Capt. Charles Moore witnessed for the first time a soup of plastic bags, nets, bath toys, bottles, etc. "that went on for hundreds of miles." Scientists know this as the "Eastern Garbage Patch."

Moore had a close encounter with the putrid underbelly of human behavior that, let's face it, we've been unwilling to roll over and seriously examine. Remotely located 1,000 miles south of Hawaii and 1,000 miles west of LA, this atrocity is too easy to be out of sight, out of mind. It must have been devastating for Moore and his crew to witness first-hand "the giant toilet bowl that never flushes."

Since his shocking personal discovery, Moore was determined to visit the Eastern Garbage Patch again to collect data. He teamed up with Steven B. Weisberg (an expert in marine environmental monitoring) and other scientists to come up with methods to measure and analyze the gyre's contents. His findings indicated that an area of seawater within the North Pacific subtropical gyre is full of plastic "twice the size of Texas." Beneath the surface, samples were taken at 100 meters that contained plastic. Furthermore, the crew dragged fine mesh nets in the area and found that the ratio of plastic particles to plankton was six to one. Moore's observations are just a fraction of the problem. Sadly, the North Pacific subtropical gyre is only one of five high-pressure zones in the oceans where our plastic accumulates.

And if all that doesn't make you reconsider our negligent demand for plastic, there are the biological hazards that plastic poses as well. Phthalates are used to make plastic pliable and soft, but they leech out from the containers into the food and drink they contain. Recently, "California listed phthalates as a chemical toxic to our reproductive systems." Also, BPA or bisphenol (which has the ability to affect the endocrine system by mimicking estrogen) is found in food containers and some plastic bottles, and leeches into food and drink similarly to phthalates. BPA research also connects it to prostate and breast cancer, as well as diabetes, diseases that have become more common as the demand for plastic has increased. Nearly every person in the U.S. who has been tested for BPA has been positive. It's clear that the convenience of plastic has the potential to do

ourselves and many other living things great harm.

So to enlighten you, it is a necessity to have “bottled water removed from campus,” because plastic has far too many negative consequences for the environment and its inhabitants.

That is at least until all plastic water bottles are made from safe alternatives, such as corn starch, which is safe for humans and fully biodegradable. Cutting out unnecessary waste is the first step to correcting our errors, and disposable plastic bottles are something we can all live without.

The Athens community is a perfect group of people to set an example for the nation, and perhaps the world, of conscientious consumption. I challenge all readers to stretch your possibilities and see how much new plastic you can go without. You may find it a lot easier than you think. Together, we can create demand for a safer plastic, and believe me, the capitalist system will respond.

(My source for this piece is an article, “Plastic Ocean” by Susan Casey, that appeared in Best Life Magazine.)

Editor's note: Russell Crooks moved to Athens this past August from Columbus. He enjoys environmental advocacy, local music acts such as Earwig and We March, a Kroger you can navigate, and Sunday mornings.