



Think Outside the Bottle
Deborah Lapidus
National Organizer Corporate Accountability International



By Ariella Cohen '10

Deborah Lapidus, National Organizer for Corporate Accountability International, has adhered to the organization's slogan "Challenging abuse, Protecting People" ever since she was an undergraduate at Brown University. She was an environmental activist on campus and continued this trend as she went onto Greencorps, the field school for environmental organizing. Now she works on the Think Outside the Bottle Campaign, a campaign that aims to reduce bottled water use and enhance public water systems.

Lapidus began her speech with a brief overview of the missions of Corporate Accountability and the Think Outside the Bottle Campaign. Corporate Accountability is a corporate watchdog, which aims to protect people and the environment from harmful corporate strategies. Since its beginnings in 1977, the organization has taken on big tobacco companies and is currently taking on Nestlé, a food and bottled water manufacturer. Corporate Accountability has addressed the bottled water issue through its Think Outside the Bottle Campaign. Two of the campaign's major goals are to address the world water crisis from a human perspective and address the dangers of bottled water.

To illustrate the severity of the water issue, an issue Lapidus stated was one of today's greatest challenges, Lapidus recounted a powerful story. When her coworker was in Zambia she encountered a long line of women waiting with buckets to retrieve water from a spigot. The coworker approached a 7 year old boy standing in line named Michael and asked him why he was in a line with all women. Michael told her that he had taken on the role of water fetcher in his family after his sister was killed. To obtain this water, Michael walks miles to a spigot and waits in line for his turn to pay to fill his bucket. Sometimes Michael will reach the spigot only to find out that there is no water left because the wealthy families in the town consumed too much. When the water from the spigot has run out, the only other source of water is a highly contaminated and polluted one.

At the end of the story, Lapidus shared the statistic that 1/6 of the world's population does not have the water they need to survive. Over a century ago, only the wealthiest segments of society had enough clean drinking water to survive. Thus modern water systems became a great equalizer for people. Lapidus argued that society is now moving backwards. She supported her argument by stating that the 100 billion dollar world bottled water industry is convincing consumers to pay more for water than oil.

Next Lapidus dove deeper into the bottled water industry through an explanation of their marketing tactics. She argued that the goal of the industry is to make consumers doubt the quality of their tap water. Corporate Accountability is now "pulling back the curtain from the bottled water industry," Lapidus announced. In fact, they pressured Aquafina into stating on their label that their water comes from tap water.

“So what’s the big deal” about the industry’s marketing techniques? Lapidus asked. She explained that the bottled water industry is changing the way the public thinks about water by describing it as a high priced luxury commodity rather than a human right. At the rate the industry is going, the future generations will think that water comes from a bottle. Unfortunately, we are already starting to see the effects of the industry’s marketing because surveys have found that 1/5 of people believe that the only safe water comes from a bottle. This statistic is undoubtedly false because tap water is more regulated than bottled water.

Lapidus expanded the discussion of bottled water to include its impacts on public water systems and the environment. A dependence on private rather than public water sources is dangerous for public water systems because numerous public water systems are in need of updates to their infrastructure. One of the largest environmental impacts of the bottled water industry is its use of oil. Copious amounts of oil are needed to meet the demand for public water because oil is needed for transportation and needed to make the actual plastic. Furthermore, although the plastic bottles are recyclable, many end up in landfills. Lapidus showed the audience a dramatic presentation of her point through a clip from the movie “Flow.” The clip told the story of a town in Michigan that is being exploited by Nestlé’s bottled water industry. Nestlé extracts water from the Michigan community without paying and then makes a profit off of the same community by selling the bottled water back to them. One citizen in the film asked, “Does [Nestlé’s] right to use water mean they can bottle it and sell it?” Another important question raised is to whom does the water belong? The Michigan Citizens for Water Conservation has spent over 1 million in court fees to get Nestlé out of their town or at least make them pay to extract water.

Lapidus passed out materials used in the Think Outside the Bottle campaign that give further insight into the activities of the corporations involved in the bottled water industry. Up to 40% of bottled water is tap water that corporations resell. Some examples of bottled water brands that are in fact tap water are Coke’s Dasani, Pepsi’s Aquafina and Nestlé’s Pure Life. Think Outside the Bottle pressures these companies to inform consumers of the sources and sites of the water used for bottling, report any problems with the bottled water quality and site their bottled water plants in areas that do not harm local control of the water.

After the movie Lapidus posed a handful of thought provoking questions to the audience. These questions included, is water a human right or privilege? Who will ensure that everyone has access to the water they need? Who gets water in times of drought? Who will have future generations’ water needs in mind? Can anyone really own water, the rain? Next she listed the top three reasons to join the bottled water movement: environmental protection, one’s pocketbook and the need to maintain public water systems. Mayors and governors are at the forefront of making sure that everyone in their district has access to water yet city offices buy bottled water. Thus public tax dollars are used to pay for the city’s bottled water use. Fortunately, over 60 cities have issued a bottled water ban.

An article from the February 13, 2009 edition of the International Herald Tribune demonstrates the effect that bottled water has on one’s pocket book. In the recent economic downturn, Nestlé and other corporations have seen their bottled water sales decline by 3.3% after rising by 11.5% the previous year. Environmentalists are taking advantage of the economic slump to encourage states, businesses and individuals to reduce their bottled water consumption. They point out the

substantial amounts of money that can be saved through this action. During February, Corporate Accountability sent letters to the governors of every state in the US asking them to end their state contracts with bottled water companies and use the money from the economic stimulus package for improving the public water systems. Some states have already discontinued state spending on bottled water and seen savings. For example San Francisco has saved approximately \$500,000 annually since 2007 and Seattle has saved \$57,000 annually.

New York City's council has jumped on the anti bottled water band wagon as well. An article in the June 17, 2008 edition of The New York Times stated that the city council would stop buying bottled water for the downtown offices and council events. Instead of bottled water, the council is installing filtered tap water coolers. Hopefully more cities will follow in New York City's footsteps after the United States Conference of Mayors discusses a resolution that "encourages cities to phase out, where feasible, government use of bottled water and promote the importance of municipal water." (Lee) The bottled water industry argues that they are merely trying to supplement tap water not compete with it. Furthermore, the industry claims that they are selling a healthy product and comprise a minor portion of the waste in the country compared to other sources.

The work of Think Outside the Bottle to raise awareness of the injustices and contradictions surrounding the bottled water industry in the US has been a huge contributor to these state and local achievements.

Lapidus concluded her presentation with five things the audience could do to reduce bottled water use. 1) Take the tap water challenge. This is when one tries bottled water and tap water while blind folded to see if they can differentiate between the two. 2) Take the pledge to use tap water instead of bottled water. 3) Organize one's community. 4) Get on the bottle free map. So far, 150 schools across the country are on this map. 5) Join the Think Outside the Bottle Team by becoming a member, online activist or pursuing a job or internship with the organization.

Lapidus wasted no time on mobilizing the audience at the conference to join the campaign. Immediately after her presentation was finished she asked us to sign the Think Outside the Bottle pledge to use tap water instead of bottled water.

References:

Haigh, Sue. "With budgets tapped, governors eye cost of water." International Herald Tribune. 13 Feb. 2009.

Lee, Jennifer. "City council shuns bottles in favor of water from tap." The New York Times. 17 June 2008.

<http://www.stopcorporateabuse.org/>

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