

To: Carol T. Christ, President, Smith College
From: Liora O'Donnell Goldensher, Elizabeth Sullivan, Rosalie Ray, Elisabeth Wolfe, Marguerite Davenport, Miki Duruz and Hallie Applebaum representing the First Year Seminar 147, "The Science and Politics of Food, Water and Energy."
Date: 16 October 2006
Subject: Bottled Water Use on Smith College Campus

Smith College should stop providing bottled water at college functions and Grab and Go lunches. As an institution that has declared itself to be committed to promoting sustainability, Smith College, in distributing water bottles, stands strangely in opposition to this goal. There are several issues that stand out as key to the argument against use of bottled water. The greatest is the harm the extraction, manufacturing, and transportation of bottled water does to the environment. The extra cost is also a concern, as bottled water is over 400 times as expensive as getting the water from the tap. Lastly, as an educational institution, Smith must also keep in mind the message it is sending its students. The one small step of switching from disposable bottles to reusable coolers and bottles will stand as a symbol to the students and college as a whole that Smith is serious about sustainability and that they should be too. This suggestion is based on, but not limited to, scholarly articles, EPA and FDA statistics and regulations, the Northampton Public Works water report, discussions with Smith College professors, and observations on Smith Campus itself.

Environment:

The most inexcusable effect of the use of bottled water is the harm done to the environment. These detrimental effects occur in every step of the process of bringing bottled water to the consumer.

1. The removal of water on a large scale from its local ecosystem by bottling corporations is an unsustainable practice that may eventually result in the permanent degradation or loss of the source and the destruction of both the local water cycle and wildlife habitat. Once this destruction has occurred, it becomes virtually impossible to regain the initial local environmental conditions (1).
2. The production of the PET plastic used in the bottles releases phthalates into the air, chemicals that have been recently banned or restricted in the EU due to worries about possible genetic mutation from exposure (2). The same plastic also releases green house gases if incinerated accelerating global warming worldwide (1). Bottles disposed in a landfill will not degrade. Given that only 12% of water bottles are recycled nationwide, this means that 88% of bottles are disposed of in an environmentally detrimental manner (4).
3. The transportation necessary to bring the bottles to Smith College consumes valuable fossil fuels and creates pollution (3). Specifically, the bottled water that Smith buys travel over fifty miles from the production site in Willington, CT to Northampton.

Cost:

Last year, Smith bought 5,468 cases of bottled water. Each case cost \$5.98 and contained 24 16.9 oz. bottles, which totaled 17,326.725 gallons and cost \$32,698.64 (5). The bottled

water that Smith buys costs \$1.89 per gallon compared to \$0.0045 per gallon from the public water supply (6). Almost all of this cost comes not from the water inside but from the costs of extracting, packaging, and transporting the water to the consumer (3). Removing bottled water from the Smith College campus would save \$32,620.64 per year. Some of the money saved should be used to provide students with a reusable water bottle and a publicity campaign to help students remember to bring mugs and bottles with them when they go to eat. The campaign would help students develop an awareness of sustainability issues, much as the mugs and Grab and Go bags do now.

Environmental Literacy:

Education at Smith occurs both in and out of the classroom. At college, students figure out how to live as well as how to learn. Smith has begun to teach its students about sustainability but the college should further that education. By distributing free bottles of water with its own label, Smith endorses a convenient, disposable, and wasteful attitude towards consumption. Instead, Smith College should make its students environmentally literate, with knowledge about the environment and how their everyday decisions affect it. This goal could be achieved by incorporating a talk on sustainability into orientation for first-year students or assigning a book that deals with environmental sustainability for summer reading, as well as having an environmental lecture series on campus.

Conclusion:

As part of Smith College's efforts to maintain a sustainable and eco-friendly campus, water bottles should not be supplied at events. Although bottled water seems very useful and practical, these benefits do not outweigh the environmental impacts. In this case, it would be hypocritical of Smith College, which promotes green practices and pushes for the conservation of water and energy throughout campus, to simply provide water bottles for people to consume. Smith has access to a municipal water facility that is making great strides towards serving its community in the best way possible. With just a few adjustments, Smith can become an even more sustainable campus and provide support to the Northampton Public Works Department's actions, and save money as well. We would be glad to talk to you further about this issue at your convenience. Thank you for your attention.

Works Cited:

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4. Llanos, MI. "Plastic bottles pile up as mountains of waste." March 3, 2005. www.msnbc.msn.com/id/5279230.
5. Patrick Diggins, Food Buyer for Smith Dining Services.
6. Department of Public Works, Northampton, Massachusetts