

Comment on the Carbon Footprint of Drinking Water

Following the recent program on Panorama (Feb.18, 2008) some of our customers have asked us about the carbon footprint of our water delivery service. This article addresses these questions.

The Freshwater Company delivers two types of water – spring water and distilled water.

The spring water source is in Wiltshire. It is bottled at source, brought to our warehouse in London and then delivered to you. This means that for most of our customers who take two 18.5 litre bottles of water per delivery the water will have travelled approximately 150 miles from source to destination. This is equivalent to 4 miles per litre.

The distilled water is produced in our warehouse in London. This means that for most of our customers who take two 18.5 litre bottles of water per delivery the water will have travelled approximately 50 miles from source to destination. This is equivalent to 1.4 miles per litre.

The consumption profile that the Panorama program focussed on was the purchase of a one litre single use bottle each time. Depending on the source this litre of water could have typically travelled somewhere between 500 to 5000 miles. This represents a carbon footprint (based on travel distance) that could be somewhere between 100 to 1000 times larger than the one created by The Freshwater Company's delivery service. If you bought ten one litre bottles at a time then it would be reasonable to assume that all ten would have travelled on the same vehicles thereby reducing the travel distance to somewhere between 50 to 500 miles per litre which is in the range of 10 to 100 times that of The Freshwater Company's delivery service.

Another issue that the program brought up was one of plastic waste. This is a considerable problem when goods are packaged in single use throw away packaging. The Freshwater Company's delivery service is based around re-using empty bottles. Empty bottles are collected on the same journey as the one that full bottles are delivered on. Once their life is exhausted these bottles are then collected and sent for recycling. Unlike the single use plastic bottles you do not tend to find these bottles washing up on beaches. A lot of The Freshwater Company's customers are already aware of this. Their concern for the environmental impact of single use throw away packaging has been one of the main reasons that has attracted them to The Freshwater Company's delivery service in the first place!

In summary, one can say that The Freshwater Company's delivery service has a considerably smaller impact on the environment both in terms of distance travelled and in terms of plastic waste than the more widely used method of delivering of bottled water in single use throw away packaging over much greater distances.

It is reasonable to assume that on the whole tap water has a lower carbon footprint than bottled water even if the differences may not be as dramatic as those suggested by the Panorama program. The simplistic message that one could take away from the

program is “drink tap water because it has a lower carbon footprint”. In half an hour the program could not reasonably be expected to explore the wider implications of its message. For example:

1. Don't drink wines that have travelled from abroad.
2. The beverages industry as a whole is considerably larger than the water industry and therefore has a larger carbon footprint than the water industry as a whole. Since beverages are not critical to our existence we could stop drinking beverages and make a greater impact on the environment.
3. Don't buy foods that have travelled from abroad.
4. Don't travel abroad for holidays – we already have a debate on travelling by air.
5. Don't buy big engine cars – again this is a debate in the public domain.

The list is endless. If we attempt to respond to each one of these points on a single issue basis all of us will have to make huge changes in our lifestyle. From a collective point of view the global society that we live in today will have to step back in time to smaller xenophobic units.

In addition, since the program was emphasising the point it was making, it did not adequately explore the reasons behind why people choose not to drink tap water. Taste was taken to be the main distinguishing feature between different types of water. Since taste is fundamentally a subjective quality it is hardly surprising that the various taste experts differed in their opinions. This does not mean that taste is a non-issue as suggested by the program. We all have our own opinions on what an aubergine tastes like or what a bottle of wine tastes like! What the experts say does not make our opinions less valid.

Furthermore no attempt was made to look at the issues around health and water quality. It is true that by current standards most water that comes through our kitchen taps is safe to drink. However it does not take a great deal of intelligence to see that the standards of yesterday are not the standards of today – so it is quite likely that the standards of today are not likely to be the standards of tomorrow. Fifty years ago it was perfectly acceptable to spray our food with DDT – today it is banned as a poison! Moving away from what should not be in our water there is a further problem in that there is no consensus on the attributes that would be desirable in an ideal drinking water. As consumers we have to exercise our own value judgements and make decisions in this environment of uncertainty.

Finally, it is not easy to compare the relative impact of the various options open to us. For example:

1. Would we as individuals make a greater impact on our carbon footprint by not drinking wine and coffee than by not drinking bottled water?
2. A lot of bottled water consumption is not displacing tap water consumption – it is displacing the consumption of other beverages like carbonated drinks, alcohol, tea and coffee. What is already accepted is that good hydration is good for our individual and hence collective health. So in net health terms bottled water can be seen as a positive contribution to our society. Furthermore it is not clear whether the net carbon footprint of drinking bottled water after taking into account this displacement is positive. It could well be negative that is to say of net benefit to the environment in carbon footprint terms!

In summary, the decision as to which water we should drink is not as simplistic as suggested by the program. This is a complex issue and is ultimately part of a wider set of lifestyle decisions that each one of us makes personally across a number of different issues every day.

What is clear is that as a society we need to cut back on our carbon emissions. However in a democratic and pluralistic society each one of us has to be given the latitude to make our own choices as to where to cut back on our carbon emissions. One should not be made to feel guilty about specific actions as long as one is making some effort somewhere in one's lifestyle. We should respect someone who chooses to cycle to work instead of driving to work and continues drinking bottled water just as much as someone who gives up on bottled water but continues to enjoy wines from the New World and coffees from South America!

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