

Turn on the Tap

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STONY BROOK

DRINKING fountains are becoming a thing of the past. They are disappearing from public buildings and public places, while the ones that remain are broken or poorly maintained.

And it's not just water fountains.

Plain old water from the faucet is increasingly ignored. Waiters look askance when diners request tap water instead of bottled. Conference tables and lecterns at public hearings no longer have the familiar pitcher of water with a supply of glasses for the participants and speakers. Instead more and more people are buying and carrying plastic water bottles; sponsors for public forums often provide them for each speaker. What is going on?

According to the Earth Policy Institute, Americans consumed about

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6.9 billion gallons of bottled water in 2004. These same people dispose of more than 60 million plastic bottles per day. These bottles require some 1.5 million barrels of oil per year for their manufacture. And here in New York, we can assume that only a small percentage of the bottles dis-

How bottled water hurts the environment.

posed are recycled since they are often used in places where recycling containers aren't available — along streets and in parks and offices.

New York is fortunate to have wonderful water — water that is likely of higher quality than most bottled water. But many of us wrongly believe tap water is of lesser quality or even a health risk compared with bottled water. Undoubtedly, this is partly because of the bottled water industry's effective advertising.

It is time to promote one of New York's greatest resources: its public water supply. Reinstating the pub-

lic water fountain, the office water cooler, water pitchers on conference tables and at catered events will lead to numerous benefits. Petroleum consumption will decline as the need for plastic bottle manufacturing decreases.

At the same time, as fewer people drink bottled water, there will be a decline in fuel usage and exhaust emissions associated with truck traffic for delivery and disposal or recycling. Solid waste generation and disposal facilities will also be reduced, and litter will be less prevalent.

And since potable water is in short supply worldwide, shouldn't countries that lack what we already have be given our bottled water?

The Bigger, Better Bottle Bill, which hit the cutting room floor during the recent budget negotiations in Albany, would have required a nickel deposit on these bottles. The bill might have encouraged more people to recycle but it did nothing to reduce waste or save much in the way of natural resources.

As we celebrate Earth Day, New Yorkers should look for opportunities to reduce our reliance on bottled water and we should insist that government and business work to bring back water fountains. □