Bottled water: People should be told the facts

It harms environment, is unnecessary in S'pore where tap water is safe: Experts

Research company Euromonitor International found that health benefits and convenience rank among the top reasons for purchasing bottled water.

Nanyang Polytechnic student Melanie Ghui, 17, said: “It’s more convenient to buy bottled water when I’m out – and it’s cheaper, especially at a supermarket.”

In terms of health benefits, experts agree that minerals needed by the body are obtained from food, not water. Nutritionist Velamani Desapriya said: “We would need to drink huge amounts of water in order to meet our daily mineral needs, which is not feasible.”

Prof Koh hopes that green groups in Singapore can take up the cause of public education. “It is hard to change people’s habits and I am also taking on a very lucrative industry.”

Though the Singapore Environment Council is not campaigning actively on this, its executive director Howard Shaw thinks Singaporeans can be persuaded to make a change.

“I think a ban is workable as tap water in Singapore is drinkable. But there is no incentive for restaurants not to serve bottled water as the mark-up on price is so high.”

PUB publishes online the components of its tap water. Water quality here is well within World Health Organisation guidelines.

Additional reporting by Goh Yi Han
See EDITORIAL, Review Page A10

THE small Australian town of Bundanoon, south of Sydney, voted to ban bottled water last Wednesday. It is thought to be the first place in the world to do so.

Such a ban may not be feasible in Singapore, say experts, but two individuals are hoping to get people to boycott the bottle.

National water agency PUB guarantees the quality of its product, yet last year, more than 135,000 tonnes of bottled drinking water was imported to quench the thirst of this $126 million market.

Ms Leong Ching, a PUB student at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, and Professor Tommy Koh, chairman of the Governing Council of the Asia-Pacific Water Forum, believe Singaporeans would change their habits if they knew of the negative impact of buying water that is bottled elsewhere and shipped at great expense to the country.

They wrote an article in PUB’s magazine, Pure, reprinted in The Straits Times, in which they urged the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources “to write to all ministries, statutory boards, agencies, Temasek-linked companies and educational institutions to consider stopping the practice of serving bottled water”.

Said Ms Leong, a former journalist: “There is a place for personal informed choice, but currently the public is not well informed about the matter. They think bottled water is better than tap water…Drinking bottled water is 850 times more expensive than tap water.”

It wastes resources and harms the environment, she added. “I can understand why they drink bottled water in countries where they have no choice. But it is senseless when the water is fit for drinking.”

In Singapore, most bottles are incinerated, adding to the country’s carbon emissions. Around the world, campaigns to ban bottled water are under way as consumers become aware of the environmental and economic costs involved.

50c gets you 850 bottles of tap water ($0.17 per m³)

EXPENSIVE TO PRODUCE
It takes 1.5 million barrels of oil to produce bottles for the water industry in the US, enough oil to power 100,000 cars for a year.

50c gets you 1 bottle of water
Bottled water is as safe as tap water but health-wise, is not better.

ENVIRONMENT UNFRIENDLY
In Singapore, most bottles are incinerated. This uses energy and produces carbon dioxide.

SOURCE: An article by Professor Tommy Koh and Leong Ching in the PUB publication Pure this month