WASTE IN THE WATER:

I've got a gripe against bottled drinking water. Just because it is healthier to drink than soda doesn't make it healthier than tap water. And what might be healthy for your inside environment is actually unhealthy for your outside one. For starters, trucking this heavy product around the country consumes petroleum. For finishers, putting the empty bottles into the waste stream requires either burial in a landfill or recycling with expensive electricity.

A recent hydrologic experience prompted this column. I was visiting my in-laws in Maine during leaf-peeping season. I was driving along on a flat, stone-free sand plain when I encountered a huge Poland Spring bottling plant named after a bedrock spring located many miles away. Why was the plant so far from the spring?

Because demand for the original spring water (due mostly to clever corporate marketing) greatly exceeded the supply seeping out of the rock. The company's response was not to limit production but to look for larger alternative sources. And where did they go? They went to one of New England's largest rivers, the Saco River, a place where the flow can exceed 150,000 gallons per second. On the floodplain of this mega-river are two high-capacity bottling plants. The one nearest my in-laws is fed by wells drilled into a sand and gravel aquifer that is similar to many being pumped by private and public water companies throughout New England.

The aquifers for the two sources of water -- bottled vs. tap -- are thus hydrologically and geochemically similar. But the distribution system could hardly be more different. Small municipal water companies usually use gravity to distribute their water, letting it flow through a branching system of ever-smaller pipes between tank and faucet. In contrast, the bottled water company uses petroleum to distribute its water, carting it over the river and through the woods with a steady convoy of trucks not unlike those leaving a FedEx or UPS hub.

Each convoy leaves with a heavy load of water, rather than the lighter weight of mixed merchandise in cardboard boxes. Each truck consumes lots of fuel, adds noise to the rural countryside, pollutes the aquifer with sooty aerosols and congests nearby arterials and interstates. And for what? To deliver the water to places where the tap water has a source similar to what's being delivered. Even more absurd is that some people living on the sand plain on which the bottling plant is located bypass their household taps for the bottled variety of the same stuff.

I don't know the details of the well-field hydrology beneath the bottling plant because that's proprietary information. What I do know is that the brand in question was named after a remote bedrock spring used since the late 18th century, ostensibly for its curative properties. Before the age of petroleum, those who imbibed the waters usually did so at the fountainhead by checking into a resort.

Modern consumers of the same brand drink water from somewhere else. Any health benefit they get is principally through the placebo effect, either believing that they're drinking restorative spring water, or avoiding something nasty.

The company doesn't lie when it says you're drinking mineral water. All of earth's water -- unless artificially distilled -- is mineral water, even drops melted from the purest Antarctic snow.

Meanwhile, at the recycling facility nearest me, most of the bottles in the bin are water bottles. With rare exception, petroleum was involved at every step from distant aquifer to local dumpster:
The employees who commuted to the bottling plant.

The trucks that delivered full bottles to the store.

The automobile that brought the customers between home and store.

The car that hauled the empties from home to the transfer station.

And this isn't the end of energy consumption. Coal, petroleum, or nuclear energy will be used during whatever recycling or burial that follows.

I suggest we ignore the marketing hype about the alleged health benefits of bottled water. I suggest we ignore the media hype about the exceptionally rare cases of tainted municipal water. Instead, I suggest we think about the energy consumption, traffic congestion, air pollution and solid waste being created by this ridiculous and unhealthy enterprise.