

Fiji Water: So cool, so fresh, so bad for the environment?

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The story of Fiji Water, as detailed in a startling investigative piece in Mother Jones magazine this month, seems familiar. Leafing through the story, I found myself trying to remember where I'd read this tale before; like an old melody at the back of my brain, it hovered, just beyond memory.

Suddenly it came to me: it's Dole, it's United Fruit, it's West Indies Sugar Corporation, it's the old, old story. A company located in a lush, tropical location with a totalitarian government that welcomes foreign interests with deep pockets. It doesn't tax them, gives them access to the country's most precious natural resources, and stands by with heavy artillery in hand, protecting them while they strip the country.

Meanwhile, the country's citizens struggle with terrible poverty, hunger and squalid conditions. The only part of the story that Fiji Water has not yet repeated is the inevitable depletion of the resource -- in this case, a 17-mile-long aquifer to which Fiji Water has "near-exclusive access" -- and the subsequent abandonment of the country.

What makes this story so difficult to swallow is how eagerly the U.S. seems to have embraced Fiji's co-owners Stewart and Lynda Resnick. On this side of the Pacific, the pair cheerfully line the pockets of any political figure in sight (they supported both McCain and Obama in the past election) while selling Fiji's best, cleanest water at a huge profit. On the other side of the ocean, the people of Fiji suffer under terrible water conditions that have led to outbreaks of typhoid and parasitic infections.

It appears that America adores the Resnicks: Lynda brags that she knows "everyone in the world, every mogul, every movie star." These relationships have proven handy, as the Resnicks have reaped \$1.5 million a year in water subsidies for their almond, pistachio and pomegranate crops in the U.S.

These agricultural water subsidies must be viewed in context: the stress from travelling to pollinate the almond "monoculture" crops like the ones the Resnicks grow, along with the pesticides they sell, are considered to be some of the major reasons that bees are succumbing to colony collapse disorder. And the Resnicks control an enormous amount of California water infrastructure that was built by public funds. They have a 48 percent interest in the Kern Water Bank, which was meant to collect water from aqueducts and the Kern River and to redistribute this water in times of drought.

The Resnicks and their Paramount Farms and Paramount Citrus could use the water to irrigate their fields (which are already subsidized by the government), or they could sell it to municipalities. According to critics, the Resnicks are "trying to 'game' the water market the way Enron gamed the energy market."

So the Resnicks are not known for their even-handedness with politicians or water, and their practices in the U.S. are not the greenest of all possible greens. In fact, they could share responsibility for many of our environmental woes. They could have a hand in California's future water shortages, during which they could profit gloriously. All the while, they are loudly and proudly marketing Fiji Water as the most environmentally friendly bottled water company in the world.

This, of course, is not saying much. Bottled water is notorious for its position in top five lists of "what not to do" for the planet. One day, future civilizations will look back on this decade and wonder in disbelief why it was that we pumped water out of one part of the planet, encased it in plastic, then encased it again for shipping, and spent many many non-renewable resources to bring it to another part of the planet where clean water was already plentiful. It's patently ridiculous.

The story is disturbing because of the truths it tells us about ourselves and our society. It's not just the water thing. It's the marketing. Lynda Resnick has been repeatedly described as a marketing genius for her ability to transform Fiji Water into a must-have accessory for environmentally-conscious celebrities and politicians, despite its heavy use of plastic and questionable commitment to environmentally sustainable practices. And oh, we are drinking the marketing at far greater rates than we are drinking the water. Our celebrities both enormous (Obama, Paris, and their ilk) and minor (the geekarati at the SXSW festival) can't live without it. So neither can we. Whatever celebrities sell us? YUM. Damn the consequences.

It's troubling, at the end of the story, that the company is not, as Anna Lenzer writes in her follow-up to the story (after Fiji Water spokesman Rob Six defended his company) doing anything about the military junta now controlling Fiji. "A UN official . . . in a recent commentary . . . singled out Fiji Water as the one company with enough leverage to force the junta to budge."

The commentary, by the way, was titled "Why Obama should stop drinking Fiji water."

Update: A spokesman for Roll International Corporation, the parent company of Fiji Water, contacted DailyFinance, claiming that there are factual errors in the piece. Roll International maintains that Fiji Water is not profitable, and that the company does not receive subsidies from the state of California.

<http://bx.businessweek.com/non-alcoholic-beverage-industry/view?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.dailyfinance.com%2F2009%2F08%2F24%2Ftale-of-fiji-water-too-familiar-sounds-like-industrial-colonial%2F%3Fcid%3Dmain%7Cmain%7Cdl1%7Clink3%7Chttp%253A%252F%252Fwww.dailyfinance.com%252F2009%252F08%252F24%252Ftale-of-fiji-water-too-familiar-sounds-like-industrial-colonial%252F>