

Water in the Spotlight (3)

Around the world consumers are not buying bottled water for the similar reasons. Indeed, background and culture influence the way we consider our bottled water. In 2006 already, the theme of the World Water Day organized by the United Nations and Unesco was Water and Culture. Objectives?

by DOMINIQUE HURET

Water and culture

Draw attention to the various ways of considering, using and celebrating water in different cultures and traditions around the globe. Obviously every culture recognizes the importance of water in human life but several elements alter our perception and management. Bottled water consumption bears many similarities, worth a sociologic analysis. For many religions and beliefs water symbolizes life, birth and rebirth. Water cleans the body and act as a purifier. These two qualities attributes a nearly "holy" dimension to water.

An essential part in Mother Nature's beauty, water can be a major source of major catastrophes and destruction. This dual roles and ambivalence has influenced the way human beings consider the essence of water.

In the field of Arts as well, water stands as an endless source of inspiration. Water was qualified as "vetturale di natura" or

"nature's means of transportation" by Leonardo Da Vinci.

A tool of power and social cohesion of ancient societies, water has always played a central role in human life. Inevitably, water management leads to numerous debates, arguments and disputes.

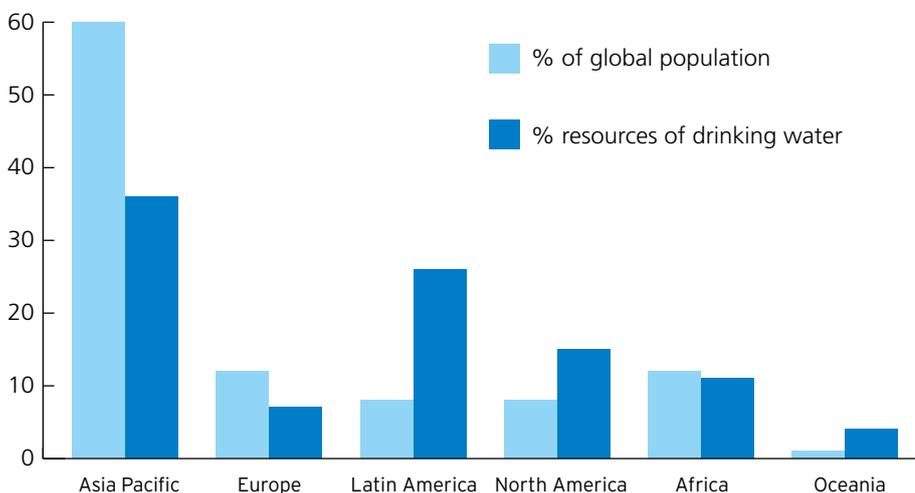
First, fresh water is unequally distributed around the globe as obvious in the bar chart 1.

Then 1.1 billions human beings don't have access to drinkable water and 2.6 billions lack access to drinkable water. In consequence, every day, 6 thousands children are dying from dehydration or water related sickness. A dramatic toll.

Today with a major increase in population, the role of water become ever more crucial: already 54% of fresh water is managed by humans and 70% is forecasted to be for 2025.

Source: Unesco World Water Day 2006 Rapport

Chart 1: Water distribution around the globe



In certain parts of the globe, the fresh water scarcity and the rise of natural disasters have strengthened the demand for bottled water.

A quick glance at chart 2 confirms the increase of bottled water demand in the major regions of the world, in a five year lap time.

If bottled water has become a mass product in the western world, elsewhere on the globe, it results of other consumer choices.

Consumer's expectations toward bottled water tend to vary worldwide

Major consumers of bottled water, North Americans favor above all hydration: water is a commodity with primary focus to quench thirst.

Water is characterized by the absence of several elements: no calories, no colorants, and only traces of salt or minerals. The origin of water bears little importance, so table water gets the market lion's share. But green awareness is high on the consumer' mind.

The super light bottle "Eco Shape Pure Life" of Nestle illustrates this trend: less PET transforms this bottle nearly into a water pouch.

South America enjoys massive water resources of outstanding hydrological quality. With no scarcity of water, innovative projects are emerging. Hence, Water of Patagonia in Chile works on the giant project of providing quality water in massive quantity through floating aquifer. Maybe a future solution to some local shortage.

The culture of water in Europe has been build over several centuries. Long gone is the time where bottled water was a medicine, sold only in a pharmacy, after thermal cures. The bottled waters then in thick glass wrapped in straw, in wooden crates were transported by horse cart.

With time, the European industry along with health claims has flourished. Today, the large variety of bottled water on the supermarket shelves allows everyone to suit one tastes and needs.

Asia

Two positions coexist in Asia: On one side, countries like China, Indonesia, India and Malaysia where natural disasters are often linked with water floods. Bottled water became then a survival good, which should mainly be 100% safe and rehydrate. But increasing damage to the environment plays a definite role to the infatuation for bottled water. Some figures mention contamination to up to 70% of lakes and rivers in China, but bottled waters remain affordable mainly for townspeople. And still the equation: bottle water and safety is not always respected, still in mind, the recent dramatic water intoxications in India and China.

However in Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, drinking bottled water a has become a sort of status symbol, sign of wealth and sophistication. Local and global brand owners have been quick to surf on this trend, proposing

an elaborate range of water products. These markets are very promising, as with the help of local producers, the annual sales increase by 15%.

The Middle East

Middle East consumers are also buying more bottled water, in direct proportions to their standard of living improvement. So, let's look at Figh, the prestigious mineral water from Damas Syria. The spring thousand of year old, has for centuries fed water to the whole city.

But with increasing demand and rarefaction of the resource, part of this "blue gold" is since 1997 managed differently and bottled up for local and regional points of sales.

Eastern Europe

Finally, soil's variations influence the water on offer. On a geographic map of Central and Eastern Europe, the further east, the higher the mineral content of the waters. Poland, Czech Republic, Georgia and Russia are granted with a wide variety of water rich in minerals and dry residues.

Some of these east European waters belongs to the national heritage and are sometimes rated as symbolic.

So the exports of Borjomi, the mineral water from Georgia were severely affected by the conflict with Russia. Not recommended for infant and pregnant mother daily consumption, Borjomi water contains 1,200 mg of sodium per



liter, similar to the French water Vichy. Such a high level of minerals characterize these waters as "nourishing".

Central Europe

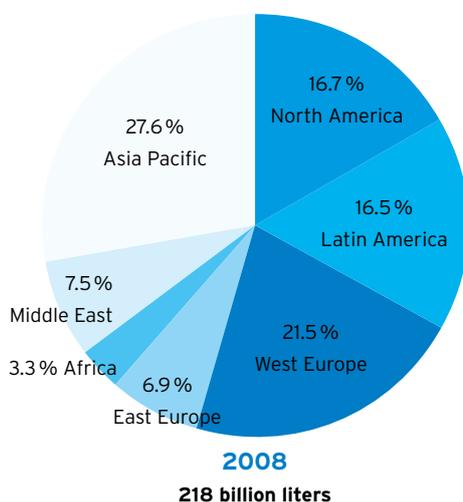
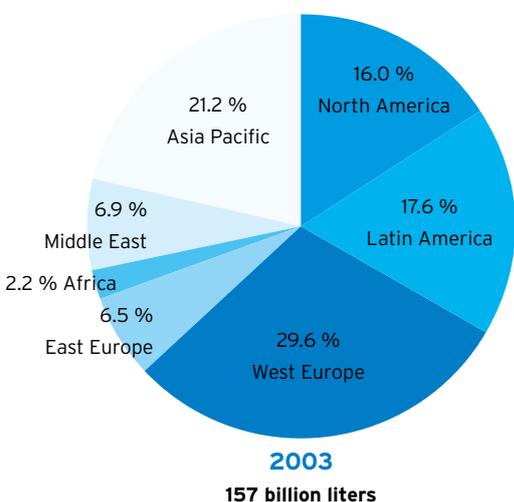
France, Belgium, Italy and Germany located in the middle of this map, benefit from an envious scope of both light and rich mineral waters.

North of Europe offers a majority of light waters with low mineral content. For instance, Hildon water springs of South England calcareous grounds. This bicarbonate water was treasured by Queen Elizabeth of England for her absence of taste, just perfect for her precious cup of tea. **Key No. 00000**

¹ In comparison, the level of sodium in Paris municipal water ranges between 6 and 14 mg per liter.

Chart 2: Global bottled water regions, 2003 - 2008.

Source: Zenith International



The Author
 Dominique Huret, expert for the beverage industries, has studied the latest EU directive 2009/54 as well as the Codex, reference book written by the World Food Organization and World Health Organization. Guide to elaborate national laws, the Codex is used to set up the different water categories as well as the criteria for exports.