

The real cost of bottled water

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AUSTRALIA'S love affair with bottled water is costing the planet 314,000 barrels of oil a year.

That's how much of one of the world's most precious resources it takes to package, ship and refrigerate a product that is already piped to every single suburban premises for next to nothing, according to *Sunday Age* calculations.

"It's one of the greatest cons ever pulled," says Clean Up Australia chairman Ian Kiernan. "It's just lunacy, there is no other word for it. We are squandering our oil resources."

Oil is not the only precious resource being squandered by consumers, with bottled water 2500 times more expensive than the tap variety.

"Drinking water in Melbourne or Sydney costs around \$1.20 a tonne," says Mr Kiernan. "Australian bottled water costs around \$3000 a tonne. And Italian bottled water? About \$9000 a tonne.

"It's more expensive than petrol — if you could turn petrol into water you could make money."

According to the Australasian Bottled Water Institute, we spend about \$385 million a year on bottled water.

Peter Gleick, president of the California-based Pacific Institute, which provides independent research and policy analysis on issues of development and the environment, recently calculated that demand for bottled water in the United States was burning up at least 17 million barrels of oil a year.

"And that's just the energy required to make the plastic resin and make it into bottles. It doesn't include the energy needed to get the bottled water to your local store," Dr Gleick says.

He estimates that the total amount of energy required for every bottle of water is equivalent, on average, to filling a quarter of a plastic bottle with crude oil.

"There are some situations where it might be OK to buy a bottle of water, but I don't think consumers are fully aware of the economic and environmental impact of what it takes to produce a bottle of water," he says.

"Especially when pure, clean drinking water is available, literally, on tap."

With no chlorine added to kill bacteria and no fluoride to strengthen teeth, bottled water can't even be considered better for you.

Federal Environment Minister Malcolm Turnbull is urging consumers to think more carefully about their purchases.

"We must be thoughtful all of the time," Mr Turnbull says. "And we must encourage people to think about the way they use all our resources."

Mr Turnbull says the waste of resources used to get bottled water to the shop also highlights the need for a carbon price.