Flow: Who Owns the World's Water?

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After seeing the new documentary, Flow, my 2009 New Year's resolution is to stop buying bottled water. Over $100 billion is spent annually on bottled water, but it would cost only $30 billion to provide clean drinking water to the entire world. Unlike tap water, bottled water is not regulated for cleanliness. And don't even get me started on the mountains of plastic bottles created by the bottled water industry.

For 84 terrifying and informative minutes, filmmaker Irena Salina makes a very persuasive case for stopping the commoditization of water and ensuring that everyone has access to clean drinking water. Salina interviews an array of researchers and activists who all describe the frightening international situation: dirty water kills more people than wars, the world is quickly running out of clean water, and water has become a valuable commodity for multinational corporations to exploit for profit. Flow is currently available on DVD.

The film is grounded in the question: Who owns the world's water? Without water life cannot exist. But 1.1 billion people worldwide do not have access to clean drinking water, and over 5 million people die annually from water-related illnesses. While Flow is a wake-up call that documents all that is wrong with the world's attitude toward water, the film also profiles a number of technologies that could dramatically improve international access to clean drinking water at a nominal cost.

Those who exclusively drink bottled water may think they're safe. But according to the National Resource Defense Council Director of Advocacy, Erik Olson, water-borne chemicals can enter the body through the skin when showering. Bathing in bottled water doesn't guarantee safety either; organic chemicals, bacteria, and even arsenic were found in one-third of popular bottled-water brands.

The film's most surprising revelation is that water has become a highly valuable commodity instead of a human right. Water is now the third most valuable commodity behind oil and electricity. And the film blames the World Bank for colluding with multinational for-profit water companies, which has led to the promotion of water privatization in developing counties. In Bolivia, short-lived water privatization at the insistence of the World Bank polluted rivers with blood and sewage flowing from slaughterhouses into Lake Titicaca.

Though many Americans take their access to clean water for granted, many people throughout the world are not able (or do not want) to pay for privatized water. Maintaining the infrastructure that brings unlimited clean water to kitchen sinks across the country is an unnoticed luxury for most Americans, though they do pay for it: either directly in monthly bills from water treatment facilities, or indirectly in taxes.

Flow profiles the heartbreaking situation in South Africa where the world's poorest citizens cannot afford clean water. Instead of paying for clean water from privatized wells, many desperate South Africans are forced to drink free water from dirty stagnant rivers, even if that means contracting cholera. During an onscreen interview, Maude Barlow, author of the book Blue Covenant and co-author of Blue Gold, discusses the contradiction in providing affordable clean water to people through for-profit private companies. She describes privatization as a "disaster" because multinational corporations cannot help people gain increased access to clean water while also pleasing their shareholders.
Several countries have recently built enormous dams to divert and store water in an effort to resolve their water crises. According to Patrick McCully, Executive Director of International Rivers Network, dams alter ecosystems while displacing thousands of people. One example cited in the film is China's Three Gorges Dam - a project also depicted in the beautiful documentary Up the Yangtze - that relocated two million people as water levels rose. McCully believes that there are

better ways to store water, especially for individuals; he cites the archaic practice of collecting rain water as a low-cost and effective way to ensure a steady water supply.

The most inspiring interviewee in Flow is Ashok Gadgil, Senior Staff Scientist in the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory and University of California, Berkeley professor, who knows the dire consequences of biologically contaminated water firsthand. While growing up in India, he lost five cousins to unhealthy drinking water. To help solve this widespread problem, Gadjil invented a water disinfector that uses UV-light to kill water-borne bacteria and viruses. This "financially viable, self-sustaining model" is maintained cooperatively in local communities - not by multinational for-profit corporations. For only $2 per person per year, over 500,000 Indians living in rural villages now have clean drinking water.

Flow captures the complex nature of water supply and accessibility issues with well-researched and entertaining information. But at times there are too many people saying the same thing. The film could have benefited by focusing more on inspiring new technology, such as Gadgil's water filtration system, and creating a narrative structure, instead of a barrage of interviews. Still, everyone interviewed drives the film's message home, and by the end viewers will think twice about their current habits.

When I finished watching the film, I turned on my kitchen sink in my Oakland, California apartment and filled a tall glass with fresh clean water. I had never thought twice about where this water came from, and assumed the supply was unlimited, especially when taking too many long showers. But then I remembered Barlow's prediction, "California's water supply is running out - it has about 20 years of water left in the state."

Flow could not be a timelier documentary because the world is literally running out of clean water. The unanswerable question of who owns water will become irrelevant when there is not any water left to own.

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