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Opinions

We don't trust drinking fountains anymore, and that's bad for our health



(Cristina Quicler/AFP/Getty Images)

By Kendra Pierre-Louis July 8

Kendra Pierre-Louis is a New York City based freelance writer whose work focuses on the connections between the environment and society.

One sultry day in 2012, a handful of New Yorkers laid out a rich red carpet in Union Square Park. As a jazz band grooved in the background, vested and begloved hosts led guests to the star attraction: a [drinking fountain](#). The event, called "Respect the Fountain," was staged by a group with an unlikely mission — to make water fountains cool again.

Fountains were once a revered feature of urban life, a celebration of the tremendous technological and political capital it takes to provide clean drinking water to a community. Today, they're in crisis. Though no one tracks the number of public fountains nationally, researchers say they're fading from America's parks, schools and stadiums. "Water fountains have been disappearing from public spaces throughout the country over the last few decades," [lamented](#) Nancy Stoner, an administrator in the Environmental Protection Agency's water office. Water scholar Peter Gleick [writes](#) that they've become "an anachronism, or even a liability." Jim Salzman, author of ["Drinking Water: A History,"](#) says they're "going the way of pay phones."






Even the International Plumbing Code, followed by builders in most American cities, has signaled that the fountain is out of style. In the 2015 edition of the manual, which lays out recommendations on matters such as the number of bathrooms an office should have and how pipes should work, authors slashed the number of required fountains for each building by half.

This loss isn't a result of some major technological disruption. While U.S. consumption of bottled water quadrupled between 1993 and 2012 (reaching 9.67 billion gallons annually), that's more a symptom than a cause. What's changed in the past two decades is our attitude toward public space, government and water itself. "Most people over the age of 40 have really positive stories of drinking fountains as kids," says Scott Francisco, who helped organize the Union Square event with Pilot Projects, an urban design company. The sense today, though, is that "they're dangerous, they're not maintained and they're dirty."

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In short, we don't trust public fountains anymore. And it's making us poorer, less healthy and less green.

The modern era's first free public water fountain was unveiled in London in 1859. Thousands gathered to watch officials [turn on the tap](#). At its peak, about [7,000 people](#) used the fountain each day. At that time, the rich were buying water brought in from the country. The poor were drinking water bottled from the sewage-infested Thames. Water-borne diseases such as cholera and typhoid were rampant.

The fountain changed all that by making clean water accessible for free. By 1879, London had 800 fountains. American cities followed suit. In 1859, New York debuted a fountain at City Hall Park. Detroit, Philadelphia and San Francisco soon built their own. By 1920, most municipalities were providing free, chlorinated water. The public health benefits were obvious. Half of the decline in urban deaths between 1900 and 1940 [can be attributed](#) to improvements in water quality, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research. "Municipal chlorinated water was considered yet another modern evolution," says Francis H. Chapelle, a hydrologist and the author of "[Wellsprings: A Natural History of Bottled Spring Waters](#)." "It basically put bottled water out of business." By 1930, Chapelle says, bottled water had become "low class," used only in offices and factories that couldn't afford plumbing.

Attitudes began to shift in the 1970s, when Europe's Perrier set its sights on the American market. In 1977, the company spent \$5 million on an advertising campaign in New York, selling itself as a chic, upscale product. Yuppies lapped it up. "It was a lifestyle-defining product," Chapelle says. By 1982, U.S. bottled-water consumption had doubled to 3.4 gallons per person per year.

Seeing an opportunity, U.S. beverage producers followed Perrier's lead. In 1994, Pepsi launched Aquafina. Coca-Cola joined the club with Dasani in 1999. Homegrown brands, though, couldn't boast glamorous European roots. So instead, they made Americans afraid of the tap. One ad from Royal Spring Water claimed that "tap water is poison." Another, from Calistoga Mountain Spring Water, asked: "How can you be sure your water is safe? . . . Unfortunately, you can't." Fiji Water [infuriated Ohio](#) with the tagline "The label says Fiji because it's not bottled in Cleveland." The insinuation, of course, was that there was something wrong with local water.

Americans were receptive to this message because of another shift: the rise of environmentalism. In response to activist pressure, the government drafted measures like 1974's Safe Drinking Water Act. The legislation made water much safer by limiting dumping and setting contaminant standards. But it had an unintended consequence: Because municipalities had to notify residents of contamination immediately, Americans who had grown up trusting tap water were now getting bombarded with warnings of possible risks.

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Public water faced more scrutiny in 1986, [when an EPA study](#) concluded that the tap water used by at least 38 million Americans contained dangerous levels of lead. Sales of bottled water and filters jumped in the weeks after the report was released, according to the Wall Street Journal. In Washington, residents flooded District officials with requests for water sample tests. (In 1985, there had been fewer than 30 requests. In 1986, there were at least 883.) Congress conducted hearings, and municipalities moved quickly to eliminate the risk. But the damage was done. Between 1973 and 1988, the share of Americans who said they were extremely concerned about tap-water pollution jumped from 32 percent to 66 percent, according to Gallup.

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In response, bottled-water sales began to rise. In 1987, Americans consumed about seven gallons of bottled water per person annually. In 2014, we were drinking [34 gallons per year](#). Americans now drink more bottled water than milk or beer.

Today, 77 percent of Americans are concerned about pollution in their drinking water, according to Gallup, even though tap water and bottled water are [treated the same way, and studies](#) show that tap is [as safe as](#) bottled.

If you don't trust tap water, you won't trust water fountains. So when you're in a public space, you're not likely to look for a fountain or complain when there isn't one. A new fountain costs between \$300 and \$4,500 to install, depending on plumbing and location. When municipal budgets are tight, cutting fountains may be one way to reduce costs without raising the public's ire.

"No one is dropping dead of thirst in the United States," Gleick says. "But the failure to maintain public water fountains is encouraging people to look elsewhere for their hydration. When people care less about the public water supply . . . [the will to] maintain it goes down."

The disappearance of water fountains has hurt public health. Centers for Disease Control researcher Stephen Onufrak has found that the less young people trust water fountains, the more sugary beverages they drink. [Studies have found](#) that kids who consume sugary drinks regularly are 60 percent more likely to be obese, and adults who do so are 26 percent more likely to develop Type 2 diabetes.

The reliance on bottled water rather than fountains also has serious [environmental effects](#). According to the Earth Policy Institute, it takes about 1.5 million barrels of oil to create the 50 billion plastic water bottles Americans use each year. (That's enough oil to fuel 100,000 cars for a year.) Less than a quarter of those bottles are recycled. And these statistics don't even account for the fuel used in transporting the water around the country and the world.

Bottled water is also expensive. Drinking eight glasses of tap water a day costs about [49 cents a year](#). If you got that hydration exclusively from bottles, you'd pay about \$1,400, or 2,900 times more. If you're living at the poverty line, that's 10 percent of your income.

The transition away from fountains has also made it harder to access water in public. For example, in 2007, the University of Central Florida built a 45,000-seat stadium with no fountains. The university claimed they were too expensive to install and maintain. Selling bottled water at \$3 a bottle, meanwhile, would generate profits. But at the opening game, with temperatures reaching near 100 degrees, vendors ran out of water. Some 60 attendees were treated for heat-related issues; 18 were hospitalized for heat exhaustion. The university eventually installed 50 fountains.

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There is some good news. Some cities are slowly bringing back — or at least increasing maintenance of — water fountains. In 2013, Los Angeles put together a comprehensive plan to upgrade and restore public water fountains. In 2008, Minneapolis spent \$500,000 on 10 new fountains designed by local artists. In Washington, the nonprofit group TapIt promotes access to tap water by pushing businesses to provide free water-bottle-refilling stations. Other cities, including [New York, Seattle and San Francisco](#), have taken steps to stop using bottled water in government buildings.

Evelyn Wendel launched WeTap, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit dedicated to public water promotion, after noticing that the fountains at the park where her kids played were frequently broken or dirty. "We can make improvements by teaching how valuable our municipal water is and making it available in schools and parks," she says. "It's a measurement of the success of humanity when you have free water for the community."

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