

Water anyone?

by Robin West

I recently found myself sitting on the shores of Skilak Lake about lunchtime. Reaching into my pack I pulled out a sandwich, an apple, and a bottle of water. I was enjoying the calls of the gulls and terns and taking in the lake scenery as I took a sip of water, glancing down at the label on the bottle. It read something like, “Bottled from clear mountain springs of Northern and Southern California.” I literally laughed out loud at the irony. In a way I suppose it was like a line from the Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner: “Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink.” I was sitting on the edge of a 25,000 acre pristine Alaskan lake, yet had paid good money for water in a plastic bottle from California! I started to contemplate that I had paid more per unit of volume for that water than for the gas I just put in my car (and winced at the price of). As I have become fond of saying lately, “What’s up with that?”

I know that my care in not drinking directly from most lakes and rivers, even in pristine areas, is warranted. I have suffered the ills of giardiasis twice in my adult life, and don’t care to again, but on the other hand, as a boy I never thought of such things (nor do I remember bottled water even being available in stores—coke yes, a bottle of water—get real!). Perhaps the water today is not as pure as it once was; perhaps we just know more today about the risks nowadays. I have heard it said that the water on Earth today is the same as was here three billion years ago. I don’t know about that, but I guess water does just get recycled through the atmosphere via precipitation and evaporation. Another way of thinking about this is that the water you are drinking today may have been the same water a dinosaur “passed” in a yesteryear. I’ll bet T. Rex didn’t drink bottled water from California.

Without a doubt water is one of the most critical, common, and valuable substances on Earth. It is also largely taken for granted. Water is found in all life: we humans are about 66% water and the average tree is comprised of approximately 75% water. It covers over 70% of the Earth, yet only 3% is fresh water, and only 1% is available for human consumption (the rest being stored in glaciers). The value of water is a given, considering that people like me pay big bucks to buy

a little bottle of it, yet we also use enormous quantities of it every day—an estimated 100 billion gallons of water are used each day to irrigate crops in the United States alone. And while we in Alaska have little near future concern for the availability of water, such is not true elsewhere in the world. “Water wars” are heating up through much of the American West. There are more of us humans arriving in this world every day and all indications currently suggest that we are facing generally a warmer and drier climate in the future. This suggests more demand for a diminishing product in many areas around the world.

The Kenai National Wildlife Refuge has several Congressionally mandated purposes, including the conservation of fish and wildlife populations and habitats in their natural diversity. One of the purposes that sometimes gets less attention, however, is the mandate to ensure water quality and necessary water quantity within the Refuge. This is an extremely important purpose, for without the needed quality and quantity of water our fisheries, and the wildlife and humans that depend upon them, are quickly jeopardized.

Water is truly the lifeblood of the Refuge. And while there is little many of us might be able to do in the near term to protect the quantity of water within the Refuge, we each can and should take individual responsibility to protect its quality. Little things like burying human waste away from water bodies and using care when fueling outboard motors near our lakes and streams can over time make noticeable differences in maintaining water purity. Collectively we can protect our tremendous water resources—one drop at a time.

And the next time you are stuck outside in a pouring rain, look upwards and give thanks, and open your mouth and enjoy a little free “Dihydrogen Monoxide”. Or, buy a bottle of your favorite brand at the local grocery store.

Robin West is the Refuge Manager of Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and freely admits to seeking help to avoid any future bottled water drinking problems. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.