IAGLR
LAKES Letter

In this issue, we share stories of scientists engaged in community service. Their experiences show us how we can each make a difference by offering our expertise to address issues within our communities and beyond.

CONTENTS

1 Activism, science, and Ontario's battle against corporate water bottling
3 Walking the talk—A Q&A with Pat Chow-Fraser
4 Elevating the voices of concerned citizens—A Q&A with Richard Rediske
5 Book Review: *Superman's Not Coming*
6 Welcome new members
6 New member profiles
Elizabeth Berg
Ernest Ronoh
Les Warren
8 Member kudos
8 News from the IAGLR
ELLS-IAGLR Conference rescheduled
Seeking nominations for board & awards
9 Donors & sponsors
10 IAGLR 2021 announcement

Activism, science, and Ontario's battle against corporate water bottling

by Rob Case



Water bottling is a contentious issue in communities around the Great Lakes. Although the quantities of water taken may be small relative to other uses, this industry and the corporations behind it often trigger protest wherever they set up shop. In Ontario, Canada, the Wellington Water Watchers (WWW) and its partners are leading that opposition.

Concerns about water scarcity, impacts on local groundwater and the surrounding ecosystem, and other matters for which scientific expertise is needed are part of what drives opposition to the water bottling industry. Yet for activists, the issue is about much more: plastic pollution and climate impacts from plastic production; frustration regarding the lack or weakening of local input into water governance decisions; competition between water profiteers and local government over groundwater access points; corporate power and the commodification of the water commons; and disaster capitalism and water justice in places like Flint or on the Six Nations reserve where only 9% of households have running water.

In contexts like these, the relationship between activism and science can be awkward. Activists are sometimes impatient with the slow pace of change in response to scientific discovery, even while recognizing the value of science in enhancing their undertanding of issues central to their cause. And as much as scientific evidence can be an important foundation for policy advocacy, it can also make channels of influence inaccessible to grassroots environmentalists and create barriers to public engagement and progressive change.

All of this is true in the case of grassroots opposition to groundwater taking for corporate bottling in Ontario. But the history of our efforts, ultimately, illustrate that when synergies can be found between scientists and grassroots activists, the impact can be powerful.

Flying under the radar

The Wellington Water Watchers is a community-based, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization. It was formed in 2007 in response to a Nestlé Waters application for a permit to take water for bottling at its Canadian headquarters in the Wellington County village of Aberfoyle, just outside of Guelph. The company had already been active in the county, having bought the Aberfoyle Springs bottling company in 2000. Its presence, however, flew under the radar until one late night in November of 2006, when Guelph resident and environmental consultant Mark Goldberg noticed transport trucks pulling out of a driveway marked "Nestlé Waters." Like many of us in the Guelph area, Goldberg had driven past that driveway and sign numerous times before, but it was on this trip home from the airport, at around 2 a.m., that the truck traffic seemed odd and drew Goldberg's attention.

The next morning, Goldberg started looking into Nestlé Waters' local operations. He discovered that the company had a permit, up for renewal the following spring, that would allow it to take 3.6 million liters each day for the next 10 years from the aquifer beneath its bottling plant in Aberfoyle. This concerned Goldberg, so he started to explore the idea of pulling together a group of people to investigate further.

One of the people he went to was his friend James Gordon, who was a musician and an activist. Goldberg's discovery concerned Gordon as well, and the pair immediately began thinking about how to form a group to take action. As a toxicologist, Goldberg was confident in his own ability to understand and analyze the technical and scientific aspects of the issue, but he hoped Gordon

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could help to get the word out and raise the concern in the community. "You play lead guitar," he told Gordon, "and I'll play rhythm and back you up with facts and figures."

And so began a process of community activism that has led, over 15 years later, to a four-year moratorium on new permits for water bottlers in Ontario, significant public and private investments in scientific study of related groundwater systems, regulation changes requiring more comprehensive scientific monitoring of water-taking impacts, and the imminent possibility that, for the first time in Ontario, a water-taking permit for bottling at a new site could be denied. If the goal is to end water bottling in Ontario, the activists have not yet won, but important progress is being made.

A downside to deference to "science"?

The experience of WWW is that concerted public pressure—Gordon's "lead guitar"—has been the key to getting the attention of provincial lawmakers. Without that type of pressure, history has shown, elected officials and their governments are more likely to favor the science and rational argumentation—the "rhythm guitar"—that serve their agendas and ideological priorities.

Scientific evidence, rational argumentation, and a grounding in material reality most certainly have an important place at the core of democratic participation and public policy making. Yet too narrow a deference to "scientific evidence" in policy making, or a misrepresentation of what "science" is and what it can tell us, can make democratic public input inaccessible and protect the status quo. The application process in Ontario's Permit To Take Water program, for instance, includes some public consultation and a mechanism for receiving public input, but only considers input of a technical nature as legitimate, biasing the process in favor of those parties with the means (and economic or regulatory incentives) to employ research consultants and commission glossy reports.

Proposed regulation changes for Ontario, similarly, would enable municipalities to veto a permit application for water bottling in their jurisdiction, but only with a scientifically supported water-resources rationale. An objection based on a clear consensus among residents, on municipal concerns regarding truck traffic or plastic waste production, on the exclusion from decision-making of Indigenous nations with overlapping jurisdictional claims, or on a precautionary desire to reserve local water taking for higher value uses and future needs will not count. In this case, deference to narrowly defined "science" protects the applicant by dismissing a precautionary approach and overriding local, democratic decision-making.

> "You play lead guitar, and I'll play rhythm and back you up with facts and figures."

In our county, Nestlé Waters states that it has more than 15 years of evidence showing that their bottling operations are "sustainable." While true that the monitoring data they make public have not consistently shown significant change on the specific parameters being measured, to claim that this constitutes evidence of "sustainability" would seem an absurd overstatement of what the data actually indicate, particularly when factoring in the climate impacts of producing the plastic and trucking the product from source to market.

When under pressure from grassroots opposition, nonetheless, water bottlers and their lobby associations use "science" as a shield in their popular media statements, claiming that their position is backed by "science" in contrast to the "emotional" reaction of those who oppose them.

Finding synergy

Far from an indictment of science and research, WWW's experience suggests that more independent research and scientific analysis are needed to confirm, challenge, or otherwise understand the overall environmental and social impacts of water bottling, and that greater scrutiny from the scientific community is needed to help to contextualize the knowledge being claimed in the name of science.

In pursuit of objective truth, scientists often keep a sceptical distance from activists (and/or keep their activism separate from their science). Our experience, however, is that such community engagement is an important companion in the translation of research evidence into progressive policy change. At key moments in Ontario's bottled-water battle, the public attention brought to the issue has shone light on research and analyses that, in the context of mounting political pressure to do something, have led to important, if incremental, regulatory change. For example, in one local township, research stimulated by the public outrage surrounding an application for a permit to take water at a new site has become a central factor driving another round of regulatory changes at the provincial level, which could prevent water bottling from ever going forward in that location.

We would like to believe that public policy is the result of considerations of the common good derived from a rational assessment of the available, relevant evidence. We know, however, that politics is often about choices, driven by ideology, distorted by power and the desire to gain or maintain it, and rationalized with evidence when available. For knowledge and reason to do their job in this context, sometimes what is needed is grassroots social action to lead the way with a firm, collective assertion of community interests, values, and priorities.

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