



# Nestlé: The Global Search For Liquid Gold

Food and Beverage multinational Nestlé dominates the bottled water industry with their Pure Life and Poland Spring brands by exploiting water resources both nationally and internationally, negatively affecting local citizens. The company's determined pursuit of profit.

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“government officials failed to act in the public interest and water was labeled as a ‘need’ rather than a universal ‘right’”

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At the **World Water Forum** held in the Netherlands in March 2000, the major topic on the agenda was whether water is considered a ‘need’ or a ‘right’. The discussion was not directed by various UN or government officials, as you might expect, but rather by some of the world’s largest corporations.

One of the biggest players was Nestlé, who insisted on defining water as a ‘need’. A statement signed by government officials failed to act in the public interest, as corporations were sided with and water was labeled as a ‘need’ rather than a universal ‘right’. Since water was then notably defined as a ‘need’, conglomerates have been able to privatize the life source as a commodity, subjecting it to capitalistic market exchange and the consumer’s buying power.



what's underneath it.

In turn, the corporation has utilized their purchasing power to buy entire areas upright and gain access to the water supplies. The small town of **Fryeburg, Maine** proved a perfect domain due to its location on an enormous aquifer. What Fryeburg's residents could get for free by turning on their taps, was in turn re-sold to them in a plastic bottle marked 'Poland Springs'.

In 2004, a pump failure in the town caused Fryeburg's water supply to run dry, and anger toward the unaffected Swiss-based corporation came to the forefront. A **citizen group** banded together, calling themselves the Western Maine Residents for Rural Living (**WMRFRL**) and petitioning against Nestlé for destructing their quality of life.

The following year, after Nestlé announced plans to build a water load-out facility in Fryeburg, WMRFRL were prepared to fight back. The Fryeburg Planning Board initially approved Nestlé's permit, but were met with community backlash from concerned residents. WMRFRL successfully appealed the approval by advocating the Planning Board's inconsideration toward the impact of such a load-out facility on the town, a fact that is stressed in the town's comprehensive plan. As a result, Nestlé took the rural town to court.

In the last **five years**, the food and beverage multinational has sued and appealed the town five times and finally won on its fifth attempt in March 2010, despite WMRFRL's best efforts. The court ruled in favour of Nestlé, their reasoning being that Fryeburg's comprehensive plan is to be used as a guidance rather than a regulation.

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"Resistance is never futile, and although Fryeburg was up against a wealthy opponent, their efforts managed to keep taking them to court and fight for people over profit."

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Despite the residents' best efforts, Nestlé possesses seemingly unlimited legal funds that could bankrupt a small town. Resistance is never futile, and although Fryeburg was up against a wealthy opponent, their efforts managed to keep taking them to court and fight for people over profit.

Nestlé's water prospecting **extends north to Canada as well**. In the past few months, the **Council of Canadians** have raised concerns over Nestlé's water extraction in **Hillsburgh, Ontario** during drought conditions—a state that has become increasingly common due to climate change.

Nestlé currently holds a permit through to 2017 to take about **1.1 million liters** of water per day from Hillsburgh, carrying out bottling operations in the nearby town of Aberfoyle. This occurs while other nearby towns have by-laws to restrict their personal water access during dry summer conditions.



*Maude Barlow gives a speech in Ottawa (2007)*

Like in Fryeburg, Canadian citizen groups and NGOs have been fighting back. **Maude Barlow**, National Chairperson for the Council of Canadians powerfully asserted that "Ontario must prioritize communities' right to water above a private company's thirst for profit." The movement extends to the internet, with efforts from online activist organization **Sum of Us** raising awareness about unethical companies and inspiring a call to action. Their campaigns encourage participants to sign online petitions and share their stories through Facebook and Twitter. **The petition**, open for all to sign, takes action against Nestlé to stop them appropriating

Ontario's water during drought conditions.

Similar to **Nestlé's dealings** in Maine and Hillsburgh, the multinational's actions in underdeveloped countries are just as ethically questionable, but considered more serious due to access to clean drinking water posing a life-and-death situation. Having discovered a profitable market for bottled water in the global south, Nestlé has **carved itself a niche** in countries such as Ethiopia, Pakistan and Nigeria where safe tap water is virtually nonexistent.

In **Ethiopia** where 20,000 Somali refugees seek asylum at the **Kebrideyah Refugee Camp**, opportunistic Nestlé **engaged in pseudo-philanthropic efforts** by supporting the camp's water supply program, but decidedly dropped the project in 2004. They had failed to replace old water pumps that maintained the water station and provide further financial contributions past their one-time \$750,000 payment. Still, 3 years later, Nestlé claimed support to the project on their website, stating that they hoped the water system could keep functioning over the long term, and continue to provide water access to the people of the region and their children for many years to come.



*A man buying water in Lahore, Pakistan.*

In **Lahore**, Pakistan Nestlé has tapped into another market for bottled water, selling their Pure Life brand to upper class inhabitants while poorer inhabitants

suffer from the effects of unsafe drinking water. Through a marketing campaign targeting more affluent Pakistanis, Nestlé has knowingly appealed to the Pakistani psyche; the Pure Life brand acts a status symbol to Lahore locals, as walking around with a bottle in hand is deemed fashionable and demonstrative of a purported health-consciousness.

In the village of **Bhati Dilwan**, Pakistan, the close proximity of a Nestlé factory extracting water from two deep wells has caused springs in the area to dry up. Citizens have been deprived of their own means of extracting water and rendered dependent on the bottled Pure Life brand for clean water.

In **Nigeria**, a country ranked relatively low in GDP per capita, Pure Life is sold to upper class consumers spending large portions of their incomes on bottled water. The **cost of Pure Life** is more expensive than the average daily income of a Nigerian citizen, and even pricier than 1L of petrol. In this scenario, citizens are faced with the unfair choice between health and poverty, becoming ill from drinking bad water but unable to afford Nestlé's inflated prices.

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“Nestlé controls more than 70% of the world's bottled water brands, including Perrier, San Pellegrino and Vittel”

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Nestlé **currently controls** more than 70% of the world's bottled water brands, including Perrier, San Pellegrino and Vittel. This case presents another example of the neoliberalist and postcolonialist attitudes of multinational giants like Nestlé, who attempt to subdue millions of human beings by suppressing human needs and commodifying something that should not bear a price tag.

Documentaries such as the 2012 Swiss documentary **Bottled Life** and the American documentary **Blue Gold** released in 2008, as well as the continued surveillance by online activist sites such as **Sum of Us**, act righteously in rising awareness of Nestlé's corporate bullying tactics. If change is to occur in relation to water equity, then international dialogue needs to remain an open one, and unethical fear mongering companies should be monitored to operate as transparent as possible.

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