



 Research has found that China's poor air contributes to the deaths of more than 1.6 million people there each year. Picture: GETTY

Opinion

Talking Point: Putting a price on the fresh air we breathe

JAN DAVIS, Mercury
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MANY have bemoaned the fact that one of our most basic needs, water, has been privatised or put into fancy bottles and sold back to us at vast profit.

And we have all rolled our eyes at the outrageous marketing claims made for some brands of bottled water.

There is one US brand that is promoted as gluten-free and free of GMOs — with no carbs, no sugar and no calories, and its only listed ingredient is purified water.

Don't panic, though, bottled water that does not explicitly state it is free of these suspect substances is perfectly safe. If you want to feel hydrated, you could just drink plain old water like we used to do.

But marketing of water could pale into insignificance compared to the emerging marketing opportunities for the basic human need for air.

The idea of companies privatising the air supply is still science-fiction, but air quality is becoming a huge problem worldwide. Globally it is estimated that 5.5 million people die annually due to polluted air.

China's emerging middle class is becoming more worried about the country's poor air quality, and they are right to be nervous about what they breathe.



Green and Clean's bottled air. Picture: SUPPLIED

Air quality fluctuates dramatically from day to day. Daily weather reports cover predicted pollution levels, just as ours forecast temperature and rain.

Air pollution is measured in terms of PM_{2.5}, or particulate matter 2.5 micrometers in diameter, which are absorbed by the lungs and can cause heart and lung disease.

The World Health Organisation recommends a daily PM_{2.5} level of 20, and says that levels greater than 300 are serious health hazards.

Beijing's air quality often surges past a level of 500, and a couple of years ago soared to 755, the highest in memory.

Research has found that China's poor air contributes to the deaths of more than 1.6 million people there each year — that's more than the population of Adelaide.

Inner-city pollution is so bad that a Beijing traffic cop is lucky to make the age of 43, because of constant exposure to car exhaust and dirty air.

Air pollution in parts of India is more severe than in China. India is home to 13 of the world's 20 most polluted cities. These increased levels of air pollution are giving rise to a new industry called air farming, where bottled fresh air is sold to consumers at a premium.

It may sound like the next big gimmick, but the idea of buying crisp, country air in a jar has proven very popular in heavily polluted cities.

Market research shows China's insatiable appetite for all things Australian has gone sky-high, and now they could be getting a taste for Australian air.

There are companies exporting tins of fresh air to China, while personal shoppers for wealthy Chinese people are also shipping Australian air overseas. This is despite the fact that there is no scientific proof that breathing small amounts of clean air has any health benefits.

One company sells bottled air from the Blue Mountains, Bondi Beach, the Yarra Valley, New Zealand and Tasmania, and it is looking to harvest the atmospheric blend from additional locations around the country.

Their website says: "The air collected is different from each location, with lab tests showing the Blue Mountains blend contains traces of eucalyptus, while Bondi Beach provides that salty seaside tang."

Each tin of air contains the equivalent of 130 deep breaths, with the cap doubling as a mouthpiece.

Considering the average person takes about 23,000 breaths each day, and that tins of air are selling for more than \$A25, it is not really feasible for someone in China to import a lifetime supply yet.

Tinned air is just one example of the growing market in China for products that address air pollution. Others are far more grounded. Personal air pollution monitors to check indoor and outdoor air quality are becoming common in more affluent households.

Clean air represents an enormous commercial opportunity, especially in rapidly developing regions. But should clean air be a basic human right, rather than a commercial product for those willing or able to pay?

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