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Review: The Sierra Club Guide to Safe Drinking Water

By Scott Lewis

Reviewed by [Brad Fisher](#)
Pittsburgh, USA

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Lewis, Scott. *The Sierra Club Guide to Safe Drinking Water*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996. 110 pp. 5 appendices, 17 tables. US \$10.00 paper ISBN 0-87156-355-X. Recycled, acid-free paper.

Those of us old enough to remember back to the day in 1969 that the chemical-choked Cuyahoga River caught fire in Cleveland can also remember a time--about the same period, actually--when people drank freely and without fear from household taps, public fountains and mountain streams. A time, in fact, when some people were so protective of their tap water that they questioned fluoridation as a Communist plot. It seems--or is it just nostalgia?--that while we as an industrial nation were fouling our commercial waterways to the point of disaster, we believed that our public drinking water was healthy and clean--and wilderness water was free of contaminants.

Today the situation appears to be reversed: our rivers are recovering, dams and pollution rates are falling, and, miracle of miracles, great swarms of mayflies are hatching out of the once dead Lake Erie. Yet we handle our drinking water with surgical gloves. We filter, soften and treat the water from our taps. We spend \$2.5 billion a year to buy it in bottles at the grocery store or have it delivered to our homes, paying more per gallon than we pay for gasoline. In offices, we bypass the ubiquitous wall cooler for the ubiquitous bubbler of bottled water. As consumers we now seek status through our choice of branded 'spring' water, much of which is nothing more than somebody's municipal water run through another filter and decorated with a nice label.

What happened?

Perhaps, while we've been focusing on the highly visible pollution that abounds in our rivers and lakes, we've overlooked the invisible contaminants that slip through the cracks in our municipal water systems. The water's always been clear. How could it not be drinkable?

Scott Lewis answers this question with hard facts in *The Sierra Club Guide to Safe Drinking Water*, a calm, well-organized nuts-and-bolts

handbook for clean water activists. Using EPA data, Lewis confirms our worst bottled-water fears: we're taking a gamble when we drink from the tap in many American cities. What looks, smells and tastes so pure can contain anything from pesticides and Giardia cysts to radionuclides.

Despite the Safe Drinking Water Act's 1974 mandate for water companies to conform to monitoring procedures and maximum contaminant levels, water in many of our cities still contains dangerous microbes as well as known and potential carcinogens from a wide variety of sources. Between 1992 and 1994, according to EPA records, 35 million of us drank from water systems that violated EPA standards; 80 million drank from systems that violated reporting rules. During this time, in one single incident, 400,000 people in Milwaukee fell ill to a water-borne organism called Cryptosporidium and 100 died.

The drinking water in America is indeed at a crisis point. We've read about it in the news, we've learned about it through personal stories such as Sarah Steingraber's *Living Downstream* and the reporting of Jonathan Harr in *A Civil Action*.

Lewis's handbook, and that is what it is, gives activists an essential and concise box of tools for fixing the situation, beginning with a chapter on how to find out exactly what's in the local water supply in any American city. Then he methodically lists and classifies the known contaminants of drinking water, with sources and brief descriptions of potential health effects. The usual suspects include bacteria, protozoa, viruses, inorganic chemicals and metals such as lead from pipes, as well as the real nasties: synthetic organic chemicals, pesticides and industrial waste products. He includes chlorine in this list, despite the fact that, in the early 1900s, it virtually eliminated cholera and typhoid. It turns out that despite its disinfectant power, chlorine can also combine with organic materials in the water to create lethal byproducts. And you thought fluoride was bad!

These contaminants turn up in water supplies all over the U.S. Lewis has tapped public water files to list water status in major American cities, so you'll know where to drink the water (Cincinnati, Denver, Dallas, LA and Phoenix) and where to BYO (Bryn Mawr, Cleveland, Elizabeth NJ, Little Falls NJ, Juneau, Madison and Salt Lake City.)

Lewis's review of remedial technology includes a thorough listing of filters, softeners and reverse osmosis systems that consumers can use to purify the tap water in their homes. The most comprehensive filter, the one that gets just about everything you could imagine, comes from a

surprising place: that Amway dealer you've been avoiding all these years. The author also examines the pros and cons of bottled water, with an extensive listing of water brands.

Personal filters and offline sources notwithstanding, the author asserts that there is no shortcut to more drinkable water. Every short-term solution has its drawbacks. Lewis proposes a strategy for recovery that reads like a water consumer's Bill of Rights. It includes such steps as ensuring basic treatment for all water systems, updating water treatment technology where needed (a huge percentage of municipal water systems are still using equipment nearly a century old), improving water distribution systems to reduce pipe-born contamination, and improving the legislation that governs our water, the Clean Water Act and the Safe Drinking Water Act.

The key step to water we can trust is watersheds we can trust, Lewis says, offering the Sierra Club big-picture point of view. It costs significantly less to keep contaminants out of drinking water by protecting watersheds than it does to remove them downstream. And the only way to protect watersheds is through political will. It takes acts of Congress to preserve wild stream sources, to upgrade municipal treatment facilities, to add force to water purity laws that are already on the books.

Unfortunately, in 1999, political will is as scarce as catfish in Death Valley. While we're discovering and documenting hideous things in our water, our pro-business, shrink-the-government Congress is, as we speak, considering significantly weakening the original clean water legislation passed in the wake of the public outcry that followed Rachel Carson's classic *Silent Spring*. The laws that guarantee us safe water are in jeopardy, long before they've reached their intended goal.

This is a situation made to order for grassroots, watershed-based activism. *The Sierra Club Guide to Safe Drinking Water* is a definite first stop for those advocates and supporters joining the fight. It is also an essential eye-opener for just about anybody who drinks water.

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