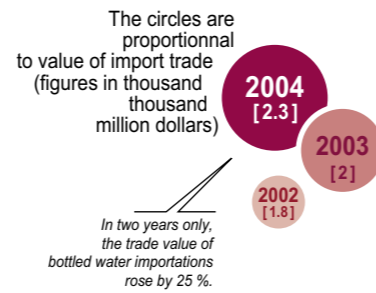
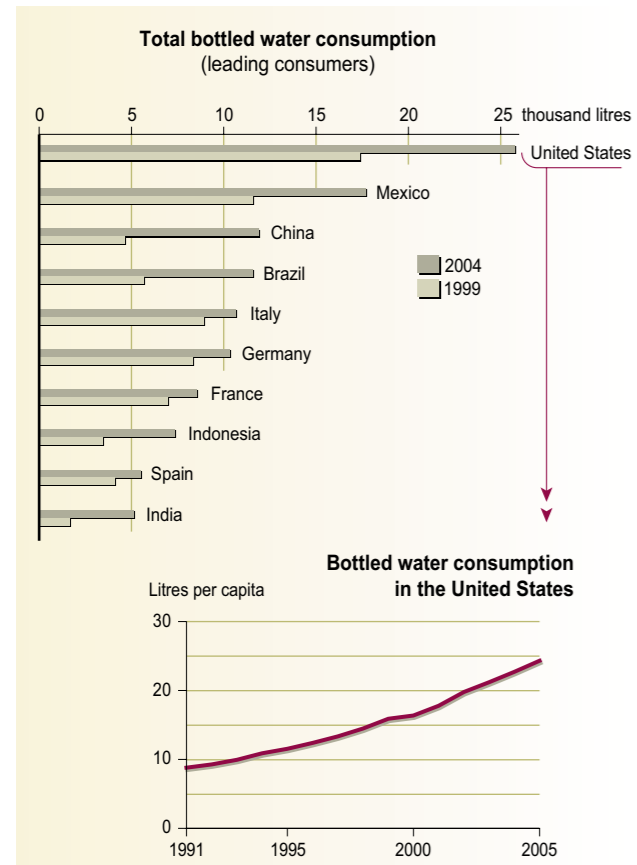
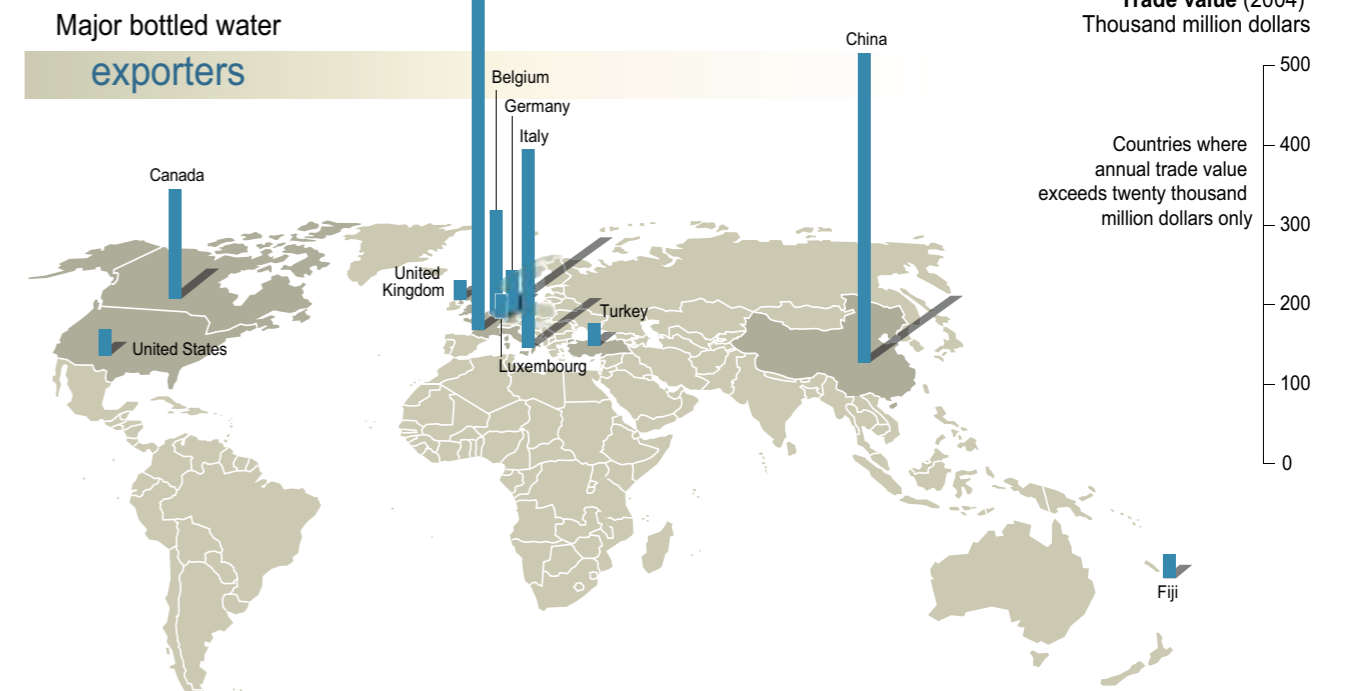


Message 'round a bottle

It seems understandable nowadays that Iceland might need to import fresh produce from abroad or that North America and Western Europe should want to bring spices from Asia. But if we look more closely much of the trade criss-crossing the globe defies common sense. Why would the United States import so much meat from Australia? Why would Canada import bottled water from France when the country exports a large share of its own output to the US and Japan?



ON THE WEB
Bottled Water:
www.bottledwater.org



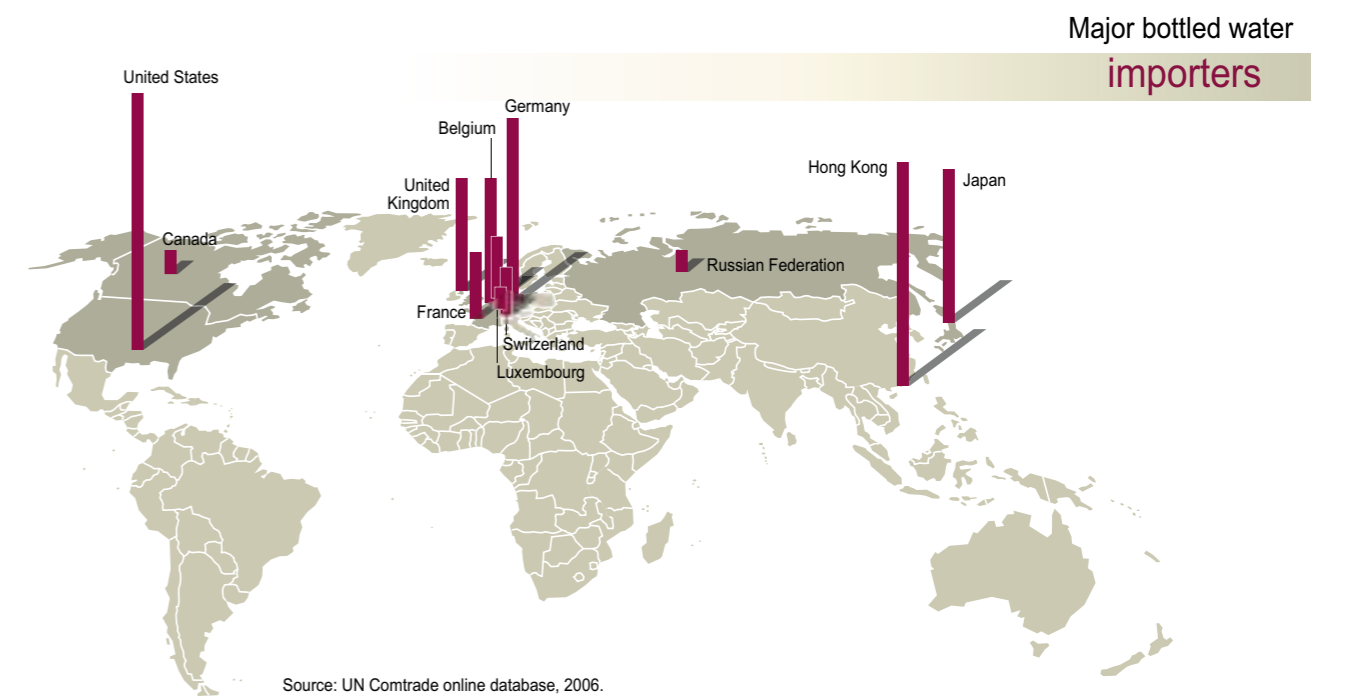
Trade for trade's sake

Why would any country import goods already produced at home or nearby? One explanation is straight forward: It may be cheaper to buy abroad than produce locally or the necessary know-how is not available locally. In some cases a famous brand or the country of origin is a guarantee of quality. Such explanations only account for part of the truth. The single most important factor for people wanting such and such a brand of water is clever advertising (see page 21). One of the reasons this system can work is that transport costs do not reflect the full story, disregarding the long-term cost of environmental damage (in terms of waste but also energy resource depletion and climate change).

Bottled water is a typical case. Powerful marketing strategies and increasing suspicion towards tap water have made mineral water a fast growing market (a largely unjustified suspicion for that matter because tap water is subjected to more regular quality controls than bottled water, at least in large cities).

The maps illustrate the crazy logic of today's global trade. Exchange is no longer based on local needs or resource availability (in most countries where large amounts of bottled water are consumed, the tap water is perfectly drinkable), with unnecessary exchange involving major importers that are also major exporters (France, Germany and Belgium).

It goes without saying that bottled water requires large amounts of plastic, for a container that has a very short life span and takes a very long time to biodegrade.



Sources: International Bottled Water Association, 2005; Beverage Marketing Corporation, 2005.

Source: UN Comtrade online database, 2006.