

most productive salmon fishery and provides irrigation water for tens of thousands of Northwest farmers, was—for over two decades—polluted by radioactive runoff from B.

It went something like this: in order to cool off the uranium slugs that were used to produce plutonium, water, after being treated, was pumped from the Columbia River and flowed through the aluminum tubes that held the uranium in order to reduce the slugs' high temperatures. Around 75,000 gallons of water rushed in at regular river temperatures every minute and was then released back into the Columbia at around 200 degrees Celsius. Early studies showed that young salmon were most susceptible to the effluent's radiation and by the late 1950s, salmon runs in the mid-Columbia began to rapidly decline.

As historian Michelle Gerber writes in *On the Home Front: The Cold War Legacy of the Hanford Nuclear Site*, "In 1959, Hanford biologists reported that the number of chinook salmon spawning in the vicinity was only about 19 percent of 1958." Gerber adds that nearby towns along the Columbia were also affected: "In mid-1947, river water at Pasco and sanitary (city) water at Kennewick first showed detectable levels of gross beta-emitting radiation.... Values in the river water at Richland were even higher, reaching up to four times that at Pasco by late 1948."

Studies to this day are seeking to unravel the extent to which the Columbia River is still being contaminated by several of Hanford's slow-leaking radioactive tanks, which are at the heart of the largest environmental cleanup this country has ever undertaken. Interestingly, Michelle Gerber was trailing along behind our tour group, jotting down notes and chiming in on occasion. It's too bad her knowledge of the environmental consequences of Hanford was not shared with visitors that day.

It wasn't just the Columbia River that Hanford's reactors filled with radioactive toxins. Smokestacks released the reactor's toxic debris when winds were strongest. They were built 200 feet high so as not to contaminate the facility workers below. However, when production of plutonium reached its peak during the Cold War, plant

operators were forced to ignore the wind patterns and released radioactive soot into the air throughout the day. Only two years into operation, radioactivity levels at two testing sites—as well as the nearby cities of Richland, Pasco, Kennewick, and Benton City—exceeded acceptable levels of radioactive contamination.

At certain periods, such as the December 1949 "Green Run," when raw uranium fuel slugs were being processed, winter storms hit the region causing heavy deposits of radioiodine (I-131) and Xenon (Xe-133) to rain down on local communities. Samples taken during the incident were 1,000 times the government's recommended level. Towns 70 miles away, such as Walla Walla, registered high readings.

The product produced inside the B Reactor helped to kill countless people and the poisoning of the land, air, and water from this one facility outshines the catastrophe of Three Mile Island. Yet none of our guides on the tour shared any of this with us that day. **Z**

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**Investigation**

**Fiji Water and the Vatukoula Dump**

**By Laura Kiesel**

Last summer, *Mother Jones* magazine printed a scathing review of Fiji Water by Anna Lenzer ("Spin the Bottle," August 2009). Specifically, the article explored the company's "Green Campaign" in the context of its presence in the small island country where citizens live under the thumb of a military dictatorship and are deprived of many basic resources, including access to clean drinking water. The article explored

the issue in terms of what the people of Fiji really get in return for hosting the corporation and entitling it to its pristine water supply. It's not much.

The recent release of the short documentary film *Rock of Gold* exposes more information about the potential harm caused by Fiji Water and the mining corporations to resident villages in the country. Produced in association with the Center for Independent Documentary, *Rock of Gold* follows natural resources graduate student Mary Ackley who, having lived in Fiji for two years previously as a Peace Corps volunteer, decided to return to analyze the effects of gold mining production on residents. In 2007, she visited the village of Vatukoula as part of her Master's thesis research for the University of Vermont. Accompanying her was her academic advisor Saleem Ali and Kristian Maynard, a freelance filmmaker who shot the footage that evolved into the documentary.

The gold mine in Vatukoula was first established in 1935. In 2006, it was closed suddenly and without warning, leaving dozens of employees out of work. Vatukoula residents were then forced to confront the health repercussions of living and working in a mining town while no longer receiving any of the economic benefits.

After conducting a survey of 340 residents, Ackley found that nearly 87 percent of the villagers she surveyed were either "somewhat" or "very" worried about the health risks posed by the remnants of the closed mine site. Her studies didn't stop at the survey, though. She discovered that Vatukoula residents' main source of drinking and irrigation water came from the Nasivi River. She began conducting tests on the drinking water used in the area. Eight out of the nine samples she collected tested unsafe for human consumption due to bacterial contamination below World Health Organization standards. Ackley also found traces of arsenic and other metals in areas of the river not traditionally used for drinking water. Reviewing water sampling data archives from the Mineral Resources Department, Ackley found that the river had been adversely affected by mining waste. Unfortunately, the extent of this impact is difficult to rigorously evaluate since cyanide does not exist in its



*Plastic pellets used to make Fiji Water bottles discarded at Vatukoula open waste dump—photo by Kristian Maynard*

original form for very long after it is released.

Due to its close proximity to the river, the polluted water and incidental health issues could easily be solely attributed to the vacant gold mine. However, one day while investigating in and around the Vatukoula landfill, Ackley and her research team found a huge amount of debris from Fiji Water’s bottling plant—located 30 kilometers from Vatukoula—including remains of plastic bottles, plastic pellets, and reams of Fiji Water labels. In tracing all of the rubbish back to its source, Ackley discovered that the Fiji Water bottling plant was actively dumping its waste at the Vatukoula landfill. The waste was routinely incinerated there, which led to an unmeasured release of dioxins and other Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs).

After asking some of the villagers about her findings, Ackley realized that this practice was common knowledge and a concern. The mayor of the nearby town of Tavua acknowledged to Ackley on film that he believed Fiji Water pays the mine company 1,100 Fijian dollars a month for the use of the dump.

This revelation led Ackley to explore the environmental impact incurred by the bottled water industry. “We never intended to look at the issues surrounding bottled water until we stumbled on the waste site in Vatukoula and started learning more about concerns regarding the environ-

mental hazards of burning plastics,” says Ackley.

After completing her research and returning to the U.S., Ackley heard from a Peace Corps volunteer stationed in the area of a diarrheal outbreak that hospitalized 40 people and killed 4 children. Ackley wanted answers. She sought not only confirmation from Fiji Water about its dumping practices in Vatukoula, but information about any steps the company was taking to address the health concerns of the people there.

Ackley received a written response dated August 2008. In the letter, Fiji Water’s corporate communications

representative, Rob Six, acknowledged use of the dump. He clarified that Fiji Water contracts with Tavua Plant Hire to dispose of the waste, which in turn pays the mine company \$1,500 a month for its use. Six stated that an effort had been underway since June 2007 to phase out the use of the dump and contract with an “accredited waste disposal company” for assistance. He also claimed that Fiji Water was actively working with its “recyclers” to restrict disposal of all non-degradable, reusable items at the dump. However, no specific details were offered on these points, such as a formal timeline for phase out completion, names of recycling partnership organizations, or the intended destination for the industrial waste.

Six was also vaguely placating on the issue of possible adverse health effects: “If the burning of rubbish...is indeed primarily responsible for Vatukoula community health problems, then as a major player, [Fiji Water] would like to work with Tavua Town Council, the gold mine management, Vatukoula residents, and the local landfill management to change those practices.” However, Six did not offer to have Fiji Water independently investigate the matter or test the Nasivi River for contaminants associated with plastics, leaving the question of accountability unanswered.

In communicating with Six for this article, he attested that Fiji Water has



*Inside Fiji Water’s bottling plant—photo by Kristian Maynard, rockofgoldfilm.homestead.com*



not used the Vatukoula landfill in over a year and that all of their plastic by-products were being recycled through an Australian recycling company called Tall Ingots. (Although, since the waste was routinely incinerated, I don't see how there could be much to recycle.) Six also mentioned that Fiji Water would be working with Rotary Pacific Water for Life to build a water delivery system for Vatukoula, though he did not directly respond to questions addressing the pollution in the village's water supply and associated health problems that may be attributed to the company's past transgressions.

In his letter to Ackley, Six repeatedly refers to Fiji Water's environmental stewardship, in particular, Fiji Water Foundation's \$150,000 investment in water sanitation projects in local Fiji communities. This figure is easily dwarfed by the \$5 million the company recently spent to market its "Green Campaign." When asked to explain the discrepancy in these amounts, Six responded that Fiji Water pays \$1.3 million in royalties to Fiji, which he claims directly led to water sanitation and improved infrastructure projects in various communities. He also noted that Fiji Water had invested \$1.2 million a year in its carbon offset program in Fiji, with a goal of reaching carbon negative status.

It is difficult to decipher the validity of Six's statements on social or environmental investments. This is because, unlike many of its corporate colleagues, Fiji Water has so far abstained from joining the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) of the United Nations' Global Compact. The GRI is an effort at promoting transparency among corporations by offering a public forum for them to report their expenditures on environmental and social responsibility projects and practices.

Ackley sees a huge problem with Fiji Water's absence from the Initiative. That's where her hopes for the film come in. In addition to nurturing a broader understanding of and sensitivity to Fijian culture, Ackley wants to contribute to a change in social consciousness. "[My hope] is that consumers will think carefully about the products they purchase, where they come from, and the claims that companies make regarding these products. There are many underlying complexities to

the concept of an 'eco-friendly' or 'green' product. There are also issues of social responsibility that must be considered," asserts Ackley.

*Rock of Gold*, which won the El Capitan award at the 2009 Yosemite International Film Festival, doesn't just offer its viewers more reasons to reconsider buying that next bottle of Fiji Water at the grocery store. It also prompts its viewers to ponder the bigger picture of corporate production and its possible harm. "When you really look at the basic concept of Fiji Water, it is about taking a resource from a place where it is scarce to a place where it is plentiful at a high economic and environmental cost," Ackley explains. "It is hard to imagine that as an eco-friendly concept." **Z**

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**Gay & Lesbian  
Community Notes**

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## New Culture Wars Over Gay Teens?

**By Michael Bronski**

We are beginning to see a small but gradual shift in the ongoing culture wars around queers, away from the issue of same-sex marriage back to the 1970s preoccupation with children. The issue of same-sex marriage has been front and center for anti-gay right wing organizing for the past decade. Ever since *Baehr v. Miike*, the 1993 decision by Hawaii's Supreme Court that allowed same-sex couples to get married (it was later overturned by a constitutional amendment), the specter of queers tying the knot has been conservatives' prime example of what can really go wrong with America.

Sixteen years later, while only a handful of states allow same-sex mar-

riage or civil unions and the government has passed the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) that forbids any federal marriage-related benefits to same-sex couples, it is clear that conservatives have lost this battle. Sure, they still bluster away about same-sex marriage hurting the heterosexual family and then bring out completely misused statistics to prove that fatherless families live in poverty, but there is little doubt that in two decades same-sex marriage will be completely legal in many states and DOMA will be gone.

This is, in part, due to most Americans getting used to the idea of same-sex marriage (polls show that women and men under the age of 25 have no problem with it) but also to the fact that most Americans don't care. Marriage in America—with an over 50 percent divorce rate and a raft of reality TV shows that demonstrate that dating, marriage, and being a housewife is a nightmare—is no longer an issue for culture wars. The general consensus is that same-sex marriage does not place American family values at risk and the institution of heterosexual marriage does not have to be protected.

On the other hand, many Americans may still feel that children need to be protected from "the homosexual lifestyle." This past October two events brought the issues of homosexuality and kids to the forefront. The first was the attack by conservative groups, spearheaded by the Family Research Council, on the appointment of Kevin Jennings to head up the Department of Education's endeavor to create "safe schools" at the state and local level. Jennings is the founder of the Gay

