Despite organized anti-bottled-water campaigns across the country and a noisy debate about bottled water’s environmental impact, Americans are buying more bottled water than ever.

In 2011, total bottled water sales in the U.S. hit 9.1 billion gallons — 29.2 gallons of bottled water per person, according to sales figures from Beverage Marketing Corp.

The 2011 numbers are the highest total volume of bottled water ever sold in the U.S., and also the highest per-person volume.

Translated to the handy half-liter size Americans find so appealing, that comes to 222 bottles of water for each person in the country — four bottles of water for every man, woman and child, every week.

Indeed, bottled water sales aren’t just growing — it’s fair to say they’re booming. Volume increased by 4.1 percent in 2011 — five times as fast as the 0.9 percent growth in the sales of beverages overall, according to Beverage Marketing. Bottled water sales, in fact, are growing twice as fast as the economy itself.

“Americans are drinking more bottled water because they find it convenient, appealing and also healthy,” says Gary Hemphill, who is managing director for information services at Beverage Marketing, and a longtime observer of bottled water and beverage sales in the U.S. and around the world.

The resurgence of bottled water — sales dropped in 2008 for the first time in 31 years, and again in 2009, tracking declines in overall drink sales because of the recession — may be surprising given the debate about its value as a product in the last five years.

The record sales year comes as more than a dozen colleges and universities have taken the extraordinary step of banning sale of bottled water on campus, often under pressure from student organizing campaigns that encourage students to drink tap water.

Just last week, Loyola University in Chicago announced it would stop selling bottled water in cafeterias and on-campus stores this fall, and remove bottled water from vending machines starting in 2013. Loyola joins at least 15 other schools in the U.S. and Canada in banning bottled water sales, including the University of Vermont, Washington University, DePauw University, and Harvard’s School of Public Health.
At least four major municipalities — New York, Seattle, San Francisco, and Chicago’s Cook County — have banned use of government funds to purchase bottled water.

Despite the record amount of water sold — 2011 beat out the previous, pre-recession year of 2007, when volume was 8.8 billion gallons — 2011 was not a record year in dollar sales of bottled water.

At retail, Americans spent $21.7 billion on bottled water in 2011, just under 2007’s spending.

The big three bottled water companies — Coke, Pepsi and Nestlé — have been discounting water heavily in the last few years, to sustain sales through the recession and the growing opposition.

“Pricing in this category has been aggressive,” says Hemphill, “which has helped.”

Although the U.S. has among the safest tap water in the world, the U.S. remains the largest market for bottled water. The next two, in order, are China and Mexico, both countries in which tap water is either unavailable, or typically not considered safe to drink.

The increase in Americans’ consumption of bottled water is extraordinary — the growth having more in common with digital-era products than typical consumer products.

As recently as 2001, per person consumption of bottled water was just 18.2 gallons per person.

Despite the size and visibility of the business, the amount of water actually sold is relatively tiny, compared to tap water volumes. U.S. water utilities supply more than 1 billion gallons of tap water an hour, every hour of the day.

The total amount of water in the bottles Americans buy in a year would only supply U.S. tap water needs from midnight until 9 a.m. on January 1.