

15 | Back to the Caves

“Huh. If we listened to him, we’d all go back to the caves and live a life of misery,” snorted Marek.

The speaker in assembly this week was a man from a green organisation, and he had been urging them all to ‘reduce, reuse and recycle’.

“Yeah, sure,” Tom sneered. “Keep on consuming Marek, and pretty soon we’ll have nowhere else to live, ‘cos we’ll have used everything up. Like he said, we have to live in a way that’s sustainable.”

“I don’t get it,” Tessa complained. “Last week, remember, that woman from the paper mill said they will be sustainable, yet today he said we should try to use a lot less paper. Who’s right? Which is really sustainable?”

“Chopping down tonnes of trees is not sustainable. You’ve gotta leave the forests alone, let them grow,” asserted Tom.

“Yeah, but they plant new trees to replace the old. That’s what sustainability is – making sure we don’t run out of stuff, or that we can replace it with something else if we do,” replied Marek.

“The animals can’t live in the new trees, can they?” queried Tessa. “What about sustaining them?”

“But we need some paper, don’t we?” Marek came back. “Sure, you can cut back a bit, but imagine going to the toilet without paper!” Everyone laughed, but they squirmed a little too.

“That woman seemed to think it was all about the economy,” commented Tom. “Just as long as the companies can still make stuff, and still make money, that’s sustainability.”

“And he seemed to think it was all about keeping the environment as it is – nothing can get done that harms it in any way,” responded Marek. “Don’t worry if people are starving ‘cos they have no job.”

“Yeah, it’s all very well people rabbiting on about being sustainable, but what exactly does it mean? What should we do or not do?” asked Tessa.

"Scientists can tell us," said Marek. "They can let us know what the effects on the environment are of doing this or doing that. They can calculate the risks involved."

"OK ..." wondered Tessa, "but we've still got to decide whether we ought to do it, and accept the risks, or not."

"It would help if we all lived more simply," stated Tom.

"What are you going to give up, Tom?" asked Marek, "your phone, your computer games?"

Wai Ling, who had been listening, now broke her silence. "That's alright for us," she said thoughtfully, "but what about the rest of the world? We're comfortable but we could give up a few things. There are millions of people in China, India and so on who have nothing like what we've got, and they want it. If they all got it, the environment would be a mess. But how can we tell them to keep living in poverty, so we can save the environment? If we want to save the environment, and be fair to everyone, we had better cut back a lot."

There was silence, then Marek said in a jolly voice, "OK, where's a nice comfortable cave?" They all laughed.