

Friends of the Earth and Palm Oil: The Pot Calling the Kettle Black?

Contributed by Frank Tate

In the final analysis, we have to ask whether the FOE has been hasty in demonizing the palm oil industry in Malaysia and Indonesia, the literary pot calling the kettle black or are they just Harper Valley hypocrites!

The phrase "The pot calling the kettle black" is an idiom, used to accuse another speaker of hypocrisy. We are the pot calling the kettle black when we point to another person and accuse that person of doing something that we are equally guilty of doing. In former times cast iron pots and kettles were quickly blackened from the soot of the fire, so it seems ridiculous of the pot to call the kettle black.

Chinese philosopher Mencius relates a similar story about a soldier laughing at another soldier retreating 100 steps, while retreating 50 steps himself.

I remember thinking of this idiom whilst walking through the aisle of Petboys shopping for a snow chain. The easy melody and lyrics of a legendary country and pop hit of the late sixties came wafting through the rows of auto-accessories. I recall thinking how ironic it was that serendipity should contrive to have the song played just as I was considering the subject of hypocrisy!

Written by the singer songwriter Tom T. Hall, the song "Harper Valley PTA" became the anthem and rallying call of a generation of Americans fed up with the hypocrisy and lies of the times.

The lyrics talked about how a Mrs. Johnson "socked it to a group of parents in a PTA meeting" for mocking her dress and lifestyle, behind her back.

The song laments:

"Well, there's Bobby Taylor sittin' there and seven times he's asked me for a date
Mrs. Taylor sure seems to use a lot of ice whenever he's away
And Mr. Baker, can you tell us why your secretary had to leave this town?
And shouldn't widow Jones be told to keep her window shades all pulled completely down?"

Well, Mr. Harper couldn't be here 'cause he stayed too long at Kelly's Bar again
And if you smell Shirley Thompson's breath, you'll find she's had a little nip of gin
Then you have the nerve to tell me you think that as a mother I'm not fit
Well, this is just a little Peyton Place and you're all Harper Valley hypocrites"

The poignant words have gone on to be a classic in the annals of songwriting on the hypocrisy that prevails around the world, not only on a social level but also in the political context! How fitting then when we juxtapose the words of this powerful social commentary against the hypocrisy of the Environmental NGO's in their relentless campaign to ban palm oil!

For one, in the past 500 years, 816 known species have become extinct. Some 103 of these have been documented to have occurred since 1800. And guess where most of these extinctions have taken place? The self same countries from which these Environmental NGO's hail! Isn't it the height of hypocrisy for European NGO's to call for the ban of palm oil as an edible oil and even as biofuel?

The pharisaic sounding Friends of the Earth (FOE), a UK based Environmental NGO in their callous campaign called "Oil for Ape Scandal" claims that without urgent intervention, the rapid growth of the palm oil industry in Asia could lead to the extinction of the great ape over the next twelve years. Isn't that a case of the pot calling the kettle black?

According to the latest Red List published by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), by 2006, close to 16,118 species are threatened with extinction. 1206 species of birds and 1,811 species of amphibians face the threat of being wiped off the face of this earth. Mammals alone account for 1,093 species that is threatened with extinction. We have to ask just where do we find these threats of extinction? Is it all over the world or just in Malaysia and Indonesia?

Of all the species threatened with extinction, some of them, such as the 21 species of albatross threatened with extinction from long line fishing, are found in the Western and Northern hemisphere. Dozens of other mammalian, amphibian and bird species in the Western hemisphere have their existence on this earth threatened, and the FOE, after much soul searching, have singled out the 60,000 Orang Utan left in the wild thousands of miles away in Indonesia and Malaysia. So torn has the FOE been, that they have launched a multi million Pound advertising campaign against the palm oil industry in Malaysia and Indonesia!

Of course things need to be done to try and keep a bit of what we still have. The problem is in interpreting the science and balancing legitimate concerns. But environmental issues are complicated and there are often conflicting interests and factors to be weighed such as the development of developing economies and the livelihood of the indigenous people. We should also consider the responsible environmental measures taken by the Malaysian palm oil industry as well as the strong environmental laws promulgated and vigorously enforced by the Government in Malaysia vis a vis Indonesia before tarring both with the same brush!

In the final analysis, we have to ask whether the FOE has been hasty in demonizing the palm oil industry in Malaysia and Indonesia, the literary pot calling the kettle black or are they just Harper Valley hypocrites! THE END.