



Small People Creating Big Changes

Asha & Jia Kirkpatrick

London, England

Ten-year-old Asha and her eight-year-old sister Jia were watching their favorite program on TV: *The Orangutan Jungle School*. This show tells the stories of the orangutans and their caretakers in the world's biggest rehabilitation center for the species, on the island of Borneo.

The sisters were learning a lot about orangutans from the show: how they learn new skills, how they behave, and of course why they had ended up in a rehabilitation center. The answer to that question was that many of the apes had been orphaned when their natural habitats were destroyed, because rainforests are being cut down for palm oil production.

"We started looking into it. We didn't think it was that bad at first; but then we realized it's a big problem," Asha says. "It causes so much deforestation!" Jia adds.

To their dismay, Asha and Jia noticed that palm oil was in the chocolate that they had gotten their mother for her birthday, and in almost everything they liked to eat. And that is no surprise: palm oil is now the most used vegetable oil in the world, and the demand for it is continuing to rise. On the island of Borneo, where the sisters' favorite TV show is produced, since 1973 16,000 square miles of rainforest have been destroyed to make more room for palm oil production.

"It is mainly the orangutans' forests that are being cut down," says Asha. "And not a lot of wildlife can live in the agricultural palm trees, because it is not as diverse as the usual trees."

Palm oil is not only used in chocolate of course: it is also used in the production of breads and sweets, biofuels and cosmetics, ice cream and soap. And when the girls had done some more research, they found another product that uses palm oil: their breakfast cereal, produced by Kellogg's.

"It's ironic how it is a cereal brand for children, but they're cutting down the rainforest as well," says Asha. They found a report by the environmental organization Greenpeace that listed companies whose practices were particularly harmful to the environment: it included Pepsi and Nestlé—but also Kellogg's.

So, together with their mom, they decided to take action. They started a petition on change.org, calling on Kellogg's to stop destroying the rainforest for palm oil.

"We love orangutans," the petition reads. "And we were really upset when we saw that the numbers of orangutans that are being killed and orphaned every year are being increased by companies who want cheap palm oil—it has to stop now!"

The sisters sent their petition to friends and family, and they gathered about 10 signatures on the first day. "It was a really slow start," Jia says. But luck was on their side.

Around the same time, a UK supermarket called Iceland teamed up with Greenpeace to create a TV ad about palm oil, but it was banned for breaching political advertising rules, and an uproar followed. "After that, our petition literally

exploded,” says Asha. “When we went on holiday there were maybe 15,000 signatures. And then when we came back it was like 200,000!”

Soon the media started to get interested in their story. The sisters were interviewed by newspapers and even invited onto a radio show. With the number of signatures on the petition constantly growing, Kellogg’s finally decided they had to react. So they invited Asha and Jia to come to a meeting.

Together with their mom, the sisters travelled to the company’s headquarters in Manchester. It was a bit nerve-wracking to meet all of the company’s executives in their impressive, 12-story glass tower, Asha remembers. At the Kellogg’s headquarters there is free cereal for all employees—and visitors. But Asha and Jia weren’t impressed by the fancy building, or the free cornflakes they were given.

“The first thing they said to us was ‘What do you know about Kellogg’s?’” Asha remembers. She kept a cool head as she calmly replied, “I know that you use 23 of the 26 worst palm oil suppliers.” With that, the atmosphere of the meeting changed immediately: the executives had hoped to talk about their brand, their company’s growth, and their social service activities—but Asha had instantly, and deftly, changed the conversation.

“As soon as we got home from that first meeting, we had two interviews,” Jia says. News stations wanted to cover any upcoming meetings, but Kellogg’s wouldn’t allow it, explaining that they weren’t a very public company.

It was the same reason they gave for not publicly supporting Wilmar, an important purchaser of palm oil that had come under pressure from Greenpeace, and as a result had recently announced more sustainable business practices. A public statement by Kellogg’s in support of more sustainable practices would have sent an important message. But at their second meeting with Asha and Jia, it became clear that Kellogg’s wasn’t willing to take a stand.

“It must have been embarrassing for them,” says Asha. “We travelled all the way to meet with them, and it was for nothing, just for them to tell us that they hadn’t done anything,” Jia says.

In the meantime, the number of signatures on the petition kept rising; at the time of this writing the number had climbed to over 900,000. Eventually, the bosses at Kellogg’s had no choice—they had to do something.

So they called a third meeting with the young changemakers, and this time they delivered—at least on paper. They pledged that until 2025 they would switch entirely to using segregated palm oil, which is a more sustainable product. They also launched a Global Deforestation policy that will help to mitigate deforestation. And they promised to enlist the help of non-governmental organizations like Greenpeace to ensure that their policy is being implemented on the ground.

“But they need to actually *do* it!” Jia emphasizes. And she says that she and her sister will stick to their guns. They plan to meet with the executives at Kellogg’s regularly, to make sure that the company is fulfilling their promises. “We need to make sure that they are doing what they said they were going to do,” says Asha. “So, it’s not just us coming by and them saying ‘Oh we haven’t done anything,’ and then extending the deadline even more.”

Besides holding Kellogg’s to account, Asha and Jia have other big plans. After all, there are a lot of other companies that use palm oil in their products, without regard to the impact on the environment and on local populations.

“We are thinking about who we are going to contact next,” says Jia. “We were considering Nestle or Pepsi.”

Until these companies change their harmful practices, there are things that everyone can do to help, Asha says. Learning about the ingredients used in the products we consume is important, and wherever possible one should try not to buy products that use palm oil.

Since the sisters have discovered the horrible effects of palm oil production, buying gifts for their parents has become a lot more difficult. But as Asha points out, it is their parents’ generation that has caused much of the damage to our

planet--so they do own some responsibility for the problem. "They destroy the world, and now they've left it to us to fix it," she says. "And that's going to affect the way we live when we're older."

Asha and Jia have recently welcomed a new member to their family--Benni, a furry, friendly-looking teddy orangutan. When they grow up they want to travel to Borneo, to see where the real orangutans live, and maybe even visit the Orangutan Jungle School.

Until then, they will keep on fighting to protect the orangutans, so there still will be something to visit once they get there. "If you think something is wrong, you can change it," says Asha. "But you have to put the effort into it." They have received several letters from David Attenborough congratulating them on their progress.

Thank you for what you are doing to help tackle the problems caused by palm oil. I am glad that young people like yourselves care so passionately about the planet - it gives me great hope for the future.

Sir David Attenborough

Call to Action: When you next go to the supermarket, check the ingredients list on the products in your shopping cart. If they include palm oil, try to find alternatives! If you can't, it's okay: the most important step is the first one; becoming aware of the problem and you can always let the product producer know your concerns. You can also follow Asha and Jia's progress on www.petitiongirls.com and sign the petition on <http://change.org/KelloggsPalmOil>

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