

Ode to the Lorax

The Business of Sustainable Development: An African Forest Tale

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Way back in the days of pre-colonial bliss
when primordial forests were covered with mist
wood dwelling natives ate nuts, berries and bees
and picked monkey bread pods from the baobab trees.

One glorious morning Abdou Jallow Njiaye
was harpooning dogfish and eating them fried
when he noted a speck sailing in from the sea.
It was Captain Lusitanious Frangelli McGee
with a flag, a cigar and a beard full of fleas.

Stepping out of his dingboat onto the beach
he presented himself with spect-perfluous speech.
He waved and he bowed and then he announced:
"Bark-dudalus Cronkus et Fribulous Sneess
by dint of my foot please give me a piece."

Well then, Abdou consulted friends, mothers and chiefs
offering the captain a well shaded seat
on the branch of a fruit-laden smorgasbord tree
with a vine for a foot rest and a cup of bark tea
a view of the village, the forest, and sea.

But, off sailed the captain waiving his hat
he was back in a fortnight with five boats at that.

McFilch and O'Pillage set up their camp
smack dab in the village by kerosene lamp.
Cousins Extracto and Bernard du Corvée
built rows of square houses in less than a day,
trading green widgets for fruits on long trays.

Extracto and Corvée soon started their work
when they pulled out hack-hackers, and tree plucking plerks.
They were met eye to eye by incredulous chiefs
with oddball requests and illogical beefs.

"Please" said one chief with a sad twisted smile
"your hacking is stretching for over a mile.
These forests provide us with edible sap, and cowberry fruits;
not to mention the spirits that live in their roots."

"Never fear," barked McGee, "our work does no harm.
It's your very own cutting that's cause for alarm."

"Why cutting in chaos for *your* houses and fuel
wastes such fine wood we could sell in ol' Liverpool.
If you keep using forests for *your* insatiable needs
how will we ever supply Europe with thneeds?"

"A *thneed*?
Why a *thneed* is a thing with just so many uses!
It can serve as a coffin for great northern mooses.
It can serve as a bench or a box to hold sunff
or a stylish stand for a fine coffee cup.

"Can't you see" said McGee "I come with a vision.
We'll cut down the forests from here to Mount Mission.
We'll rotate them by decades and watch them grow back.
So there'll always be forests for continuous hack-hack."

"Sustainable-bility we'll call it" he said.
"There'll be eternal growth from now till we're dead.
The whole lovely thing will take place in straight lines
and its assured to work smoothly due to exorbitant fines."

"The best for the most and the most for the best--
mostly me, he then mumbled—and jobs for the rest...."

"Yes" spoke the chief, "I can see with your eyes.
Have you ever considered selling kola nut pies?
...or tradable permits for black clouds in the sky?"

"Your work leaves our village in a sea of new stumps
we don't even have places to hide rubbish dumps.
Our rains won't come without forests around
and your rotational methods drive our young out of town."

"We can't wait ten years for our trees to grow back.
We must cook our next meal on that wood that you hack.
We have bellies to fill and spirits to feed.

So please go away with your plerks in good speed."

"But if," quipped McGee, "you use trees *just* to survive
the thneeds of all nations will be cruelly deprived."

"Don't waste them for fodder or your daily fuel.
In the life of your nation play your role as a tool
for supporting the national good is the rule."

"Look! Here in the rulebook—which you must obey—
you have rights to the things that we don't take away.
But we can't take the wood without taking the trees
so you'll have to make due with the stumps and some seeds."

"You can grow village woodlots—eucalyptus or pines
we'll help you to manage them through incentives and fines.
If you want to participate please lend in a hand.
Do as we tell you and we'll tell you you can.
If you listen-look-learn and do as *we* say
even democratization will be on its way!"

"We must protect forests from people like you
so people with business will have business to do."

Abdou and the chiefs puzzled looks at each other
when they heard the wise voice of Abdou's first mother...
She said: "I can remember the last time you came.
You said something totally different, but you did just the same."

"This time it is I who will outline the rules:
You must stop hogging access to markets and tools.
We will cut and sell forests just as we like
keeping smorgasbord trees and paths to ride bikes."

"The woods of my vision are a patchwork so fine
of trees giving lumber and rope-making vines:
We'll keep great stately egg-trees, and bee trees with honey.
We'll eat purple zump fruits, and sell some for money."

"When it's time for the harvest we'll dance the night through,
Eating berries and crumpets, we may even invite you."

*** THE END ***