

Passage 1 – Palm Oil

- 1 Palm oil, an edible oil derived from the fruit of oil palm trees, has had many uses, for example as food and in medicine, for more than 5,000 years. It is one of the first products ever to be traded among different countries. Demand for palm oil increased significantly during the so-called Industrial Revolution in Britain, where it was used to grease the machinery in the factories which were springing up everywhere. By around 1870, palm oil was the main export of some African countries, such as Ghana and Nigeria, but today its main producers are Indonesia and Malaysia. 5
- 2 Palm oil is used in the making of various soap-based goods, because it provides a satisfying lather. Most large-scale manufacturers of processed foods make use of palm oil because it contains a natural preservative which enhances the food's shelf-life. Moreover, the smooth and creamy texture of palm oil, along with its absence of smell, makes it ideal in many recipes, including those for pastry and other baked foods. Some research shows that palm oil has medicinal properties which improve liver health, the immune system and even skin nutrition. 10
- 3 Fuel called biodiesel is manufactured from palm oil, thereby providing fuel for cars and other means of transport which is both sustainable and less polluting than petrol. Biodiesel is used in furnaces and boilers to heat buildings, and produces far less pollution than fuels like coal and gas. The waste materials which result from the production of palm oil – shells and bunches of palm fruit – are also used to produce energy, as they can be converted into pellets for use as bio-fuel. After it has been used for cooking, palm oil can also be chemically treated to create yet more biodiesel; in 2007 Disneyland began running its park trains on biodiesel made from its own cooking oils. All of this means that palm oil is in high demand as a fuel as well as for food, giving rise to the 'food versus fuel' debate. 15
- 4 Compared with other types of oil, palm oil needs half the amount of land to produce the same amount of oil, and so its production is much cheaper than that of other oils. It is a high-yielding crop as both the flesh and the kernel of the fruit produce oil, which makes it lucrative for the companies who own and manage palm oil plantations. These plantations bring employment to local people; it is estimated that currently 4.5 million people in Indonesia and Malaysia earn their living from palm oil production. Additionally, the profits from this industry bring further advantages to local people by providing better roads, sewage systems, water supplies, schools and hospitals. 20
- 5 However, palm oil production has its critics too. Despite some claims that palm oil has health benefits, recent research suggests that this may not be the case, and that its consumption is linked to increased risk of heart disease. Moreover, some palm oil companies develop the land without consulting the people who already live there, or offering them any compensation for their loss of land. Forests are cleared to plant palm oil trees, and this deforestation produces greenhouse gases and is a contributor to global warming. Such deforestation destroys the natural habitat of many animals, making some of them, for example the orangutan and the Sumatran tiger, critically endangered species. However, the Malaysian government in 1992 promised to limit the expansion of palm oil plantations by keeping at least 50 per cent of that beautiful country's land as forests, so all is not lost. 35
- 6 Environmental groups, such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, campaign to raise public awareness of the issues surrounding palm oil. They argue that the threat posed to the planet by greenhouse gases outweighs the benefits of switching to biofuels. In 2004 the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) was formed, outlining the environmental and social criteria with which palm oil companies should comply. It is wonderful that by November 2012, RSPO had over 1,000 members. It can be seen that palm oil has both positive and negative impacts. The key will be to minimise the negative ones. 45

Passage 2 – Swimming

- 1 One of my father’s business contacts became such a close family friend that my elder brother, Ravi, and I called him uncle to indicate respect and affection. When he was a young man, he was a champion competitive swimmer and he looked the part his whole life. Ravi once told me that, when our uncle was born, the doctor, to get him to start breathing, had to take him by the feet and swing him above his head round and round. ‘It forced all his flesh and blood to his upper body, Pi,’ said Ravi, wildly spinning his hand above his head. ‘That’s why his chest is so thick and his legs are so skinny.’ To think that I believed him! 5
- 2 Even in his sixties, my uncle swam thirty lengths every morning at the local pool. He tried to teach my parents to swim, but he never got them to go beyond wading up to their knees at the beach and making ludicrous circular motions with their arms. This made them look as if they were walking through a jungle, spreading the tall grass ahead of them. Ravi was just as unenthusiastic. To find a willing disciple, my uncle had to wait until I was old enough to learn how to swim which, he claimed, to my mother’s distress, was at the age of seven. He brought me down to the beach, pointed seawards and said, somewhat extravagantly: ‘This is my gift to you.’ Under his watchful eye I lay on the beach and fluttered my legs, scratching away at the sand with my hands, turning my head at every stroke to breathe. I must have looked like a child throwing a peculiar, slow-motion tantrum. In the water, as he held me on the surface, I tried my best to swim. I was faithful to my aquatic guru. 10
- 3 When my uncle felt that I had progressed sufficiently, he decided we should turn our backs on the blue-green waves and the bubbly surf, and so we headed for the predictability and the flatness of the local swimming pool. I went there with him three times a week, on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, an early morning ritual with clockwork regularity. Swimming instruction, in time becoming swimming practice, was gruelling, but there was the intense pleasure of doing a stroke with increasing ease and speed, over and over again, till I practically felt as if I were hypnotised, the water turning from molten lead to liquid light. It was on my own, a guilty pleasure, that I went sometimes to the sea, beckoned by the mighty waves that crashed down, and by the gentle tidal ripples that caught me. My gift to my uncle was two full lengths of the pool on my thirteenth birthday. I finished so spent I could hardly wave to him. 15 20 25
- 4 Beyond the activity of swimming, there was talk of it. It was the talk that my father loved. The more vigorously he resisted actually swimming, the more he fancied it. Swimming lore was his leisure talk, so different from the workaday talk of running his business. 30
- 5 My uncle had studied for two years in Paris. He liked to describe the Deligny pool; it was unfiltered and unheated but, he said, an Olympic pool is an Olympic pool. He spoke of indoor pools with roofs, open all year round, but these were often dingy and crowded. Then there were others which were bright, modern and spacious, setting the standard for excellence in municipal pools. But no swimming pool in his eyes matched the splendour of the Molitor pool, about which he was prone to impossible exaggerations. It had the best swimming club in Paris, a section reserved for swimmers who wanted to swim lengths, and was as big as a small ocean. Wooden changing cabins, blue and white, surrounded the pool on two floors. The porters who marked your cabin door with chalk to show it was occupied were friendly and no amount of shouting or tomfoolery ever ruffled them. The showers gushed hot, soothing water; there was an exercise room, there was a cafeteria. It was, it was...it was the only pool that made my uncle fall silent, his memory swimming too many lengths to mention. My uncle remembered, my father dreamed. 35 40 45

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