

# What happened?



## Lesson Report

In this 2-part lesson, sustainability consultant Jon Walsh took Kenny's Grade 5 students on a voyage back through recent history where they examined a collection of objects we take for granted – including plastic drink bottles, mobile phones, disposable diapers and air conditioners – and looked for the answer to “What happened?” – ie: how did society only recently move from having none of these items, to now, where we have all of them, and an ever-growing mountain of pollution?



Out of mind does not mean out of sight – Jon describing where a lot of rubbish goes, including the Great Pacific Garbage Patch.

### What did students learn?

- Key ways that past generations coped without many of today's modern conveniences.
- Past generations were masters at recycling.
- 'Old time' methods were far more effective at reducing rubbish than almost anything we have today.
- In many cases, current generations have 1 more option than past generations did, and often that additional choice (often plastic) is highly destructive to the environment.
- Many societies have only recently lost or forgotten good sustainable living habits and replaced them with unsustainable ones.
- To find out more about how to live more sustainable lives and help create a healthier and cleaner planet, all we need to do is talk to older people.



Students discussed the following everyday objects:

- |                         |                    |
|-------------------------|--------------------|
| • Plastic drink bottles | Plastic bags       |
| • Mobile phones         | PCs, Internet      |
| • Air conditioners      | Disposable diapers |
| • Milk / Milk cartons   | Microwaves         |

to find out:

- Why we didn't have any of them only 65 years ago, and
- How people managed without them.

First, students learnt what 'sustainability' means, and that recycling, reducing and reusing are key ways to live more sustainably. They also learnt that the choices we collectively make about the things we buy, do, and use can have a very large impact on our environment: everything we throw away goes somewhere.



### FAST FACT

An estimated **200 billion** plastic water bottles were used worldwide in 2013.

Americans used about 50 billion plastic water bottles in that same period. However, the U.S.'s recycling rate for plastic is only 23 percent, which means 38 billion water bottles – more than \$1 billion worth of plastic – are wasted each year.



Next, based on their own research, students shared some key sustainability practices of past generations.

**Instead of.....**      **past generations.....**

**Plastic bottles**      Drank from fountains, taps, hoses, wells and glass bottles, the latter of which could be returned to a shop for a refund.

**Plastic bags**      Carried things in paper and cloth bags, wrapping paper, or used a trundler. Grocers would deliver shopping using bikes with large baskets on the front (see photo at right.)

**Mobile phones**      When meeting others, people would use a landline to arrange a time and place, then wait for the other party.

**PCs, Internet**      People researched information using encyclopedias, a library, or asked people.

**Air conditioners**      People would keep cool by opening windows and doors, and using electric fans.

**Diapers**      Before disposable diapers, cloth diapers would be washed, rinsed, boiled then re-used. To dry them, they would be hung on clotheslines (see p1) or in front of an open fire.

**Milk cartons**      Before cardboard and plastic milk bottles were invented, fresh milk would be delivered every night to the door and poured into a tin can. Later, milk would be delivered in recycled glass bottles that were collected (from mail box), washed and re-used.



Before plastic bags...a bike used by grocery stores to make home deliveries.

## Key questions

- Are we or were our parents' and grandparents' generations more sustainable?
- How many of these objects do you think you really can't live without?
- Which of these objects do you think creates the most pollution?
- Which of these objects do you think you could either **1/** replace with an environmentally-friendly alternative, or **2/** simply not use at all?
- Do you think our society is going backwards or forwards in terms of becoming more sustainable?

Finally, students discussed a number of key questions (at right) and concluded that past generations were more sustainable in many ways than ours. The answer to "What happened?", it would seem, is largely convenience.



- Personal & business sustainability resources, training and advice
- Urban food production & training
- Garden installation & maintenance

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