

Monsoon Features

Taking life into their own hands:

How the population of Tamil Nadu is taking a stand for their environment

What can break through our apparent immobilisation in the face of climate change? We are not documenting the demise of someone else's planet; we are walking eyes open into an uncertain future for our own. Does the lack of appropriate or logical action show us unwilling to comprehend the enormity of what we have created, or simply too overwhelmed by the scale of what we may need to do about it?

In 2005, just after the tsunami that swept away so many lives and livelihoods, a group of volunteers from The Isha Foundation were starting the job of rehabilitating the



devastated coast of Tamil Nadu, Southern India. They noticed that coastal villages that were forested suffered significantly less damage than those that were not, and an idea arose. Could trees be a tool to reconnect people to their hearts, to their grief and to their land?

They decided to grow saplings and present them on white cloths to each family as a gift to plant in memory of their loved ones. The effect was an unprecedented mass planting of 25,000 trees within a few short weeks by the inhabitants of only 6 villages. The overwhelming response of the people proved what the volunteers had hoped; that by directly interacting with and taking responsibility for a living tree, people experienced an internal shift back into "felt" relationship with themselves and the land. A

new environmental initiative called Project GreenHands was born.

Project GreenHands was clear from the very start that its role was to catalyze a mass mobilization of rural people to reforest their agriculturally ravaged land before desertification led to famine. Rural India was then and is still in the grip of a deep agricultural, financial and emotional crisis that is leading to the suicide of over 20,000 farmers every year. The project needed to be designed in a way that could breathe hope and self sufficiency back into the villages with the first step being education. Once the context for the planting was understood, an event would be created that linked joy and community to the experience of planting trees.

To raise immediate profile and energy around the project, a Guinness World Record attempt

was loudly proclaimed through every means possible, engaging every sector of society. On the 17th of October 2006, over quarter of a million men, woman and children planted 852,587 saplings across 27 districts in Tamil Nadu and Union of Pondichery, successfully claiming a new world record.

2007 saw the project shift gears and start adopting itself to a new intention; how to maintain the momentum but translate this into on-going, deliberate, mass public propagation and protection of trees? The answer; show how tree planting provides a way out of suffering. By supporting farmers to plant trees as poly-culture crops on lands that they can no longer even afford to farm, they are rehabilitating once barren land, protecting the soil from flood erosion, improving the health, happiness and livelihood of farmers, increasing the green cover, improving the micro climates and sequestering carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. By supporting schools, colleges, businesses and self help groups to participate and work together to build or tend nurseries, run their own campaigns and plant as many trees as they can, they are offering a whole population a collaborative way of handling the climate driven inevitability of their situation.

Project GreenHands has since facilitated the planting of a further 4 million saplings. They want their strategy of mass mobilization and environmental action to spread across India, and to other developing and developed nations, but they need our help to do this. These people are among the least responsible for climate change, and yet they are already among the worst affected. To increase their green cover by 10% state wide, to minimize the risk of wide scale deserti-

fication and famine, they need to plant 114 million trees within the next 5- 10 years. They have the map, the tools and the willingness to do it, now they need the money, and they need millions fast. Anything that you can give will contribute.

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