Growing Sadhana Forests in India and abroad

On December 19th, 2013
Sadhana Forest will turn 10 years old. Auroville Today spoke with founder Aviram about the project’s activities and progress.

Sadana Forest started after Aviram, together with his wife Yorit and their daughter Osher, came to Auroville in 2002. They went to the Forest Group in 2003 and were granted about 70 acres of largely barren, unused land to develop. Since then they have been living and working to develop the forest.

They have now covered about 55 of the 70 acres, reclaiming about five acres each year. Aviram explains that a lot of effort goes not only into planting trees, but also into water conserva-
tion. In fact, most of the manual work goes into the latter. Without first preparing the land to prevent the waste of water, the trees won’t do well unless a lot of effort is put into irrigating them, which is not cost-effective and not sustainable.

With good water conservation, tree planting becomes less important, because there will be a lot of natural regeneration. Sadhana Forest has made hundreds of small bands around trees, dozens of kilometers of contour bunding, and some large water catchment ponds with the help of Kinert from Gua’s Garden.

The Sadhana Forest community doing this work has now grown to about 20 long-term vol-
unteers and from anywhere between about 10 to 14 short-term volunteers, depending on the season. Whereas various institutions are regularly sending groups of volunteers, most come through word of mouth or learn about Sadhana Forest on the internet. Aviram explains that the community works very much as a gift economy. “People stay for free and contribute for their food if they can, and this goes together with their work for the forest. We give this experience to people, and then they can go back and perhaps live their life with some new insights. It is a way to move out of the human-centric idea that nature is there to serve us, and to move into a more plant-centric approach that looks at the needs of other species as well. Our effort goes into expanding consciousness beyond our own immediate or even long-term needs.

“Our emphasis is on putting consciousness into matter, on increasing the consciousness in our everyday actions. For example, we try to be very conscious and conserve natural resources. We cook only organic vegan food using very efficient wood-burning ‘rocket stoves,’ and provide all our own electricity with solar panels and a human-powered bicycle generator. We also try to be more conscious in our relationships with others in the community.”

Aviram

More than 40 wooden structures have been built in the community with a team of local people. For short-term volunteers, there are two wooden dormitories, each of which can house up to 60 people, each person in their own cubicle separated from the others by curtains. Once people stay in the community for a few months and demonstrate their commitment to the forest work and have leadership skills, they may become a long-term volunteer and take on more responsi-

Aviram explains that although there are many volunteers for normal tree care which takes place dur-
ing the tourist season, there often aren’t enough volunteers during the planting season, which begins in August in order to catch the summer monsoon and contin-
tues through September before the winter monsoon.

Having few volunteers dur-
ing this time, the work is challenging because of a lack of funds to hire work-
ers. They are presently try-
ing to find ways to create a bigger flow of volunteers during the planting season.

The growth of Sadhana Forest into a close-
knit community has happened very naturally, explains Aviram. “When Yorit, my wife, and I first came it was just us. Then people started coming and asking can we volunteer and eventually we ended up with many volunteers, but it wasn’t planned like this. At first it was just my family and slowly it grew with the same habits of a family, such as eating three times a day together, working together, and often spending time in the evenings together. For me it is great fun, because I feel that the diversity of people enables huge growth for each other. We enrich each other with ideas and different systems of beliefs and feelings.

“Like any diverse system that we see in nature, diverse human systems create resilience. A monoculture of people that all think the same is not interesting and is not strong. Sadhana Forest is an extreme example of human diversi-

We get volunteers from over 50 countries here every year, people of different ages and physical capabilities, eating together, working together, and living in dormitories together, in very close quarters. That has helped to create the resilience of the community, and enabled us to start the projects in Haiti, Kenya, and other places in India. All the support and energy and well-wishing that comes brings a huge force. People all over the world are thinking how to develop this and make it happen. I feel very lucky to live in a community like this; it is some-
thing very rare. It is not to say that there are no challenges, but overall the picture is one of a lot of happiness and joy.”

How is Sadhana Forest connected with the rest of Auroville? Aviram explains that Sadhana Forest serves Auroville in several ways. In addi-
tion to its obvious work of regenerating a large piece of Auroville land, Sadhana Forest is attract-
ing hundreds of volunteers each year, and they get to know about other projects in Auroville as well. They consume various services of Auroville, and then move on and tell others about their experience in Auroville. Also, many people have joined Auroville through Sadhana Forest, because joining Auroville is not cheap, and Sadhana Forest supports the people during the transition period. Another way it serves the Auroville community is that every week since June 2008 (except the week of Cyclone Thane) they have held the EcoFilm Club for the benefit of Aurovilians and guests, which includes an explanation and tour of the community, an eco-

Auroville Film Festival. In the words of the Jury, “It’s a wonderful film about a great attitude, that of service, or ‘Seva’, an Aviram puts it. Caring for the Earth in places where it’s most wounded and bringing it back to life, making it a personal cause and its own reward, making it possible for others to experience this ‘giving’, of themselves, to inspire the present and to work towards a future, full of wellbeing for the generations to come, this is what we see in this film about ‘Sadhana Forest,’ Haiti.”

Presently a third Sadhana Forest is being started in north Kenya, which will be built on the same model. Twenty-seven acres of land have already been purchased for the campus, and there are thousands of potential acres for development.

Sadana Forest also has expanded to other countries. There is a Sadhana Forest in Haiti, which is developing an area of about 6,500 acres. The campus and the nursery is on about seven acres, where there are dormitories and private huts for volunteers, just like in Auroville. The 83 minutes documentary on the work of Sadhana Forest in Haiti, One Day, Everything Will Be Free, just won the Wisdom Award 2013 in the Auroville Film Festival. In the words of the Jury, “It’s a wonderful film about a great attitude, that of service, or ‘Seva’, an Aviram puts it. Caring for the Earth in places where it’s most wounded and bringing it back to life, making it a personal cause and its own reward, making it possible for others to experience this ‘giving’, of themselves, to inspire the present and to work towards a future, full of wellbeing for the generations to come, this is what we see in this film about ‘Sadhana Forest,’ Haiti.”
PHOTO COURTESY SADHANA FOREST

The Ashram is happy with Justice Sasidharan's order. "We are never afraid of facing any inquiry. We were concerned with the unfair and partisan manner in which the inquiry was sought to be conducted by the District Collectors," said a representative of the Trust. Moreover, in the past similar allegations have been made against the Ashram and official inquiries which probed into these allegations have found them to be utterly false. The allegations with regard to human rights violation, for example, had already been investigated by the National Human Rights Commission, which found them baseless. Similarly, in the past the National Commission for Women, after a detailed investigation, had also dismissed complaints of sexual abuses in the Ashram and had observed that "there appeared to be a policy design in the manner in which the complaints have been lodged."

The Ashram responds to M.P. Pandit's right hand man in Gujarat. In his letter. The response of the Ashram can be read at http://auroleaks.wordpress.com/2012/10/19/ashram-responds-to-mps

AVIRAM EXPLAINS THAT WHEN PLANNING forest projects with a local popula- tion, it is necessary to first analyze what are the nutritional needs — what they have and don’t have in their diet and what should be supplemented. In terms of government funding, Sadhana Forest got one grant a year. In 2006, the USAID gave us a grant to the Ashram of ex-MP Shri Kartikeshwar Patra. However, though asked to furnish the list of the names and addresses and the contact numbers of these MPs, so that the Ashram could send the MPs the letter, the response of the Ashram can be read at http://auroleaks.wordpress.com/2012/10/19/ashram-responds-to-mps

THE LETTER OF 68 MPs

In July 2012, in a 14-page letter with 12 appendices, the Ashram responded to the letter of 68 MPs of May 22nd, 2012, seeking clarification of what they alleged was the Ashram’s role in Haiti. The letter of 68 MPs had been announced in a letter addressed to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram of ex-MP Shri Kartikeshwar Patra. However, though asked to furnish the list of the names and addresses and the contact numbers of these MPs, so that the Ashram could send the MPs the required explanations directly, this list was not provided by Shri Kartikeshwar Patra. It was found later that the signatures of two MPs had been affixed twice. That, and the fact that none of the MPs has so far responded to the reply of the Ashram, has cast doubts on the authenticity of the letter’s MP’s letter. The response of the Ashram can be read at http://auroleaks.wordpress.com/2012/10/19/ashram-responds-to-mps

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Aviram explains that when planning food forests with a local population, it is necessary to first analyze what are the nutritional needs — what they have and don’t have in their diet and what should be supplemented. In terms of government funding, Sadhana Forest got one grant a year. In 2006, the USAID gave us a grant to start the project. The project in Haiti is funded by two donors, one a French company that does processing of organic food. For Auroville, Sadhana Forest has depend- ed mainly on private donations, which are routed through the Unity Fund. Aviram explains, "It has been a struggle all along with the money and it is still a big struggle. But we feel supported, and as we know how we are doing, we believe that the Divine will support us. Until now it has been okay."