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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.

Sadhana 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 conservation. In fact, most of the manual work goes into the latter. Without first preparing the land to prevent runoff of rainwater, 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 bunds around trees, dozens of kilometers of contour bunding, and some large water catchment ponds with the help of Kireet from Gaia's Garden.

The Sadhana Forest community doing this work has now grown to about 20 long-term volunteers and from anywhere between about 10 to 140 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 on 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



Aviram

out of the human-centric idea that nature is there to serve us, and to move into a more planet-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."



Watching an eco film in Sadhana Forest

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 responsibility. The long-term staff members, those who stay for more than a year or two, get their own private hut or a couple's hut.

Aviram explains that although there are many volunteers for normal tree care which takes place during 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 continues through September before the winter monsoon. Having few volunteers during this time, the work is challenging because of a lack of funds to hire workers. They are presently trying 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 diversity. 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 something 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 addition to its obvious work of regenerating a large piece of Auroville land, Sadhana Forest is attracting 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 ecological film, and a free vegan organic dinner.

Sadhana Forests abroad

Sadhana Forest has also 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', as 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



Sadhana Forest Haiti's two new Tetrahedron dormitories

are thousands of potential acres for development. Having established a very good relation with the Kenyan government, Aviram hopes to do the same thing there on an even larger scale.

In Kenya they are working with the Samburu people, a local tribe that lives in the north. The idea is to give every home the opportunity to develop a small food forest around them. They will train the people in irrigation techniques that are simple, affordable, and accessible, as well as in tree planting and tree care techniques. The volunteers will come to their homes with the trees and help them plant them and later follow up to help them take care of them. This is the same approach as they have been using in Haiti for the past three years, where it has been very successful.

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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 Haiti, the problem is basically protein. "Our approach was to bring trees that have seeds or nuts that are very rich in protein, such as the Maya nut, an indigenous tree of Haiti that went extinct, which we have brought back to Haiti from Mexico. In Samburu County, Kenya, protein is not a problem. What they need is vitamins and minerals. So together with the Kenya Forest Service, we researched and identified 18 indigenous species which are high in vitamins and minerals which we will plant."

Are these projects in Haiti and Kenya independent of Auroville? Aviram explains that while the Sadhana Forests in Haiti and Kenya are registered as international NGOs through which donations for those projects are passed, they are tied into Auroville as much as possible. "We

feel that this is our expression of human unity. In Haiti, we are the official liaison with Auroville International. In Kenya, we have not started yet, but when we start we will find a way to tie it with Auroville as closely as we can. Auroville International has been very supportive of our work both in Haiti and in Kenya. We feel that Auroville is not just a physical place, but a perceptual place which can be expanded beyond its physical boundaries."

Sadhana Forest work in India

Sadhana Forest also extends to other parts of India. "In Madhya Pradesh in a place called Omkareshwar, an island in the Narmada River, we've created a beautiful piece of forest. Also in Madhya Pradesh, we are doing a water conservation project in a place called Luniyakhedi, near Ujjain. We made one big earth dam in February, and we will go back there at the end of October to do another one, and later it will be planted around. We've also



Sadhana Forest Kenya - Designing the land

trained a lot of people from India who come here and stay with us for some time and then go back to their place to do work."

Research

Research in Sadhana Forest is more an applied research as they have learned and experimented while working on the land. Aviram explains that they no longer plant in holes in the ground, but in heaps above the ground, which they have found is much more cost effective and gives a better survival rate. They have also experimented with wick irrigation, which consists of using reused plastic bottles with a wick that drips the water very slowly underneath the tree without any evaporation. This technique was introduced two years ago and it is working very well. The area currently being planted is very difficult terrain, full of pebbles, a very hard and dry soil. But using this technique it is now full of thousands of trees.

Sadhana Forest is also conducting research together with the University of Lausanne in Switzerland on oxalogenesis, which is a phenomenon in which trees take carbon from the air, and fix it into the ground as calcium carbonate, limestone. Even if you cut the tree and burn it, the carbon would stay in the ground. Aviram explains that is a very important discovery vis-a-vis global warming. Sadhana Forest in Auroville is now mainly planting four species of oxalogenic trees that are part of the Tropical Dry Forest indigenous to this area, as well as a few oxalogenic species that are indigenous to other parts of India, and will follow their growth and the soil composition for the next few years. There is also a master's student volunteer doing research on oxalogenesis in Haiti, and soon there will be a Ph.D. student doing research on this as well.

Aviram explains that indigenous reforestation is not a profit-making venture, so all the funds for Sadhana Forest come from donations, mainly

private. In terms of government money, Sadhana Forest got one grant a few years ago from the German government, through Auroville International Germany, to build the staff quarters and the training centre. For the new project in Kenya, they have just received approval of a grant request for \$50,000 from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to start the project. The project in Haiti is funded by two donors, one a French foundation and the other a French company that does processing of organic food. For Auroville, Sadhana Forest has depended 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 we are doing our best, we hope that the Divine will support us. Until now it has been okay."

Larry

for more information contact
<http://sadhanaforest.org>



Sadhana Forest Kenya - Community meeting