

## HUEY D. JOHNSON

# Planting a forest

**T**HIS IS A story about a forest renewed in India, a project started with help from a small foundation in California that began experimenting with ideals, appropriate technology, and a little money.

Two million trees now stand near Madras in southern India, where 20 years ago there was nothing but hard red clay, baked by the unrelenting sun, the result of the 100-year process of deforestation.

The forests had provided shade,

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food and fuel for many generations of Tamil people. The forests were habitat for birds and other wildlife, the stabilizers for soil, the holders of water, and absorbers of the carbon dioxide that had drifted in from more industrialized areas. When the trees were all chopped down for fuel, life became unimaginably hard. The water level dropped and the village wells went dry. Carrying water and fuel from long distances became part of life's burden.

Then came a group of 30 American and European idealists searching for a place to begin a new kind of life, looking to establish an alternative, artistic community. They founded Auroville, several thousands of barren acres on a plateau in Madras, above the Bay of Bengal.

By 1973, red haired, American-born Alan Lithman was back in the United States seeking ideas to help solve the problems of life in Auroville.

I counseled Lithman in a Marin coffee house. As a board member of the Point Foundation (which Stewart Brand had set up from the profits of the sale of the Whole Earth Catalogue), I argued that Lithman's small international community should focus on planting trees as a means of bringing the needs of people and the land together in a harmonizing way. Alan agreed and went back to India to discuss the value of growing trees in Auroville. His community agreed, and a plan to renew the earth began.

Tree planting was laborious, back-breaking work for these young idealists from industrialized nations. They had no gasoline for tractors. All they had was a need and a vision.

The baked red clay was hard to break through especially with hand tools. But they started, sweated and persevered. Tender care and constant watering were needed to keep new seedlings alive in those conditions. The water wagon was an ox-drawn cart with a 50-gallon barrel. The workers drew out water

for each tree down the line. When shade was apparent from the first plantings, more seeds were brought in from elsewhere. The diversity included threatened species like rosewood and mahogany.

The community used technology appropriate for the region more out of necessity than understanding. But it helped them learn important lessons such as planting before the monsoons, and building check dams to hold water in fields and gullies to prevent run off.

The native Tamil villagers watched, but did not assist the planting effort for several years.

They viewed these crazy foreigners with cynicism.

Then an astonishing thing happened. The villagers noticed that the water had returned to their wells. The trees had opened the soil, allowing underground aquifers to be recharged. The Tamils quickly became believers and tree planters.

Most wonderful of all was the return of the birds. Where there once was silence in the dry parched landscape, now the songs of a hundred different kinds of birds filled the air above the growing trees.

The success of Auroville's reforestation program has brought accolades and recognition from the Indian government and its example is now being introduced elsewhere in the country. Areas all over India need reforesting, and since the people there can replant for far less money than in most nations, their efforts can produce many millions of growing trees in a short time.

Little did the Point Foundation sense that its grant would foster such a phenomenal success. But we believed in the process and importance of involving people with renewing the earth. The Auroville reforestation story is a nice example of the potential of experimentation in American philanthropy, one of the ways we have to improve and even solve global problems.



EXAMINER/HARRY ALON