

# THE ACORN

APRIL 2015



## ¡ADELANTE!

Onwards! In January, Matt and I spent a couple of weeks in the project area of our Tree Bank Hispaniola program. We needed to solidify the arrangements that we had made after the death of Gaspar Pérez Aquino, the program's former Director, last September.

The Tree Bank works along part of the Dominican Republic / Haiti border, on the Dominican side, to conserve native forest and improve the incomes of small-scale farmers. Thus far, the project has protected or restored about 225 acres of forest and is helping 44 families.

The chaos that ensued after Gaspar's death has subsided, leaving us with an assortment of problems — some serious, and some merely irritating. None of these problems threatens the program's stability, and we are working on solutions to all of them. As we work, we are trying to reach beyond immediate issues, to improve the program as a whole. Here are the three problems of greatest concern to our farmers, and notes on how we are addressing them.

**1: Outstanding loans teach valuable lessons.** The Tree Bank's Forest Credit program, which extends credit to farmers in exchange for conservation easements on their forests, has closed its books on 34 of the loans that were made last year, leaving five loans outstanding. These unpaid loans can be attributed partly to the collapse of coffee (see the next item), and partly to declining annual-crop prices. All five of our debtors are committed to repaying when they can. Our 2015 loan cycle will include improved lending practices that educate people on the importance of safeguarding their credit.

**2: Death of coffee leads to rebirth of "coffee forest."** During the past two years, a coffee rust pathogen decimated coffee production in Central America and the Caribbean. The rust killed most of the coffee trees in our project region. This is a major set-back for our farmers because coffee was their most lucrative crop. But the Tree Bank nursery is producing thousands of rust-resistant coffee seedlings and

these are being planted out nearly as fast as we can grow them. (The trees should begin to bear in two years.) The coffee replanting is an opportunity to begin implementing our "incentivo" package. The incentivo is designed to establish groves of coffee and cacao — the little tree whose seeds are used to produce cocoa and chocolate — on low-value farmland. The coffee and cacao will be interplanted with native trees, which will eventually grow up over them, to create a native forest canopy. The result will be a kind of modified forest valuable to both wildlife and the farms, since both coffee and cacao are high-value crops. (For more on coffee, see inside.)

**3: Pickup parking will improve our field station.** A big disagreement has arisen over where the Tree Bank nursery's pickup truck should be parked. (Does this sound like a conservation issue to you? Not to us either.) It is currently garaged in the town of Loma de Cabrera, about nine miles from the nursery, at the house of Gaspar's family, because that's a safe place and the truck can be readily maintained there. Some farmers approve of this arrangement, but others want the truck stationed closer to the nursery, partly for convenience but also because, in their eyes, such an arrangement would be a big vote of confidence from us in their community. So we have agreed to build a garage near the nursery, in the little group of cabins that makes up our field station. Frankie, our mechanically savvy nursery employee, will care for the truck. (That's Frankie above, on the right.) The garage will be an important improvement to our field station.

As you may have gathered, this will be a busy year for the Tree Bank. The two biggest items on our agenda are likely to be the incentivo, and improvements to the Tree Bank nursery. (See inside for more on the nursery.) We'll keep you posted!

— Chris Bright, President

**Photo:** In January, Manolo (left) and Frankie extracted seeds from cacao fruit at our Tree Bank Nursery. Cacao seeds are the raw material for chocolate, but these seeds will grow more cacao trees.



## WE NEED MORE TREES!

Our Tree Bank Nursery is simple in its physical structure, but it serves a complex mission. It supplies native trees, propagated from local wild seed, for restoration plantings like the one shown above. It also produces thousands of economically important crop trees, like cacao, citrus, and the coffee shown below.

These two purposes complement each other: both types of production support the farms, and both support conservation. The tree crops provide some wildlife habitat and create income. The native trees provide higher-quality habitat, both for wildlife, and for two important shade-compatible tree crops: cocoa and coffee.

After eight years of production, we know the formula works. But we also know that the nursery is far too small to support its mission on a landscape scale. So we're going to upgrade it! At the nursery itself, we're planning to extend its shade frames, improve irrigation, and double our back-up water supply by installing an additional cistern.

A more sophisticated part of the upgrade involves seed collection. At present we have 11 native tree species in production. That's nowhere near enough, so we have set a short-term goal of having 25 natives in production by the end of the year.

Every year, the Tree Bank project area loses more forest. Our nursery, and the community that supports it, are one of the best hopes for regenerating this threatened world.

## BALANCING FOREST & BEAN

Just three years ago, when Chris and I launched Rising Forests Coffee, we roasted every bag to order, one at a time, in a small countertop roaster. There were nights we hardly got any sleep as we stayed up roasting coffee well into the evening. After we set fire to our overburdened roaster — who knew that my firefighting experience could come in handy after all? — we knew we had to come up with a better method.

That realization eventually lead us to our current arrangement at Beanetics Coffee Roasters in Annandale, Virginia, where every bean of Rising Forests Coffee has been roasted for the last two years. That hurdle cleared, all we had to do was maintain an online ordering system, organize inventory, design and print packaging, keep track of incoming orders, and ship them out. Simple!

Despite our best efforts, it seems that we are better at conservation than logistics. With over 75 bags of coffee to pack and ship every

*Continued on inside back page . . .*

**Photo:** Above, in January, Cosme and son (at left) show Manolo (center) and Matt part of Cosme's Tree Bank forest-restoration planting near the Dominican Republic / Haiti border. Those trees are about seven years old. Below, also in January, thousands of disease-resistant coffee seedlings await planting at the Tree Bank nursery.



# IN GRATITUDE TO OUR MAJOR DONORS FOR 2014



## **\$5,000 & above**

The Shared Earth Foundation (\$20,000)  
An anonymous donor (\$15,090)  
The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region (\$13,943)  
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## **Our 2014 Government Partners**

Our government partners are crucial allies in conservation. We are grateful for the funding that these two agencies provided for our work last year.

**Fairfax County, Virginia:** \$16,150 for work in Fairfax County parks and schoolyards.

**US Fish & Wildlife Service:** \$16,260 for meadow restoration at the Occoquan Bay National Wildlife Refuge.

## **Year-End / New Year Match**

The match to help build our "Conservation Teams" amounted to \$7,056. We are deeply grateful to the two anonymous donors who provided it.

**Photo:** Mountain ridges in early morning, as seen from our Tree Bank field station in January.

We thank everyone who has given to the Sangha, in whatever form. We owe a special debt of gratitude to these people and organizations, who made major donations to our work last year. The Sangha has drawn great strength from their generosity and vision. May the spirit of their gifts continue to live within our work and practice.

### \$250 - \$499

Harry & Nicole Campbell  
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**Photo:** In January, Gary Putnam, Arlington Regional Master Naturalist and Seed Craftsman Extraordinaire, displayed the fruits of his skill at one of our seed cleaning events. We think that Gary was working with purpletop grass (*Tridens flavus*). That seed will be germinated this spring at our Wild Plant Nursery — and planted into restoration sites by the end of this fall.



... from inside front page

month, we have sometimes messed up orders (sorry!) or run out of packaging. Not exactly the customer experience that we had hoped to offer.

That's why we're so excited to announce a new partnership with Beanetics. Beginning April 6, not only will you be able to buy Rising Forests Coffee directly from the Beanetics coffee shop, on Columbia Pike in Annandale, just west of Gallows Road — but Beanetics will also pack and ship subscription and online orders. This means fresher coffee that actually arrives on time.

But the biggest benefit will occur at the other end of the supply chain: we'll have more time to work with our farmers to improve their coffee, and to conserve and restore threatened tropical forest.

If you've been following our updates on the Tree Bank, you'll know that we're at a critical juncture in our work, after the loss of Gaspar. (See the first page.) The Asociación de Productores de Bosque, Los Cerezos, our partner association, is under new leadership, and we are adding a third position to our own Dominican staff. Our Tree Bank Nursery is undergoing renovations in preparation for a substantial expansion. And we're continuing to develop our Forest Credit program, which serves about 40 farms in exchange for easements over 150 acres of forest.

Our January trip to the Dominican Republic was all about building a framework for better communication and collaboration, and we're making good progress on this front — it seems that hardly a day goes by without Chris talking on the phone to someone in Los Cerezos. So I think we're where we need to be. Our coffee clients will appreciate more professional delivery, and we'll be able to invest more staff time in forest conservation on Tree Bank farms — growing more trees, vetting more loans, beginning to map out our conservation easements, and working with farmers to develop their coffee groves for even tastier coffee.

— Matt Bright, Conservation Coordinator

## Marie Butler Leven Preservin'

In the previous *Acorn*, we described our plans to roll out a new Restoration Team Leader program to tackle invasive alien species at the 20-acre Marie Butler Leven Preserve, in the McLean section of Fairfax County, Virginia. Despite the harsh winter, we've already made a lot of progress, and we have a full schedule for spring at the Preserve.

Already Jerry and Evelio have cleared large swaths of brambles, Japanese honeysuckle, and multiflora rose from the narrow strip of forest between Kirby Road and the main meadow. This area, where it's not overrun by invasive thickets, is home to tuliptree, redcedar, black cherry, sassafras, staghorn sumac, and at least half a dozen other native tree species. We plan to let the area regenerate naturally. A diverse, regenerating forest is a perfect way to educate park visitors about the benefits of native plants in both cultural and natural landscapes.

And near the park entrance, candidate Eagle Scout Greg Hardison from Troop 1128 has restored the Pollinator Garden. Using local-ecotype stock from our own Wild Plant Nursery, Greg and his team removed English ivy, Japanese honeysuckle, and Eurasian fescue, then planted a selection of common meadow forbs (goldenrods and asters) that will serve as a floral foundation for future work in this area.

Other Restoration Team Leaders have also begun to lead field events, or will do so soon. Our spring season has only just begun but the volunteers have already invested many hours of effort into the Preserve. We're committing to making a big impact here this year, and thanks to everyone who has come out, we are well on our way.

— Matt Bright, Conservation Coordinator

**Photo:** In January, volunteers pulled invasive alien vines and shrubs from a forest edge at the Marie Butler Leven Preserve, in Fairfax County, Virginia.



## Coming Up This Spring

**N**ative, local-ecotype plant sale! On Sunday, May 3, our Wild Plant Nursery hosts its annual Spring Open House and Plant Sale, in Springfield, Virginia. Choose from scores of native herbs, shrubs, and trees, all propagated from the wild. All proceeds go to ecological restoration projects in local parks. Member discounts are available. See our website, [earthsangha.org](http://earthsangha.org), for more information.

**Befriend** hundreds of native-plant species by volunteering at the nursery. You'll meet an interesting assortment of native-plant enthusiasts, Nursery Divas, naturalists — as well as the occasional stray lawyer or engineer. (These categories overlap somewhat.) Engage in witty, culturally-informed banter with fellow volunteers while watering, transplanting, and hauling wheelbarrow-loads of soil. It's a full life out there. For details check our website, [earthsangha.org](http://earthsangha.org).

**Release** your rage for harmony with the Earth at the Marie Butler Leven Preserve. (You didn't even know you felt that way, right?) This spring our new Conservation Teams are launching a major effort to remove invasive alien vegetation from the 17 acres of forest in this park, in McLean, Virginia. This is your opportunity to spend a few hours — or more — chopping, yanking, prying, and engaging in other ostensibly destructive yet fundamentally wholesome activities that will leave you feeling physically fulfilled, wise, and at One with Nature. Details? Website.

**Help** cause a meadow to occur. In the fall of 2013, we started a small meadow project at Marie Butler Leven. (See previous entry.) The initial plantings have done well, but before adding more plants we need to spend a growing season tending what we've got, mostly by weeding. But this is a back-to-the-Pleistocene, work-with-Nature kind of weeding — meaning mostly that there are a lot of plants in there and you have to know what you're looking at before you pull anything out. If you want to introduce yourself to our local meadow flora, this little project is a good place to start. More info? You know the drill.

**Photo:** In February, Juniors and Seniors from the Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart, in Bethesda, Maryland, help start herbaceous species at the National Park Service greenhouse on Daingerfield Island, in Alexandria, Virginia.

The Earth Sangha is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) charity based in the Washington, DC, area and devoted to ecological restoration. We work in the spirit of Buddhist practice, but our members and volunteers come from a wide variety of religious and secular backgrounds.

**Want to contact us or make a donation?** You can support our work by becoming a member. Membership starts at \$35 per year. Donations are tax-deductible. You can mail us a check (made out to "Earth Sangha") or donate on our website. We will send you a receipt and include you in our mailings. (If your name and address are correct on your check, there is no need to send us anything else.) To donate specifically to our DC-Area programs, write "DC-Area" on the check memo line; to donate specifically to the Tree Bank, write "Tree Bank" on the memo line. [Contact us at: Earth Sangha, 10123 Commonwealth Blvd., Fairfax, VA 22032-2707 | \(703\) 764-4830 | earthsangha.org](mailto:Contact us at: Earth Sangha, 10123 Commonwealth Blvd., Fairfax, VA 22032-2707 | (703) 764-4830 | earthsangha.org). Complete program information is available on our website.

**Want to volunteer or meditate with us?** We work with volunteers at our Wild Plant Nursery and our field sites in northern Virginia. We meditate in the Del Ray section of Alexandria on Tuesday evenings. For more information see our website or call Lisa Bright at (703) 764-4830.

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**One of the best:** The Earth Sangha is recognized by the Catalogue for Philanthropy as "one of the best small charities in the Washington, DC, region."



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