

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE EARTH SANGHA

THE ACORN

DECEMBER 2012

WHY MORE ACREAGE?

Matt Bright, the Earth Sangha's Tree Bank Coordinator, spells out the advantages of thinking big.

One hundred acres is a lot of land. As many of our members may know, we've been working at the Meadowood Recreation Area, on northern Virginia's Mason Neck peninsula, for several years. Meadowood totals 800 acres, but our restoration efforts have been focused on a handful of sites making up only about 25 acres. Why then, if we can spend years restoring 25 acres here in the DC area, are we already embarking on the gargantuan task of doubling our conservation efforts in the rural Dominican Republic?

The first reason is simply about the dollars-and-cents. The Tree Bank gives us the most land conserved for every dollar we invest. For example, a typical micro-credit loan to one of our Tree Bank partner-farmers costs us \$500 in principal. For that amount of money, the farmer would have to agree to enter just over three acres into a conservation easement. Often this is land that already contains high value forest. And of course, the money isn't really spent—it's a loan so it stays within our system.

During my last trip to our project area, in August, one of the farms that I visited belonged to Andrea Contreras. She's one of four new *socios* (members of our partner Association) and is in a tiny minority in our region: there are very few female landowners. Andrea enrolled 20 tareas of land (just over three acres) in our loan program in April, and she was eager to show me the forest that she has agreed to protect.

The two of us met up with Gaspar, the Tree Bank's Project Director, and we hiked into a densely wooded valley that Andrea owns. This, she told me, is the area that she enrolled. "I wrote down 20 tareas, but I own about 100. I will conserve that too, but I don't need the extra money [for enrolling it]." As we walked back to her house, she continued, "It's too much work to farm there; the land is steep and it's too dangerous and expensive to clear it. It's never been used. There are many native pines there." (The native Hispaniolan pine is the most valuable of the still-abundant native tree species; logging is claiming more and more mature stands.)

Gaspar vets all our socios before we lend to them. He's doing a great job; everyone repaid in full in the last loan period. We lent less than \$6,000—and protected over 36 acres

See "Matt talks acreage," over.

LOCAL IS GLOBAL (AT LEAST SOMETIMES)

All ecological restoration is local. But some restoration has out-size implications—some programs reach far beyond the areas they actually restore. The Tree Bank's work is like that, for three reasons.

First, we're working in a "Global Biodiversity Hotspot." A hotspot is a region that contains an unusually high concentration of native species living under an unusually high level of threat. Stabilizing hotspots is a global conservation priority. Our project area is sitting right on the largest deforestation front in the Caribbean Biodiversity Hotspot. We're working on the edge of the largest surviving forest biome in the Caribbean. That biome is unraveling, and we need to find cost-effective ways of reversing the process.

Second, we are addressing a problem that is very widespread in the rural tropics—a problem deeply implicated in tropical forest loss.

See over, at top.



Andrea Espenia Contreras

JOIN THE TREE BANK "NEXT 100 ACRES" CAMPAIGN!

The Earth Sangha's Tree Bank Hispaniola works along part of the Dominican Republic / Haiti border to improve small-holder farm incomes and restore native forest. The Tree Bank includes:

The Tree Bank Nursery, now producing over 20,000 trees per year.

Forest-Credit, which provides low-cost farm credit in exchange for forest conservation easements.

Agroecological farming, intensive polyculture that boosts yields on the best farmland, thereby freeing up marginal lands for forest restoration.

Rising Forests Coffee, a native-forest coffee that helps farmers make money from forest without having to cut it down.

Forest planting support and a water security program.

All told, these programs have protected or restored 100 acres of threatened tropical forest.

Help us protect the next 100 acres! Return the enclosed card with a donation or donate at earthsangha.org. Your gift to the Tree Bank will be matched, with up to \$100!

To date, the Tree Bank supports about 40 impoverished farms. Tree Bank forests shelter numerous threatened plant species and at least four species of threatened birds. More information at earthsangha.org.

Our special thanks to the Shared Earth Foundation for supporting the Tree Bank.

Local as Global, continued:

Simply put: there are hundreds of millions of very poor people clearing forest to grow crops throughout the humid tropics. We need to create systems that break this driving connection between poverty and forest loss. Fighting poverty depends on that—given the vast number of people caught in this predicament. Stemming the tide of extinction depends on that, since tropical moist forests are the most biodiverse ecosystems on Earth. And stabilizing the climate depends on that, since tropical forest loss accounts for about 15 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions. (That's a little larger than the share for the world's entire transportation sector.)

The Tree Bank may seem too small to be relevant to problems as big as that. But it's not, because it's a kind of laboratory. Through careful trial and error, we and our partner-farmers are developing tools that give small-holder farmers options beyond slash-and-burn.

Matt talks acreage, continued:

of threatened forest. This loan period, we have 19 loans out, amounting to about \$9,600, and protecting about 62 acres of forest. Try doing that in DC!

The other reason we're committed to the Tree Bank has to do with the people. By now, you've probably watched the Rising Forests mini-documentary featuring Quiterio. (If not, see the green box below.) He's just one of about 40 farmers we've grown close to over the years. But for every socio who participates, there are many other farmers who want to take part in our program, but can't because we lack the capital to bring them in.

On one trip to collect seeds from a stand of locally endangered West Indies mahogany, I was accosted by an angry farmer riding on a donkey. He grabbed my wrist and started shouting at me. His thick accent and the speed at which he yelled made it difficult to understand but I got snippets: "You Americans, you come here, but you don't help! . . . American aid goes to Haiti, but none comes here and we are poor too! . . . Haitians get food from Americans and then the Haitians come here and cut our forests! . . . I want to save my forest, but if I have no money, how can I?"

The semi-racist tirade aside, Gaspar tells me that this farmer had wanted to join our program, but lived too far away. I've seen some of the forest this man owns, and it's beautiful old growth, and badly threatened: all around it are dry fields that yield very little. Without protection, and a bit of economic support, this farmer will have no choice but to cut his last patch of forest as he struggles for a little more arable land.

There are many other farmers in our region like this man—poor and running out of options, but concerned about their ecosystem. Even the illiterate farmers know what's happening: they tell me they worry about cutting forest because of the effect on water tables and pollinators. That's why it would be wrong to stop. We need to protect the next hundred acres, and, I hope, the next hundred after that.



**From the Tree Bank's farmers
To you:**

Rising Forests Coffee.

Revive yourself.

Restore the forests.

earthsangha.org/coffee.html

Follow us on Twitter @RForestsCoffee

In effect, we're reinventing small-holder agriculture. We're expanding it to include, not just crop production, but the provision of conservation services. We're developing a system that replaces the vicious circle of poverty → forest loss → soil decline → more poverty, with a virtuous circle in which forest restoration creates wealth.

And finally, the Tree Bank has a third kind of global significance, which is perhaps the most unusual thing about the program: its grass-roots to grass-roots character. The Tree Bank is not a product of the policy establishment. No big institutions, either governmental or non-governmental, were involved in its development or are funding it now. Instead, it's something that two very different groups of people have, in effect, invented together. The Tree Bank is a collaboration between you, the Sangha's members, and the small-holder farmers who live along the Dominican Republic / Haiti border. The Tree Bank is built from your contributions and their labor. And it has been shaped by ideas and discussions among both of its collaborating groups.

Thus far, the Tree Bank only covers about 100 acres of land—but it already spans 1,500 miles.

—Chris Bright

EARTH SANGHA

BUDDHIST VALUES IN ACTION

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.) **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.

The Acorn: Our newsletter is produced with "print on demand" technology, which consumes far less energy and materials than does conventional printing. This paper is 100% post-consumer waste recycled, process chlorine-free, and manufactured entirely with wind-generated electricity. This issue © copyright 2012, Earth Sangha.

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."



VIEW THE TREE BANK VIDEO

**"Rising Forests: A New Way of Farming"
go to earthsangha.org & click Tree Bank Video.**