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The Armenia Tree Project Works to Protect Forests, Soil, Water and People

Since 1993, over 100,000 hectares of Armenia's forests have been lost due to unregulated cutting. Only 8%, or roughly 240,000 hectares of Armenia's land is now covered with forest. If the current rate of deforestation continues Armenia will have no forests left by the year 2030. Without forest cover, much of Armenia's lands will turn to desert and its fertile topsoil, accumulated over thousands of years, will be quickly lost through wind erosion. Desertification will destroy the ability of most of Armenia's villagers to grow enough food to support themselves and their families. This pending environmental and social disaster requires an urgent response. Armenia Tree Project (ATP) is one of the first organizations founded to combat the loss of Armenia's forests while also working with its poorest citizens to improve their economic conditions.

ATP was founded in 1994 by Carolyn Mugar, who came many times to Armenia in the midst of its unprecedented energy crisis of the early 1990s. During these trips, she observed extensive tree cutting in urban and rural areas as people devoid of access to electricity or gas looked for any means of keeping warm through the severe winters. Her vision, to start replanting at once for Armenia's future, gave birth to the Armenia Tree Project.

Since its founding, ATP has been furthering Armenia's environmental protection and social development through community-based reforestation initiatives. The ATP pledge is to use trees to improve the standard of living of Armenians, aiding those with fewest resources first. During its first nine years of work, ATP has planted and rejuvenated over 415,000 trees at 450 sites throughout Armenia and employed hundreds of villagers and refugees of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict.

As ATP prepares to enter its second decade of service in the Republic of Armenia, its activities have coalesced into three broad programmatic themes: **Urban Reforestation, Rural and Mountainous Reforestation, and Environmental Sustainability.**

Urban Reforestation. Urban Reforestation describes ATP's work of Community Tree Planting, Nursery Establishment, and Coppicing. Annually, ATP plants 40,000 high quality fruit, nut, and shade trees in Yerevan and other communities through its Community Tree Planting program. Two state-of-the-art tree nurseries needed to provide these trees have been established in the refugee villages of Karin and Khachpar. These nurseries are an important source of employment in the villages. ATP has also introduced the practice of coppicing to many villagers. Coppicing is the forestry practice of reviving the stump of a cut tree, producing a rapidly growing new tree nourished and watered by the mature root system of the stump. ATP is using



this technique to restore hundreds of hectares around important monuments such as the Genocide Memorial located in Yerevan.

Rural and Mountainous Reforestation. Rural and Mountainous Reforestation describes ATP's activities of village poverty reduction and reforestation. Near the border of Tavush Marz, in the Getik River valley, ATP has launched its poverty reduction through its reforestation program. In the refugee village of AYGUT, ATP is building partnerships with the villagers and with other international and local organizations to combat the linked problems of poverty and natural resource degradation. Contributors so far include the World Food Program, Heifer International, ORRAN, Boghosian Center, USDA/MAP, and many others. Accomplishments so far include an Earth Day 2003 one-hectare fruit orchard planting on a plot that belongs to the village school. The production from this orchard will be used to feed the students and to obtain needed school supplies. Also, 30 families and youth group members are enrolled in a visionary project whereby tree seedlings are produced in backyards and then, upon being planted by the villagers in areas needing reforestation, are purchased by ATP. In this way, villagers receive an income and useful training, and ATP is able to obtain the seedlings needed for reforestation projects, at prices more favorable than purchasing them from larger nurseries. Next year, 20,000 seedlings will be planted. The Armenia Tree Project plans to expand this nursery business to other families in the village and then to other villages in the region, assisting in the economic development of the area while reforesting the Getik River valley.

Environmental Sustainability. Environmental Sustainability describes ATP's outreach, public awareness, and law reform campaigns. ATP is developing a methodology of reaching out to organizations and to villagers to develop a sustainable method of 'doing business' regarding protecting Armenia's natural resources and its villagers because it recognizes the challenge is too immense for any one organization to tackle alone. In response, ATP has also helped to found the Protect Our Forests Coalition. The Coalition was formally launched in June of 2003 to bring together hundreds of organizations and individuals interested in increasing awareness of the environmental problems facing Armenia today. Unique in the Caucasus, this Coalition hopes to use the large number of voices it can mobilize to effect change on the government level.

The Armenia Tree Project has an office in Yerevan, and its headquarters office is located in Watertown, Massachusetts.