



November 12, 2003

The Great Armenian Desert
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There is no Great Armenian Desert, but unless the situation in Armenia is turned around, the world will record the death of a beautiful country and its descent into a big sand dune. This is no mere propaganda scheme. Currently the world is losing 250 million acres of fertile soil each year. The culprits are deforestation are drought, over-grazing, climate change, ignorance, selfishness, poverty, citizen apathy, and governmental neglect. All of these factors undermine the food security of 1.2 billion humans in 110 countries. Armenia happens to fall within this staggering number. But for us, Armenia has to be considered more than a mere statistic. Help is needed to preclude Armenia from becoming a number on a statistician's graph. Figures specifically for Armenia are frightening.

Armenia's forest cover has declined from 25% to 8% of its territory. This denuding of the country's tree and forest cover is not something that is recent. The rape of the trees cannot be attributed only to the people's drive to stay warm during the periods of economic stress or warfare.

The "un-greening of Armenia" began slightly over a century ago. The Soviets had other priorities that pushed Armenia's healthy environment into the trash basket. Unfortunately, this terrible lack of concern has placed 80% of Armenia's territory in danger of being debased into a desert. Once full desertification takes place and the essential nutrients in the soil are gone, with the current knowledge on hand, the process cannot be easily reversed. In plain language the soil becomes played out—dead.

Topsoil in Armenia has eroded on 60% of land used for agriculture. Erosion threatens Lake Sevan, and landslides caused by erosion destroy homes and roads. A few sentences ago, I stated that not all of the erosion and depletion of forests is due to human ignorance or neglect. However, many of the current problems in Armenia are aggravated by just that. It is understandable that during a winter without gas or other fuel to heat the homes, a family will do whatever is necessary to stay warm. Axe in hand, the trees fall. Each winter 12,500 acres of forests are cut by poachers and others anxious to provide themselves with winter fuel.

What is difficult to understand is the felling of trees on a massive scale for export or local use as lumber. There are alternatives to using lumber for every project, such as using vinyl or other manmade materials. Further, a favorite use of smaller trees is to cut them for railings around scaffoldings for safety during construction projects, when other materials can be used.

Armenia Tree Project



Another destructive practice springs up every Christmas. Unlike the US where there are thousands of acres of forests and unknown numbers of farms dedicated just to Christmas trees, Armenia has a limited supply. The government passed a law last year prohibiting their cutting, but effectiveness of any law requires acceptance of it by the people and enforcement by officials. Neither occurs in Armenia.

Ecological thought is not a favorite topic. Most people don't realize that vast amounts of territories are being violated or see any immediate negative consequences. Armenia's natural survival, so eloquently stated by Carolyn Mugar, is the land, and it is directly linked to the country's national survival. "We must capture the moment today and tackle the problem of deforestation and the severe environmental, economic, and social consequences that go with it."

Approximately 10 years ago, Carolyn Mugar decided she would do something to prevent Armenia's desertification by establishing the Armenia Tree Project (ATP). ATP will celebrate its 10th anniversary in June 2004 with a gala event. This relatively unheralded organization has not only dedicated itself to the "re-greening" of Armenia, but in the process it has put numerous Armenians to work at a time when jobs are difficult to come by. The ATP employs a holistic approach to reforestation and greening. Trees, jobs, education, and security go hand-in-hand. The ATP has begun a program of helping the citizens of Armenia to reclaim their forests, "One village at a time." The ongoing project in Aygut Village is an outstanding example of the thorough local research that led to a cooperative program with leaders and villagers.

The outstanding folks at the Yerevan Office of ATP and members of the home office in Watertown, Massachusetts, spend days searching for a village with both the need and the will to begin a well-rounded program to help reverse the desertification process. Aygut was the first one that met the requirements. Realizing that nothing worthwhile is accomplished in the dark, the expert ATP staff began Stage 1 by educating the students and the villagers as to what was happening and how a reversal of the desertification will benefit everyone. Part of the education program was an environmental art contest in the village school. Some of these results will be shown at the 10th anniversary celebration.

Knowing through experience that the way to a person's heart and mind is through the stomach, ATP included a program to help reduce poverty in the village. With the cooperation of the USDA, ATP worked with the village to establish a fruit and nut plantation. Stage 2 focused on helping the village develop a staple source of food and income. Thus, they are now in the stage of refining the fruit and nut plantation, and in addition they initiated a community plot to grow potatoes.

These efforts proved to the village that their welfare was at the heart of the matter. This laid the foundations for the next stage—developing tree-based reforestation wherein the villagers will develop backyard nurseries, which will begin with 20 Aygut families who will collect and germinate seeds. By the fall of 2004, it is anticipated that 20,000



homegrown seedlings will be ready for ATP to purchase from the 20 AYGUT families. These purchases are another means to help reduce poverty, but most of all to include the Armenians in the program of working to help themselves. It enables the villagers to feel a sense of pride when they are accomplishing something worthwhile and making some money at the same time. It is also an added incentive to stay involved for success. The more seedlings they harvest and sell to ATP, the more money they earn.

Phase Two is planned to begin in fall 2004. All interested AYGUT families will be offered the same opportunity. From careful analyses it is estimated that eventually upwards of 200,000 seedlings will be purchased from backyard nurseries and then will be planted in Armenia's forests by fall 2005.

ATP discovered early on that the AYGUT villagers did not want handouts. They want to participate in their own betterment. Once the end results are analyzed, and the predictions are made, replicating similar programs in other villages will be studied. Naturally some problems are anticipated, and the ATP expects to learn valuable lessons with the AYGUT project. I am positive that a great deal more will be learned about AYGUT from persons that will speak at the 10th Anniversary in June 2004.

You are welcome to join this vibrant team that is working to reverse deadly deforestation in Armenia. The ATP has begun soliciting funds to help re-green Armenia and boost the economy. Attractive Certificates made out to you or someone you designate can be sent out for any donations that are made in memory of events such as birthdays, anniversaries, or in lieu of flowers.

I think that the ATP programs are so outstanding that I am an active member of its executive board. All of us do not have the time or the inclination to be on the board, but all of us can donate and make a commitment to stay involved with the ATP. This is not a one-shot program. The ATP intends to stay involved and to reforest Armenia. Their 10-year maturation is an indication of the ATP's commitment to Armenia, its people and the environment.