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ATP Makes a Difference in Armenia
By Moorad Mooradian, Ph.D.

Anyone who maintains that a Diaspora based organization is not capable of making a monumentally positive contribution in Armenia should consider touching base with the Armenia Tree Project (ATP) at its headquarters in Watertown, Massachusetts. The organization touches many citizens of Armenia on a daily basis. ATP is staffed by dedicated people who are highly motivated to work with folks at the grassroots level, and also with any officials who desire to help Armenia with positive contributions for the greening of the country and at the same time employ citizens of Armenia. The ATP is not the stereotype "pie in the sky" advocate of a cause. Their employed daily staff is made up largely of personnel who help the organization maintain realistic and doable projects that benefit the environment and the people. Frustrations that might cause less motivated individuals to find excuses for failure act as a catalyst for more success to these workers.

Part of the ATP's success is grounded in the organizational structure. From the organization's inception in 1994, one of Carolyn Mugar's numerous innovations to help Armenia, the ATP accepted a grassroots philosophy. This thinking evolved into a structural component wherein the headquarters strives to ensure that its experts in Armenia set the tone for its operations.

The Watertown-based personnel function to meet the forestry needs in Armenia that stimulate employment and income-- which are largely determined by the folks on the ground in Yerevan--rather than dictate to the organization from afar. Its missions are cooperative efforts that lead to success stories.

The ATP has a forward operations center in Yerevan that keeps its hand on Armenia's pulse to analyze and understand how preserving and reconstituting trees and forests in the country can help produce vitally needed jobs and income. In addition to employing close to 20 of Armenia's citizens full-time with livable wages, I have lost count of the number of citizens who receive needed supplemental income that helps stave off disaster. ATP discovered very early that the Armenians do not want handouts, as most want to earn a living. Thus, ATP is helping those people that it touches preserve their dignity and pride as constructive members of their society.

The ATP understands that it is not capable of resolving the total economic and forestry shortfalls. Hence, with your assistance, the organization works on projects that it can handle. Each project is constantly analyzed and evaluated in close coordination between the Watertown and Yerevan offices. I know of no project that was started that resulted in the abandonment of the citizens involved. The bottom line remains to bring



citizens into the planning process so that no matter what happens, it becomes a winning situation.

A clear indication of the concern for each person with whom ATP comes in contact is recently illustrated in Aygut, where winter reached out with its icy fingers in the remote village located in the northeast Gegharqunik region. ATP has begun a cooperative project, with the village intimately involved in planning, to help with poverty reduction as a vital part of the forestry program. The mayor and village leaders are all involved and they are enthusiastic cooperating officials.

With the people of the village as its most important concern, ATP folks discovered that 132 families were in desperate need of winter clothing. Finding this information out took some doing, as the citizens of Armenia sometimes hesitate to convey that they need anything.

The ATP staff in Armenia went to work. They coordinated with the Boghossian Educational Center in Gyumri, the Orran Benevolent NGO, and many generous individuals to collect warm clothing. The ATP staff put together specifically packaged bundles to meet the special, at times unique, needs of the people. For instance, three families with newly born infants received the requisite clothing.

A youth club was formed in the village to teach the citizens how to prepare and maintain backyard nurseries to grow trees that will help supply the forests with new life.

Many of the trees around the village had been cut for family heat and other reasons. The villagers realized that, gone unchecked, their bountiful forests which were already in danger could quickly become desolate lands. They were looking for help and the ATP obliged them. These young people were trained by the US Department of Agriculture and ATP experts. They needed clothing to keep them warm during the winter while they worked. Twenty-one young people received heavy sweatshirts. The schools received clothing for teachers and students. The staff of the World Food Program supported the cafeterias, where eight workers received uniforms. As this article is being written, additional warm clothing is being distributed to help the Armenians cope with the severe winter.

What has clothing to do with the ATP mission? At the ATP, people come first, and their welfare can be a concern without sacrificing the future of Armenia's woodlands. People are what I think of as the real heart of the ATP.

Can the Aygut story be written as another success? Not yet. The project is still in the beginning stages. There are many possible scenarios that could cause the Aygut project frustrations. Keep in mind that frustration does not mean failure, especially when the people involved convert frustration into activity to overcome the stumbling blocks. I personally know each of the leaders, and there is not a quitter or defeatist in the crowd.

Armenia Tree Project



I can guarantee all readers one thing; everyone, ATP and the villagers, are determined to make the reforestation program in and around AYGUT work.

The ATP has not done these things alone. Your gifts and donations are at work in Armenia. The ATP is your conduit to definitely making a constructive difference in Armenia. Without question, donors to the ATP receive a huge return in Armenia for each dollar donated. People, trees, and forests together are an unbeatable partnership. Brains and heart describe the ATP and its donors— real winners for Armenia and humanity.