

Armenia Tree Project



ARMENIA TREE PROJECT
65 Main Street, Watertown, MA 02472
617-926-8733
info@armeniatree.org
www.armeniatree.org

For Immediate Release
September 10, 2004

ATP Executive Director Addresses UN DPI NGO Conference

WATERTOWN, MA--Armenia Tree Project (ATP) Executive Director Jeff Masarjian participated this week in a panel held as part of the 57th annual United Nations Department of Public Information/Non-Governmental Organization Conference at the UN headquarters in New York. The conference, titled "Millennium Development Goals: Civil Society Takes Action," is taking place from September 8-10.

The focus of the conference is the role of NGOs as well as civil society and governments for implementing the eight Millennium Development Goals adopted by the UN in 2000. ATP was invited to participate in the conference by the Armenian General Benevolent Union in association with Rotary International, NGO Committee on Human Rights, Peace Action, and the World Federation for Mental Health.

At the September 8 panel discussion with representatives of two other NGOs, titled "Overcoming Obstacles to Economic Growth and Community Development: The Role of Civil Society," Mr. Masarjian outlined the ways that ATP reforestation efforts are addressing many of the UN Millennium Development Goals. The following is an abridged text of Mr. Masarjian's speech:

ATP Programs Contribute to Fulfillment of UN Millennium Goals in Armenia By Jeff Masarjian, Armenia Tree Project Executive Director

Armenia Tree Project was founded in 1994 in response to the massive felling of trees for fuel during the harsh winters of the early 1990s. The mission of Armenia Tree Project is to improve the human, economic, and environmental conditions of Armenia through the planting of trees, aiding those with the fewest resources first.

Forests and trees are important and necessary components for maintaining the environmental and economic infrastructure of a nation. They clean the atmosphere, absorbing carbon dioxide and pollutants, while simultaneously releasing oxygen. They attract and retain moisture, both in the air and the soil, helping to regulate and stabilize the climate. They prevent erosion and landslides, while retaining precious topsoil, which is otherwise washed away with the rain, becoming silt in rivers, streams and lakes, choking plant and animal life.

Armenia Tree Project



Forests also provide habitats for a diverse array of flora and fauna. Armenia is home to over 3,600 species of flowering plants, many of which are endangered and exist only in the ecosystems provided by the dwindling forests.

>From 1994 - 2002, Armenia Tree Project focused its activities on creating jobs through re-greening public spaces, many of which were littered with the stumps of sacrificed trees. ATP works closely with the residents of local institutions, such as schools, senior centers, hospitals, and orphanages, as well as neighborhoods.

Once accepted as an ATP site, residents receive the training and tools they need to plant and tend the trees. The relationship is based upon a contract between ATP and the recipient institution or group, which agrees to replace the trees at its own expense if less than 70 percent survive.

By appealing to residents' self interest, and using informal incentives to promote compliance with the agreement, ATP is fostering a growing respect for the environment through traditional value systems and needs of the community. Residents--who had previously been plagued with despair, while expecting the government or others to do something for them to improve their lot--are now in a position of taking action to make a direct impact on their immediate environment.

To date, ATP has assisted community residents in planting over 375,000 trees at 477 sites in every region of Armenia through our Community Tree Planting program. ATP works closely with community schools to develop environmental lessons, which are not typically part of the standard curriculum.

The restoration of urban green spaces is the goal of ATP's Coppicing Program, which employs several hundred Armenians each year in seasonal work. Coppicing is a forestry technique by which tree stumps with intact root systems are trimmed of shoots, leaving the strongest one to grow into an exact replica of the original tree.

To date, ATP staff has supervised the restoration of 760 acres of land at several sites, including the Armenian Genocide Memorial, Botanical Gardens, Victory Park, and Paros Hill, all located in Yerevan. Over 155,000 trees have been restored through ATP's coppicing program since 1999.

The trees ATP supplies to community sites are propagated from seeds and cuttings in our two state-of-the-art nurseries, founded in 1996 and 1998 in the refugee villages of Karin and Khatchpar. The nursery sites were chosen specifically to provide employment opportunities for Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan who are supporting extended families, and who would otherwise have no source of income. The nurseries' 29 employees are responsible for the production of 50,000 trees each year for planting at community sites.

Armenia Tree Project



The 53 species of trees growing in our nurseries are all indigenous to Armenia, and were chosen for their hardiness in surviving Armenia's harsh climate. With the opening of the new Michael and Virginia Ohanian Environmental Education Center at ATP's nursery in Karin village, students from the State Agricultural Academy and elsewhere will attend multi-media seminars and receive hands-on field practice with our staff.

In 2001, in response to a growing body of evidence published in documents by the UN, the World Bank, and other sources regarding the immediate and critical state of Armenia's deforestation and path towards desertification, ATP initiated a series of strategic planning sessions to devise new interventions that might have a greater impact for the people and land of Armenia.

We realized that we needed to devise innovative new programs which would not only plant considerably more trees, but also address the widespread poverty and despair suffered by nearly half of all Armenians. Many Armenians live in rural villages, and are forced to strip the surrounding forests of trees for heating and cooking fuel, as well as for sale to commercial interests.

In Fall 2002, ATP met with the leaders of Aygut, a small, slowly dying Armenian refugee village, comprised of 290 families. Youth and young adults would routinely leave seeking opportunities elsewhere, and elders longed for their lost homes and villages in Azerbaijan.

The school principal spoke of a plot of land near the river which she had hoped would someday be an orchard, supplying income to purchase badly needed school supplies. ATP agreed to provide technical assistance and 500 fruit and nut trees for the site, if residents could collaborate together to clear the land, build irrigation channels and a road to the site, and fence it in for protection from livestock. ATP also developed an environmental curriculum for the school and trained teachers in presenting it.

The members of the Aygut community succeeded in completing their part of the contract within weeks of our initial meeting. By Spring 2003, 500 fruit and nut trees were planted by school children and adults, assisted by the US Ambassador to Armenia, John Ordway, and other invitees, who celebrated Earth Day at the new Aygut School orchard on April 22. I'm very happy to report that I observed the first cherries blossoming on the trees this summer.

Seventeen families also signed up to participate in a pilot project whereby they would be trained to propagate several thousand tree seeds, collected locally, in newly developed backyard nurseries. For each surviving seedling that the participant will then plant in the forest, ATP will provide a set payment.

Seven species of local tree seeds are currently being propagated, and some have already reached a height of 12 inches and may be out planted this fall. In this, the pilot phase of the project, 20,000 seedlings are being grown; we hope to increase this 10 fold over the next two years by

Armenia Tree Project



expanding this micro-enterprise opportunity to more residents in Aygut and other villages.

This project can potentially increase the annual income of participating families several times over, without negatively impacting the amount of land needed for subsistence farming. In addition, because the trees are grown using a short-term rotation cycle of 12-18 months, the per-unit cost is less than in our traditional nurseries, creating a win-win situation for everyone.

There are 13 villages in the river valley where Aygut is located, comprising 6,000 people. ATP plans to replicate programming in three new villages in 2005, using the same methodology to promote economic, ecological, social, and cultural development. We expect that the fruit produced in this valley will not only contribute to residents' food security, but also attract the interest of businesses involved in fruit juice production and export.

Early on in our involvement with the residents of Aygut, it became clear that the humanitarian and development needs of this village were far beyond ATP's individual capacity. We took a very collaborative approach to our work in the village, inviting other international aid organizations and NGOs to visit the village and observe the progress achieved over the past year.

Organizations such as UN World Food Program, UNDP, Heifer International, Project Harmony, USDA, Peace Corps, Satsil, and Jinishian Family Foundation, among others, have contributed expertise and support in furthering the social and economic development of Aygut.

The Mayor recently reported that since ATP initiated programming there, emigration from the village has halted, there has been a noticeable improvement in the overall demeanor and perspective of villagers, and there was even a record number of births, all indicators of a growing sense of hope and optimism.

In addition to this innovative community development and reforestation programming, ATP this year partnered with a local environmental NGO, called Tsiatsan, in the city of Vanadzor, to build a six hectare reforestation nursery that has the capacity to produce over one million trees each year beginning in 2006. These trees will be used to reforest the devastated hillsides around the city, which have become subject to serious erosion and landslides over the past 13 years.

In conclusion, Armenia Tree Project is implementing its mission to protect and restore Armenia's forests through a unique combination of programming that aims to plant a growing number of trees each year, while providing opportunities for employment, sustainable economic development, training and education.

Our goal is to empower residents to become stewards of their environment while also enhancing their standard of living and hopes for their children's future. It is our hope that our decentralized approach to developing an environmental ethic based on education, action, and self-determination will eventually lead to a national and even regional commitment to environmental protection and enforcement of sustainable practice.