



20 YEARS FROM NOW

The Sangha was founded 20 years ago, in September 1997. Since then, thanks to the extraordinary generosity of our donors, volunteers, and colleagues, we have managed to get some useful things done. (See the November *Acorn*.) But how much difference will those things really make? I think that will depend largely on what we manage over the next 20 years. Below, I define our work so far in each of our program areas, and explain where I hope we are headed.

In the DC area, we have created a conservation utility that is helping to preserve the wild genetics of local, native-plant species, and the natural communities in which those species occur. It does this by collecting native-plant seed from the wild, growing it out, planting the resulting stock in appropriate habitat (usually in parks), and controlling invasives. By helping to keep natural areas natural, the system also protects the investment that the public has made in our parks.

What will this system do over the next 20 years? First, I'm hoping that it will promote a cultural shift in the way residents of this region understand the landscape around them. Unnecessary turf may start to

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PROGRAM COVERAGE

Just a reminder: in this newsletter (as in pretty well all the previous ones), you'll find coverage of our work in both of our program areas:

In the Washington, DC, area, we are propagating over 300 native plant species directly from the wild, and working on public lands to restore the region's meadows and forests.

In our Tree Bank area, along a stretch of the Dominican Republic / Haiti border, on the Dominican side, we are working to conserve and restore remnant native forest in ways that boost the incomes of the region's residents, both Dominican and Haitian.

THEY'LL MATCH YOU!

Our two extremely generous year-end benefactors will match the first \$50 of your gift! You give at least \$50, we get at least \$100 — and you can designate the full amount for either of our program areas. See the enclosed card, the back page of this newsletter, or go to earthsangha.org. The match runs through January 5th. One \$50 match per household. And don't forget: to claim a 2017 tax deduction, you must donate before the year-end!

Photo: In October, Matt Bright and Katherine Isaacson demonstrated basic planting techniques for students and staff of Hunters Woods Elementary, in Reston, Virginia. Matt is the Sangha's Conservation Manager; he's the crouching figure in the green shirt. Katherine is our Coordinator for Development and Outreach (next to Matt, in the purple shirt). For this project, students and teachers installed about 700 plants on the grounds of their school. All the stock was grown from local, wild seed at our Wild Plant Nursery. The planting area is a stormwater dry-pond — an artificial depression designed to collect run-off. A drainage pipe at the bottom dumps the water into the nearest stream. The Sangha has more than a decade of experience in creating plantings to mitigate damage done by development to northern Virginia's lands and waters.

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look ugly. Infestations of invasives may begin to look unnatural and unhealthy. The boundary between “developed” and “natural” begins to soften — not because we’re losing yet more forest and meadow, but because we’re learning how to help wild plant communities reach back out onto developed landscapes. Perhaps local schools lead this development. Conservation comes to seem more and more a standard civic obligation — a trend Matt pointed out in the September *Acorn*. These changes begin to reverse the advance of invasives in local natural areas. Maybe — dare we imagine it? — VDOT stops using invasives in its roadside plantings. And the Sangha begins to supply, not only plants, but information as well: we become a public resource for data on local ecological change.

Now for the Tree Bank. Thus far, we have created a nursery system and a set of small-scale financial tools to conserve and restore forest in ways that benefit small-holder farmers. In effect, we are redefining small-holder agriculture in our region: former agents of deforestation are now working within a system that is creating more forest, that is building soil instead of degrading it, and that is putting more money in people’s pockets than slash-and-burn ever did.

The Tree Bank dates from 2006, so it’s much less mature than our DC-area work. Over the next 20 years, I’m hoping that we can expand it in several dimensions. First, we need to improve financial stability. This process was interrupted by the loss of our coffee groves to the leaf-rust epidemic of 2014, but coffee production will likely resume over the next couple of years, joined shortly thereafter by cocoa. We’re going to need a flexible system for managing these harvests — and

one that keeps us focused on the forests, rather than on becoming some sort of tiny Starbucks. Another financial goal: we want our farmers to become more sophisticated users of our Forest Credit loans, perhaps by creating small enterprises that aren’t necessarily agricultural. That could help relieve some pressure on the land.

As the Tree Bank matures, we hope to develop an organized educational component. One way to enable this might be to create additional jobs linked to conservation — for example, we could already use a small ranger corps, made up of local residents trained to gather data, identify easement infractions, educate their peers on wildlife issues, and so forth.

On the ground, a matrix of community-held parkland and privately-held easements might begin to coalesce. This system would link up forest remnants, buffer streams, and continue to provide incentives for replanting barren lands. Resurgent forest cover might allow some species lost to the region to make their way back in — for example, the island’s two native parrot species.

Finally, I’m hoping for proof that the Tree Bank approach is portable. Could we extend the program to at least one additional community — maybe elsewhere in the Dominican Republic or in another country? There are hundreds of millions of people living in formerly forested parts of the tropics; many of them are small-holders working in conditions similar to the Tree Bank’s partner farmers.

These long-term speculations may seem ridiculously ambitious, and no doubt some of these things won’t happen. But none of this is any more improbable than what all of us, working together, have already achieved.

— Chris Bright, President

20 YEARS OF EFFORT

a few of the numbers that inform our story

140,300+ native plants have been distributed from our DC-area Wild Plant Nursery.

7,612 volunteers have generously donated their time and effort to our projects.

150,000+ hours have been volunteered.

184 local schools have been supplied with native plants for educational gardens.

100,000+ trees have been planted in our Tree Bank project area over the past decade.

300 acres of threatened tropical forest have been placed in restoration or easement in our Tree Bank project area over the past decade.

108,137 dollars in cumulative lending, over the past 6 years, have helped small-holder farmers, while conserving forest, through the Tree Bank’s Crédito Forestal program.

Compiled by Katherine Isaacson

THIS YEAR & NEXT: DC AREA

This was yet another busy year for our DC-area work. In 2017, we:

... finished renovating the house at the Marie Butler Leven Preserve, thanks to Sophie Lynn and David Frederick. (See the November *Acorn*.) The house is now occupied by two members of our staff.

... expanded our restoration work at the Preserve, largely as a consequence of the previous item.

... hired a very efficient Coordinator, Beverley Rivera, for our Wild Plant Nursery, bringing our DC-area paid staff to five.

... distributed at least 27,000 trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants, all of them local-ecotype natives grown at our nursery, to more than 59 field and schoolyard sites.

... improved various nursery procedures. (Despite its importance, you wouldn’t want to read about this activity. Just trust us on this.)

... extended our Schoolyard Garden Kit approach to 15 schools and developed a kit manual. The kits are designed to create plantings that mimic the wild plant-communities of this region.

... created a “Plant Grant” incentive for local, small-scale restoration projects. (See below.)

During 2018, we plan to emphasize three activities:

Restoring the Preserve. We want the Preserve to be a model for government / NGO partnerships focused on the restoration of medium-sized, suburban parks. (The Preserve is about 20 acres.)

Expanding our work with schools, HOAs, and other local organizations to enable more small-scale projects. Lots of little projects could add up to major benefits — for both the landscape and the people who use these spaces.

Improving our nursery inventory of early-flowering species, both woody and herbaceous — for example, “spring ephemeral” herbs of the forest floor. Many early-flowering species shed their seed quickly, so collecting it can be a challenge.

OUR COLLEAGUES: WHAT THEY SEE IN THE SANGHA

“I remember when I first started volunteering with the Sangha, we were working at Marie Butler Leven and we had to take out an English ivy infestation. And it just looked gigantic to me. Enormous! I wasn’t so sure that we would be able to do it. But I was with Lisa, and she told me that I couldn’t allow the size of the task to scare me away. So we went at the ivy, all of us working together, and we did it! We got rid of it.

That taught me a useful lesson — something I still rely on today. You can’t let challenges scare you off. You have to trust in yourself and the community that you’re part of and just go at it. One of the reasons that I think the Sangha is so valuable is that you’re very pragmatic and systematic in the way you think. You always want to know what you’re going to get for the money and effort that you’re putting in. And that attitude makes it possible to do big things — not just making ivy disappear, but replanting whole meadows or forests.”

— *Former intern, Diana Prado. Photo: Diana working one of our meadow transects at the Occoquan Bay National Wildlife Refuge, in Prince William County, Virginia, in May 2014.*



“Our association, the Association of Forest Producers of Los Cerezos, wishes you all the best on your twentieth anniversary, and we look forward to continuing to grow our projects with you! I asked my colleagues at the nursery to explain what goals they most valued in our work with you, and here is the list of what they said:

1. Protection of the environment;
2. Improving the quality of life for Association members;
3. Community development in general;
4. Provision of the Forest Credit loans; and
5. Strengthening our Association.”

— *Statement offered by Cosme Damián Quezada, Co-Director of our Tree Bank program, and translated by Chris Bright. Photo: Cosme examining one of the Tree Bank’s forest-coffee plantings, in southern Dajabón province, Dominican Republic, about five miles from the border with Haiti, in December, 2015.*

“About five years ago, I found myself with some free time and was feeling the need to ‘earn my place on our planet.’ I stumbled upon Earth Sangha and connected with Lisa. After one day at the nursery, there was no turning back for me. I’ve been volunteering, usually a couple of days a week, ever since.

Why? Well learning about our native plants, observing the progression from seed, to seedling, to a strong plant, ready for planting in a garden or a habitat restoration project is one reward.

But perhaps, enjoying the company of the wonderfully simpatico group of the Earth Sangha community is the most valuable gift I’ve received in return for my volunteering. My life has been wonderfully enriched by each hour I’ve spent at the nursery.”

— *Volunteer Joan Gottlieb. Photo: Joan collecting wild seed in the Scott’s Run drainage, in Fairfax County, Virginia, in August 2015. The seed that we collect is grown out at our Wild Plant Nursery and used for local restoration projects.*



DC AREA: BRINGING NATURE BACK TO THE BURBS, SITE AFTER SITE AFTER SITE



We work with local governments, community groups, and our own volunteers to replant denatured public lands. We plant local natives exclusively, and we propagate all of our planting stock ourselves, from seed that we collect (with permission) from local natural areas. On our sites, we avoid planting out of habitat — for example, we don't plant wet-soil species in upland areas. The scenario shown above is typical for us: this is a section of floodplain in Rutherford Park, in the Accotink Creek watershed of Fairfax County, Virginia. The trees in the background line the bank of Long Branch stream. The foreground area is in turf presumably because nobody knew what else to do with it. It's near the park's parking lot and there's



a path that runs through it to playing fields on the other side of the stream. In July 2005, when the photo at left was taken, it qualified as “green space” — but it was useless to both wildlife and people.

In collaboration with the Fairfax County Park Authority, we enclosed the path in an allée of sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*), and planted a selection of native alluvial shrubs and herbaceous plants on either side of the sycamores. This is sycamore habitat and the trees have responded with enthusiasm — as you can see from the photo at right. This photo was taken in August 2012. The sycamores are even bigger now!



We have long-term partnerships with many local schools. Schools are important to us for two reasons: they help us introduce young people to local natural areas and to conservation work. Schools also control a substantial share of this region's landscape, and school properties often include left-over areas — pieces of turf that don't fit into established patterns of use. We help teachers and students recover such areas, with plantings that approximate natural, native-plant communities. The photo at left, taken in October 2008, shows one such area, at Franklin Middle School in Chantilly Virginia. The photo



was taken just before a field event in which students from another partner school, Lake Braddock Secondary School, replanted it in forest. The soil on this site was so stony and compacted that we had to drill most of those holes with augurs.

The photo at right was taken last August. It shows Katherine Isaacson, our Development and Outreach Coordinator, examining the Franklin planting. Those trees are just 10 or 11 years old, yet many of them — redbud, staghorn sumac, even some of the oaks — are beginning to bear seed. The planting has begun to perpetuate itself.

TREE BANK: NATIVE FOREST RESTORATION THAT BUILDS SMALL-HOLDER INCOMES



This was the site of the Tree Bank's nursery in June 2006, just before we started construction. It covers only about an acre, but that acre is especially valuable because reasonably level land is hard to find in our project region. The location adds to its value: the site is adjacent to an elementary school, which is an important community center. (The school is out of frame to the left.) There's also access to a road and a water pipe. Deeding the site over to our project was an act of great generosity on the part of our host community.

More than a decade later, the nursery is booming. (The Tree Bank



now has two nurseries, but this is still our main one.) The photo above, taken last August, shows Franklin (left) and Manolo standing before a section of coffee seedlings. Franklin is one of our nursery hands; Manolo is a Tree Bank Co-Director. In addition to native trees, our nurseries produce large quantities of both coffee and cacao, the little tree whose seed is used to make cocoa and chocolate. Our farmers grow these high-value, shade-loving tree-crops organically and under native forest canopy. The resulting profits create an incentive to conserve forest.



The slope above has been planted in Hispaniolan pine (*Pinus occidentalis*), and a few other native trees here and there. This photo was taken in June 2009, a couple of months after planting; those green tufts are pine seedlings. Hispaniolan pine dominates many uplands and ridges throughout the rugged central uplands of the island, but its populations are collapsing from over-cutting and it is now listed as endangered.

This slope belongs to Fausto "Eduardo" Mateo, a local farmer. Eduardo receives a small annual payment from us — about \$44 — for



maintaining the planting and collecting some tree-growth data from it. Only five of our sites are subsidized like this, but the others help farmers make money in other ways: some sites enable lines of credit from our Forest Credit system; others host coffee and cocoa groves; and in the case of Hispaniolan pine, loose stands provide light shade over pasture. (Light shade helps local cattle gain weight by reducing heat stress.) The photo at right shows Eduardo's slope in January 2015. That's Eduardo (left) with Manolo. Both the farmer and his pines are doing well!



THIS YEAR & NEXT: TREE BANK

Here are the highlights from a very productive year. In 2017, we:

- ... installed nearly a mile of water pipe to give the main Tree Bank nursery a more reliable water supply.
- ... hired a Coordinator and two additional Nursery Hands, bringing our Tree Bank paid staff to six.
- ... made over 1 million pesos (over \$22,789) in farm loans from our Crédito Forestal program, against about 195 acres of forest conservation easements. That's about two-thirds of our total land in care.
- ... developed a program to encourage the planting of Hispaniolan pine, an endangered tree and a keystone species in upland forest.
- ... expanded our Bosques Rentables program (for planting coffee and cacao under native forest canopy) from 3.75 to about 9 acres.
- ... created our first extensive, locally-specific native-tree list, to improve our nursery accessions.
- ... launched an annual bird count, in conjunction with the Virginia Society of Ornithology. (This occurred at the very end of 2016.)
- ... increased the number of participating farms to 54, up from last year's total of 42.

In 2018, we'll focus on two activities:

Enrolling more land into our three main conservation systems:

Crédito Forestal, Bosques Rentables, and our Hispaniolan pine initiative.

Working with our tree list and expanded nursery staff to boost native-tree production. We need more native species, and even for the natives already in production, we need more volume.

Photo: A Tree Bank planning session in June 2006, during our first visit to the little settlement of Los Cerezos, in the Dominican Republic, near the border with Haiti. From left to right, that's Chris Bright, the Sangha's President, Peace Corps Volunteer Tommy Ventre, and Gaspar Pérez Aquino, who became the Tree Bank's first Director. For this session Chris drew a series of diagrams with art supplies that we had brought with us for the local kids. It had taken nearly a year of long-distance conversations between us and the local farmers — an effort managed by Tommy — to reach an agreement that seemed strong enough to act on. By the time of this meeting, the Tree Bank nursery was already under construction. (See page 5.)

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.) To donate specifically to our DC-Area programs, write "DC-Area" on the check memo line; to donate specifically to the Tree Bank, write "Tree Bank" on the memo line. [Contact us at: Earth Sangha, 10123 Commonwealth Blvd., Fairfax, VA 22032-2707 | \(703\) 764-4830 | \[earthsangha.org\]\(http://earthsangha.org\)](mailto:info@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 printed on paper that is 100% post-consumer waste recycled, process chlorine-free, and manufactured entirely with wind-generated electricity. This issue copyright © 2017, Earth Sangha.

Gold-rated: The Earth Sangha has a gold rating from GuideStar Exchange for commitment to transparency.

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."



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