

2. Quarterly Report (February 2016)

Volunteer: Vincent Förster

Project: Sadhana Forest

It has been 4 months by now since I decided to change my project and live and work in the reforestation and water-conservation project Sadhana Forest, which is organized as a volunteering community.

I am still very happy with my decision since this place comes much closer to what I actually aimed to experience during this year. Here I feel the structure, support and productivity that I was missing in the former project. But not only workwise, also in terms of the lifestyle as well as the philosophy and values that are being practiced here, Sadhana Forest appears to suit me quite well. The inspiration that comes from the place and all the people passing through is a constant learning and growing opportunity.

After many discussions, conversations and observations I have the feeling to understand better and better what this place is actually about and to grasp the bigger picture of its idea. Being criticized sometimes for not being very efficient in actual tree planting activities compared to other reforestation projects, one has to understand that Sadhana Forest is to almost a hundred percent run by mainly shortterm-volunteers, making no money and having no paid labour. Therefore of course, a big amount of time and energy flows into maintaining of the community structure and constant training of new volunteers. But as Sadhana's slogan *"May there be more forests to grow people"*, which is the quote of a former volunteer, puts out beautifully, the main impact of the project probably happens in the minds of the people, of the thousands of international volunteers that come here and experience practically this simple, ecological and conscious lifestyle, not rarely get transformed and inspired to also change their lives back home. With this, Sadhana is taking an active part in spreading the consciousness for environmental as well as spiritual issues all over the world, which is in my opinion a considerable achievement.

Being engaged in Sadhana for 4 months now, I feel grown into my role as a longterm-volunteer, taking the responsibilities that come along with it.

After my introduction time where I basically did the normal tasks of a shortterm-volunteer to get an overview of everything, I took over the position of the compost toilet manager. Having been skeptical at the beginning, I found myself enjoying it after a while. I learned lots of things about the theory and practice of proper composting as well as the various environmental benefits of using compost toilets instead of wasting all the valuable organic matter of human excrement, polluting and wasting huge amounts of water using a normal flush toilet. It is also a very humbling experience to work with all this human manure, losing the disgust of it and learning that it is a natural and essential part of the nutrient cycle that has to be dealt with as well, rather than just flushing it down the toilet, pretending it is not there anymore.

The actual practice of this task is much about managing and training shortterm-volunteers to do the daily hygiene procedures and helping them to exchange and store the compost barrels. Other than this and overseeing if the work has been done properly, there are always some smaller things to be done here and there which fall under the toilet department. If not, I also enjoy to engage myself in some other fields like pathway works, carpentry and building projects as well as garden maintenance and tree care. I really enjoy the hard physical work which makes me feel productive, active and alive.

Furthermore, as it is still my main interest, I am involved in the forest work since the beginning of my stay. At first, it was mainly replanting of dead trees. At the times this was done, also the former forest manager decided to leave Sadhana, which enabled Laurent, another longterm volunteer, me and Carolin to take up the management. After some surveys and talks with Aviram, we decided to start two new projects.

The first one was the plantation of indigenous trees under the existing canopy of acacia trees which are exotic and invasive pioneer trees that were spread in the area by the first Aurovillians to recover the land. They grew by themselves on our plot, after Sadhana did lots of soil work for water-conservation. Making use of the beneficial micro-climate under the canopy (moisture, shade & organic ground cover from leaves) we could introduce the endemic trees with a simpler planting technique than we use usually and without the need to water them afterwards. Following the succession process the native trees will grow tall and eventually form the new climax forest layer, while the acacias with a shorter lifespan will disappear over time. After more than two month after the start of this project, it appears to be quit successful, which is encouraging for us.

The second project is about soil regeneration in a plot that has particularly bad soil condition. With log mulching (burying big tree logs in the ground) to attract fungi and the application of a layered ground cover of organic matter and compost, we want to encourage soil life and form a new topsoil layer to create better planting conditions for next season. We also plan to set up bird poles in the area, so they may spread seeds while they are resting.

I really appreciate the freedom that we have to experiment with our own projects. It is a great learning opportunity having the space to directly apply all the theoretical input that I get from books, conversations and visits of other forest projects in Auroville as well as the Permaculture Design Course that I absolved recently.

In the last weeks Laurent, who was the forest manager (me and Carolin were assisting) was on vacation and also decided to leave to Sadhana Forest Haiti in April, while Carolin took over the tree care and watering work. Therefore I took over the management of the forest work for now and, as soon as Laurent has left, will most likely become the new forest manager throughout the rest of my stay. This new responsibility of coordinating the people and their work all by myself is definitely somewhat challenging and stressful but I see it as another learning opportunity. I feel myself gradually growing into the job, acknowledging the social and management skills that it requires.

Speaking of the social aspects, I realize more and more that this big number and constant change of people consumes a lot of energy sometimes but again, is also a chance to practice detachment. Since I am not the most emotionally open being anyway, conversations not often get very personal and rather cover small talk topics as well as visions, values and philosophies which can also be quit interesting and inspiring from time to time.

The atmosphere in the longterm team is relaxed yet not unproductive and I feel well integrated in the group even though I also didn't bond very deeply with anybody except of Carolin who I knew before already. Still, I don't feel lonely here and rather enjoy the time being and dealing with myself.

With many of the other weltwärts-volunteers in Auroville I also have a good relationship even though I don't see them too often. I enjoy meeting and chatting with them and am happy about the support I feel through their presence.

This first half of our volunteering year passed so fast, that it is actually hard to believe it is already over. I am thankful for this opportunity and look forward to the second half of it which now fortunately will be started by my first holiday which I will spend in Sri Lanka with my family. Even though I enjoy the hard work, I guess some vacation in between might not hurt as well...