

MOUNTAIN OF MEDICINE

Arunachala planting project

Imagine that in just a few years from now you will be able to begin your inner pradakshina of Arunachala by walking through a protected park of medicinal plants and trees, a natural paradise typical of the forests that once covered this sacred mountain. Where once there was a wasteland and municipal garbage dump, there will be the shade of sacred and healing trees, a natural refuge place and a centre for awareness of indigenous medicine. This is the vision of the Mountain of Medicine project, an idea that was originally conceived by the Arunachala Greening Society as part of their efforts to reforest large areas of land on the hill.



In the beginning... the allocated land had been used by the Tiruvannamalai municipality as a garbage dump and by local people as a public toilet. It also contained the remains of an abandoned government office. The first task was to remove as much of the plastic as possible and to level the land.

WHAT'S SPECIAL ABOUT THE PROJECT?

Almost the whole of South India was once covered in forest – a forest land rich in healing powers, with over 2,000 recognized medicinal plants. India's native medical systems evolved out of, and in harmony with, this great natural resource. As the forests have steadily been eroded, so people have turned away from natural ways of living and healing. Now the plants themselves are becoming scarce and a huge wealth of knowledge is in danger of being lost forever.

The guiding belief of the Mountain of Medicine project is that the forests themselves and the survival of natural medicine are inter-dependent and that the protection of one leads to the protection of the other. Our aim is to provide both a haven of bio-diversity on the Hill, and a centre for the awareness of local medicine.

PROGRESS SO FAR:

Since its inception in August 2003 the project has already achieved much:



The land has been fenced to protect it from grazing, and the garbage dump has been leveled.

Mountain of Medicine workers erecting a granite and barbed wire fence around the land. This fence will protect the land from grazing goats and cows, and from grass and wood cutters.



Fire lines have been cleared on the lower slopes of the hill to protect from the fires which are frequently started in March/April.

To prevent the summer fires from spreading, strips of vegetation have been dug up. These will stop or slow down the spread of fires. The Mountain of Medicine project will hire guards in summer to prevent fires being started and to extinguish those that do break out.



A percolation pond has been dug to catch seasonal rains and to help re-charge the underground water table.

The pond (the photo on the left) being excavated with a hired bulldozer. The government has given the project permission to divert water from a stream on Arunachala. In the two photos below, project workers are damming and diverting this stream.



Over 3,000 trees, shrubs and lianas of 170 different species, have been successfully planted, and a nursery has been started to provide the seedlings for the following years and for other reforestation efforts on the hill.



Seven local people are employed full time, with up to twenty-five being involved on a seasonal basis.

Local women watering the newly planted trees. Watering trees during their first summer massively increases their chances of survival.

EVENTUALLY THE PARK WILL INCLUDE:



1. A fully functioning nursery.
2. An area of cultivation of medicinal herbs of commercial value.
3. An area of zero human interference to act as a control plot showing what natural regeneration is possible on Arunachala hill if biotic pressures are excluded.
4. The creation of a showcase natural forest with full range of plant strata, with particular emphasis on medicinal plants
5. Cultivation of medicinal tree species and associated lianas and shade-loving herbs with a view to sustainable harvesting
6. An awareness and educational centre for the general public, farmers and young people.
7. A living example of organic cultivation, pest control and maintenance.

Left: two views of the newly started nursery at the foot of the hill.
Below: Vijay, one of the project workers, planting a new tree. Signs indicating the Tamil and Latin names are placed beside the medicinal trees.

HOW YOU CAN HELP:

We need to raise around \$8,000 to cover the following works over the coming year.

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| 1. Digging of well | \$1750 |
| 2. Electric pump, and piping | \$500 |
| 3. Water tanks | \$600 |
| 4. Shade net and irrigation system for nursery | \$250 |
| 5. Signs giving plant names and medical uses | \$300 |
| 6. Main gate | \$190 |
| 7. Check dams to harvest rainwater and stop erosion | \$500 |
| 8. Annual wage bill | \$4500 |



If you visit Tiruvannamalai and would like to see what we are doing, please come and visit the site Monday to Saturday between 6 a.m. and 8 a.m., or between 4.30 p.m. and 6 p.m., and ask for Govind.

You can also email me at govintvm@rediffmail.com. If you would like to make a financial contribution, details of the account you can send your donation to can be found at the bottom David Godman's introduction. If you know anyone else who might be interested in helping this project achieve its goals, please contact them on our behalf.

Govind (Luke Bowley)