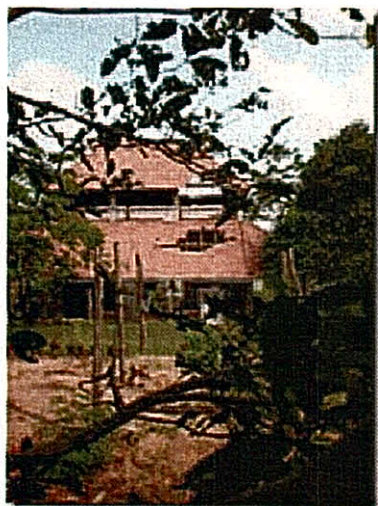




QSA Notes

people, places & projects



Pitchandikulam Forest, Tamil Nadu

Some months after the devastation of Cyclone Thane Jackie Perkins has returned from a visit to QSA's project partner at Pitchandikulam Forest in Tamil Nadu, Southern India. During her visit she has had opportunity to take stock of the enormity of restorative and regenerative efforts undertaken by Joss Brooks and his staff in the immediate post cyclone emergency. In addition to this the trip has been a dynamic though sobering insight into the longer term imperatives necessary to restore livelihoods, health, safety and wellbeing to the project and to the wider affected community.

Cyclone Thane crossed the coastline of Tamil Nadu on December 30th 2011 in a narrow band between Cuddalore and Puducherry, and over the course of 24 hours, left a trail of destruction through the Cuddalore and Viluppuram Districts.

The path of the cyclone took in Pitchandikulam Forest and the international community of Auroville, both of which suffered considerable damage, the coastal town of Puducherry and extended up to the Nadukuppam Village where most of QSA and AusAID funded projects recently have been located.

The damage sustained by the communities living along the 'disaster prone' Tamil Nadu coast, many of which continue to manage the after effects of the 2004 Tsunami, has been profound. Recent articles in the press and reports have made comparisons between the two disasters, and noted that with the tsunami there was extensive loss of life and damage covered a wide area, whereas Cyclone Thane was more concentrated with fewer people killed, but damage and destruction of property and crops being far more extensive.

An independent NGO survey team has recorded 57,362 homes as totally damaged and 51,395 as partially damaged which may or not mean that part of them is habitable. Thousands of families have had their livelihoods destroyed or disrupted with cash and tree crops of banana, coconut, tapioca, pulses, mango, casuarinas, jack-fruit and cashews decimated.

Livestock losses have also been immense with upwards of two million animals lost including tens of thousands of chickens. Food shortages are also expected to occur with newly planted rice paddies washed out by torrential rain and water contamination wide spread.

For the region, it will take some time for services to be fully restored and with no electricity supply, and no effective pumps for water to be drawn up out of wells or supplied to houses, urban streets in poorer suburbs can quickly become a torrent of rainwater, sewage, rotting refuse and garbage as services become overloaded, and to date over 2,000 adults and children have reported symptoms of fever and diarrhoea. Concerns for human health and particularly disease outbreak are in the minds of local officials.

And so it is in this challenging circumstance that the Pitchandikulam

Forest project has with great resilience taken to what according to Joss Brooks the project manager and Kannian the Nursery and Infrastructure Coordinator will be the two year task of, clearing out all of the debris, planning, repairing and rebuilding and replanting. The project has had help from some contracted community members, all established staff and some volunteers, to all of whom they are extremely grateful in the shared goal of seeing the forest restored and functioning as a training centre again.

If anyone would like to make a tax deductible donation to support this on-going work, please contact QSA at atadministration@qsa.org.au or 119 Devonshire Street, Surry Hills NSW 2010, 0296 989103.

Sustainable Enterprise Development in Auroville Bioregion (SEDAB) project and Pitchandikulam Forests planned contribution.

Pitchandikulam Forest has also newly become involved in a proposal drawn up by a joint team of several economic units operating at Auroville, and covers agriculture, natural resources, cottage industries and information sharing aiming to create a range of sustainable and innovative rural enterprises in communities throughout the Viluppuram District of Tamil Nadu. The proposal holds to enhance the financial returns from livelihoods for the poorest communities in the area, utilising natural resources in a sustainable way, and provide technological and marketing information, links to credit and infrastructure to ensure profitable enterprises.

Among the hundreds of enterprises Pitchandikulam Forest's contribution will include growing and marketing of

Spirulina, medicinal plant collection and training, the production of herbal based cosmetics as part of a beautician training program and snake rearing for snake venom towards the production of anti-venom.

Vasandham Society and Environmental Education Centre (VERC)

Since the last QSA monitoring visit to the Vasandham Environmental Education Centre (VERC) also in Tamil Nadu, there has been much significant change relating particularly to energy; supplies and production. The nearby Vaigai River flood plain has seen 520 large wind power generators installed and has also welcomed a more beneficial arrangement with the power company purchasing rather than leasing the land on which the turbines stand.

Everyone spoken to about these generators was very pleased to have them in operation as the area now has a reliable energy supply and there has been no issue regarding sound pollution when in motion.

Solar panels have also been successfully installed upon the roof of the centre itself further underwriting the Centre's power needs at all times and a windmill type energy generator is also awaiting complete installation. These installations are part of a wider plan at the project

to further expand sustainable energy resources and their benefits including a planned biogas conversion, water pumping from the dams to demonstrate appropriate water management systems and the training centre's weather station monitoring weather patterns in order to track changing situations as they affect agriculture.

Most fortunately the area was did not experience any damage in the recent Cyclone Thane and as such cash crops such as cashews are still thriving. However there has been some species changes as older trees cease to be productive which has led to the project manager Guna to introduce some compensating, income generating alternatives such as such as the sale of timber, honey production and beeswax candles.

Guna and his staff are also very keen to deepen their water stores at VERC, in order to make wider use of the water which flows down from the adjoining Forestry Department land and rock outcrops. Any expansion needs to occur prior to the next wet season and ahead of a pending government decision concerning the location of a wildlife sanctuary planned for the area.

Should the Sanctuary be built it will bring with it planning restrictions and also the need for bigger and more robust fences particularly as leopards, indigenous to the region, would be one animal encouraged to the sanctuary.

The sanctuary is welcomed by those at the project in the belief it will restore the natural biodiversity in the region, and hopes to be able to work with the Forestry Department to help bring it about.

The VERC staff has also established a training timetable working in organic

farming methods currently with 8 farmer's groups as well as providing advice across a range of other 'sustainable agriculture' topics such as which traders selling animal feeds are adding stone dust to add bulk and weight to the grain, and how to check for this unwelcome additive.

A regularly scheduled framers workshop covering the manufacture of natural fertilisers and pesticides took place during Jackie Perkins' most recent visit where she was able to observe the Centres' inclusive training methodology in action.

The VERC trainers ensured a variety of teaching resources were available relative to the varying literacy levels of the farmers as well as facilitating practical demonstrations in which everybody took part. The farmers were eager to learn these new skills, and there was much discussion and exchange of ideas on topics such as the 'green revolution' and enthusiasm for converting from chemical based agricultural practice to organic methods.

Other examples of workshops that have run recently cover integrated pest management, companion planting, crop rotation and inter-cropping.

CAMBODIA – Update to December QSA notes.

Friends will be pleased to know that flood waters in Cambodia have receded and the trainees have been able to re-establish their permaculture food gardens. QSA has reissued the seeds and seedlings given out before the flooding and these have since been replanted. As such, the seasons roll around and the hard work continues!

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QSA is a member of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), and is a signatory to the ACFID Code of Conduct. The purpose of QSA is to express in a practical way the concern of Australian Quakers for the building of a more peaceful, equitable, just and compassionate world. To this end QSA works with communities in need to improve their quality of life with projects which are economically and environmentally appropriate and sustainable.

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