



# QSA NEWSLETTER

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Welcome to this July 2015 QSA Newsletter. Here we will share with you something of the recent study tour to projects in Tamil Nadu, South India. Authors Acey Teasdale, Wies Schuiringa and Jackie Perkins.

Four Friends, Katherine, Bee, Acey and Wies from New South Wales joined Jackie Perkins on a regular monitoring visit to projects in Tamil Nadu. They were able to learn about the work of QSA for themselves, to meet the project partners and participants, and also to see something of the environment where the projects are being run.

## Project Partners

QSA has been working with Pitchandikulam Forest and Vasandham Society for a number of years. Joss Brooks, Tasmania Regional Meeting, has, along with partner Anita and daughter Divya, been living and working at Pitchandikulam for many years. The project has a very strong environmental focus and with a large team of well qualified personnel, has established a good reputation among their peers for sound scientific knowledge and understanding of the indigenous flora and fauna. They have been working with the teachers, students and communities in the region to develop a greater understanding and appreciation of their role in maintaining the environment. Thousands of trees have been planted, with financial help from Australian Quakers, using seeds collected locally and grown especially for extending the indigenous tropical dry evergreen forest trees. Guna Kunasekaran is the project manager of Vasandham Society working in the west of Tamil Nadu. Here training in more productive and better ecological methods of agriculture are being taught, providing an increase of income to the many farmers and women's self-help groups who practice the training they have been given.



Joss, project  
manager  
Pitchandikulam  
Forest on left,  
Guna project  
manager  
Vasandham  
Society



## People and Places

Wies reports 'the projects in Tamil Nadu aim to provide skills and knowledge so that local people can earn a regular income to support their family. QSA often compliments what is already happening or what is funded from different sources. QSA funds the next step or the next stepping stone, to extend or consolidate what is happening for a group of people. Environmental awareness and education are part of all the projects. We visited some of the projects together with about eight local people,

travelling in a small bus. These local people work for or are associated with the outreach work that is done through the Pitchandikulam Forest. One day, on the way back we stopped at an ancient temple that is important to the local people and they made offerings in the temple. When we were walking around the compound of the temple, they all started to pick up things from the ground. I learnt that they were picking up seed pods from an old tree and that these seeds would be used in the plant nursery at Pitchandikulam Forest for new forestation projects. Seeds from such an old local tree are valuable.' The sacred groves and temple sites have been an important source of indigenous seeds as these trees are protected, and may contain the only local examples of particular species. In the seed room at Pitchandikulam Forest many of the examples have been sourced in this way.



Seed harvesting at Nadukuppam, & an example of larger seed pods.

We visited a number of groups working collectively to generate an income, benefitting from peer support and the bargaining power of increased numbers. Acey reported feeling 'moved and humbled' by the Keseva Nayakkau Palayam Village self-help group who were producing spirulina but thought first of supporting the 'undernourished students at the local school, before making calculations about their loan repayments and profits to the group of investors'.



Photo of spirulina group at Keseva Nayakkau Palayam Village.

Wies commented 'I learnt that local communities are based on groups of people working together and holding each other accountable for the work of the group. There is not the individual focus of our society where each person or family is expected to take care of themselves economically. Groups of between ten to 25 people share income, profit sharing and can get micro loans from the Bank of India. We were told about the entrenched caste system and the difficulties of having groups



with participants from different castes. The leaders of the women's groups told us that they provide education to their group members in literacy, numeracy, book keeping, addressing issues such as domestic violence, marriage of girls in early puberty and abortion and infanticide of baby girls. These women were determined to lift the economic ability of women and to stop the abuse of women and girls. In isolated villages we saw posters with cartoons, denouncing domestic violence. The projects provide an annual income to the women who otherwise would rely on seasonal agricultural work for part of the year. '



Weaving palm fronds into a panel for a roof or walls, packaging nuts they have collected, & the women who work in the plant nursery.

Acey reports 'I remember the delight of Pitchandakulam –walking in the forest, paying respects to the stars from the roof of the eco-dorm, the din of the wildlife at night, squawking, croaking and shrilling, and in the daytime, glimpses of little furry things flitting through the vegetation and the kitchen.



Pictures overleaf - Some views of Pitchandikulam Forest, one of the quietest places in India! On left is the eco-dorm with bedrooms, a meeting room, kitchen and bathrooms. On the right a shady place for small meetings or to have lunch.

We spent a lovely afternoon as 'consultants' to the T shirt designers suggesting what colours and designs would be a hit with an international market, and with Guna at Vasandham Society, spending no more than half an hour tilling a garden and yet experiencing the back breaking aches!'



I-r Wies, Acey and Bee working in Vasandham Society's orchard, resulting in 'back breaking aches'!

Acey was struck by the unbelievable generosity of the people she met, throughout the trip, starting with Joss Brooks driving us all along the vast sandy beach to the north of Chennai to look for Cherianagar where she volunteered on a project in 1963. We also had a wonderful time with Guna and his family. Everyone made us very welcome, and were so pleased that we wanted to explore and understand so much about their lives in Tamil Nadu.

## The Impact of this project

At a meeting with about 25 women leaders, Wies asked what the husbands think of their wives becoming educated, understanding the finances of their business, having an income all year round and at times earning more money than their husbands. This question caused much animated discussion between them in Tamil and the answer that came back to us was, that the husbands now understand that the women do not use the money for themselves, they use the money for health care for the family, education for the children and to build a new house for the family. We were shown evidence of this. Having three cows that are in good health, provides enough income for a family to keep their children in school and after their education has been paid for, to save up to replace the thatched house with a dirt floor with a brick house.

Permission was obtained for the use of each of these photographs, taken by QSA staff during monitoring visits and the recent study tour.

If you would like to be part of future study tours to Tamil Nadu, Cambodia or Uganda, for a mix of seeing the projects for yourself, meeting project partner staff and participants, and having some fun, do please let Jackie Perkins know via the QSA office.



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