



SAHARA ROOTS FOUNDATION

Earth Day 2016

Freeing trees, Replanting and PermaCulture



“Earth Day 2016 — Trees for the Earth.

Let’s get planting.

As Earth Day Network moves closer to its 50th anniversary, they are planning to plant 7.8 billion trees starting as from now. This will have a big impact on the Earth and will serve as the foundation of a cleaner, healthier and more sustainable planet for all.

Trees help combat climate change.

They absorb excess and harmful CO2 from our atmosphere.

Trees help us breathe clean air.

Trees absorb odours and pollutant gases (nitrogen oxides, ammonia, sulphur dioxide and ozone) and filter particulates out of the air by trapping them on their leaves and bark.

Trees help communities.

Trees help communities achieve long-term economic and environmental sustainability and provide food, energy and income.” www.earthday.org

Bearing this in mind, Ilham Bakal, Anouk Schaedtler and I set off once again to help during the Earth Day 2016 celebrations in M’hamid El Ghizlane, Morocco. This would be our 5th Earth Day celebration and we were looking forward to once again working together with our local partners, the local schools and the different official ministries that would all be involved. Armed with 30 waterboxx’s donated by Arno Vlooswijk of “de Kleine Aarde” in Boxtel (who contacted us via Pieter Hoff of Groasis, www.groasis.com) we arrived in Morocco on the 18th of April and on the 19th we drove once again alongside the river Draa which to our surprise was gently flowing through the Draa valley until Zagora. We had stopped at the nursery in Ouarzazate to buy trees that would be needed for the planting activities. We also wanted to work with a different variety of trees such as apricot, hibiscus and plants such as aloe-vera, to see how these will adapt in a harsh desert environment if they were well taken care of.

Climate change: so much sand!



The 20th and 21st of April was spent preparing the last minute details for our Earth Day activities which were being organised by the local Foundation L'Association Zaila. A visit was made to a new site that is going to be used for a new project: "Green Gateway to the Sahara" which we will be starting in October 2016 if all goes well. See further info here below). During this visit we would also have the opportunity to speak with the village elders of Zaouia as we wanted to explain this new project, which will be based on the knowledge of "PermaCulture" to them, and to see if they still had knowledge on how planting was done before the arrival of modern techniques such as chemical fertilizers. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Permaculture>

We were staying in Bivouac Le Petit Prince <http://www.bivouaclepetitprince.com/en/environnement/> where we had now been planting with the Groasis Waterboxx's for the last five years and in the afternoon it became clear to us that our project had been suffering since the last time we had been here in November 2015. Due to climate change there have been many more sandstorms than usual, during the last six months. Winter had been extremely difficult, no rain had come. Thus the sand dunes remained soft as the minuscule seeds, which lay under the top layer, were not able to develop and help keep the sand stable. The sand dunes "walked" over our trees and on into the bivouac. A tractor had to be rented to help clear an enormous amount of sand as shovelling seemed useless. **So much sand!**



Our trees suffered

It was heartbreaking for all of us to see that some of our 4 year old palm trees had been devoured by sand dunes and had not survived. Trees were lost, other were suffering and struggling to survive in waterboxx's, now filled with sand instead of water. We realised just how important it is to have a responsible local farmer working for us. Our tree-caretaker Abdurazak, who had worked with us for four years, had stopped working for us in January and we needed to find someone to replace him during the next four days.

Halim Sbai, President of the local foundation L'Association Zaila and our partner, introduced us to two men from the village Zaouia and for the next few days we decided to work together with Habib and Mohammed. A start was made that same afternoon as we systematically cleaned the waterboxx's around the bivouac, (ca. 50) explaining how the waterboxx's work, refreshing the water, checking the growth of the trees and replanting where necessary. This needed to be done on a regular basis which is why our tree-caretaker receives a small salary from Sahara-Roots.



Earth Day activities in M'hamid

22nd of April 2016



Our International Earth Day celebrations 2016 officially started on the 22nd of April as we entered the M'hamid Center Primary school together with members of L'Association Zaila, Mohamed Chebaibi a teacher at the High School M'hamid Center and members of the Environmental Club, and many volunteers ready to help. The trees that were planted the year before were doing very well so together with children from different classes we replanted the waterboxx's with different kind of trees. We were happy to see that the GRASSROOTS (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grassroots>) approach really applied here as the school grounds now had special areas designated for planting and looked well taken care of.

As we walked from the one school to the other we cleaned plastic and rubbish along the way. On arrival at the High School M'hamid Center we once again met with the director of the school Mr. Fatahala. Together with teacher Mohamed Chebaibi and the Environmental Club we set out to free all the trees, that had been planted one year ago, from their incubators (Groasis waterboxx's). They had grown well and were now ready to be released to see how they would survive without the help of the waterboxx. We re-planted the twelve waterboxx's with olive and palm trees. It was such a good feeling to see that teachers and students were so enthusiastic about the project.



Earth Day activities in M'hamid

22th of April 2016



Arrangements had been made to start a project together with school children and their teachers at the new school that had just been opened in M'hamid. To be able to work together with the schools in this area we need to have permission from the local authorities. It is a big thank you to Halim Sbai, who spends many hours visiting the Governor in Zagora, the different Ministries involved such as Education, Water and Environment. Without the correct papers we would never be able to achieve as much as we do. So, we were really happy to be able to start a project with this school. We donated 10 waterboxx's with trees as well as 30 "Me and my Sahara" booklets and we look forward to visiting them again in October 2016, to see how well the project is going.



Earth Day activities in M'hamid

22th of April 2015



It was a great relief to see the trees had grown so well at the girls and boys dormitories, our "Green and clean home away from home" project. The oleanders that we had planted now stood 2 meters tall and were still in their incubators!! Luckily we were able to free them without damaging them which was a surprise to everyone!!

And so we were able to teach a new lesson about the Groasis waterboxx. The waterboxx's are able to be re-used as long as they are still in a good condition. And so we replant them with new trees and shrubs including a small aloe Vera cactus. We were really looking forward to seeing how well this cactus will grow in the Sahara!



Earth Day activities in M'hamid

23th of April 2016



The 23rd of April was dedicated to connecting with the local people of the village Zaouia, Sahara Roots will be working together with L'Association Zaila on a new project called the "Green Gateway to the Sahara". We would like to help bring back ancient knowledge on how to farm in the oasis as it was done before without the use of chemical fertilizers. We hope to combine ancient techniques and modern techniques, such as the use of the Waterboxx. With this new project we hope to create awareness on the importance of fighting desertification as they live on the frontier of the huge Sahara desert and it is important to save the agricultural land and the cultural heritage of this environment.

It was wonderful to have singer Aziz Sahmaoui who had flown over from France to joined us for this years Earth Day activities.

See (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q5BACf_ZrbQ)

Aziz had visited M'hamid during the Taragalte Festival in January 2016 and is not only enthusiastic about the music from this region but also about the environmental projects that are taking place in and around M'hamid.



Earth Day activities in M'hamid

23th of April 2015



We met with some of the village elders and explained the idea of working with the PermaCulture system for agriculture. We have been researching this system for the past 6 months together with our Dutch Permaculture partner Roos Beute. It is a sustainable approach to farming and planting that rules out the use of chemical fertilizers and mechanical systems that do more harm than good. This system has been proven to rehabilitate formerly arable land for example in Jordan.

See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1rKDXuZ8C0>



During our discussions it was moving to see how emotional the two elders were. They understood completely what we were trying to explain, for them it was the "old way", the traditional way. They explained that many of the younger generation have moved or are wanting to move away to the cities leaving the village desolate behind, to be taken over by sand. They welcome this small project, with the hope that it may help to stop this migration if we are able to create a new socio-economic balance by planting in such a way that the farmers can make an earnest living and help provide a better life for their families. As we walked to a plot of land close by we were surprised to see pomegranate trees flourishing in amongst the wheat growing. In the back ground we see encroaching sand dunes!!



Earth Day activities in M'hamid

23th of April 2015



We celebrated by planting three baby fruit trees in waterboxx's together with Aziz Sahmaoui, children of Zaouia village and all others present, on the piece of land that is to become the "Green Gateway to the Sahara". During the Taragalte Festival in October 2016 we are planning to start this project. After a delicious traditional lunch which was served in one of the village houses, we left for M'hamid village where presentations were held in "Dar Shabab" after which we planted trees in 2 waterboxx's in the patio of the building.

It was then Party Time! Music was played by various local groups as well as Daraa Tribes (see... <https://www.facebook.com/daraa.tribes?pnref=lhc.friends>) a new group managed by our friend Thomas Duncan who is also involved with our Green Sahara Project. It was so nice to see him as well and we were very grateful that he was able to be with us. The closing act was Aziz Sahmaoui as he played his beautiful music while the sun was setting.



Earth Day activities in M'hamid

24th of April 2016



The morning of the 24th was spent planting the remaining trees together with all present in the bivouac, a very special moment as we are all determined to help our Mother Earth by planting trees. We are so gratefully for your support.

During Earth Day celebrations in M'hamid we planted some 30 trees, we visited three schools for educational activities, we visited the girls and boys dormitories where we replanted more trees because they had worked so well with their projects! We contacted the village elders of Zaouia and were welcomed. We enjoyed the music of Aziz Sahmaoui and Daraa Tribes. And we had counted our trees around Bivouac Le Petit Prince. In the afternoon we headed back to Ouarzazate, happy with what had been accomplished by all.



Earth Day activities in Ouarzazate

24th of April 2015



On the morning of the 25th we visited the two schools in Ouarzazate that also have Sahara- Roots tree-planting projects. Armed with new trees we entered the Al Khansaa Primary school and were pleased to see that once again they had done a wonderful job.

They are such a good example to all the other schools!! The grounds were tidy, the trees and shrubs were growing really well and they had started yet another area in which they had started a new herb garden.

As we entered the Institut Technologie Hotellère et Touristique we heard that our dear friend Mr. Mohamed Khattouch was unfortunately not present. Even so we were given permission to check all the trees and shrubs that had been planted a year before. This project is part of the "Rotary Amsterdam West" project so we were anxious to see how if the trees had done well. Bougainvillea's had been planted in a secluded spot and had grown. The trees that we had planted during our visit in 2012 were standing tall, proud and grew peppers!



Earth Day activities in Ouarzazate

25th of April 2016



As we entered the designated "park to be" area, it became clear that the 18 waterboxx's had been neglected, we were really disappointed as we saw weeds growing out of the "blue pipes" in the waterboxx's. It is through these pipes that any dew or raindrops present enters the reservoir. They were now clogged. In the heat of the day we decided to get to work by clearing away all the weeds and while we were working we discovered that all though it seemed neglected, the trees had done very well. All had survived.

A young man joined us, new at the school, and as we talked, we realized that this could be just the right person to handle the responsibility of this project. Even though Mohamed Amrak works in the administration it became apparent that he was very interested in helping us and so we agreed that he would discuss the matter with Mohamed Khattouch. As the students leave each year we do need someone who could be at the school year round. We left the school grounds feeling positive once again.



Earth Day activities in M'hamid

25th of April 2015



We realize that it is not an easy task to "green the Sahara" and there are times that we are so disappointed to see that we have lost trees. But when we meet a child who is so responsive to what we are trying to accomplish, we realize that we have once again "planted a seed". This child will carry on with our work in the future. It's these children that we need to reach with the help of the local people. We feel a big responsibility towards all those who believe in our work. We have now been working in this area for more than eight years. It is with the support of all the donated monies received, as well as all the volunteers that donate their time for our projects, that we are able to continue. For this we are truly grateful.

But we are not only dependent on our volunteers, the local people involved also help to carry out the work needed to sustain the projects. Without Halim Sbaï it would be difficult to organize our events and receive permission from the local authorities to be able visit the local schools. We are grateful to both Halim and Ibrahim Sbaï for allowing us to work with the Groasis Waterboxx around Bivouac Le Petit Prince in M'hamid for the past 5 years, giving both locals and visitors an insight into how this wonderful invention works. A small man-made oasis is now appearing!

Without the enthusiastic headmasters and teachers who help in explaining the importance of the environment during class hours, the children and students would not be able to comprehend the importance of the tree planting projects. By contacting the local farmers we hope to establish a relationship in which we can learn from each other while connecting the "old traditional ways" with new techniques. Without their support we cannot start the "Green Gateway to the Sahara" project as they will be largely responsible in carrying out the work needed to start this "PermaCulture project.

Ilham, Anouk and Marika, our Sahara-Roots team!! I couldn't do it without you!! Thanks for all your support.

Between 27th of October and 1st of November we will be present during the 7th Taragalte Festival. During this period we will be planting trees in 60 waterboxx's together with the local farmers of Zaouia as we make a start on the "Green Gateway to the Sahara". See www.taragalte.org **You are welcome to join us!!**

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