



Sahara-Roots activities during Taragalte Festival 2016 “Under the Stars”

Miracles really do happen!

The 2016 Taragalte Festival (www.taragalte.org) took place between 28 – 30 October. During the Earth Day activities in April 2016 we had agreed to start planting trees on the “Green Gateway to the Sahara” site during this years Festival and so our local partner and director of the Taragalte Festival as well as President of the local Foundation L’Association Zaila, Halim Sbaï, had asked us to come a little earlier to do the tree-planting event. The “Green Gateway to the Sahara” project is the environmental part of a larger project: the “Joudour Sahara” Music school in M’hamid (www.joudoursahara.org) which is currently under development.

Joudour Sahara: an eco music school in M'hamid Al Ghizlane

"Joudour Sahara" will focus on empowering youth with music and arts education programming in a safe and welcoming space. In addition to classroom instruction, the school will offer a visiting artist exchange, indoor and outdoor performance spaces for local and travelling acts, an on-site workshop for musical instrument creation and repair, and accommodations to tourists who are interested in supporting the school while on holiday. The project is music-centric but has a heavy environmental awareness and conservation component, because it is a learning institution, and creating awareness about the environment issues is also very important.

Partners involved:

Local NGO Zaila: has been pioneering environmental and cultural projects since 2005 and created the Taragalte Festival in 2009. Through music, art, workshops, exhibitions, and conferences the festival promotes and provides a platform for the sustainable development of the region. (www.taragalte.org)

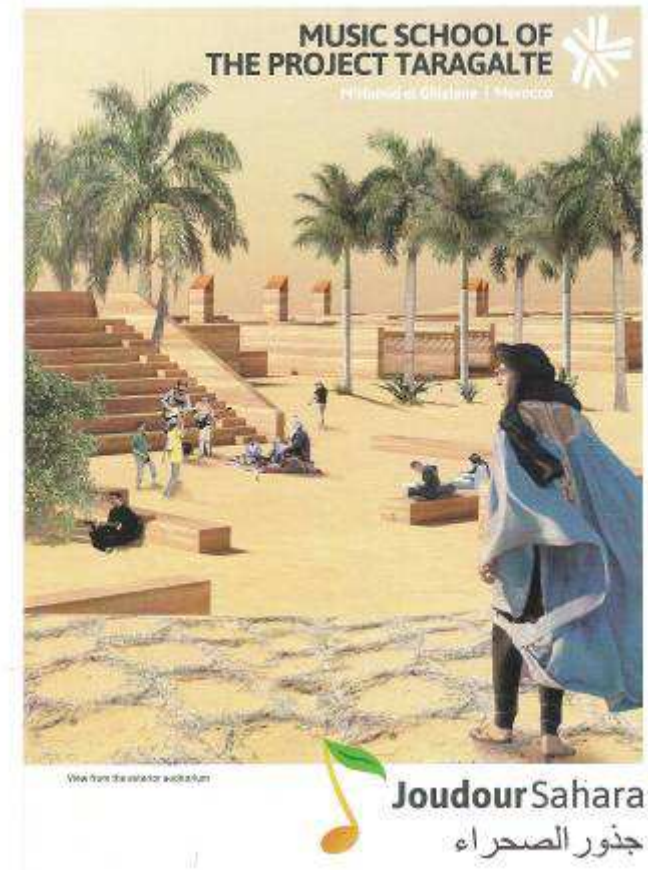
Aziza Chaouni Projects: Aziza's Ghaouni's expertise in the integration of architecture, landscape and green technologies in arid climates. She will be responsible for the construction and layout of the school site and structures. (www.azizachaouniprojects.com)

Playing for Change Foundation: mission is to create positive change through music and arts education. (www.playingforchange.org)

Their guiding principles are:

- using music to transform lives and communities;
- connecting people and communities (locally and globally);
- economic empowerment (use of local materials and labour, teachers, earned income through instrument creation, performances, administration of the school);
- local leadership.

Sahara-Roots Foundation will be responsible for planting trees on the premises of the school and helping to educate about the fragile desert environment"





(Anouk, Ilham, Wanda, Roos, Aziza, Petra)

This time the Sahara-Roots team consisted of Ilham Bakal (Translator), Anouk Schaedtler (photographer), Roos Beute (Permaculture expert), Petra Kibbe (volunteer) and myself and we were pleasantly surprised by the unexpected rainfall, which definitely was long overdue, on our arrival in Ouarzazate, Morocco.

Our luggage, which consisted of 40 Groasis Waterboxx's (<https://www.groasis.com/en>) as well as our personal suitcases, was piled in and on top of the car and we hoped that there would be enough room still left for the small trees we were planning on to buy the next day. Roos had made a list of trees that we would be needing to help rejuvenate the soil of the piece of land that we would be working on. As we drove to M'hamid, we stopped at the Ministry of Eaux et Forêt, Zagora where we met Mr. Mohamed Baddouzi. After we explained our project to him we were pleased to receive baby acacias and tamarisk trees to plant during our activities! Our 4WD became a small forest as we loaded the car with our precious cargo, luckily Sharif (our driver and friend, of Cherg Expeditions, was used to the oasis life and cars packed to the brim!!

On arrival in M'hamid El Ghizlane we noticed a "Catch 22" feeling being generated by Halim & Ibrahim Sbaï, the organizers of the festival. After 3 days of heavy sandstorms followed by three days of rain in the Sahara, they were behind schedule with the preparations of the festival: very happy with the rain but very unhappy with the sand! So much still needed to be done and only three days left before the grand opening of the Taragalte Festival in the afternoon of the 28th.



As we entered the site that we would be working on, we discovered that nothing had been prepared here as well. No wadi's/trenches had been dug, no water-tank present on the site and not much time left to start on these preparations. What now? After discussing the situation with Halim we decided to start the job ourselves so the next day after a 20 min walk through the desert to the site we bumped into our tree-caretaker Habib, one of the local farmers living in the village Zaouia, next to the piece of land.

During the April 2016 Earth Day activities, we had promised the local farmers of this village that we would return in October to start this new project using the traditional methods known to them together with Permaculture techniques as well as with new innovations such as the Groasis Waterboxx. We had been experimenting with this last invention for the last 5 years and by combining all these we hope to develop a way to combat the desertification of the oasis villages. Thus we want to create a 'pilot project' from which others can learn and also implement.

We were also joined by Thomas Duncan, an ex Peace Corps volunteer now working for the Joudour Sahara Project and with a team of 5 women and 2 men we started discussing, measuring and strategizing where the 3 wadi's/trenches (20 meters x 3 metres and 60cm deep) would be placed while keeping in mind the architectural plans made by Aziza Chaouni and her team from.

Habib, our local tree-caretaker, agreed to help find four other local farmers to help us with the digging.

What a sight it was to return in the afternoon to find that Habib had done such a great job in measuring out the 3x wadi's and to find him working together with the women of his family digging the first trench and wheel barrowing the sand!! By the end of the afternoon, the 1st trench was finished. In Holland we work with tractors and modern equipment to dig trenches of this size but here everything is done by hand. With sheer willpower, girl-power and 3 men we succeeded. It gave us great hope that we would actually have the trenches finished on time for the planting.



Artists and visitors for the festival were now starting to arrive, the stage was being set up and everyone was on edge, working incredible hours to make sure that all would be ready for opening day, a real challenge realizing that we were in the desert, no roads, no permanent electricity, no running water, no buildings except for the small bivouac Le Petit Prince.

The new Joudour Sahara Music School project was also going to be presented so we were happy to see that two partners of this project: Aziza Chaoui of Azizia Choouni Projects and Stacie Freaiser of the Playing for Change Foundation, had also arrived.

On the grand opening day many of the local traditional groups were lined up to welcome all of the officials who were joining us for the festival. As we stood in line to welcome the local officials from the different ministries such as Water and Environment, as well as the Governor of the region we were also honoured to welcome the US Ambassador Mr. Dwight L. Bush Sr, and his wife. And what a great surprise it was when in his speech, he mentioned that the Joudour Sahara Project would be receiving the US Ambassadors Grant 2016, what a great achievement!

(<https://eca.state.gov/cultural-heritage-center/ambassadors-fund-cultural-preservation>)

Many of the musicians from Morocco, Mali, Mauritania, Algeria, France and the Netherlands had now also arrived and during the evening we witnessed the first performances on stage. Our days were spent working on the site and our nights were spent listening to the wonderful music of so many artists that had joined the festival including: Tinariwen, Oum, Aziz Sahmaoui, Khaira Ariby, Imarhan N'Tinezraf, Mariam Koné, Draa Tribes, Goupe Hassani, Génération Taragalte and many other local and international artists.

It was magical!!



The biggest challenge for us was to make sure there would be water available for planting. There was no water-well on this site and so we wanted to fill a plastic water tank that had been carried through the desert to the site by donkey!

Once again Habib, his nephew and his friend Mohamed came to the rescue as they laid out a huge hose from the neighbours water well to "our" piece of land. Although the water hose could not fill the tank, there were big holes in the ground from which rammed-earth bricks had been made to use for a wall around the site. Worried that the water would sink straight into the ground when put in these holes Mohamed assured us that this wouldn't happen: the ground was hardened by years of drought! He was right: the next day the hole still contained water.





Once everything had been prepared on the “Green Gateway to the Sahara” planting site, including the 50 waterboxx’s with their trees, Aziza Chaouni invited artists and visitors alike to join us for our planting ceremony.

And so it was that we planted 70 trees of all kinds, including olive, jacaranda, pomegranate, palm-trees and tamarisk as well as shrubs such as lavender and rosemary, together with all present. Many visitors were interested to hear how the Groasis Waterboxx system works, and why we had dug wadi’s (trenches) in which to plant, and why we had so many different tree types during this planting session. We also planted alfalfa, onions and garlic which will help rejuvenate the soil. As the sun was setting, there was a golden glow over the site and we realized that:

“Miracles really do happen”!



Catching a ride on the morning of our last day the famous singer Aziz Sahmaoui happily joined us. Aziz had also joined us during the Earth day Celebrations in April 2016 and his song: (A dune for two) on his "Mazal" album brings such sweet memories of his wish to plant a peach tree in the desert. We had planted trees with Aziz during Earth Day and he was looking forward to seeing what had survived. Unfortunately the peach tree did not but the pomegranate had survived the harsh hot summer temperatures.

To make sure that all was finished and the last details of the tree care-taking were discussed with Habib we drove through the desert to the site. The last shrubs were planted and the mulch (made from old palm leaves) was ready to cover the ground so that it would not dry out too much. However, just as we were ready to disperse the leaves in the wadi's Habib stopped us. Shocked, he asked us to please not throw the leaves into the trenches. Apparently if we did so the scorpions would seek cover underneath!! And he would not be able to take care of the trees!!

We had worked hard together as a team with the local people. We learned from them and they from us. We are very grateful to Halim and Ibrahim Sbaï for supporting our planting projects and we hope that this will become an inspiring "pilot project" to help fight desertification. *A big thank you* to all who helped to make this planting project possible!! We hope that in the future we will pass through this piece of green paradise: **"The Green Gateway to the Sahara"!!**

**Wanda Hebly,
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