ADOPT A TREE FOR ARMENIA

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By Prof. Z. S. Andrew Demirdjian, Los Angeles, 18 June 2022

Since prehistoric times forests have been a great source of essentials of life such as clean air (oxygen), food, shelter, reaction, and sustainability of our wildlife friends. Forests have been the communal home of all living things. Despite these gifts, humans are destroying forests at an alarming rate. For example, in ancient times, Armenia was covered with thick forests of Armenian and Georgian oak trees. According to a study in 2005, Armenia's estimated forests covered 11.2 percent of its land area, dropping to 8.2 percent by 2000. Sadly enough, in 2012, the Armenia Tree Project (ATP) reported the country's forests had dwindled to 7 percent. In the aftermath of the 44-Day War with Azerbaijan, through the indiscriminate shelling of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artstakh), the enemy has destroyed many parts of the Armenian forests as well.

Almost a third of the Earth's land surface is covered with forests. The taiga is the world's largest forest, stretching 6,000 miles (10,000 km) across northern Russia. However, the taiga is very cold during the long, dark winters, and summer in the forest is short and cool. As a result, it has a comparatively limited number of wildlife habitats. Some countries are lucky to have kept the major part of their forests, such as Sweden. Others, for various reasons of necessity or poaching, have depleted their forests such as, unfortunately, Armenia.

The rain forests, the "lungs" of the planet Earth, are in danger of depletion as well. The three largest rainforest areas are in Brazil (the Amazon), Congo, and Indonesia. These forests are being cut down in clearance for farming or for lumbering. The world is heading toward suffocation from lack of oxygen and the destruction of the habitat of our animal friends that live there.

In 2019, Brazil's land clearance skyrocketed 29 percent in just one year. Fortunately, Google E arth has worked with the Brazil's tribes to pinpoint destruction of the planet's largest rainforest which produces over 20 percent of Earth's oxygen. This is an effort that can be repeated in Armenia to impress upon the people that "no tree, no oxygen to breathe" reality.

Trees give out oxygen and so help make the fresh air that we need to breathe. Reforestation or afforestation (i.e., planting of trees where no trees existed before) is good for the socioeconomic progress of Armenia. Forests help boost the economy and deter soil erosion just to mention two major benefits. We can do a lot to help Armenia. The government cannot do this alone. We need to get the community involved in the reforestation of Armenia.

Here is a proposal for young students to participate in the reforestation or afforestation efforts of the Armenian government.

Give school kids (up to high school) the opportunity to adopt a seedling and care for it, say for two or three years until it becomes a sapling. Then organize a school trip to the designated place to plant it. The government will have the technology ready for digging a hole for it. Each kid will plant his or her adopted tree in the hole and throw the dirt in the hole and pack it well, but not forgetting to create a

berm around it as a basin to catch more water.

While getting students of various public and private schools involved in reforestation or afforestation is not a new idea, the idea proposed here is completely different. Anyway, it will be new to Armenia. The traditional approach to get students interested in helping with the planting of trees is based on orientation of the benefits of reforestation and once a year the volunteer students would participate in planting of trees with their classmates under the supervision of their teachers. These projects involve field trips and students relish the opportunity to participate.

Unlike the traditional approach to get students participate in planting trees every year, the idea being proposed in this article is "Adopt a Tree for Armenia." In adopting a tree, the student would have physical possession of a seedling to take home and to take care of it for two or three years, depending on the selected tree or cultivar to reach a sapling stage. Then, the sapling is planted in designated areas for reforestation or afforestation.

Armenian teachers are dedicated and nurturing. Once they accept the idea, they would work wonders to make it a success by sparking enthusiasm in their students to carry out a community project for the government.

The main agenda of the “Forest Summit: Global Action and Armenia” conference held in Yerevan in 2019 was to address the plight of Armenia's endangered forests. The event was attended by a number of international experts. In his welcome speech, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated that his government had allocated 424 million drams (US$ 890,000) to launch a massive reforestation undertaking to save Armenia's forests. He also promised to double the extent of forests of Armenia by 2050. In other words, Armenia would end up with 14 percent covered with forests. What a grand project, but he would need help.

To realize Pashinyan's resolve to double forests in Armenia is a tall order. To make it achievable, people have to rally to his side. Here are the steps for the "Adopt a Tree for Armenia" program to mitigate the task at hand to reforest parts of Armenia:

Step One. The government of Armenia and ATP (Armenia Tree Project) should get enlisted to participate into the program. ATP has done wonders to reforest Armenia. Dr. Carolyn Mugar is worthy of the Nobel Prize for environmental protection work. They would jump at a viable idea to increase the forests of Armenia. Arrangements should be made as which organization will provide the seedlings, who would handle the distribution, etc.

Step Two. Before asking for volunteers in class, the teacher or an invited speaker would talk about peoples' responsibilities and benefits of reforesting Armenia for the government alone cannot do everything. Select benefits relevant to kids, such as trees shield children from ultra-violet rays, trees provide food, trees clean air, trees cool the streets and the city, trees provide shade to cool a playground, trees makes us healthier and even improve our academic performances, and "forest bathing" practice of staying about 20 minutes in an environment surrounded by forest like trees is

becoming widely accepted as beneficial to humans physically and mentally, etc. Power Point presentations would focus on the vibrant life of birds and animals in the forest including those of residing at the canopy of the forest.

Step Three. Parents also should know about "Adopt a Tree for Armenia" program through teacher-parent conferences or by letter. If parents are amenable to the idea, they should submit their approval to the teacher. Parents may want to have their kids adopt more than one tree and that should be OK. Once the idea becomes operational, "Adopt a Tree for Armenia" program can be applied to different populations such as college students, government employees, ordinary citizens, etc.

Step Four. The government or a not-for-profit organization such as ATP or Hakopyan Environmental Studies center should provide seedlings to the students to take home and to see that they grow healthy. A native tree species would be the best for this project, but not a fruit tree which needs a lot of watering and care after being planted. Information on the specific tree culture should also be given to students to take home for proper treatment.

Step Five. The native tree should survive on its own when planted right before the rainy season begins. Although mixing up different trees is recommended by some, people relate more when the trees are alike and look like a forest rather than a backyard orchard. Thus, the same kind of tree should be given to students. A forest would look better when it is populated with the same kind of native trees or cultivars. Besides, it would facilitate learning the culture of the tree care and make the management of the forest easier.

Step Six. When the seedling becomes a sapling within two or three years, the school organizes a day for the volunteer students to bring their adopted trees to be planted in designated area of a forest. Students would love the field trip and mark the event unforgettable.

Step Seven. After successful planting of trees, each volunteer student should receive a token of appreciation ceremoniously, such as a certificate signed by PM Pashinyan commending them for being good citizens of Armenia. Armenian kids would feel proud to have contributed to the wellbeing of their homeland.

The Pashinyan government's plan for reforestation and afforestation is a win-win project. The environment of Armenia would benefit by turning those vacant lands into vibrant forests. As a consequence of this project, it would also provide jobs for the people to work at the accomplishment and management of this noble project.

The proposed idea has two major advantages: Armenia benefits from increasing the size of the forests in certain localities. Moreover, the students would get engaged in experiential learning project with an ulterior motive of helping the country achieve the re-greening of the Armenian Highlands.

When kids get involved in the environment and conservation of natural resources, scientific studies suggest that students are better able to concentrate, complete tasks, and follow directions after playing in natural settings. Another study reported that self-discipline in young girls can be achieved through increased exposure to settings where nature prevails. School programs that get kids involved in tree planting, foster in them everlasting environmental stewardship. Tree planting is a great way to increase student interest and involvement in their local environment and achieve academic goals better.

"Adopt a Tree for Armenia" program would provide educators with the opportunity to inspire school administrators, faculty, and students to affect positive change at their schools and in their communities. Students become aware that they can play an important role in protecting the environment through personal involvement. Hopefully, when they grow up the experience of "Adopt a Tree" will help them make intelligent decisions about conservation and use of Armenia's valuable natural resources by learning that without plants, there would be no animal life on our planet.

Like boy and girl scouts, allegiance to the country's destiny is grasped at an early age that unless we all collectively contribute toward the advancement of our Homeland, we would regress. The only way we could improve conditions for our country is to believe in the philosophy that each and every one of us can make a difference because the sum total of all of our synergetic efforts would enable us to move mountains.

"Adopt a Tree for Armenia" means plant and see Armenia green again. Re-greening the Armenian Highlands is everybody's responsibility and it would make sense from socioeconomic perspectives. So, let us go for "Adopt a Tree for Armenia" program and see the beauty and the benefits it would add to Armenia in providing the needed oxygen and to support PM Pashinyan's reforestation plans to promote our Homeland, Hayastan, through much-needed socioeconomic development.

There are no comments yet.