

'Kill me,
not the tree'

It was a Tuesday – Tuesday the 10th of Bhadrapad (an Indian lunar month), 1730. Amrita Devi was at home with her daughters in the village of Kherjali, near Jodhpur, churning milk, when she heard the sound of a tree being cut down.

She was alarmed. Trees were never felled in her village, because she and her neighbours were Bishnoi, people of a religion that forbade hunting animals or cutting down trees. These were among 29 principles (bishnoi means 29) laid down by the religion's founder Guru Jambho Ji in the 15th century. By following them, the Bishnoi had made their villages green and fertile even in the middle of the Rajasthan desert. It turned out that the local Maharajah's men were cutting down trees for wood to fire lime kilns at a new palace. Amrita Devi ran and hugged a tree that was about to be chopped down, calling out one of the Guru's sayings: 'Sar santey rookh rahe to bhi sasto jaan' – 'If a tree is saved even at the cost of one's head, it is worth it'.

The men cut off her head. Her three young daughters – Asu, Ratni and Baghu – followed her to hug the tree, and were cut down too. The people of Kherjali and the surrounding Bishnoi villages decided that one of them would give up their life for every tree that was chopped down – and 363 died before the felling stopped.

The Maharajah, shamed by the villagers' courage, apologised, and issued a royal decree, engraved on copper plate. The new law prohibited the cutting down of trees or the hunting of animals in Bishnoi villages, on pain of severe punishment.

The villages have continued to be green oases in a harsh environment down through the centuries. Flora and fauna are said to flourish wherever the 6 million Bishnoi are found. Deer can be seen grazing in their fields without fear; they can count on food and water in even the worst drought.

Some say that these first environmental direct-action protestors inspired Mahatma Gandhi to develop his successful strategy of civil disobedience. Certainly they gave rise to the modern tree-hugging movement, Chipko (meaning 'cling to'), which has spread across the Himalayas. Through it, local people – mainly women – have hugged trees to protect them from loggers, saving many forests and thus stopping the precious topsoil their villages need to grow food from being swept off bare hillsides by the rains.



Wise TREES

The kauri trees of New Zealand are among the largest and oldest on the planet, growing over 50 metres high and living for up to 4,000 years. Kauris are so tall that kokako birds – creatures long thought to be extinct – were recently found to have been living all this time unseen among their sky-high leaves.



Ancient Maoris used these remarkable trees to build boats, since their wood is incredibly strong and resilient to water. In fact, their wood is so durable that kauris which fell into swamps thousands of years ago can still be pulled out and used today.

When cuts are made in kauri bark, gum seeps from the wounds constantly and never seals. Over centuries, these drippings form stalagmites and stalactites on branches and on the ground, which are then used to make paints, varnishes and even jewellery.

Taking the long view

An old Kashmiri proverb observes, 'We have not inherited the world from our forefathers – we have borrowed it from our children'. When it comes to environmental decision making, young people have a special right to have their opinions considered, as they are the ones who will be living with the long-term results.

My name is Alan Wu, and I am the UNEP Tunza Youth Advisor for Asia and the Pacific. My vision is for participatory communities – local, national and international – that develop robust solutions in response to the voices of all their citizens. I try to work towards this by representing young people and raising the prominence of youth issues and opinions in community decision making. I work for youth participation and the development of more responsive institutions to facilitate that participation, and to build the capacity of young people to get involved in their own communities.

From where I live in Australia, I am involved in many national and international programmes that promote and facilitate youth participation, including as Chair of the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition and as a member of the Advisory Council of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Most recently, I was selected as a delegate to Oxfam's 2004 sitting of the International Youth Parliament. I founded and coordinate Wellspring, an environmental non-profit organization that focuses on educating young people on sustainable consumption issues.

In recognition of my work with Wellspring, the Australian Government appointed me as Youth Representative on the Australian Delegation to the 2002 United Nations World Summit on Sustainable Development, the largest UN event ever held. There, I coordinated youth input into Australia's positions on environmental issues, and wrote a number of articles that were picked up by the international media, ensuring young people not present were kept abreast of developments.

In 2003, the participants of the UNEP Global Youth Retreat elected me to the UNEP Tunza Youth Advisory Council, where I also serve as Special Envoy for Young People to the UNEP Executive Director. One of the biggest successes of the Council has been our representation of young people and youth opinion at international environmental negotiations, where, on several occasions, our team has successfully lobbied for the inclusion of text on the importance of partnerships with young people.

But we feel that the first step in working towards a vision of youth participation in environmental decision making is the development of knowledge, skills, perspectives and values which will empower young people to assume responsibility for creating and enjoying a sustainable future. So we've been very happy to develop and implement UNEP's own youth participation strategy, which includes several exciting initiatives for young people like us, such as this magazine, the Tunza book, regular UNEP conferences and retreats for young people, and the 'youthXchange' educational campaign around sustainable consumption issues.

There are thousands of young people around the world who are working for positive change in our local communities – and this work is gradually changing the world. Join us!

Alan Wu, 20, is the UNEP Tunza Youth Advisor for Asia and the Pacific. He is currently completing a combined Bachelor of Arts (Political Science)/ Bachelor of Laws course at the University of Melbourne, Australia.

You can learn more about the work of the UNEP Tunza Youth Advisory Council and how to get involved with our activities. To get started, visit the website at http://www.unep.org/tunza/youth/About_Tunza/Advisory_Council.asp. If you live in Asia and the Pacific, subscribe to the regional e-group by sending a blank e-mail to tunza-asiapac-subscribe@yahoogroups.com



illustration based on photo: Dutta/UNEP/Topham

The Maori people consider kauri trees sacred and wise, because they have observed so much history. The largest kauri in New Zealand – called Tane Mahuta, the Lord of the Forest – stands in the northern Waipoua forest, home to most of the country's remaining kauris. It is 51 metres tall, has a girth of 14 metres, and is believed to be between 1,250 and 2,500 years old.

photo: Australian Government – Department of Family and Community Services