

Friday January 11, 2008 - Archive


KATHIMERINI
English Edition

Greece's International English Language Newspaper

EXCLUSIVELY AVAILABLE INSIDE THE INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE IN GREECE AND CYPRUS



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An alternative way to make trees grow: Natural Farming



In Edessa last August and September, 150 people from 10 different countries made 5 metric tons of clay balls containing the seeds of different species of plants. (Photo courtesy of Natural Farming.)

A different kind of reforestation effort pioneered in Greece by Panayiotis Manikis uses the Natural Farming method developed by Japanese visionary Masanobu Fukuoka. Manikis seeded an area at Anthousa on Mt Pendeli after wildfires in 2005 by sowing clay pellets containing seeds of a variety of plants.

The seed mixtures are encased in a ball of red clay and soil humus which act as a miniature environment of nutrients and beneficial soil microbes. The clay contains enough moisture to keep the seeds viable and prevent them from being eaten by animals. They are spread on the ground until rain softens the clay, allowing the seeds to sprout. No further action is needed and no water other than rainfall.

The clay pellets are formed in cement mixers, packed in sacks and trucked to the sites where armies of volunteers fan out to sow the site, scattering pellets as they go. In larger-scale projects, pelleted seeds can be sown from airplanes; this has already been done in Greece.

Manikis and his associates, along with a network of volunteers from around the world, have already sown a number of areas in Greece that have either been devastated by fire or eroded, using seed pellets made at their base near Edessa every September. They have gone on to sow areas such as in Pella, the mountains of Aegaleo and Pikilos in Attica, as well as Tzoumerka and Ellassona.

"On Mt Pikilos, the results were very good as the mountainside was protected," Manikis told Kathimerini English Edition this week. "At Anthousa, however, even plants we had sown in the square were destroyed afterward by grazing animals, even though the local authorities told us this would be stopped."

Manikis's next effort will be at Keratea, Attica, next October, where 500 hectares of forest were destroyed by fire last summer. They have the support of the local authorities and will be including local livestock breeders in the project to make them aware of the potential benefits to their own interests.

Manikis is dismissive of reforestation efforts because they are not usually followed up with the appropriate maintenance. "It is known that planting trees usually has a 90 percent failure rate," he said. "Erosion is a big problem. For a forest to regrow it takes 10-15 years. If the area is burnt again, there is little hope of it regenerating spontaneously, particularly if the soil has been washed away."

He is also not hopeful about government support. "There was a proposal by the Greek Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics suggesting that the government provide aircraft and funds to seed from the air. Apparently Environment and Public Works Minister Giorgos Souflias has referred the matter to a committee of experts."

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