



*Girls and boys working together to help clean M'hamid*

## **Earth Day 20 – 22 April 2014**

“Education is at the heart of Earth Day”.

“Earth Day” is an annual event, celebrated on April 22, on which day events worldwide are held to demonstrate support for environmental protection. It was first celebrated in 1970, and is now coordinated globally by the [Earth Day Network, \[1\]](http://www.earthday.org) and celebrated in more than 192 countries each year. Numerous communities celebrate Earth Week, an entire week of activities focused on environmental issues”. ([www.earthday.org](http://www.earthday.org) )

### **Earth Day 2014: to be held in M'hamid Al Ghizlane**

With this in mind on the 19th of April, Ilham Bakal- Attar of Noor translations: my Arabic teacher and friend living in The Netherlands, Marika Barthelomy, active in tourism and our friend living partly in Ouarzazate and France, Halim Sbai, president of the Zaila Foundation, M'hamid and I travelled from Ouarzazate to M'hamid El Ghizlane, a six hour enjoyable journey as we meandered alongside the Draa rivier southwards towards the Sahara. Ilham and I had arrived in Ouazazate the evening before from the Netherlands and it would be the third time we would be celebrating International Earth Day in Morocco. However we had decided that this time that we would focus our activities in M'hamid El Ghizlane, where the Sahara-Roots Foundation had already been actively involved in working with the local people since 2007.

During our tree-planting and educational activities here in November 2013, we were asked by Mr. Saïd, the new Caïd, (regional government representative), if we could involve the young ladies from the “girls dormitory” in M'hamid and of course we were happy to do so. And so it was planned to have their help during the Earth day activities between 20 – 22 April 2014.

We were also very happy to hear that Mr Mohamed Khattouch ( Responsable de la Formation des Guides des Espaces Naturels in Ouarzazate) would also be joining us for our activities in this fragile desert environment. We worked together with him already during the 2012 and 2013 Earth Day activities in Ourazazate.

As we came closer to M'hamid the weather changed, a sandstorm was brewing. Apparently the hot weather had arrived sooner than expected and already the water was being rationed due to the fact that there had not been enough rainfall or snow fall in the Atlas Mountains during the winter months. It was now spring with temperatures rising to



*Strange UFO's*



*Planting olive tree grafts*



*A little oasis*

steaming 35 degrees and all of M'hamid as well as many of the villages along the Draa River were rationed only 4 hours of water per day, after which it is shut down. My heart sank because the heat of the summer months still lay ahead.

Of course it is so important that we use as less water as possible for our tree planting which is why we are so happy with the Groasis Waterboxx ([www.groasis.com](http://www.groasis.com)). We have now been working for three years with this Dutch invention by Mr. Pieter Hoff for three years and we can show the wonderful results. The sandy environment in which we first started to plant is slowly becoming a little oasis. The local people now believed in this "strange UFO" as they first saw it. They have witnessed how it works and were now ready to plant in other area's around M'hamid.

This Earth Day we would be concentrating on education and cleaning as well as planting trees and as we met Mr. Mohammed Khattouch and his college Brahim of the Institut Technologie Hotellère et Touristique in Ouarzazate on arrival in M'hamid, we were happy to hear that he had prepared "olive tree grafts". We would be planting our first olive trees in M'hamid.

Plans were first made for the activities in the following days together with the Caïd, Halim, Mohamed, Marika and Ilham, before we were on our way to Bivouac Le Petit Prince, where we would be staying during our days here in M'hamid El Ghizlane. The air was thick with sand and we were happy to have Halim as our driver. Coming from this area he knew the way even though he could hardly see through the mist of sand. We arrived safely to see our trees (around Le petit Prince) swaying in the wind!

### **20<sup>th</sup> of April: The girls dormitory activities**

We were excited about visiting the girls living in the dormitory that was provided for them so that they could continue their education, we prepared our small gifts for them. As we heard from the Caïd, this was a new venture in M'hamid. These girls come from remote villages around M'hamid and are from traditional but poor families. Usually girls only attend the primary school in their own village and there after their education stops. Since a dormitory has now been provided for them to sleep, opposite their secondary school, parents had given permission to allow the girls to continue their education. A huge step for both parents and their children.

Ilham and I had visited the dormitory together with the Caïd in November 2013. We were struck by the lack of cleanliness in the building, broken doors, peeling paint on the walls, no books, no computer, torn curtains, empty grounds, no sheets on the beds. But we



*Visiting the girls*



*Tiny courgettes growing*



*Explaining the waterboxx*

were also struck by the determination of these young girls. It was heart warming and we made a promise to come back. Before leaving, in November, we gave all of them own a copy of the Sahara-Roots booklet "Me and my Sahara", the first book that they had ever received and owned. But of course to keep this booklet we also asked them to do something for us: to make drawings and write about the message of the booklet for our next visit in 2014.

In February 2014 I returned to M'hamid together with a small group of students from Essence College ([www.essencecollege.nl](http://www.essencecollege.nl)) in Bodegraven, the Netherlands. Sahara-Roots had received a wonderful donation from Essence College so we planned to plant trees and vegetables in waterboxx's together with the girls. We also gave them paper, paints, colour pencils so that they would have something to do as a after-school activity.

### **Tiny courgettes growing in the Sahara!**

What a surprise it was now, in April 2014, to step through the gates of the girls dormitory and to see the waterboxxes were still there!! That was step 1. The courgette seeds had germinated and we could see tiny courgettes growing in the sand!!

Unfortunately the trees in two of the 4 waterboxxes were not doing well so we replanted these together with them.

The girls where quite excited to see us again like we were as well. Mohamed Khattouch had joined us because he was very interested to see how we work together with the children. As we spoke to the girls, Ilham was really able to get the message across to the girls in their own language, (Arabic). We where so happy with the work they had done for us as they showed us their books with drawings, paintings, and stories about what they had learned from the booklet given to them.. As we gave all the girls a small gift from the Netherlands we explained that we would pick the three best stories for 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> prizes as we collected their work.

We also asked the girls to think carefully about what they would like to have done to help make the dormitory "a home away from home". We wanted to receive their answers the next day during the official prize award ceremony.

### **Activities also for the boys!**

In the meantime, the boys from the boys dormitory across the street had also joined us, the more the merrier and we all joined the "nettoyage" (cleaning session) in the streets of Mhamid! Although the wind was blowing relentless I could hear Ilham singing with the girls as they picked up the rubbish along the pavement, while Marika and I helped the boys with their part of the cleaning. We all then joined the boys for a tree-planting session on the grounds of their dormitory. Carefully we explained how the waterboxx works and where happy to see that the girls also paid good attention to this. We planted the first 6 olive trees!!



*Who will be winners?*



*Beautiful drawings*



*Checking assignments*

After lunch it was time for the judges to read the stories to determine the winners of our small competition. It turned out to be very difficult as the girls all had done such a good job. From the twenty four stories six were selected and it would take until the next morning before the final decision was made. Luckily we had many judges (including teachers) to help make this difficult decision!!

After lunch a further three waterboxxes were planted outside the entrance to the office of the Caïd. He was very impressed by the new possibilities to grow trees with the use of as little water as possible. It will of course draw lot of attention to have the waterboxxes placed outside the entrance to his office. We are honoured to be working together on this wonderful project. We hope that one day in the future he may bring his son or daughter and show them that he planted an olive tree in the Sahara where there is so little water.

We then spent time discussing sustainable tourism and education possibilities for the lucky few to have work in tourism in this area together with Mr. Mohammed Khattouch, Mr. Abdul Karim, director of the new Educational and Cultural Museum in M'hamid, members of L 'Association Zailia and Marika Barthelomy who also works in tourism. There after it was time to head back to Bivouac Le Petit Prince. On arrival we could see that Mohammed was really impressed to see our tree planting project!

Mohammed had been experimenting, in Ouarzazate with four waterboxx's over the last two years, with good results but he had never seen our project in the Sahara. The trees that were first planted in the Groasis waterboxx's in 2010 now stood three meters tall!! Around the bivouac we have ca. 63 waterboxx's with different trees such as tamarisk, palm and acasia, in many different stages, from just 3 months up to those that are ready now to be "set free" after one year of growing in the waterboxx. These are then reused so it is now an ongoing process. Our tree caretaker Abderakak also provides a small amount of water (recycled from the showers of the bivouac when possible) once a week to the "independent trees".

Mohamed is now ready to start his new Groasis Waterboxx projects in the Dades Valley as well as at the Institut Technologie Hotellère et Touristique as part of the environmental educational project for young guides.

### **21st of April: "a clean home away from home"**

While checking the girls assignments once more before making the final decision we met Ismael, a young teacher who had worked together with us during the first Sahara-Roots tree planting projects in 2008. He was now living in the High Atlas Mountains where he teaches around 80 children living in various villages in a very rural area. He had taken some of our booklets with him when he first left in 2011 and was so happy when we gave him another 20 booklets to take back to the school with him.

*Activities with the girls and boys in their dormitories.*



We arrived at the new "Museum and Cultural Education Centre" to start our day with tree planting together with a young Italian couple who had also donated trees after which we were invited to pay another visit the boys dormitory. They were eager to also receive assignments as we had done with the girls, so together with the Caïd, the dormitory director Ali and Halim, we gave an educational lesson as well as giving each child their own copy of the "Me and my Sahara" booklet. We had purchased stationery for them in which they could write their assignments for the next time we were in M'hamid. Education is just as important for the boys as is for the girls and so we also asked what they would like to have done to help make their dormitory more a "home away from home". Painting the walls and planting trees was their answer!! With this we would also like to help knowing that there are no funds available for this from the government. Ali promised that he would paint during the hot summer months so that when the boys and girls come back for the new school year after summer, they would have a fresh start!!

It all seemed so official to have the winners of our little competition announced by the Caïd and the girls were a little nervous. After announcing the three winners, photos were taken to commemorate the occasion and we then listened to the wishes of the girls on what they would like done to make their dormitory "a home away from home". Shyly they started naming things such as painting the walls, a "uniform" like the other girls have, pyjama's, sheets on their beds, caps and scarves, a new door to their bedroom as it is falling apart, windows repaired, more trees and vegetables on their grounds. We felt embarrassed and aware that we have so much, and they so little and so we really want to help to create a nice safe place for these girls to stay in while continuing their education. With determination to help these girls, Ilham, Marika and I discussed how we could help in making a difference.

The sandstorm continued as we kept on planting olive trees close to the Cherg Café in M'hamid along the pavements. We would be leaving M'hamid the next day and we wanted to get as much planting done as possible. Arriving for the evening back in the bivouac we realised how bad the sandstorm was as sand slowly streamed, like rain, through the roof of the restaurant tent which until now had been the only place away from the sand!



*Our first tree flowers!*



*Freeing trees from sand!*



*Groasis sculpture!*

### **22<sup>nd</sup> of April**

We awoke to a beautiful sun rise and a blue sky, the sandstorm was finally over. But as we walked to the area to where our trees were planted we were amazed to see that some of the waterboxx's had disappeared under the hills of sand. It only took three days of sandstorm!!! Feverously Ilham and I started to dig out some of the waterboxx's realising that this was the continuous fight that we were up against. The people that live in this area have to deal with this situation many times a year. We can only hope that by building this "green wall" others will also do so. For now they can actually see that it does help in stopping the walking sand dunes once the trees are bigger. After counting trees and waterboxx's, as well as enjoying the serene surroundings, we were on our way back to Ouarzazate.

### **23<sup>rd</sup> of April:**

#### **Waterboxx's for Institutue Technologie Hotellère et Touristique in Ouarzazate**

We had arranged to meet Mr Mohamed Khattouch for the start of a new project at the Institutue in Ouarzazate. We had been discussing this new project for one year with Mohammed and with many thanks to the Rotary Club Amsterdam-West from whom we received a donation, we were now able to start this new project.

Because of the major water deficiency also in the area of Ouarzazate Mohamed wanted to start a Groasis Waterboxx project at the ' Institutue Technologie Hotellère et Touristique as well as at the University of Ouarzazate.

**Firstly:** to increase the greenery on the grounds at the school.

**Secondly:** to help educate the students on environmental issues regarding water use and sustainability of their own environment.

The students come from all over Morocco and they study at the Institutue for two years either to become mountain guides, work in tourism or in hotels. They will be able to take this newly acquired knowledge back to their own villages which are usually very isolated.

After presenting Mr Mohamed with the first 21 Groasis Waterboxxes, he showed us the area in which they were to be planted by the 21 young guides on "Graduation Day" in December 2014. Before graduation Day there was a lot of work to be done in preparing the grounds are totally barren. But we were assured that the grounds would be prepared as part of this educational project. It will be interesting to see the progress next time we are in Ouarzazate. We will also donate our booklet " Me and my Sahara" to each of the graduating students.

We also passed by the trees which had been planted with the first donated waterboxxes in April 2012. They were doing really well now, and proudly standing 3 meters tall!



21 Groasis waterboxx's



Area for treeplanting project



"Appel de L' Environnement"

The vegetable seeds that we had bought with us from the Netherlands would also be put to good use here as Mohamed explained where they would be planted. It would be a new project for the students of the Hotel and Restaurant department of this Institute. During the next months a new foundation, with the aim of a " Green Ouarzazate", is going to be set up by students and teachers and they will be working closely with the Ministry of Environment as well as the University of Ouarzazate. We feel very proud to be part of this wonderful new project.

#### **24<sup>th</sup> of April: donation for "Environmental Club" Lycee Abi bakr Sadiik**

As we believe in following through on our projects, we visited all the schools where we have had activities in the past in Ouarzazate. And so it was that we first paid a visit to Lycée Aboubakr Sadik to see how the waterboxx's were surviving. We met with Kamal, now a student at the University and his friend Abdelaziz as well as their Biology teacher Mr. El Houcine Dahbi. It was so good to hear that they had been inspired by the Sahara-Roots projects!! Since April 2013 they had worked hard, together with their Environmental Club, giving educational workshops to schools or during tourism fairs. To be able to get their message across to others, they had developed a booklet "Appel de L' Environnement". Next to respect for the environment they also explain renewable energy, solar energy, how to preserve and economize on the use of water, the hazard of plastic and the Taragalte festival. The Sahara-Roots projects with the Groasis Waterboxx are also mentioned in this booklet. Unfortunately there were no funds to print these booklets. Because we believe that education is the tool to help make a difference and because we were so impressed by the work that has been done we were happy to announce that the Sahara-Roots Foundation was able to make a donation to have these booklets printed.

We feel that the work that is being done by the "Club le bel espace de L'environnement au Lycee Abi bakr Sadiik" is a crown on our activities and an inspiring result in which Sahara-Roots played a (small) role.

Our next surprise visit was to the El Khansa Primary School and we were totally impressed by the change we found on the school grounds. This school has set out to be the "greenest and cleanest" primary school in Ouarzazate if not the whole of Morocco! The six waterboxxes with trees that we had planted the year before had survived really well and the waterboxxes had now been reused again. A bed of sunflowers was now growing and car-tyres had been placed and were now being used to protect newly planted trees and flowers. The school ground walls had been painted in bright colours. We feel that the teachers and children here had been inspired by the attention that they had received during the Earth Day activities last year.

*Small projects like these can really make a difference in spreading the word:  
How to maintain a sustainable environment!!*



*Halim Sbaï and Mohamed Khattouch*



*Ilham, Marika and Wanda of Sahara-Roots*

We would like give a special thank you to the following people for their help during the Earth Day Activities 2014:

Mr. Halim Sbaï of Cherg Expeditions, Ouarzazate and president of L'Association Zaila

Mr. Saïd, the Caïd of M'hamid

Mr Mohamed Khattouch, Responsable de la Formation des Guides des Espaces Naturels of the Institut Technologie Hotellère et Touristique in Ouarzazate.

All members of L' Association Zaila for Development and the Environment Awareness.

Mr. Pieter Hoff, the inventor of the magical "Groasis Waterboxx".

My dearest friends Ilham Bakal and Marika Barthelomy for joining me. Your involvement and enthusiasm in our projects is always so very much appreciated!!

Finally we express our gratitude to all who have donated to The Sahara-Roots Foundation and thus making it possible for us to continue with our activities in the Moroccan Sahara.

Please follow our activities on our website:

[www.sahara-roots.org](http://www.sahara-roots.org)

Facebook: <https://nl-nl.facebook.com/wanda.hebly>

Wanda Hebly

Sahara-Roots Foundation

23<sup>rd</sup> of May 2014

