



An "Inspirational Journey" in the Sahara included tree-planting by students from Essence College in the Netherlands. February 2017

Sunrise in the Sahara, a magical moment.

A beautiful warm yellow sun with golden rays shone over the landscape of camels, sand dunes and tamarisk "cones". There was a huge sense of peace within me as I realized the students of Essence College (www.essencecollege.nl), travelling with me during this "Life's Journey" experience, had become one with this desert environment. Not an easy task, especially for those in the desert for the first time. A promise of a new beginning, each taking careful new steps for his or her own process during the challenges that we met along the way.

As I slowly looked around I could see others also enjoying this moment of silence. Gently, I heard sounds coming from the kitchen tent, a small fire was now burning with the promise of delicious "shay" (Moroccan tea) to help start the energy flow within us all. I greet our guides one by one with a "Sabah al Khair", an Arabic "good morning". They had taken such good care of us during our days in the desert. It was hard work for them but we felt their love for this beautiful desert environment, knowing that they felt the deep contact with the earth as we felt it as well.





For years we have been supported by Essence College

With peace in our hearts, it was now time to leave this magical place and continue our journey back to “civilization”. In the small villages built along the edge of the Sahara we saw how the local people must constantly be aware of the encroaching sand. Desertification is a reality here and the rammed earth houses have become deserted as the sand takes over. If possible, the younger generation leave for the modern cities in hope for a better future, leaving the elderly to take care of the oasis and the villages. But once there, they realise that life in the city is also very difficult.

It was during one of my earlier visits to the area that we had spoken with village elders and realized how sad they were that a lot of the younger generation wanted to leave their homes and did not want to work the fields any more. The elders are noticing that their traditional way of living is slowly disappearing. Our Sahara Roots Foundation has now been working in this area for years together with the local people to try to help “turn the tide” with the hope that the younger generation will want to stay. This is done through different activities such as tree-planting, together with students and teachers at schools throughout the area.

For years Sahara Roots has been supported by Essence College: and during this journey we would also plant trees together. It was now time to give something back to Mother Earth and to keep the promise we had made in the Netherlands: to plant trees for all the new students of Essence College in 2016 and 2017. Essence College provides its students with “Mindfulness” trainings to help find a new balance between their inner and outer worlds. This spiritual journey to the Sahara desert of South Morocco, is part of the 5th year “graduation” program.



Connecting Essence College to the new music school “Joudour Sahara “ with tree planting activities

As a surprise for our group we arranged with our guide Halim Sbaï (www.cherg.com) that we would plant trees on the site of the future music school: Joudour Sahara. (www.joudoursahara.org) This school now provides free music lessons to local schoolchildren as a post-school activity. In the future it will also provide the opportunity to help children become aware of the importance of their beautiful but vulnerable environment, by planting and maintaining trees and bushes on the school site. The first trees had been planted in November 2016 and as we approached the site we were very curious how many of these trees had survived.

Our 4 x4's left the soft sand as we approached the first village on the edge of the Sahara. We drove past the familiar rammed earth walls of the village of Zaouia and stopped alongside the site where the new music school is going to be built. It wasn't long before we saw a familiar face: Habib, our "tree caretaker" who had been taking care of the newly planted trees. We had planted them in 50 Groasis waterboxx's to give the trees a better chance of survival in this dry environment. The Groasis waterboxx's were designed by Dutchman Pieter Hoff. (www.groasis.com) .



Tree-caretaker Habib worked hard on "Essence Wadi"

In 2016 we had started combining the "Permaculture" way of planting together with the waterboxes by putting the waterboxx's in trenches (wadi's) . We had dug out five "wadi's" (15m x 3m x 60cm) together with Habib and his family and trees and shrubs were planted during the Taragalte Festival in Oktober 2016. (www.taragalte.org). With the use of trenches any moisture in the form of dew or rain, remains longer in the trenches and therefore the moisture is able to immerse deeper into the soil.

Habib had been very busy with digging out a new "Essence Wadi" and it was ready! This work had been done by hand with a shovel, a huge job and we were pleasantly surprised. We were now able to plant this wadi. We were happy to see that most of the planted trees in the waterboxes had survived. Tree planting is a continuous process because of the lack of water in this area and for us it is important to find the right balance with regards to water usage. The water comes from wells and the winter had been very dry. But most of the trees had survived and even flowers where blooming in our wadi's.





Thank you for all donations and support!

Fifteen baby palm trees were ready to plant. They were carefully planted one by one together with Habib. There were four different types of palm trees but as the roots were too big, they were not planted in waterboxes this time. We trust Habib to keep a watchful eye on their progress during the hot summer months.

Symbolically, we attached the nametags on the trees, representing all those who had donated towards our projects. We sang to the trees, in the hope that they will all survive the heavy summer months. The donations from Essence College, as well as from many others, enables Sahara-Roots to give Habib a modest salary for the care of our trees. As a result, he can offer his children a future in this harsh environment, the place that they call HOME.

During this “Inspirational Journey” with the students of Essence College, I was able to share my passion for this beautiful part of Morocco, the simple way of life of the desert environment , as well as to plant trees to help fight desertification and help build a sustainable future.

Wanda Hebly, February 2017, www.sahara-roots.org