

## **From a Tiny Seed: Reforestation Efforts in Turkey**

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*Below are comments by Nihat Gökyigit presented at the Conference about an almost unbelievably ambitious project to plant 10 billion acorns in Turkey. Those of us that heard his address were so impressed that we wanted to share it with the general membership, so below is the text of Nihat's presentation — Editor*

Dear Conference Participants,

Mr. Kraca and I represent here today the TEMA Foundation of Turkey, which is dedicated to preserving the natural environment. By way of brief introduction, Turkey is a country of 65 million people with a land area about two-thirds the size of Texas. It is surrounded by water on 3 sides. Its land includes forests, mountains, plains, beautiful coastal areas, rivers and lakes.

However, about 80% of it is subject to soil erosion and each year 1.4 billion tons of topsoil are displaced because of erosion, and 550 million tons of it is lost, running into lakes, reservoirs and the seas. As a result, Turkey's agricultural production has been falling and the number of livestock has been reduced. Impoverished small farmers flock to the cities, forming shanty communities around them and thereby causing immense socioeconomic problems.

As anywhere else in the world, much of the soil erosion in Turkey is the result of over population and human activities: agricultural malpractice, conversion of forest land into cropland, forest fires, deforestation through illegal timbering and overgrazing. Faced with these overwhelming environmental problems, we established the TEMA Foundation 8 years ago. TEMA is the acronym for Turkish foundation for combating soil erosion, for reforestation and the protection of natural habitat. I realize that the text of our name is a mouthful, but our goals are as ambitious.

To provide you with a broad overview of TEMA, we are today Turkey's fastest growing and largest Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), with already over 100,000 members, 580 regional managers, and around 100 scientists and legal advisors who provide their time and expertise voluntarily for free. TEMA is also organized in Europe; it has 2500 members there, some of which are in the European Parliament.

There are several ongoing activities of TEMA, ranging from the simple continued emphasis on education and public awareness, to more ambitious ones like rural development and lobbying for the revision of laws that are "unfriendly"

contd. on pg. 96

## Reforestation Efforts . . .

contd. from pg. 95

to the environment. Another one of our courageous programs is related to oaks. In antiquity, Anatolia, the original name for modern Turkey, was "a sea of oak forests". Today there are 18 local species of oak in Turkey, each adapted to the climatic and soil conditions of different regions.

In order to alleviate the pressure on natural forests and assist in erosion control, 2 years ago we initiated a 25-year campaign, in collaboration with the ministry of forestry, to sow 10 billion acorns into the soil. Dear participants, you did not hear me wrong! Our project aims for "10 billion acorns to meet the ground". The first acorns were put into the ground by our president in late October 1998 in the gardens of his official residence.

- This 25-year program is estimated to:
- cover about 1 million hectares and
- cost about 1.8 billion dollars

Where do we stand so far? In 1998 we sowed about 200 million acorns. In 1999, due to the earthquake disaster, this number reached only 130 million. In 2000, we estimate about 350 million acorns will be sown. This is indeed a very ambitious program when you consider that it will be primarily the undertaking of an NGO.

However, in order to carry out the project, TEMA also recruits many other cooperators. Besides the general public, TEMA has received assistance from the private sector, some 25 local governors, armed forces, universities, clergymen, and people from all walks of life. What is most gratifying is the support we get from youngsters, especially school children.

The project has attracted worldwide interest, as reforestation attempts of such grand scale are rare. We are convinced that it is a very timely measure at a time when the world is threatened more than ever by carbon emissions. In fact,



Figure 1 (top). TEMA 'kicks off' the Acorn Project with a ceremony attended by important dignitaries.

Figure 2 (bottom). Volunteers are helping to plant acorns throughout the country:

photos by author



the EU Commissioner in Turkey has strongly endorsed the project.

In closing, we are pleased to have had this opportunity to inform you, dear participants, of this ongoing project of ours. We would be grateful to hear from you of any and all suggestions, assistance, be it on advising or fiscal manner for the promotion, or furtherment and realization of our project. We have brought along some leaflets, which are available for your review. In anticipation of your support, I thank for your kind attention and wish to leave you a suggestion: please consider holding one future conference in Turkey where TEMA would be delighted to assist.