

College Students Join in Reforestation Efforts

Central American governments estimate that 2.2 million people have suffered crop losses this year, primarily due to high temperatures and exceptional drought. Logging and a diminished forest cover are the cause on top of climate change. Erratic weather patterns leave local Mayan people in urgent need of food assistance.

College forestry students from the Guatemalan University of Rural Studies in Santa Elena have volunteered to aid our tree planting venture. Here they are gathering early in the morning. They will team up with the local military detachment and a group of Guatemalan fire fighters who have learned that intact forests are far less flammable than degraded forests. As a welcome surprise they will assist our effort to restore this area into a restored intact rainforest.



The firefighters, standing out in bright yellow jackets and t-shirts, join students as we provide an orientation to planting technique and the tree species that will be planted. This will be a torridly hot day with temperatures approaching 100° F. We start early – at 7 AM and intend to finish work hopefully by 11 and certainly by 12 noon. After that it will be too hot and humid for further efforts.

Jose (in the light green shirt at right) is coordinating today's planting. He describes the challenges of this day's effort. Lines have already been cut through second growth forest to allow access into a brushy hillside. Four foot tall sticks show where holes will be dug. A variety of different tree species will be planted today, including tropical mahogany, ceiba, sapote, ramona, sapodilla, hormigo, copal, guaca, and pepper. All of the saplings have been carefully pre-arranged in old soft drink containers for easy carting into remote areas. Large water containers remind everyone that lots of water should be drunk today.



The students are eager to restore the forests and address the drought. They load up their containers, and make regular trips from the staging area of saplings out into the degraded areas that are being reforested. They see tree planting as their civic and patriotic duty. For the people of Guatemala restoring forests is now a life and death challenge.



This is not easy work. A full load of saplings is heavy, the terrain is steep and rugged, and morning temperatures are sweltering. We all need to drink a lot of water, but it never seems like enough.



There is a special sense of accomplishment after trees are planted. Here Geraldo, a student from the nearby town of Santa Elena, proudly smiles after securing a small sapling into the soil before him. It turns out that the soils here is thin, only three inches and below that we hit hard limestone rocks. This makes planting more difficult than we suspected as it is hard to penetrate into the limestone bedrock.



By late morning we have planted all 700 trees. Now the students gather along with the military and the fire fighters for an early lunch of chicken and carrot burritos. Jose thanks all who have worked hard this morning and reminds us that the task of reforestation is only beginning. We face a long hard road of reforestation if we are to restore stability to the land and the rains that are essential for survival in this region.