



[GREEN AND GROWING]
AID STILL REQUIRED

HELPS
DARFUR
REFUGEES
TAKE ROOT

By Allison Norman

Andrea and Hunter Payne, co-founders of Aid Still Required believe that the course of events in Darfur can be altered by an elegantly simple innovation: the planting of trees. Large areas of Sudan, once forested and arable, are now covered in sand dunes. Ongoing drought threatens the survival of villages and fuels the fires of warfare, prompting U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon to proclaim that “the Darfur conflict began as an ecological crisis.” By planting miles of forest breaks to stop the advance of the desert sands, it is possible to reclaim arable land and ease the territorial tensions brought to a head by drought.

In fact, it is more than possible. The Village Reforestation and Advancement Initiative (VRAI), a joint project of Aid Still Required and Christie Communications in conjunction with a local Sudanese NGO, has achieved astonishing results in its forest-break experiments in northern Sudan, demonstrating that minimally-irrigated forest breaks may be all that divide grassy fields from arid wasteland. Funds are currently being raised in order to run a pilot project, which will serve as a model that can be replicated in other areas experiencing desertification. If implemented in war-torn Darfur, this program has the potential to effect long-term peace and prosperity by increasing the availability of suitable land for settlement and agriculture, providing a future for vast numbers of refugees.

This initiative is just one example of the range of projects which Aid Still Required supports, under a philosophy of “building back better and building back green.” It all began with a charity music CD project in the wake of the tsunami in Southeast Asia, entitled “Aid Still Required”. Although the Tsunami CD project was temporarily put on the back burner as Hurricane Katrina hit and a new crisis demanded attention, this first fundraising effort gave its name to the developing organization, which aimed to provide aid to the tsunami-affected regions after the media spotlight dimmed and the world forgot their suffering. The Tsunami CD is still forthcoming (release date early 2010) and eminent artists including Paul McCartney, Sarah McLachlan, Norah Jones, Eric Clapton, Ani DiFranco, and recently Maroon 5 have donated tracks. A letter of endorsement from Clinton’s United Nations Office of the Special Envoy for Tsunami Relief helped Andrea and Hunter obtain donated tracks for the CD. A series of powerful public service announcement collaborations with NBA All-Stars Kobe Bryant, Steve Nash, Grant Hill, and Tracy McGrady raised awareness and initiated ASR’s fundraising, with capital coming in

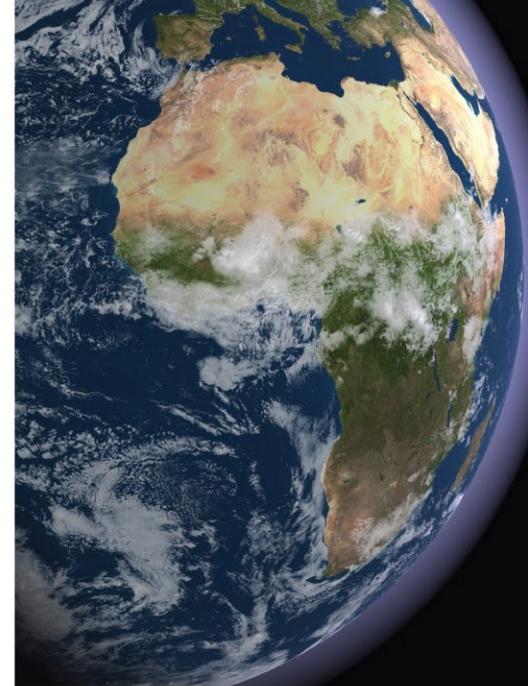
from a variety of sources including private foundations, socially-minded companies, and the general public. The latest drive centered on the October 20 L.A. Clippers benefit game, an event organized by the Israeli orphanage Migdal Ohr in which the Clippers hosted Maccabi Electra Tel Aviv. ASR participated at the request of Migdal Ohr, in a truly international fundraising effort.

As ASR continued to grow, the husband-and-wife team went on to explore partnerships with organizations providing floating apartments in flood-prone areas of New Orleans and solar stoves in Sudan. Andrea and Hunter have already committed to using the CD proceeds to fund a center to teach organic farming techniques in Aceh, Indonesia in order to replace the day-fishing industry which was destroyed by the tsunami. Aid Still Required functions as a sort of humanitarian venture capital firm, providing funding for the projects that Andrea and Hunter deem the most efficient and lasting solutions to ecological problems in devastated areas. Their mission, simply-put, is to “address long-term resource concerns to ease the sources of conflict.”

In order to support and expand upon this work Aid Still Required is committed to building consistent streams of funding. In the wake of America’s very own economic crisis, I asked Andrea about ASR’s fundraising challenges. Her reply was refreshingly optimistic: “I believe that people want to give. They just need reassurance that the money is going where we say it will.” To this end, Andrea and Hunter personally travel to the locations in which Aid Still Required sponsors initiatives in order to identify the best uses of donated dollars in each location and to assess progress. They develop personal relationships with the directors of the organizations they sponsor, and prefer solutions in which local populations learn new skills and provide labor in exchange for teaching and materials. This way, both the organizations and the residents of an area are invested in restoring and maintaining it.

In the spirit of “teaching a man to fish,” Aid Still Required adopts a long-term view of the problems it addresses, preferring environmental engineering to simple handouts. Andrea and Hunter have noticed that when news coverage of a disaster fades, the handouts typically do too—but the underlying cause of strife remains. Their goal is to address the issues that lie at the root of various crises resulting from natural disasters, be it desert creep, poor levy construction, or lack of advance warning. To achieve long-term results, the pair needs the support—or at least the toleration—of local governments. To achieve long-term results, the pair needs the support—or at least the toleration—of local governments. Cultural and political considerations must be carefully navigated, with the focus remaining squarely on the humanitarian issues. Sustainability, on the other hand, is integral to ASR’s projects, since any solution implemented needs to be low-cost and low-tech in order to be maintained locally for the long haul. ASR’s goal is to help lay the groundwork for future prosperity and safety in devastated regions, which means that the projects need to be maintained by villagers without the need for future infusions of capital or technology. The projects, like the people they are designed to help, need to be self-sufficient in order to be successful in the long term, and sustainable solutions achieve this end by helping villagers to utilize existing resources in more efficient ways.

Darfur is perhaps the most vital of these projects. Though rooted in an environmental disaster, it is also a human crisis: the refugees are victims of desertification, but also of genocide. Aid Still Required seeks not merely to repair environmental damage, but to alleviate conflict in this region by “re-establishing prosperity as a foundation for peace”. The pilot project, developed with a local NGO in Northern Sudan, has elements in place for replication



throughout Darfur, Sudan, as well as the rest of North Africa. Given tensions in the region, Aid Still Required is in talks with Darfuris and The UNHCR as well as Northern Sudanese to see where the project can best take root and flourish.

The most striking thing about ASR is that it is not a gigantic, faceless organization equipped with jingling bells, collection boxes, a byzantine administrative structure, or bored-looking uniformed workers. It is not a resume-builder for college kids, a space-filler for social calendars, or a platform for political grand-standing. It is the beloved brainchild of two extraordinary people who felt compelled to live lives of service to others. The talents that they have each developed as professionals are coming into play in the creation and development of ASR, and they tell me that they feel as though “everything we’ve been doing has been leading to this.” Talking with Andrea and Hunter Payne about their journey in creating Aid Still Required feels like talking to proud parents about their child’s growth and accomplishments. They are excited—irrepressible, even—about the potential of their projects, and remain buoyed by their faith in others’ willingness to help, even as the bleak atmosphere of global recession burdens their donors. They are as keen to educate themselves about the crises they work to alleviate as they are to educate others about them, and they have managed to inspire everyone from NBA players to rock stars to local leaders. For many in Darfur and around the world, they are, in fact, exactly what is required.

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