

HCLFoundation

THE Sacred STORY

THE TRADITIONAL COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE

HCLFoundation

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People without the knowledge of their past history,
origin, and culture are like trees without roots.

~Marcus Garvey



Vision
 “To conserve, restore and enhance indigenous environmental systems and respond to climate change in a sustainable manner through community engagement.”

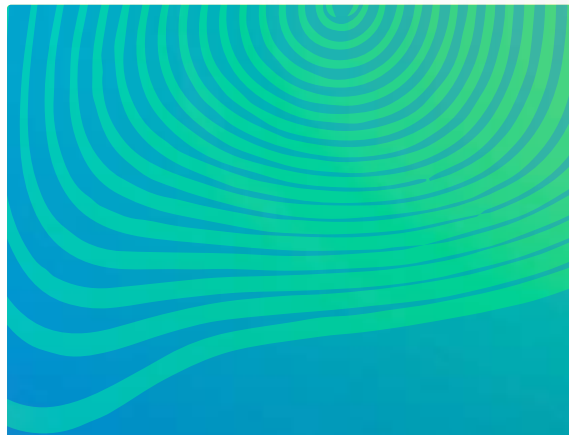
Aligning with the UN's 'Decade of Ecosystem Restoration', HCL Harit conserves, restores and enhances indigenous environmental systems.

With participation and stewardship of local communities, it is implementing sustainable measures to combat climate change.

Spread across nine states and embracing ecosystems from mountains to sea, HCL Harit is working with urgency to mitigate the impact of environment degradation.



Thematics



This document under **HCL Foundation** has been prepared to showcase the best practices and encapsulate the stories from the community. The stories depicted here encompass the efforts laid down by the community, challenges faced during the course, and tales of holistic engagement.

Photographs have been used to exhibit the scenario and the practices prevalently encountered during site visits.



To begin with

Unquestionably, growing modernity and urbanization have their own impacts; a great deal of forest cover and grasslands are gone, and the aquatic ecosystems are also severely degraded. It has harmed not just humans but also wildlife and numerous aquatic species by destroying their habitats.

But environmental deterioration is not only caused by this, although it might happen if the community's traditional knowledge and a sense of belongingness are lost. When this knowledge is lost, it becomes challenging to maintain a balanced relationship with the environment, there is a higher risk of overexploitation as the connection between the community and the environment weakens.

In Madurai's scenario, despite being a modern metropolis, the temple city nevertheless maintains some traditional and customary characteristics that have kept the community quite intact with nature. The visit to Madurai honors accounts of a successful collaboration between the **HCL Foundation**, government agencies, the partner NGO (Dhan Foundation), and the community, leading to the implementation.

This journal is an attempt to document the collective contribution to the change that aimed for extraordinary outcomes.

Oath of the 'Oorani'


The '*Nila Oorani*' clearly defines its coherence with the thought and provides a one-of-a-kind example of a community-driven water conservation programme. Before the actual action could take place, a notable effort was made to retrace this *Oorani* (Tamil word for pond), including the associated community. Over the years, as urbanization took its toll, '*Nila Oorani*' slowly faded into oblivion.


In Ward 28 of the Madurai Corporation, directly across from Elcot's IT Park campus, lay '*Nila Oorani*', a pond that was long forgotten in Ulaganeri village. *"This pond was listed in the corporation's records, but it wasn't present in the actual landscape. Originally agricultural land, this area was later going to be developed into housing plots,"* says Elamuhil, the project coordinator from our partner NGO, Dhan Foundation. Neglect, encroachments, and pollution transformed the once-vibrant pond into a forgotten and dilapidated space. '*Nila Oorani*' had turned into a stagnant pool of despair.

Because Ulaganeri is currently urbanized, it was challenging to locate the natives who could attest to the ownership or size of the pond. It took some time for our partner NGO, but a few natives came forward to witness that there had been a body of water that once shimmered with life, where they bathed and their cattle could drink.

Later, with the assistance of corporation officials and the community, they were finally able to identify the tank using DGPS surveys and GIS-based mapping. Together, the **HCL Foundation**, partnering NGO, and the local community initiated a comprehensive plan for pond rejuvenation.




 **Nila Oorani Pond, Madurai, Tamil Nadu**
a scenic view of the pond

An aerial photograph showing a large, irregularly shaped pond in a rural landscape. The pond is surrounded by green fields and some small structures. In the background, there are mountains under a clear sky. The pond's water is a light brown color, suggesting it might be a natural or recently cleaned pond. The surrounding area is a mix of green vegetation and brownish soil, indicating a semi-arid or semi-humid climate.

The silt was removed, increasing the tank's capacity from less than a million litres before to ten million litres later. To maintain the bund and deter further encroachment, native trees were planted along it, and the bund was strengthened. Since '*Nila Oorani*' receives most of its water from rain, the contour was examined, and the natural drainage was channelized to ensure the water gets into the embankment rather than logging around.

The ground implementation work was commenced by a committee composed of marginalized and land-deprived laborers, which included prominent citizens and local residents. These individuals possessed wisdom passed down through generations, and inspired by their shared history and collective responsibility, they embarked on a journey to rejuvenate the pond and restore its glory. The 1.9-acre tank's boundaries were delineated.

 **Nila Oorani Pond, Madurai, Tamil Nadu**
pre and post condition of the pond

The community knew there was a need to revive their lost treasure, not just for their sake but also for future generations. On interacting with the site workers, who were a part of the community, clearly, a sense of belongingness was perceived as they pledged to keep it saved and sustainable. *"Most of our rivers are rain-fed, and water scarcity issues have sore up. This pond is our effort to preserve the loss and create a social space for the betterment of the community and overall",* says a wage worker.

A resident girl who frequently visits the lake explained how the **HCL Foundation's** support led them to take a stand against the local developers' forcible means of capturing the land. She added, *"We in our community are awakened by the efforts taken to support us, which in turn motivates us to do our bit. Often our families visit here to look after and we felt to beautify the lake, so we planted colorful flowers around it and we thank the HCL Foundation to guide us in the process".*

This initiative under **HCL Foundation**, caught the attention of many individuals in the area who recognized the importance of preserving natural resources. As the pond began to flourish under their dedicated efforts, the lost glory of *'Nila Oorani'*

was gradually restored. The once-forgotten pond became a hub of community activity, attracting locals and tourists alike. Children splashed in its clean waters, while birds and aquatic life found a safe haven once again.

An increase of about 10,000 cubic liters of water-holding capacity was obtained. Also, a walkway was built around the pond including fencing for safety purposes. *"Now people visit this pond, there are people who come in the morning for jogging and sometimes with families to just spend time",* confirmed a local.

Deeply moved by the success of their collective endeavor, the community made a solemn pledge to protect the rejuvenated pond. They formed a committee that would oversee the pond's maintenance, and enforce responsible usage practices.

This *'Nila Oorani'* story exemplifies the power of collective action, heritage preservation, and environmental consciousness. A symbol of hope, reminding everyone that through unity and commitment, even the most lost treasures can be revived and protected for generations to come.

Tale of the groves


Sacred Groves are tracts of virgin forests left untouched by the local inhabitants and are protected by them due to their culture and religious beliefs. These groves are remnants of a once-dominant flora as well as a biodiversity hotspot. The last bastions where indigenous peoples' rich culture and customs are still preserved.

However, because the **HCL Foundation's** selected sites were in urban settings, the plantation was initiated and later termed an "urban sacred grove", keeping communities connected to the forest.

'*Kundrangkadu*', a waste-to-wonder story attracted our attention, where in situ community-driven initiative led to the development of a dense afforested patch using traditional methods and indigenous plant species. The community considered it as paving for the abode of deities and revered it as sacrosanct.

The residents of Thiruparankundram (under Madurai Corporation) used to express their concerns about the wasteland in their neighborhood. Since the space was vacant, it gradually became a usual dump yard with *Prosopis* growing in abundance. The foul smell of the garbage used to spread all around the village, making it an obvious breeding space for mosquitoes and flies. People wanted to do something, but they didn't have anyone to guide or fund them because the parcel was too large for their budget.

So finally when they were approached by the NGO on behalf of the **HCL Foundation**, the residents were eager to put their skills to best use and built the forest on the wasteland.

 **Thiruparankundram, Madurai, Tamil Nadu**
bird's eye of the community forest post intervention

Thiruparankundram, Madurai, Tamil Nadu
pre-condition of the site before intervention

"All we had was the will to cover the land with vegetation. Dwelling surrounded by nature and the sound of birds chirping became our ideal", said the residents.

"It certainly needed a lot of patience and has been a Herculean undertaking. It was initially necessary to clear the trash and garbage that had gathered with a layer of contaminated soil. Another crucial stage was building a solid foundation by replenishing the soil with bio-fertilizers like cow dung and organic compost to replace the topsoil's lost humus", confirms a fellow participant. The whole procedure was under the guidance of our NGO partner who saw the willingness and hope for the project for the community's benefit.

"We consider this forest a holy place for our deities and this is now our sacred grove", said the locals. They worship 'Lord Murugan' as their deity and like any other sacred grove it has its own rules

and restrictions. The residents believe that any god-fearing person would not harm this forest and that it could lay the path for its sustenance.

The native people here had revived the land by planting native species of multi-layered plants including trees, shrubs, and climbers following the 'Miyawaki' technique. The sacred grove spreads across 0.2 Ha of land with above 75 species of indigenous plants. The forest is now well-tended to the point where the soil is now a silt reservoir in addition to being the ideal ecosystem for insects and other small creatures. Plant development is also aided by the dry, decaying leaves on the ground achieving a height of around 10-15 feet. *"No one believed that this land can ever be like what it is today",* said our partner witnessing their sheer strength and will for the motion.

This sets an exemplary model in which the community plays an integral role.

Thiruparankundram, Madurai, Tamil Nadu
saplings planted during the procedure



These statues, located in the sacred grove, are regarded as the land's guardians. Every statue, according to the locals, has its own folklore, and these enormous statues are thought to be capable of speaking and moving. They are regularly worshipped through a variety of rituals as well.

Black Drongo
spotted in
Kundrangkadu



a mating pair of
Ruby-Spotted Swallow Tail

Blue-Faced Malkoha
a non-parasitic cuckoo




Next to Godliness

The land under Madurai Kamraj University was suggested by the District Administrator, who was contacted with the intent of conducting an afforestation drive. The land was deemed suitable after relevant studies were done in response.

But due to prior experiences of the organizations that neglected the property post-plantation, the university administration was initially averse to transferring the land, hence the initial plan called for only two acres. After regular discussions with administration officials for more than two months, an agreement was finally reached to donate 4 acres of land for the pilot project.

Prior to this, '*acacia lantaplua*' was introduced under the social forestry project to at least have some vegetation cover the site and prevent further erosion and soil degradation. Some professors claimed that the land was so barren that only this species could survive as it could withstand both the harsh weather and poor soil conditions, which later posed a challenge for both the NGO and the community in the course of the execution.

The entire '*Adavi*' forest was covered with this species, and the site was meant to be cleared before the actual plantation could begin. Therefore, these plants were completely uprooted and eliminated during the plantation procedure.

 **Madurai Kamraj University, Nagamalai Pudukkottai, Tamil Nadu**
a view of the Adavi Forest post intervention

Adavi Forest, Madurai, Tamil Nadu
the trenches-tanks dug for storing rain water

Because the area was entirely composed of gravel, it was so stiff that excavators had to be used because physical work was inefficient on the terrain. Also, the soil lacked organic content and moisture, which had been a concern since the commencement of the project. *"Unless you believe otherwise, nothing is barren"* said the NGO team who welcomed us when we reached 'Adavi'. They described how adding natural compost helped them add micro-nutrients to the soil.

Since there was nowhere to find water, figuring out an uninterrupted supply became the next challenge. A bore well was recognized as a potential remedy with the assistance of the Agriculture Department and with due guidance from the neighbourhood water diviner. Two percolation tanks (ponds) were made using streamlined contour trenches and bunds to further offset the water demand, and the check

dam was also renovated during the process. Water harvesting-related innovations and techniques were used throughout to ensure water availability in the region.

Prior to this, a PIA (Privacy Impact Assessment) procedure was conducted in conjunction with the neighbourhood residents, who conveyed that it was once fully vegetated land and was utilized for grazing and firewood. When the land came under the ownership of the university, those practices were barred. Evidently visible, the community's careless practices seemed to be the key reason for the land degradation.

They recalled how their predecessors protected the forests and considered them sacred, believing that now they were experiencing the wrath of God due to their sheer negligence. Hence, they made a commitment to re-afforest the land while going forward with preserving their culture and customs.

Adavi Forest, Madurai, Tamil Nadu
the women group involved in maintenance



📍 **Adavi Forest, Madurai, Tamil Nadu**
the women group involved in maintenance

Adavi Forest, Madurai, Tamil Nadu
glimpse of women group celebrating pongal

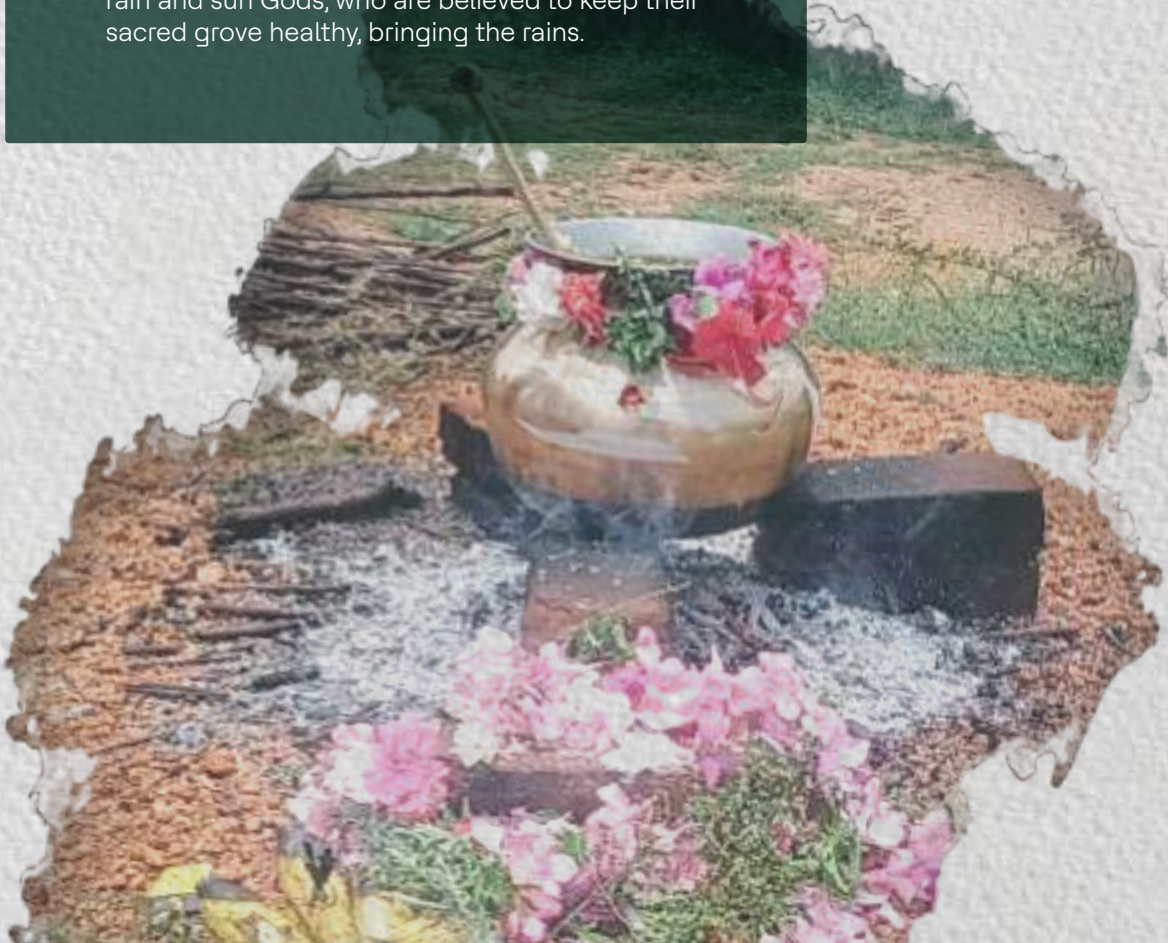


Hence, the community had already listed the native species in the region, so when the NGO approached them, they were eager enough to make their contributions to rejuvenate the site. Also, women from the community formed groups in order to maintain the land, and the Panchayat President lent his support by providing MGNIS labour for the removal of unwanted plants.

In the first phase, 3800 saplings were planted on 4 acres of land and were maintained for a year. This sought the university's faith and they agreed to provide an addition of 10 acres of land for the extension, with furthermore in the future as per the results. In line with this, the Vice President of the university extended his support through NSS & NTC, while the Plantation Department showed interest in collaborating for research studies in the region.

The 'Adavi' forest is well-forested now, covering a total area of 14 acres with more than 21,000 saplings, including about 6,000 bio-sensing plants. This has proven to be a prime example of a community-driven strategy combined with a committed CSR partnership for enacting the change the world needs.

The community celebrates Pongal once a month in the 'Adavi' Forest area, as they have dedicated this forest to their deities. They have a strong belief that after the afforestation drive led by **HCL Foundation**, Madurai is receiving good rainfall, which is nothing but the gift of God, because particularly in their region, 'Nagamalai' was known for being dry. The 'Pongal' Festival is considered a community thanksgiving to the rain and sun Gods, who are believed to keep their sacred grove healthy, bringing the rains.



Adavi Forest, Madurai, Tamil Nadu
the pongal preparations



Oriental Garden Lizard

An insectivorous lizard. During the breeding season, the male's head and shoulders turn crimson and his throat turns black. Males also turn red-headed after a successful battle with competitors.



Purple Sunbird Female

Seen in pairs, they feed chiefly on nectar, but they also take insects. Breeding males display by fluttering their wings in front of females while singing.



The **Plain Tiger Butterfly**

inhabits a wide variety of habitats, although it is less likely to thrive in jungle-like conditions and is most often found in drier, wide-open areas.



White-browed Bulbul

A plain brownish bulbul that is endemic to the bottom half of peninsular India and Sri Lanka. White-browed can be distinguished by their brown faces and white eyebrows.

In light of these facts

Indigenous people and communities have been utilizing the knowledge passed down through the generations to enhance their quality of life, such that modernity and tradition complement each other. They do this by emphasizing their innate propensity for environmental stewardship in order to strengthen beliefs about the conservation, restoration, and sustainable use of nature for the benefit of themselves and their communities.

Shows that loss of traditional knowledge and a sense of belongingness in communities can lead to unsustainable practices, weakened connection to the environment, increased vulnerability to environmental change, cultural erosion, and missed opportunities to use traditional wisdom to find sustainable solutions.

Juvenile Pale-Billed Flowerpecker

A tiny nondescript bird with a pale and bulky curved bill. they feed on the nectars, and pollens and are known as pollinator birds.



Indian Peafowl

The males fan out their iridescent tail feathers to attract the females during the breeding season and the behavior is known as 'train rattling'.

On the other hand, the Madurai case study clearly demonstrates the importance of protecting and revitalizing traditional knowledge systems to foster a strong sense of community and promote environmental protection and sustainable development.

The **HCL Foundation's** approach supports participation and inclusion, invites the best of collaboration, and harnesses it for the betterment of the environment. The public and stakeholders are actively involved in the decision-making process and throughout the development process. Therefore, these initiatives are considered to offset the negative effects of climate change by effectively conserving and restoring natural resources.



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