

Bhutan's Phoenix Forest

Summary of Achievements

Our project, *Phoenix Forests – Bhutan's Forests Revival*, was designed to respond to the increasing number of forest fires in Bhutan, with the core aim of combining reforestation with youth education. With the generous support of the \$2,000 GoMakeADifference grant, we successfully started our project on June 17 with the paperworks, following up with the plantation of **1,400 trees** and wrapping up on July 30 with the deliverance of in-depth workshops to students of two schools (Lungtenzampa Middle Secondary School, Thimphu and Yangchenphug Higher Secondary School, Thimphu). The Nurture a Tree project in Bhutan that aims to plant a million trees by 2033 hugely benefitted from our contribution and the completion of our project fulfilled its purpose of raising awareness about the importance of forest conservation and fire prevention, bringing an everlasting change in one of the most vulnerable communities of Bhutan.

The project presented a chance to bridge the gap between the youths and national organizations like **Bhutan Youth Development Fund (YDF)**, the **Bhutan Institute of Wellbeing (BIW)** and **Young Volunteers in Action (YVIA) network**. By engaging not only the youths but also young adults recovering from lifelong addiction, our project has been a source of light and hope, a reminder that there's always room for rebirth and change. Simultaneously, it helped the UWC scholars equip themselves with the skills of an environmental leader. Through this initiative, we not only contributed to the physical revival of Bhutan's forests but also successfully fostered a spirit of environmental stewardship among young Bhutanese. Our work demonstrated how collective action can address urgent ecological challenges and inspire long-term community involvement. Bhutan, a country that rarely has youth led projects like ours, our project acted as an opening of doors to the youths, encouraging them to bring forth their own personal projects with utmost passion.

How did we make a difference?

Our project has been a powerful force that has made insurmountable difference in the community by addressing both the ecological and social dimensions of the forest fire crisis. On one hand, we physically restored degraded forest areas through large-scale plantation; on the other, we engaged the younger generation in awareness-building activities. This dual focus ensured that the project created both immediate impact (trees planted) and future-oriented impact (educated and motivated youth).

What we have achieved

- **Planted 1,400 saplings** in Samarzhingka, contributing to reforestation and biodiversity restoration.
- **Two awareness workshops** were delivered to students, with sessions covering the science of forest fires, local case studies, preventive measures and interactive activities.
- **Over 70 volunteers** participated in the tree plantation, including UWC scholars, BIW members, YVIA students, and local community members.
- Developed **collaborations** between youths and local organizations, creating a model of partnership that can be replicated in future initiatives.
- Created **practical resources** (workshop materials, posters, and presentations) that schools can continue to use for awareness campaigns.

What are we proud of?

We are particularly proud of the energy and ownership shown by students during our workshops. Many participants engaged in lively discussions and committed to taking action in their own communities. During the plantation, volunteers treated the saplings with care and expressed excitement at contributing to a long-term environmental legacy. Moreover, the students that we provided the workshops to came forth with the promise to care for the trees planted.

Enduring successes

- The planted trees will grow over the coming years, restoring biodiversity, improving soil quality, and reducing erosion in the fire-affected sites.
- The workshops empowered students with knowledge and skills, ensuring ongoing advocacy for environmental protection.
- Accelerated the Nurture a Tree project of YDF and contributed to the maintenance of 70% forest coverage as stated in the constitution of the country.
- Strengthened partnerships with the Bhutan Youth Development Fund and the Young Volunteers in Action network, paving the way for sustained collaboration.
- Inspired more young people to consider community-led conservation as a pathway to making a difference.

How did the project make a difference to the people we aimed to help?

The communities living near fire-affected areas felt encouraged by the restoration efforts, as many were deeply concerned about the damage to their surroundings including the environment and their settlement. For students, the project provided an opportunity to learn beyond the classroom and actively engage in conservation. They reported feeling more motivated to prevent forest fires, igniting a strong sense of responsibility to start their own personal projects as well as share their knowledge with their families and peers.

How did the project make a difference to us?

For us as a project team, this initiative was transformative. We learned the realities of organizing large-scale environmental projects, from logistical planning to mobilizing volunteers and coordinating with multiple partners. The challenges of transporting saplings, ensuring their survival, and managing diverse groups of participants taught us resilience, adaptability, and leadership. Above all, we developed a deeper sense of responsibility toward the environment and toward mobilizing others for meaningful change.

Where the money was spent

Purchasing 1,400 saplings, plantation materials, and educational resources for the workshop.

Transportation of the saplings and volunteers to planting sites.

Volunteer support (refreshments, transport, and logistical coordination).

Miscellaneous costs: site preparation and minor administrative expenses.

Lessons learned

Awareness programs are most effective when interactive. Students were more engaged when they could participate in activities, discussions, and role-plays rather than only listening to presentations. Partnerships significantly increase impact. Working with organizations like YDF and YVIA gave us access to networks of youth and local expertise.

What would we do differently?

- Expand to more schools to reach a larger number of young people with awareness programs.
- Develop a youth-led sustainability club in the schools we engage, so that the conversation continues beyond the workshops.
- Plan to hold the plantation in the pre-monsoon season, for instance the month of June to ensure the survivability of the saplings.

