



# GreenFriends North America NEWSLETTER FIRST QUARTER 2024 JANUARY - MARCH



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In October 2023, the Rio Negro in the Amazon—one of the world's largest rivers—reached its lowest recorded level, surpassing marks going back over 100 years.

GreenFriends strives to communicate the importance of treating Nature with respect and gratitude.

We invite each of you Green Friends to share your ideas and experiences with your own gardening efforts as well as experiences with animals.

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# ISLAND BUCK



Acadia National Park



## **ON NEW YEAR'S DAY I LOST MY WAY ON THE TRAIL UP ST. SAUVEUR MOUNTAIN IN ACADIA NATIONAL PARK, ON MT. DESERT ISLAND, MAINE.**

It was a cold and crisp sunny day. The hike to the top takes about an hour, maybe less. With bright blue markers painted on trees and boulders, the way is sure. The way is sure, as long as the mischief-makers of the forest are not at work leading you up and down and all around, confounding your sense of direction, coaxing you upwards by another way through pines and bush. I'd had that happen before.

I recognized the ways of the forest beings who sometimes seem to prefer you not know exactly where you are or where you think you are going. Getting lost sets you on an adventure of their making, outside the realms of your own design.

Nevertheless, I felt I had to at least be on the lookout to find the pathway again. Pray to Amma, chant my mantra, and move on. Surely, I'd eventually meet up with the marked trail. I'm not the kind who enjoys backtracking. I'd rather be lost in the miracle of Amma in every detail of nature, in the scent of the pines, in the sound of water trickling down rock outcroppings, dripping through moss, forming miniature icicles in shady spots. The terrain became drier the farther upwards I climbed. After meandering through red spruce trees and a thicket of blueberry bushes, a deer path appeared before me. I followed it and then chanced upon a clearing below a granite cliff. Several stunted pitch pines were growing out of the rock, each one shaped by the wind, twisted and gnarled, like Japanese Bonsai trees.



All of a sudden, a buck with 8 points on his rack, leapt out from behind a maple tree. He was suspended in mid-air for what seemed like a long time, and then, twisting his body, he turned in slow motion and landed noiselessly, not more than ten feet from me. I think he must have noticed me while he was in mid-leap and so preferred to land facing me. Indeed, his gaze was fixed on mine. I was paralyzed in astonishment. Time spread out wide, to the other side of the world. My mind expanded like a floating cloud and traveled all the way to full moon nights in Avalon where more than once a young man wearing antlers sneaked up on the Lady of the Lake to join in a mystical dance.



White tailed buck - National Parks Gallery

The buck, tan, with circles of cream around his black nose and eyes, and four points each rising from the top of his head, high and proud, pausing under the old sugar maple to deliver a New Year's vision to an unsuspecting traveler. How he knew the precise day is a secret kept buried somewhere in time. Who knows how long we faced each other, gazing eye into eye. I held my breath, drew myself inward, mingling my thoughts with the trees, trying to be invisible. I wasn't about to do anything that might spoil the link between the deer and me. While letting the inflow and outflow of air from my lungs be soft and gentle, I very slowly lifted my gloved hands into prayer.

I longed to hold him there, to create an ancient circle, to dance while wearing a wreath of leaves. What magic wand, what incantation, what spell do those who speak with animals and fairies use? Flute music, a voice inside me said. With hands still pressed together at my heart, I dared to hum OM, wavering and awkward at first, but my heart was full in it.

I was remembering that in ancient India men hunted in pairs, one with a flute to attract the deer and the other with the bow and quiver of arrows. Five animals epitomize the nature of desire in one of each of the five senses. Sound for the deer, touch for the elephant, taste for the fish, smell for the scarab, and sight for the moth. The ultimate temptation from the particular sense organ of each animal raises an irresistible attraction that casts away all reason, often leading to the end of life for these creatures. To capture a male elephant, the king sends a domestic female into the wild, and the male follows her to the end of the world. Everyone knows how to catch the fish that grabs the fatal morsel dangling from the hook. The moth rushes, transfixed, into the flame. The scarab enters the sweet-smelling lotus blossom and often remains inside, bewitched, until the petals close at twilight. The deer seeks the mesmerizing tone of the flute and finds an arrow in his heart, losing a life for love of the sound. For us humans the desires aroused from all five senses are known to cause a downfall, or worse. However, we have the ability to discern, to avoid desires that tempt us, and to make a choice to follow the desire for liberation.

My voice was no flute, but I experimented to see if I could imitate one. My buck endured. When my improvised arpeggios began to squeak in the upper range, he cocked one ear forty-five degrees. Whoops. So as not to risk losing the enchanting gaze, I let my voice resume with the sound of OM. He relaxed into chewing on something, probably whatever he had been grazing on before I appeared. Munching and staring at me all the while. Then I suspected he was bored because he turned sideways, showed me his full body, lifted the white of his tail, dropped dark brown pellets from his bowels, and then bent to nibble on whatever he found tasty there.

We seemed to have found a certain soul to soul comfort between us. I was in gratitude for Amma's Grace. So, while continuing to hum OM, I sat under a pitch pine to enjoy the view from St. Sauveur, looking out towards the Atlantic, gazing at the many little islands that surround the area. My buck went about his business, alternating between eating and keeping an eye on me.

I pondered the potential message. It was, after all, New Year's Day. I'd never communed with a buck in the wild. I'd had close encounters with coyotes. One time while camping on the banks of New Mexico's Chama River, a bird's lone song had pierced the predawn silence calling me out of my sleeping bag, luring me to walk the half-mile to Christ in the Desert Monastery. I arrived just as the monks began their Gregorian chanting. Listening while sitting on the steps outside the Benedictine chapel, I was enchanted by the full moon's reflection on the water and the casting of its light onto nature's own cathedral of sheer rock on the opposite side of the river.

But what about the island buck? What did he represent for me? The legendary divine nectar known as Soma is associated with Mrigashira, the deer's head constellation. My own Nakshatra (birth star) is Mrigashira. On the website medium.com I had noted that the Mrigashira constellation symbolizes a vivid imagination and the search for enlightenment and ultimate joy— "Imagine a beautiful deer

wandering in a thick forest while pausing to look deeply into your eyes and then jumping out of sight.” How perfectly my buck experience fit into medium.com’s rendering. Some say Soma is the Divine nectar of immortality from the heavens that flows down on us like water from a mountain stream. For me the Divine nectar flows directly from our Holy Mother Amma who leads us on a warm and gentle, sometimes rough, often circuitous pathway, always upward, and ultimately into ecstatic devotion of the Divine and freedom from all sorrow.

The sound of human voices coming from the ridge broke the spell of my pastoral experience and reminded the buck of his original leap. He disappeared as if he had arrived in the first place, out of a dream.

**~ SAVITRI BESS, PORT HADLOCK, WA**



The universe in a puddle.

# REJUVENATION OF RIVERS



Life flows with a flowing Sairni River.



**EXTRACTED FROM “REJUVENATION OF RIVERS,”  
BY DR. RAJENDRA SINGH AND DR. INDIRA KHURANA**

[Tarun Bharat Sangh](#) is a renowned Indian NGO working since 1975 towards climate change mitigation and adaptation by promoting water conservation, sustainable agriculture and rural development in the arid and semi-arid regions of India.

Groundwater scarcity has placed a significant strain on rural areas, prompting migrations to urban centers for work and compelling farmers to sell their livestock - a crucial source of income and cultural identity. This situation disproportionately affects women and girls remaining in villages, impacting their health, education, and economic prospects. To combat

this, water conservation initiatives are essential for both alleviating water scarcity's effects and aiding in climate adaptation and rural development.

Forty years ago, Dr. Rajendra Singh, Chairperson of [Tarun Bharat Sangh](#), gave up his government job to pursue more meaningful opportunities and landed in Gopalpura village, one of the hundreds of water-scarce villages in Rajasthan. Night-blindness was prevalent due to malnutrition as agriculture was nearly impossible and food was hard to come by. In desperation, youth had left to eke out a living, leaving behind the older generation.

Dr. Rajendra went around treating these elder villagers for night-blindness. An old villager whom he treated berated him. The villager said, *"If you genuinely want to make a difference, you must address the root cause – lack of water."*

Dr. Rajendra asked if the villager could help him learn since he knew nothing about the issue. He agreed to help. Steeped in indigenous wisdom on harvesting rain and replenishing water resources, the villager shared his mantra – *"Capture the raindrop and gently direct it into the ground."*

He guided Dr. Rajendra on where and which structures to build. Slowly the work gained momentum. As the wells started to fill, the youth returned to restart agriculture. As water conservation work expanded, the forests grew, and rivers began to flow, leading to prosperity and a life of dignity.



*As water becomes available for livestock, their productivity increases*



The rainfall needs to be harvested for groundwater recharge. Water conservation structures called *Bandhs* slow the flow of the rain, capturing the raindrops and nudging them to recharge the groundwater. A bandh is a physical barrier, an embankment or a dam-like structure often made of earth, stone, or concrete, constructed across a slope to control the flow of water. Suitability of the location of the structure depends on an understanding of the local ecology, topography, geology, and rainfall pattern. India's ancient water conservation wisdom is based on this knowledge.

Slowly, this water captured in the bandh restores the lost connection between ground and surface water. With the strengthened connection, rivers can be brought back from their ill-health by focusing on the various streams that contribute to its flow. For rivers to be healthy, these small streams and rivulets must be rejuvenated. Slowly, the entire river is awakened and flows freely, sometimes even perennially. The bandhs must be maintained to avoid erosion and breaking and the land of a river along with its flood plains must be protected against encroachment and over extraction.

The bandh structures created must be with people's involvement. This results in ownership and care of the structures so created. Communities contribute cash, kind, and labor for creation of the structure and with the benefits accrued, can manage the maintenance by themselves. A handover of the structures to communities helps build responsibility.

One of the many examples of success stories after river rejuvenation was in Naharpura village, which was without water and totally barren. To make ends meet, the people were involved in mining or theft, or in rearing stolen buffaloes. Tarun Bharat Sangh worked with the community members towards making the village water sufficient, thus leading to food and livelihood security and improvement in quality of life. But first they had to urge the people to give up their illegal activities and 'pick up the plough' for agriculture. A bandh was constructed in the village.

After the first monsoon rains, there was a marked difference in water availability. Wells filled up and fields came alive again, humming with agricultural activity. Additionally, the water available in Naharpura is used by local livestock and the livestock of nearby villages.

Khurwa, a villager, said, "*We had stayed away from our fields, because our land was not worth watching over since there was no water, and we were not growing crops. When we saw that water was now available, we quickly began working in our fields to make these cultivable. If it was not for water, I would not be here, and neither would you. It's water that has brought us together.*"

Khurwa's son Lokendra added, "*With this bandh will come stability, prosperity and peace of mind.*"



The bald landscape before work on the Sairni River began (above) and the changed landscape after water conservation efforts (below.)



Through the pioneering efforts of Tarun Bharat Sangh, it has been demonstrated that leveraging local ecology and community-driven water conservation strategies can significantly enhance climate resilience and water security. This approach has successfully regenerated natural ecosystems, revitalizing groundwater levels, rejuvenating rivers, expanding forests, enriching biodiversity, and fostering socio-economic transformation, including improved livelihoods, increased rainfall, and cooler temperatures. Initiatives in Rajasthan and Maharashtra have showcased the effectiveness of indigenous knowledge and participatory methods in revitalizing water sources, even in challenging environments such as the rocky terrains of the Sairni River or drought-stricken areas like Sangli district.

Read more about Tarun Bharat Sangh's water conservation efforts at <https://tarunbharatsangh.in/environment/#WaterConservation>

**~ EXTRACTED FROM “REJUVENATION OF RIVERS”  
BY DR. RAJENDRA SINGH AND DR. INDIRA KHURANA  
WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY GFNA TEAM**



Dr. Rajendra Singh, Chairperson of Tarun Bharat Sangh, conducting “Waterman Academy”, providing education across India about how to care for water.

# THE SENTIENCE OF PLANTS



**ACCORDING TO ONE MODERN SCIENTIFIC DEFINITION, SENTIENCE IS THE ABILITY TO EXPERIENCE FEELINGS, BE RESPONSIVE OR CONSCIOUS OF SENSATIONS, THE CAPABILITY TO FEEL THINGS OUTSIDE OF ONESELF THROUGH THE PHYSICAL SENSES.**

Intelligence or sentience in plants is still highly debated in scientific communities. But Amma has said, *“We must remember that everything is sentient, everything is full of consciousness and life. Everything exists in God. Plants and trees also have emotions and can feel fear. When somebody approaches a tree or plant with an ax or a hacking knife, the plant is afraid; it trembles with fear. You need a subtle ear to hear its cries, a subtle eye to see its helplessness, and a subtle mind to feel its fear. You do not see a plant’s suffering, but you can feel it with a compassionate heart. To see the suffering of a plant, your mind’s eye must be open. When we have a loving and compassionate attitude towards plants and trees, we can learn to listen and to understand them.”*

Stefano Mancuso, the director of the [International Laboratory of Plant Neurobiology](#) in Florence, Italy, in his book, *Brilliant Green: The Surprising History and Science of Plant Intelligence*, addresses the ways plants use the senses of sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing and how they additionally use other senses that we humans don’t have. He further elaborates on the topic of how plants communicate with themselves, with each other and even with animals.

For example, they are now documenting that plants hear much in the same way that animals without ears hear, like snakes and worms. They hear by vibration. The earth and soil conduct vibrations so well that vibrations can be captured by the cells of the plant, as if it were covered with millions of tiny ears, and this sense of hearing also helps the plant feel the sense of touch.



One famous experiment that has been validated many times through repetition, demonstrated that music with lower sound frequencies promotes seed germination, plant growth and root lengthening, and that higher frequencies tend to inhibit growth. Classical and

jazz have been shown to promote growth. Plants have even grown towards and entwined themselves around speakers that are playing Beethoven, Brahms and Schubert. But heavy metal and some types of rock music have been shown to inhibit plant growth. Plants have been shown to grow away from loud speakers that are playing heavy metal and rock music.

In Italy, grape vines that received musical treatment didn't just simply grow better than those that did not get to listen to music, but they also ripened earlier, producing grapes richer in flavor and color. Music also kept the insects away by disorienting them, which made it possible to drastically reduce the use of pesticides. This has brought into being a new branch of agricultural biology called agricultural photobiology which is being promoted by the United Nations as one of 100 projects that they hope will change the world towards a green economy in the next 20 years.

Understanding that plants are sentient beings has the potential to affect the way we treat nature; it can affect our attitude towards it and ultimately our understanding of ourselves and the world we live in.



Similar to the findings of these experiments, Amma states, *“Modern science says that trees and plants respond to the thoughts and actions of human beings. Scientists have created instruments that can detect and register the feelings of plants and in some cases, even*

*measure the intensity of such feelings. They have observed that, through loveless actions and lack of compassion, plants also suffer.”*

To help raise our awareness regarding plants and all of nature, we can begin to ask how we can see ourselves as inseparable from nature, and the roles we can play to protect and preserve Mother Nature.

In a satsang given by Swami Shantamritananda as part of an Amritaculture course, he asked us what have we done to repay the debt we owe to nature for all the oxygen we’ve breathed in our life so far and will continue to breathe until we drop this body? How have we given back to the sun that has provided energy for the plants to grow, the plants that have fed us for all these years? Or for the metal that has been mined to create the steel beams and the wood cut from the trees that are used to construct the houses and buildings we live and work in?

Swami Shantamritananda said parents know that it does not occur to their children to pay them back for all that they’re doing to raise them in this world. He said that nature is also patient with us in this way. But once we grow into maturity and become adults, we have the opportunity to realize what we’ve been given by nature and to give back to her what we can, in order to live in harmony with its cycles.

*Amma says, “Our thoughts and actions have an effect on Nature. If the balance in nature is lost, the harmony of human life will also be lost. The destruction of nature is the same thing as the destruction of humanity. Our biological mother may carry us on her lap for a few years, but mother earth will tolerate all our abuses and take care of us for our entire lifespan. We have forgotten the truth that nature is a powerful force—just as capable of retribution as redemption. Perhaps Mother Nature has begun to realize that being patient will not improve humankind. Therefore, let us learn to bow our heads in humility to nature. Let us learn to treat nature with love and respect.”*

Shantamritanandaji also told a story about when he first met Amma. He used to be concerned that human beings could destroy nature. But Amma said, *“a man may think he can push a button and destroy the planet (meaning the button to launch a nuclear war), but where does the power to push that button come from? The power to push that button doesn’t belong to him. He can only push that button if he is given the permission to push that button.”* Swamiji said these words from Amma shifted his mind. He said every bit of destruction we’ve done so far is only because nature is being patient with us. With a flick of her wrist she can remove us from her lap.

Amma often says that before we eat something, we should take a moment to reflect on how that food arrived on our plate. *“Not a grain of the food we eat is made purely by our own effort. What comes to us in the form of food is the work of others, the bounty of nature and God’s compassion. Never eat anything without first praying with humility and gratitude.”*



A farmer sows seeds, cares for the crops, harvests them and sells them at the market. A processing plant with all its employees, packages the goods and sells them to the retail outlets. Trucks and drivers transport them. We travel to a store to buy them, usually in a car made by other people and made with metals and combined elements from the earth, where someone unloads the truck, and others stock the shelves, and still others stand at the cash register to sell these goods to us. If you are eating off of a plate, who made that plate? Who mined what was needed to create it? Who shaped it? What about the silverware or the table and chairs many of us use? We can be grateful for how intertwined our human community is even when it comes to just one simple meal, by acknowledging all the plants that gave their lives for us.

To deepen our relationship with plants and nature, Amma says *“Carpooling, nurturing honeybees, planting trees, cleaning the environment, waste management and growing vegetables were recommended many years ago, and Amma’s children are doing that. Even if we only have a tiny plot of land, we should try to grow a few vegetables using organic fertilizers. But never grieve. What is the use of feeling sad if a plant that we have grown withers away? Plant another one without brooding over the lost one. This relationship will give us a new vitality. We can create heaven right here by doing such things like growing our plants with love. Looking at nature and observing her selfless way of giving, we can become aware of our own limitations. This will help us develop devotion and surrender to God. Nature can bring us closer to God and teach us how to truly worship the divine. The royal path to a beautiful and inclusive world is the way of equal vision. As this equal vision increases in society, the lost*



*harmony of the world can be regained. Amma offers a prayer to the Paramātmā (Supreme Self) that this vision of unity may shine in all her children!”*

In conclusion, now that we’ve had a look at the sentience of plants and taken a view into how we might become more aware of the value of our relationship with nature, including how food gets to our table, we could further our efforts towards honoring and serving nature and all plants, by following Amma’s advice in her words throughout this article. Additionally, we could cultivate our own personal awareness of the sentience of plants by spending time in the woods, feeling what the trees are feeling, talking to the bushes, communing with the flowers and herbs, and meditating in nature, feeling the Oneness, the deep silence.

**~ DIVYA NANCY GRIFFITHS  
ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO**



# ON NATURE DEFICIT DISORDER



**THERE IS A LOT OF TALK NOWADAYS ABOUT THE CHANGING CLIMATE AND DECREASING BIODIVERSITY, BUT SOME OF THE INFORMATION COMES IN THE FORM OF SCIENTIFIC LITERATURE WHICH CAN BE QUITE UNAPPROACHABLE.**

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These publications assume that we want to preserve our current ecology, but how many people know how to preserve our ecology, from a practical standpoint for everyday living? There is often a disconnect between big picture concepts in the natural sciences and an actual individual experience of the natural world.

The term “Nature Deficit Disorder” (NDD) was coined by Richard Louv in his 2005 book *Last Child in the Woods*, in which he described a state of alienation many people experience from the natural world beginning at a young age. It is not a scientific diagnosis; it is referencing Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) to imply that people are not paying attention to the world outdoors, nor do many even know how or why this might be important. This lack of awareness is detrimental not only to nature but to our quality of life.

There are many mental and emotional benefits to spending time outdoors. Fresh air, sunlight, and wide-open places help reduce anxiety, depression and stress. While activities such as bird watching, climbing trees, walking by a stream or catching bugs, improve motor function and physical ability in children and adults, other activities in nature such as camping and hiking, keep us healthy and strong. Inner city children, for example, are known to benefit from experiences in nature, away from the city. A week of river rafting for at-risk-teens helps heal their emotional wounds. When back in the city, these children are more likely to pay attention to and want to protect the local flora and fauna—even the raccoon or a bat family tucked up under exterior rafters.



There are many different ways of evaluating NDD in terms of qualities and activities. A study by Treehugger reveals that across the US, prisoners are guaranteed two hours of outdoor time a day, while too many kids are spending only one hour a day outside. There is a stark difference between the types of activities and facilities these two groups have for choices in their time outdoors. Prisoners might have a chance to play sports during their 2-hour time in the prison yards, and they have a chance to feel the sun and breeze on their faces. However, the prison yards are drab and with high walls and barbed wire all around and the danger of fights breaking out. But at least inmates have the chance to see blue sky, clouds, the occasional daytime moon, and even some insect activity. Inmates have noted that this time outdoors has a positive emotional and mental impact.

On the other hand, many children who have the freedom to be outside after school hours, and who have the opportunity to spend hours playing or practicing sports, opt to spend an average of only one hour a day outdoors. All too often, children prefer to spend time inside playing computer games or glued to the TV. Treehugger suggests that it would be well for schools to get involved, by increasing mandatory time spent outside on school playgrounds. Studies in Finland have shown that the more children play, the better they perform in school and that teens do better on scores. <https://taughtbyfinland.com/the-joyful-illiterate-kindergartners-of-finland/>

The time we allot for kids getting together for spontaneous play, making up rules on the spot or going exploring in nature, is critical for their development, according to the American Psychological Association. The APS describes unstructured play time as “. . . a fundamental necessity for children to thrive physically, emotionally, mentally and socially.” It is in the unstructured outdoor playtime in the hills, forests, or arroyos of the desert, that children have the chance to let their imaginations soar. At the same time, they have a chance to revel in the innate beauty of nature. However, many kids are only spending seven minutes of their time a day engaged in unrehearsed play, according to a report from the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research; this unstructured play time is down 50% over the last 20 years alone.

Where is our time spent for both adults and children? It should be no surprise that one of the biggest sinks of our attention is electronic devices with internet access, also known as connected tech. This problem is not limited to children alone, with data from DataReportal showing that globally, adults spend just under seven hours a day looking at screens, which is around 40% of our waking day. Almost all of this time is spent indoors on work and leisure; a survey conducted by the National Human Activity Pattern all the way back in 2001 determined that US adults spent 93% of their time indoors or in their car. NDD is a symptom of deeper underlying cultural issues surrounding our increasingly urban lives. But if we want to heal ours and our children’s connection with nature we have to start with our inner child.

Amma often tells us to become innocent like a child. Watch a child playing in nature, and then remember your own childhood and times you might have gone camping or on a picnic. Remember the joy of it, the abandon you felt while chasing a butterfly or trying to catch the dog who’s running after a rabbit. Or maybe, as Amma often describes, you might remember playing king and queen in a royal court in the forest. Our inner child is always available to us; we only need to remember and then go out and experience nature with child-like fascination and care.

But where can we access nature? Paradoxically, we often regard nature as something that exists far from cities in an untouched and pristine state, like one of the National Parks or Forests. This mindset of a generally inaccessible natural world has contributed to our lack of awareness. The world of animals and plants is teeming within our cities. Species like racoons, frogs, crows, rats, coyotes, pigeons and many other birds, sometimes are regarded as pests, but they have adapted to our urban environments. At night some of these species come out to forage away from our prying eyes, but they live among us nevertheless. They can teach us a lot about nature, if not more so than the bears, deer, and eagles of the Sierras, because they’re our local neighbors. We can observe them and their behaviors on a daily



basis. Have you ever heard the coyotes howling at night? Or the haunting sound of a loon, if your city is near a lake? Or found a frog in your planter? It can be a great joy to spot a bird's nest in a tree in your local area. A space as small as a front yard or neighboring lot can host an abundance of plant species that support innumerable insects and an assortment of birds. While these spaces are not distributed equitably across our cities, they can serve to raise awareness of the natural world, which would make the occasional or one time visit to a National Park such as Yellowstone or Yosemite even more rich. And if you don't have any exterior space, a single house plant in a window that you care for is still a valuable connection to foster. In whatever way you can rouse your inner child to behold and remain in awe of the natural world, which is all around us and inside of us, is certain to bring invaluable expansion of consciousness on all levels.

The single greatest thing keeping us apart from nature is our belief or our lack of experience. Human exceptionalism has been the dominant worldview for a few hundred years now, and it has led us to a fabulously high tech world with very little spiritual regard for the countless other beings that we share this planet with. As Amma has repeated again and again, technology should serve nature and not the other way around.

The remedy to many of the anxieties we feel about our changing climate and resultant stressful lives is to think globally and act locally. To heal the planet, we're going to have to start in our own hearts, homes, and communities. Any small steps we take to raise awareness and care for plants and animals will lead us to changes to build a better world for all. As Amma says, *"Don't be discouraged by your incapacity to dispel darkness from the world. Light your one candle and step forward."*

**~ LEANDER MCNEELY AND GREENFRIENDS NORTH AMERICA TEAM**

# AMAZON'S DEVASTATING DROUGHT



Lake Tefe – Amazon region. *Photo courtesy of Mongabay.com.*



## **IF THE EARTH IS OUR BODY, THE AMAZON RAINFOREST IS OUR LUNGS.**

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Situated in South America, it spans over a whopping 6.7 million square kilometres, 9 countries, and is twice the size of India. It is a fascinating place that hosts 10% of the known species of Earth, with new animals and plants discovered almost every other day.

The majestic Amazon is home to nearly 400 billion trees. Producing about 20 percent of the world's oxygen and storing close to 140 billion tons of carbon, it is no surprise that the Amazon rainforest is

one of our most potent medicines for the climate crisis that human activities, especially the burning of fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas) have created. However, it is facing an unprecedented crisis due to severe drought conditions that have persisted over recent years. This environmental catastrophe not only threatens the rich biodiversity within its vast expanse but drastically affects the local indigenous communities and has far-reaching implications for global climate patterns.

*Amma says: "When fire breaks out on the first floor of a ten-story building, the person living on the first floor cries out for help. The person living on the tenth floor says that it is not his problem. But it soon will become his problem too. He does not realize that."*

*"Our own mother may carry us on her lap for five years or so. But Mother Earth will tolerate all our abuses and take care of us for our entire lifespan. We cannot forget the Mother who sustains us for all our life, who sustains all of life. We cannot forget our responsibility towards her."*

Since the 19th century Industrial Revolution, when coal-, oil- and gas-fuelled machines began to take over manual labour, the increase in pollution such as carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) has greatly accelerated. With the rise of CO<sub>2</sub> in our atmosphere, more of the sun's heat gets trapped and the Earth's surface temperature consequently rises. Since 1750, the CO<sub>2</sub> in our atmosphere has increased by a staggering 50%.

The truth is that every fraction of a degree of warming is significant. Greenhouse gases like CO<sub>2</sub> caused by human activities are responsible for a temperature increase of about 1.1 °C since 1850. This has caused extreme weather patterns, negatively impacting all life and nature. As global temperatures continue to rise, it becomes increasingly more difficult for species and ecosystems to adapt and survive, not to mention the harmful effect on our health.

*Amma says: "Today, our air, food, water – all are polluted. If we do not stop exploiting nature for our temporary selfish gains, we will destroy the world."*



Dead fish as the Amazon dries up. Photo courtesy Mongabay.com.

The Amazon is home to nearly 50 million people, including 1.5 million indigenous people. The indigenous communities are comprised of 385 different groups, speaking 274 indigenous languages, more than anywhere else in the world. As a result of unprecedented global warming, in the middle of 2023, the Amazon was hit with a devastating, record-breaking drought affecting all nine rainforest countries. As temperatures increased, reducing rainfall and causing high evaporation which dries out the soil, Scientists and researchers agree that climate change was the leading factor.

Mark Poynting, Climate and Environmental researcher for BBC News, writes: "In October (2023), the Rio Negro – one of the world's largest rivers – reached its lowest recorded level near Manaus in Brazil, surpassing marks going back over 100 years."

Due to the high river temperatures, hundreds of endangered, pink and grey dolphins were unable to adapt and thousands of fish died. This devastating drought isolated millions of people who rely on Amazon's waterways for transportation, income, food and medicine. Bom Jesus de Igapo Grande, a community of 40 families living in the middle of the forest, has been severely affected. The head of the village's son, Oliveira Tikuna admitted, "I'm 49 years old, we've never seen anything like this before. I've never even heard of a drought as bad as this." Their transportation was disrupted, their crops spoiled, and they could not get their bananas, cassava, chestnuts and acai to the city fast enough, which severely affected their income and livelihoods. They had no water to shower. Facing such dire challenges, the elderly and most vulnerable were urged by the head of the village to move away from their loved ones and homes so they could be closer to town and the nearest hospital.

National Institute for Amazonian Research plant ecologist, Flávia Costa, who has been living and working in the rainforest for 26 years says: "When it was my first drought I thought, 'Wow, this is awful. How can this happen to the rainforest? And then, year after year, it was record-breaking. Each drought was stronger than before."



Dry Amazon River Bed. Photo courtesy of BBC News



Amma says: *“By living in harmony with Nature, one gains a healthy mind and body.”* It is no wonder then that the further we move away from our connection with nature the more we suffer, both mentally and physically.

The current global temperature is at 1.1°C above pre industrial levels and the Amazon Rainforest is at 17% deforestation. Brazilian climatologist, Carlos Nobre warns that if the Amazon deforestation exceeds 25% and the global temperatures rise above 2.5°C, this rich treasure that is the Amazon Rainforest will tragically reach the tipping point, drying up and becoming a savannah. ([Mongabay Series: Amazon Conservation, Q&A: Climatologist Carlos Nobre’s dream of an Amazon Institute of Technology, by Jaqueline Sordi](#)).

Amma says: *“When man cuts a tree, he is actually making his own coffin. It is not enough to plant one tree for each one he cuts. He may have to plant at least 50 trees or more. It is said that about 5 million people get cancer from polluted air.”*

Considering the major role and incredible support the Amazon offers us, we can’t even begin to imagine how devastating it would be for all life and nature on our planet to lose this precious treasure.

- 👉 So, what can we do, those of us living on the top floors, to help those living on the first floor of this building that is on fire?
- 👉 How can we help those affected and ensure the flames do not spread and devour us all?
- 👉 Can we call upon the fire brigade of awareness to help us make better decisions?
- 👉 Can we be more consistent and focused in our sadhana (spiritual practices) so that it can reflect in the outer world?
- 👉 Can we bring awareness into every moment of our day-to-day life to sharpen our discrimination and increase our understanding, compassion and sense of oneness with all of creation?
- 👉 Can we follow Amma’s advice of living a simpler life, carpooling, growing our own vegetables, cleaning the environment, engaging in better waste management, using less plastic, planting more trees and nurturing honeybees?

Do not be discouraged and fooled by the mind that tries to make us believe that one small change and one little person cannot impact the world.

*“There is harmony in the universe. Everything in the universe is interconnected. The universe is a net held by each of us. When there is movement in the corner of a net held by four people, it will reflect everywhere. All actions we perform knowingly or unknowingly, alone or as a group are being reflected in the corners of the universe. It will not work if we wait for others to change. Even if they do not change, we should be willing to change. We should see what we can do.”* – Amma

*“If we all get together and do it with more focus, we will be able to transform this earth into heaven. For that, we should first create heaven within ourselves. I pray to the Supreme to grace us with the blessings to do so.”* – Amma

~ IOANA BARRETT, TORONTO SATSANG

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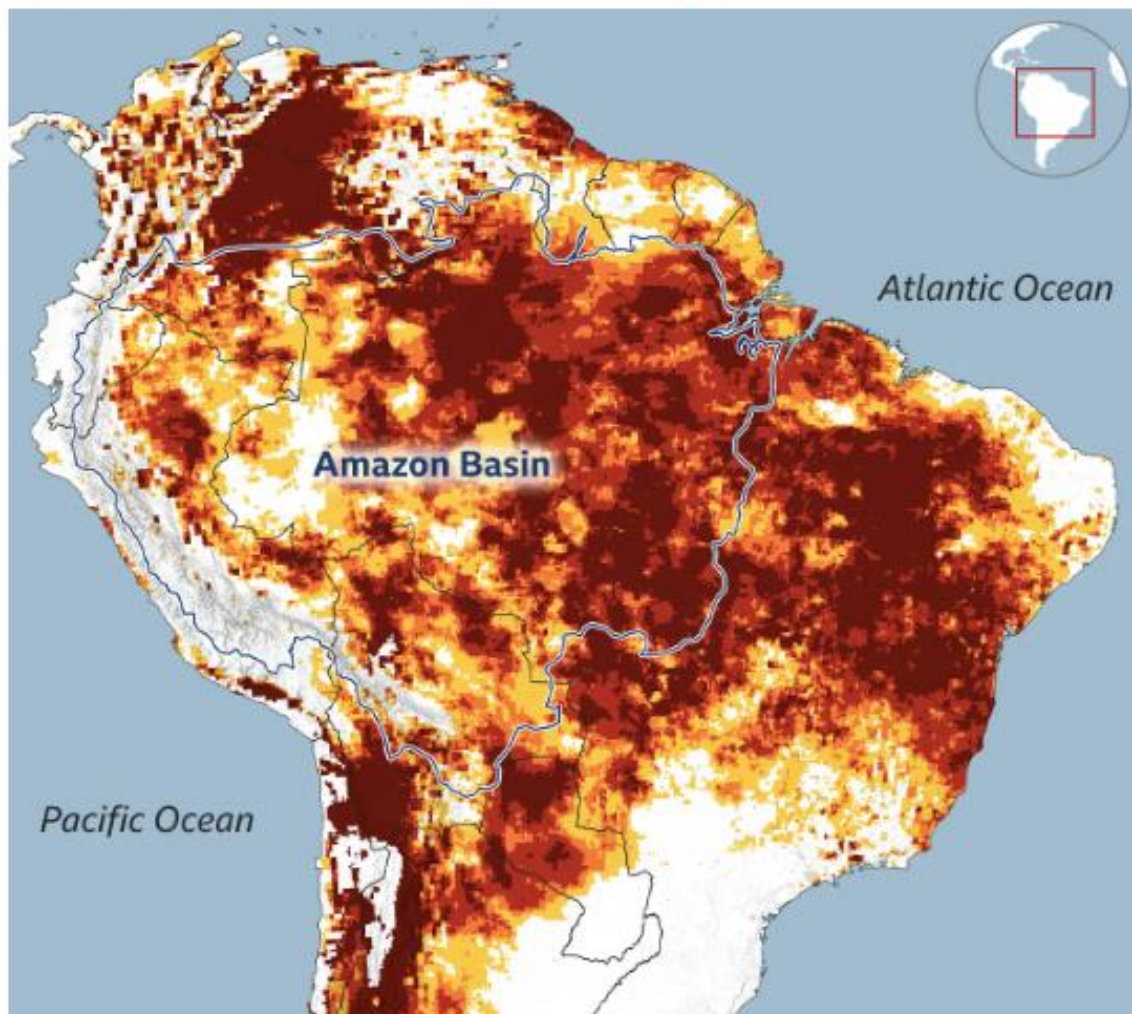
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## Amazon's worst drought on record

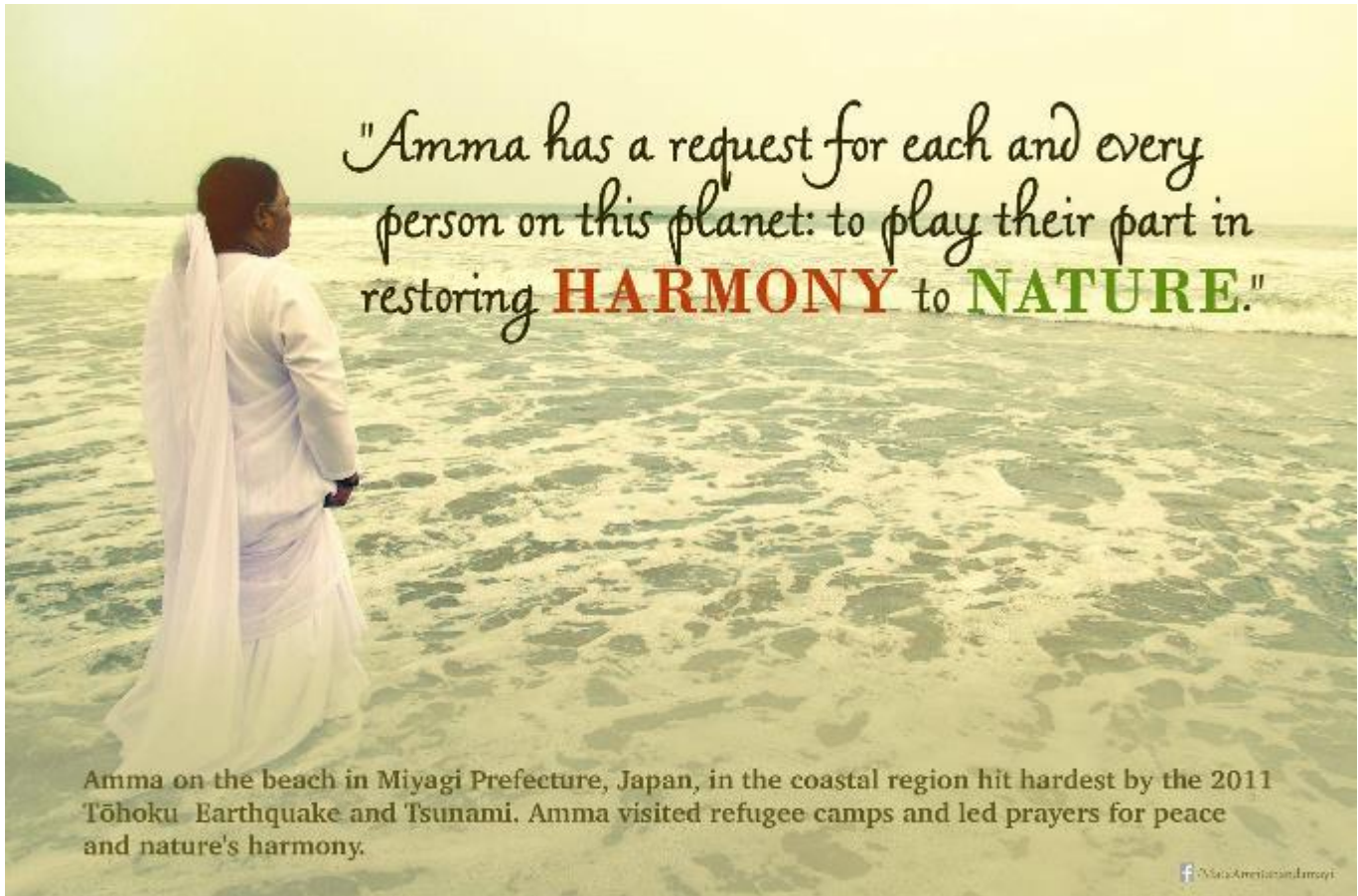
Intensity of drought, June to November 2023

■ Moderate ■ Severe ■ Extreme ■ Exceptional



Source: World Weather Attribution (SPEI - Drought Index)

BBC



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