

A legend lives on in the salty West

An enthusiastic volunteer organisation in Western Australia is helping farmers put trees back into the landscape and combat salinity. Where Men of the Trees differs from many other environmental organisations, however, is that its dedicated members follow an inspiring international precedent set by a man ahead of his time. **Frank Smith** reports.

In 1922, young forester Richard St Barbe Baker, working for the British Colonial Office in Kenya, persuaded thousands of Kikuyu tribesmen to undertake a massive tree-planting program to replace the forests they had destroyed.

Eighty-five years on, the vision of that young Englishman is being kept alive through Men of the Trees, a global network of volunteer tree-planting groups.

The historic Kenyan tree-planting success was the first of many inspired by St Barbe Baker during his long life (see box).

In fact, St Barbe Baker may have been responsible for the planting of more trees than any other person in history. He successfully campaigned to save the giant redwoods of California and visited Australia three times, which led to the establishment of Men of the Trees groups in all Australian states.

Today, Western Australia's Men of the Trees division has some 1200 members. Despite the group's name, women make up at least half of the membership. Between them, these volunteers raise and plant around 600 000 trees a year.

Trees with economic potential

While the group is running a number of projects (see box), it has made a special study of economically productive trees for semi-arid farmlands.

'The main ones are carob, stone pine, trees for eucalyptus oil production, fodder

Carbon Neutral



Barrie Oldfield has been committed to Men of the Trees since the early 1980s and now runs native tree experimental trials for the group.

trees for sheep and cattle, pistachio, pecan and macadamia nut trees, olives and mulberries,' says Barrie Oldfield, who was President of Men of the Trees WA from 1987 to 2004, and has been awarded an Order of Australia medal for his long-term commitment to tree conservation.

'Research into carob has been so successful that there is now a Carob Growers Association in Western Australia and the promise of a new, multi-million dollar industry just around the corner.'

The oil mallee is also touted as a potential money-spinner. A pilot plant designed by Western Power at Narrogin – 190 km south-east of Perth – will extract the valuable oil, cineol, and use the residue to generate electricity.

In 1990, Men of the Trees leased its own 23 ha of land, Amery Acres, at Dowerin, 170 km north-east of Perth, to establish a Tree Farm Project.

Amery Acres has trial plantings of pistachios, mangoes, pomegranates, several varieties of almonds, olives, mulberries, carobs, figs and other fruit trees. Elsewhere the group has planted sandalwood, eucalyptus, pines and sheoaks.

Oldfield has an interesting history with the organisation. Formerly a media officer at Curtin University, he made the film *On the Edge of the Forest* with Ernst Schumacher, the well-known economist and author of *Small is Beautiful*.

So inspired was Oldfield by

Schumacher's work that in 1983, he resigned from his job and became a full-time volunteer with Men of the Trees.

Carbon Neutral offsets

Another Men of the Trees WA venture is the Carbon Neutral scheme run in

conjunction with Trees for Life in South Australia, another group whose origins can be traced back to St Barbe Baker.

Carbon Neutral offers vehicle fleet operators, companies and individuals the opportunity to offset the more than four tonnes of carbon dioxide produced annually by a typical Australian car.

Subscribers pay a \$50 annual fee for the planting and maintenance of the number of trees estimated necessary to absorb that amount of carbon dioxide.

'This year we are planting trees to offset emissions for over 11 000 vehicles,' says Carbon Neutral Business Development Officer, Angela Tillier.

The Men of the Trees Farm Tree Help Scheme (see box) raises and plants the trees and audits their performance to ensure that they sequester as much carbon as the vehicles they are linked to. The scheme coordinator, Jenny Young, has been a volunteer for 10 years.

'I retired and was at a loose end, looking at four walls,' says Young, who initially volunteered to work a day a week at a Men of the Trees nursery in Hazelmere.

Young often ended up working five days a week when the nursery was busy, and before she knew it, was running the Farm Tree Help Scheme.

The original Man of the Trees

Richard St Barbe Baker was born in England in 1889, but as a 19-year-old, migrated to Canada where he studied at the University of Saskatchewan. He returned to England and, after WWI, joined the British Colonial Office as a forester and was posted to Kenya.

It was here that Men of the Trees was born. Concerned about the deforestation practices of the Kikuyu tribespeople in the northern highlands, St Barbe Baker sought out clan leaders to address a gathering of 3000 warriors, and asked them to leave behind their 'Forest destroyers' reputation, bestowed by their enemy the Masai, and become forest protectors and regenerators – men of the trees.

In his subsequent campaigns in Africa – including Nigeria and the Sahara – the Middle East, India, the US, Australia and New Zealand, St Barbe Baker continued to apply this appreciation of indigenous beliefs and attitudes to mobilise people into action. He called his approach 'social forestry'.

'You can gauge a nation's wealth, its real

wealth, by its tree cover,' he wrote. 'The health and the economic security of the human race depend on how well the forests of the world are managed.'

After St Barbe Baker's first visit to Australia in 1979, forester Charles Peaty founded a Men of the Trees group in Western Australia and helped set up branches in all Australian states.



Richard St Barbe Baker at 62 on one of his return visits to Kenya, one of the many countries where he campaigned for tree conservation and replanting.

Profile

Experimenting with natives

Men of the Trees also carries out trials using native tree seedlings under the guidance of University of WA professors Bob Gilkes and Lynette Abbott.

The field trials are run by Barrie Oldfield, who is currently comparing the growth rate of six salt-tolerant tree species including *Eucalyptus gigantea* and *E. spiculata*. Volunteers collected the seeds for the trials from salt-affected areas throughout the WA wheatbelt in the state's south-east.

An 11 ha field trial has been established in salt-affected country at Nambling on land belonging to Mike Irvine.

Irvine's grandfather cleared the land in the 1930s. When salt became evident in 1972, Irvine's father began planting sentinel trees around the edges of salt scalds to indicate any expansion of the scald.

In 1999, Irvine and Men of the Trees volunteers planted 4000 more trees around the back of the scald. Oldfield says the salt-affected area gradually reduced. As a result, a further 2000 trees were planted.

'Samphire and saltbush have begun to spread,' says Oldfield. 'Samphire collects a small dust mound, and this is colonised by saltbush and barley grass.'

'It's the natural version of raised beds used in suburban gardens.'

In 2000, the volunteers borrowed the shire grader to build 30–75 cm high artificial raised beds. The grader also

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aerated soil with a ripping tine to help rain penetrate and leach out the salt.

Oldfield says that while results could have been better, good rains in 2005 and in January 2006 have lowered the salt content of soil in the beds to 4000 ppm compared to 7000 ppm on the surface.

'We mulched the trees with woodchips. These provide a matrix for the mycorrhiza that eucalypts use to extract scarce nutrients from the soil.'

'We aim to observe and assist nature, making revegetation as natural as we can get.'

At the catchment level

Men of the Trees is now in partnership with the community living in the 3500 km² Lake Chinocup catchment surrounding the town of Pingrup, east of Perth.

A chain of salt lakes here, including Lakes Magenta and Chinocup, form the headwaters of the Avon River, which drains into the Swan River. Mallee scrub is the dominant natural vegetation, but land clearance has resulted in gradual spread of salt-affected areas.

With a population of only 200, Pingrup

was in need of some help in raising and planting enough trees to make a difference.

The Avon catchment group is encouraging surface-water control, protection of remnant vegetation, planting of deep-rooted perennials and changing farming systems in favour of high-water-using crops and pasture.

Men of the Trees is helping by raising and planting the trees.

'We collect local provenance seed at Pingrup and provide volunteers with grower kits including seed and sterilised soil,' says Jenny Young.

'Eighty volunteers grow 300 or more trees each at home. One volunteer has 5000!'

'When the trees are ready, they help to plant them. This amounts to around 20 000 trees annually in a three-year program.'

'Farmers and their families help with the planting, provide the utes and feed the volunteers on Saturday night.'

Richard St Barbe Baker adopted the Swahili word 'Twahamwe' – meaning 'all as one' – as the motto for Men of the Trees. No doubt he would be pleased to see that spirit, which kindled the Men of the Trees movement in 1922, alive and well in Western Australia in 2007.

More information:
Men of the Trees WA,
www.menofthetrees.com.au

Many ways to get their hands dirty

The Western Australian Men of the Trees group runs a number of community programs, the main ones being:

Carbon Neutral: A not-for-profit company founded by Men of the Trees WA and affiliated with Trees for Life SA. The company guarantees monitoring of all trees planted and follow-up maintenance at all sites to ensure sustained carbon-capture capability.

Million Trees Program: An education program involving more than 90 schools in WA. Children learn about the value of Western Australian native trees by propagating and nurturing seedlings in their own school nurseries, before planting them in degraded urban and rural locations. The program's ultimate goal is to have one million trees planted in one season.

Farm Tree Help Scheme: The scheme's slogan is 'Linking city people with rural

communities'. It encourages city people to raise seedlings that they will help plant on WA farms, at the same time helping farmers reclaim land affected by salinity and erosion.

Children's Forest: Parents or relatives can sponsor trees for their children. This idea



Students from Halls Head Primary School oversee saplings in the school shadehouse.

Melanie Bainbridge/MTP

was close to St Barbe Baker's heart: 'I have a dream of the whole earth made green again,' he said, 'an earth healed and made whole through the efforts of children of all ages and all nations planting trees to express their special understanding of the earth as their home.'

City Farm: A reclaimed scrap metal yard in East Perth that has been transformed into an organic produce garden – certified by the Biological Farmers of Australia (BFA) – and education centre with the help of unemployed people, school children, work experience students, mental health patients and other volunteers.

Tree Farm Project (Amery Acres): This experimental farm is helping volunteers and researchers understand the complex interactions of soil, rocks, organisms and different plant species.