Forest man

Don Jackman finds an example of a rare species – an environmental feel-good story.

There's no **shortage** of gloomy stories about the environment. Most of us have heard **alarming** reports of climate change and environmental destruction, but we often feel powerless to do anything other than get depressed about it.

Jadav Payeng didn't get depressed. His is the heartening story of a man who decided not to give in to that feeling of powerlessness. He has totally transformed the environment around him, **single-handedly**.

A dying island

It all began when he was a teenager, in 1979. Jadav grew up on Majuli Island in northern India, the largest river island on Earth, and enjoyed walking along its shores. One day, he saw hundreds of dead snakes on the river bank. Flood waters had washed them there, and there was no vegetation for them **to shelter** in. 'The snakes died in the heat, without any tree cover. I sat down and **wept** …'. Jadav realized how serious the problem of deforestation was – floods were washing away the soil where trees had been cut down. Majuli, with a growing population of 170,000 people, had lost 70% of its land over the last century.

Jadav planted some tree saplings on the **barren** land, but they died and it seemed nothing would grow there. He didn't want to give up though, and when he talked to some of the older people in his village, they suggested he try planting bamboo.

The first plantings

So Jadav went out every day, making holes for bamboo plants in the desert-like ground with a stick, and in a few years, large areas of bamboo forest had grown. He learned that red ants improved the condition of the soil, so he carried hundreds of them onto the land. He was stung many times. 'That was an experience!' he says, laughing.

He then decided to try growing proper trees again in the improved soil. The saplings survived this time, but as they grew in number, watering them regularly was a big challenge for one man. He hung pots of water full of small holes over each one, and the water slowly **dripped** down over several days.

Since then, Jadav has been planting saplings and seeds every day, for nearly 40 years. He gets up at 3.30 a.m. to milk his cows, which provide a living for his wife and children, and then sets out for the forest at 8.30.

Life returns

As the forest has grown and grown, wildlife has returned – eventually rhinos, tigers, and elephants began to take shelter among the trees. Jadav then had to face his biggest challenge – men. It wasn't only the **loggers** who wanted to cut down his trees, but local villagers, too. They were worried about the elephants and tigers eating their **crops** and attacking their animals. Jadav said they would have to kill him before they killed his forest. He had the idea of planting banana trees for the elephants to eat, and made sure there was enough deer for the tigers to hunt, so they wouldn't need to go into the villages for food. The tigers have taken some of his own cows, but then, says Jadav with a smile, 'they don't know how to farm, do they?'

Future forest

The forest is now 1,400 acres, nearly twice the size of New York's Central Park. Jadav's story has been made into a film, The Forest Man of India, by a Canadian filmmaker, Douglas McMaster. McMaster followed Jadav for a month and says,

> 'He taught me that you can **accomplish** a lot with very little …. He doesn't even wear shoes. His way of life is extremely pure; free of possessions, yet he is extremely happy and positive.'

Is Jadav himself satisfied with what he's achieved? Well, yes, but his aim now is to create another forest on other barren land nearby. 'It may take another 30 years, but I am optimistic about it,' he says. 'No more global warming if everyone plants forest!'

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