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"If there was once a forest, a forest can return": Tony Rinaudo at work.

Image: Silas Koch (World Vision)

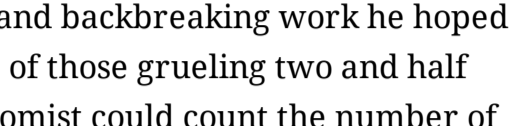
Tony Rinaudo

Saving Lives with a Carpet Knife

Armed only with carpet knives, terrorists hijacked four planes perpetrating the most devastating attack in modern history. Tony Rinaudo of World Vision uses the same weapon, but he uses it to fight poverty and hunger. Known as the "Tree Whisperer," the Australian explains how, with a sharp blade — and a little heavenly help —, he can make even the most barren regions of the world bloom and therefore help to slow down mass migration.

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By Urs Gehrig



For 30 months, Tony Rinaudo had been in Niger, one of the poorest countries in the Sahel. He was there to plant 6,000 saplings, slow and backbreaking work he hoped would inspire an agricultural miracle. At the end of those grueling two and half years, his plan was a complete failure. The agronomist could count the number of surviving saplings on one hand.

In his despair, he did what he had done as a child when, in his home, the Owens Valley in northeastern Victoria, Australia, a pesticide runoff had polluted the waters, devastating the fish and destroying thousands of acres of scrubland. The devout Christian, fell to his knees and prayed. And Rinaudo received an answer in the form of a patch of small shrubs that, as he discovered, were not shrubs at all but a thatch of trees stunted by the arid desert. Underneath, under the ground, was a glorious and thriving root system. The Australian had his miracle.

Today, thanks to his pioneering techniques, farmland across many countries has been regenerated. The World Vision leader's re-foresting efforts have led to what has been called "probably the largest positive environmental transformation" on the African continent.

I ask the 61 year old "miracle worker" how he did it.

Tony Rinaudo, you had loaded tree seedlings on your truck driving to remote villages. And then you made a discovery that would change your life and the lives of millions of people. How did this happen?

I had stopped to adjust the air pressure of the tires. There had always been many "bushes" in the landscape. But this day they caught my attention and I took a closer look. As soon as I saw the shape of the leaf, I recognized that that was a tree species because there were still some remaining trees in the landscape and the leaf shape was pretty distinctive.

In that moment, everything changed in my mind because there were literally millions of these bushes, and I knew that they all had the potential to become trees. Under normal farming practices, each year in preparation for sowing crops, these "bushes" are slashed and burned. They are considered weeds which a good farmer will get rid of! That's why I'd never thought maybe there were trees.

As far I understand, there was a subterranean tree colony, an underground forest that had survived for a long time. What you saw on the surface was just the top of that forest?

That's absolutely right. Most tree species, when you cut them down they don't die. You still have 30% to 50% of the biomass of the tree underground in the form of roots and stump.

How deep underground?

It depends on the age and the species, but some of the taproots can go 20 or 30 meters deep.

How old are these underground forests? How far do they go back in time?

In that district that I worked in they reached back maybe 60 to 80 years prior to my coming. When farmers move into virgin bushland, the first thing they would have done was to cut the trees. They're at least that old. But from my visits to more desert areas, I believe that tree stumps could be even more than 100, maybe two centuries old. But I can't scientifically give you an answer as I did not count tree rings... In addition to clearing trees for farming, people depended on them for fuel and construction. People were desperately short of firewood. Women and children walked very long distances to collect fuelwood. Often they resorted to using straw and animal manure for cooking fuel and so any twig, it didn't even have to be a decent piece of firewood, any twig would be collected and dried and used for cooking.

You have a special technique to make this underground forest grow on the surface again. How does it work?

Actually, most of what I do is the regreening of mindscapes. If I can change human behavior, the tree will grow by itself. So, I convince people that they will have a better life, their children will have a better future if they don't remove every single stem that regrows. If they manage their livestock and use of fire and fuelwood collection differently and allow trees to come back, their life will be better. The key to the success is behavior change.

Technically speaking, how do you draw the underground forest to the surface?

Technically, it's very simple. It's just pruning and thinning excess stems and branches. When the tree stump regrows, there might be 30 to 50 stems all competing. And so we reduce this competition by selecting the best ones, the strongest, the tallest, and removing the excess. Farmers are encouraged to leave up to five stems and then remove all of the rest because they are competing for light and space and water and nutrients. That simple act of reducing the competition is like releasing a spring, and even in those dry areas, those trees grow very quickly. We call this technique 'Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration' or 'FMNR' for short.

In fact, you only need a knife to do this?

Correct. My dad, when he passed away, he had a toolbox and there was an old carpet knife. That's what I travel with all the time. I deliberately don't bring secateurs and so on and things that are expensive. It might be a stumbling block. I tell farmers, "You already have everything that you need to do this. You don't need a project or expensive tools. If you believe in this and you want a better future, you have everything you need." That's another secret of FMNR.

How could it possibly spread so fast in Niger? In just 20 years, this practice spread to 5 million hectares – largely from farmer to farmer - even without my knowledge.

You make the desert bloom, and you save lives with a knife. Have you an idea how much area you turned green with your initiative and how many lives you have saved?

Firstly, this is an ancient practice. I didn't invent this. I revived it. I popularized it, then presented it in an appropriate way for agroforestry. That's an important point because, even in Niger, there were communities I never had any contact with, and they themselves rediscovered this and started doing it. I never claim that everything that happened was because of me. I certainly played a role, but it was a combination of things. In Niger today, we know that from satellite imagery, there are approximately 6 million hectares of farmland with roughly 40 to 45 trees per hectare. There's about 15 million hectares of new forest in eight countries across West Africa. Some of this would have been just indigenous knowledge being revived without any of my involvement.

Through my work in World Vision, it's been very hard to quantify the area. Because if I plant a tree, I can geotag or I can keep a record and I can go back to check if it's there. But with FMNR, I am planting an idea, and I have no control where that idea goes. For this reason, I cannot give an exact area for this method of reforestation. However, technologies are improving all the time and scientists are perfecting how to measure the spread of FMNR through interpreting satellite imagery. In World Vision, I've been able to introduce this approach in 25 countries around the world. I've been able to introduce it to other NGOs, to governments, and to farming communities. What I know is that in most of these countries it's spreading. Sometimes faster, sometimes slower. But I've sown the seeds. My guess is that since starting in World Vision, maybe there's a million hectares of new forest. But don't ask me to prove it. [laughter].

When you first showed your method in Niger, some farmers would call you "Crazy Tony." How do they see you today? Do you still face resistance?

I think the "Crazy Tony" reaction has mostly passed. I had that title in Niger. If you think about it, my suggestion must have come across like a really stupid idea. People were hungry and believed they need every piece of space on their land for growing food crops. How could I possibly expect them in their minds to waste that land growing a tree? Fortunately, we were able to introduce it to a small number of people and then a larger number. In a very short time, they realized their crop yields would double because of the improved microclimate and soil fertility. They now had fuel woods and their wives were no longer suffering, walking many kilometers. walking three, four hours, or using straw and cow manure and donkey manure for their fuel.

The trees were indigenous. Some were very good for fodder trees. Instead of their animals starving every year, they now had healthy, well-fed animals. Some of them produced wild foods – edible fruits, nuts and leaves. Some farmers could now keep bees and have an additional income. The major battle against opposition was won in Niger. Of all the places, can you imagine if I'd gone to a country with a better climate, then it would be very hard to convince someone else to do this. But I went to the worst place, and it worked. Today, many people are inspired to practice FMNR because they see that it worked in the difficult conditions in Niger.

If you can do it in Niger, you can do it anywhere.

Almost, yes. Certainly, the principles apply because, as I described to you, it's not about the tree stump. It's actually about changing the way you manage the whole land: burning, grazing, removing woody material, ploughing every square inch. If you change your behavior, nature will heal itself. The birds of the air, the wildlife, the livestock will bring tree seeds in the manure, and because you changed your behavior, there will be a seedbed there where it can take root.

There are a lot of places where forests are chopped or burned down. We are currently witnessing big fires in the Amazon area. According to news reports, irreversible damage is being done. Can we say that through your technique, through your mission, the destroyed forest is not totally lost?

Definitely. My rule of thumb: If there was a forest there before, then a forest can return.

So, no forest is lost forever?

That's my experience. It may take more time in some places because of the very harsh environments, or it might take longer for people to accept to change behavior. But if there was a forest there before, my experience is that it can return.

We witness millions of people migrating from Africa to escape poverty and starvation. With your method to regain the forest, are you able to curb mass migration?

Definitely. That's my experience. Why would you risk your life crossing the Mediterranean if you could have a dignified life and hope for the future in your own country? But we need to do more. We need to put more effort into family planning because every environment has limits to what it can support. And we need to reach more communities to restore their land by working with nature instead of fighting against it and destroying it.

Are there any heads of states that listen to your words and implement your vision?

It's happening. More and more, I have a platform to speak to governing bodies. There are a number of global initiatives that really help me. In 2001, the Government of Germany and IUCN created the Bonn Challenge. The challenge is to restore 350 million hectares of degraded land by 2030. Many governments have signed onto this. In Africa, 29 countries have committed to restoring 113 million hectares of degraded land. World Vision works in many of those countries and is about to launch it's own regreening campaign.

Additionally, World Vision is a founding member of a new organization called the Global EverGreening Alliance. It's not one organization alone It's not Tony alone. Through the Alliance, I have the capacity to influence these other organizations and teach them the method. There is already great momentum, and not too soon. Because of climate change and widespread land degradation, people are desperately searching for answers. We definitely have a much bigger voice today than we did even a few years ago.

Tony Rinaudo was awarded the Alternative Nobel Prize in 2018 "for practical proof of how dry areas can be greened on a large scale and at minimal cost to improve the livelihoods of millions of people." Rinaudo's goal is to reforest one billion hectares worldwide by 2030. He visited Switzerland this week to attend the Swiss Green Symposium.

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