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I wanted to return to nature what I had taken: Atul Kulkarni

Actor Atul Kulkarni shares his experience of converting a barren land into a dense forest with nature lovers at Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) on Tuesday.

Reported By:  Edited By: Priya Iyengar |Source: DNA |Updated: Sep 15, 2010, 12:25 AM IST



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Actor Atul Kulkarni of the *Rang De Basanti* fame shared his experience of converting a barren land into a dense forest with nature lovers at Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) on Tuesday. The two-time National Award-winning actor, who is known for his versatility, spoke to *DNA* about his pet project of converting the 24-acre land near Satara. For Kulkarni, it was time to encourage others to take up similar projects.

Can you explain the motivation behind developing such a project in a remote area?

For one, I wanted to give back to nature what we have stolen from it. I had also read an article about a couple who had developed a private forest in Coorg, and were working towards preserving it. I wanted to do something similar; I believe unless an individual has a stake in a project, it will not be a priority for him.

The government has been doing a difficult job of preserving our natural resources. It has even declared stretches as protected wildlife sanctuaries as it faces enough problems with the local residents.

per acre. I then appointed experts to develop a forest in the land.

What were the challenges while developing the project?

The main challenge was to create fertile soil on the land. For this purpose, I had appointed two experts who worked on the land for a long period. In six years, the land is showing signs of getting back to what it was earlier. It is also located very close to Koyna Wild Life Sanctuary which is divided from the area by a 65km stretch of the Koyna river. I knew it was a fertile area, but continuous grazing and cutting of vegetation had led to degradation of the land.

A project like this needs a lot of patience. I also had to convince my family that developing a forest is better than buying a farmhouse at Lonavla or Khandala.

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What was the cost of turning the barren land into rich vegetation?

I knew that cost would be a major factor and be a deterrent for the common public. But since I bought the land for Rs30,000 per acre, the annual maintenance of redeveloping the area into a forest comes to Rs2.5 lakh. However, this is a group project, therefore, the cost is equally divided between five people.

What do you plan to do with the area once the forest is developed and how it will help others?

Firstly, I felt like I had achieved what I set out for when Rakeysh Mehra, director of *Rang De Basanti*, showed interest in the project and said that he would like to invest in something similar. Further, I have not planted any yield crop or mango trees. There will be no monetary benefit out of this.

However, in a few years, the next generation can enjoy the beauty of a dense evergreen forest. We have also got a lot of wildlife in the area. Just recently, we spotted pug marks of leopards in the terrain. There are also small birds, butterflies and snakes which have made their home there. We did not enter it with any monetary objectives. I intend to spread awareness that such projects can be taken up by others. They can buy plots in a remote area and then redevelop it. There are ways to do this with the help of experts and environmentalists.

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