

# Streams in the desert

As part of Mazars' carbon-compensation programme, a team from its China offices recently ventured to the over-farmed lands of Inner Mongolia on a tree-planting mission

**On any day of the week, Thomas Granjard, the Beijing-based financial adviser of international audit firm Mazars, can be found working alongside his team of accountants to solve clients' accounting and tax problems. He joined the company in 2008 and is an expert in Chinese accounting standards and tax regulations. But recently the French accountant has had a different assignment: solving the desertification problem of China.**

In April, Granjard led a team of Mazars staff to Inner Mongolia to turn desert into farmland. They were participating in the Million Tree Project (MTP), a programme founded by green group Shanghai Roots & Shoots in 2007. By planting trees in the desertified land of Kulun Qi every April, the MTP aims to improve both ecological and human living conditions. It wants to plant 1 million seedlings by 2014 to fight global warming and restore over 666 hectares of land (around 1,000 football fields) to slow down the devastating desertification in the area.

Climate change and land exploitation including over-grazing and over-farming have degraded the land of Kulun Qi from farmland to fragile soil, which is primarily sand or desert. Now the desertified area is expanding quickly. Sandstorms, caused by wind erosion, have also destroyed homes and forced many people to flee.

'We've all seen how badly Beijing is affected with sandstorms every year. The desert is a problem that has consumed about one-third of China's landscape and each spring it spreads further and further. The MTP aims to reforest the area, revitalise the land and block the sandstorms,' says Thierry Labarre, senior founding partner of Mazars in Beijing.

## Major commitment

Mazars, founded in France, has committed €20,000 (156,778 yuan) to fund the planting of 5,000 trees, which will help replenish 13,333 square metres of desert lands. The backing is part of a global carbon-compensation campaign advocated by Mazars in 2010. The vision came about after the company's 2010 annual general meeting, which encouraged attendees to minimise carbon emissions to combat global warming. Since then, Mazars offices around the world have undertaken various carbon-cutting programmes.

Labarre and Granjard became involved with the MTP in May last year after Mazars encouraged them to support a green project in China. Soon Granjard began researching China's most critical environmental issues

online. The pair then shortlisted two environmental projects – one was the MTP, the other involved planting trees to help restore the natural habitat of pandas. The management picked the MTP.

'It's not just about trees and improving the quality of the air, but actually creating a much more fertile land for farmers to live off,' says Mazars board member Ken Morrison, who also founded Mazars in Hong Kong.

## Footprint calculation

Deciding to become involved with the MTP led to a new way of life for the Mazars team. To discover the carbon footprint of the firm's four China offices (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Hong Kong), Granjard turned himself into a 'carbon auditor'.

## \* MAKING A DIFFERENCE


**Mazars' audit associate Maxine Shen was always passionate about saving the environment, but has never had the chance. So when she heard about the Million Tree Project (MTP), she did not think twice about signing up. But when she stepped into the planting site, she was taken aback. 'It was a shock to learn the desert we were walking on was green farmland just a few short years before. The desert had taken over completely,' says Shen, one of three Hong Kong staff on the MTP trip.**

The team saw first hand the effects of global warming – witnessing the life of deprived farmers, and felt the sweltering heat in the area. Another member of the Hong Kong team on the trip, Richard Cheng, a senior in the forensic department, said: 'Local children told us that there were lakes and rivers, but now they are empty as the weather is getting hotter,' Cheng says.

To help out, the three worked hard to plant trees. 'I was a digger. It was pretty hard work. I used a simple shovel to dig the hole, and we had to work fast,' Cheng adds.

The planting trip has changed the trio. Cheng told his friends about what he saw in Inner Mongolia to help them see the impact of global warming, and has encouraged them to join the MTP.

Shen learned that people could make a difference. 'We planted 400 trees in one day to stop the advance of the desert. I learned that people could actually achieve a lot within a short time if they actually put their minds to it,' she says.



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*The Mazars team on site during their tree-planting mission in Mongolia. The 1.2 metre-high poplar seedlings were planted on the desert's borders to keep it from spreading*

He added up electricity, gas and taxi bills, and worked out the number of trips staff took to and from work and on assignment, and their typical transport modes. Then, using a carbon audit methodology, he estimated the level of CO<sub>2</sub> the activities of the company produced and worked out how many trees they needed to plant to offset the emissions.

Around the same time, Labarre was creating a campaign to increase staff awareness of environmental issues. He then sent out an online quiz to all China staff to select those who would go on the tree-planting trip. Eight people were chosen based on who had provided the most creative and practical ways to reduce paper, water and electricity consumption at the firm.

In April, Granjard and his team of flew to Kulun Qi for their three-day green mission. He was shocked to see the soil erosion when they arrived at the site. 'I saw areas which had collapsed into small canyons overnight. People said the canyons were not there a few years ago. It made me wonder what was going to happen in this place in the future,' he says.

### One day, 400 seedlings

After receiving basic tree-planting training, the team joined around 30 volunteers and planted 400 poplar seedlings on their first day. Poplar trees are fast growing, strong and effective at sequestering carbon.

But planting in the desert is not easy. 'Replanting is a very traumatic experience for trees,' Granjard says, adding that spring planting works best. 'If you plant the tree seedlings in summer, it only gives them a couple of months before winter comes. The more time you give the seedlings to find roots in the soil, the higher the chance that they will survive the winter.'

The planting crew followed instructions carefully, such as keeping the plants moist at all times as the sandy soil dries out quickly.

'First there was a digger which dug the hole, which had to be about 1 metre square and 1 metre deep. The next person placed the tree into the hole. Next, another person added some



*The Mazars team also taught local children how to better care for their environment*

moist soil, filling the hole by about 50%. Someone added water. Then more soil was added to fill the hole and finally more water,' he says.

They planted the 1.2 metre-high seedlings on the desert's borders that were being degraded to keep the desert from spreading and to protect the neighbouring towns and cities like a wind barrier. They also left a gap of 5 metres between rows of trees to create farmland.

'The 5-metre distance can be used by farmers to grow certain crops if they are given enough water. The trees will also bring the soil back together. This is the most amazing thing about nature,' he says, adding that the crops will be shielded by trees on two sides from harsh winter winds.

### Pruning and teaching

On the second day, the crew went to see trees planted four years ago and cut new branches from trunk base to help them grow higher. On their final day, the Mazars team gave classes to children to raise their awareness of conservation and sustainability and

taught them ways to protect their own environment.

The team will be able to watch how their trees grow via Google Earth and a forestry manager and local farmers will help monitor the soil and maintain the trees for 10 years.

The project has helped Granjard and others at Mazars develop a passion for environmental protection.

'Accountants have something to bring to sustainable development. We're good with numbers, we know how to account for things like CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. We really hope that we can contribute to protecting the environment,' Granjard says.

Meanwhile, Morrison is happy that the project has built greater depth of relationship among staff and community. He says that people have a responsibility to save the environment.

'In the longer term, we cannot afford not to be involved in environmental issues as people, because we have a duty and a responsibility to create a better environment for the future.'

**Sherry Lee, journalist**