

Have you been to Chennai's Tholkappia Poonga? Meet the ecologist behind it

Australian ecologist Joss Brooks, the man behind some of the city's famed restorative projects like Adyar's Tholkappia Poonga, elaborates on the importance of sustainable green pockets in a city like Chennai

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A view inside Tholkappia Poonga | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement

A welcome oasis of green, far removed from the metropolis' daily hustle, in the happy company of pelicans and mangroves: This is how Chennai would describe Adyar's own Tholkappiya Poonga; as the much-needed pocket of calm that reminds the city and its people of "where they came from." This is precisely what ecologist Joss Brooks, the man behind the important ecological site, envisioned for the 60-acre stretch of Adyar creek, which was once a dumpyard for construction debris, hotspot of miscreant activities and home to a biryani shop. A rediscovery of this urban wetland by Chennai's urban youth is now underway despite its existence since 2008.



Local community (friends of Adyar Poonga) at work | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement

Joss, with decades of experience in mammoth restoration projects like that of Pitchandikulam forest, Siruseri twin lakes and Nandikuppam, brought in a new lexicon of gardening to Tamil Nadu. Tholkappia Poonga, armed with an elaborate master plan, is perhaps a notable manifestation of his rigour for greening the State. "I came to India [from Tasmania, Australia] 70 years ago, as a six-year-old boy. I came to Madras 64 years ago, and haven't left since," he says at a panel discussion on Greening Madras, in the company of Supriya Sahu, Additional Chief Secretary to Departments of Environment, Climate Change and Forests at Anna University.

"Never forget that this is a city of lakes," Joss says. "It was a transformation game. All the best ecologists of Tamil Nadu were involved in this project," he says of the *poonga*. Sixty-five thousand tonnes of building rubble were

removed. Two hundred thousand seedlings of 172 indigenous plants were planted, which had all come from Auroville. "When you see a space like this, you start using your imagination. Your imagination is backed by information and helps you read the landscape," he says, adding that his work on a similar estuarine system for the past five decades only aided this process.



Ecologist Joss Brooks | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement

Having learned in "the school of common sense" with no formal education, Joss says that research, training and teaching were very much what the *poonga* was created for. Additionally, an organic cafe, farmers' market and ways to generate revenue as a community-led ecological park were all part of the business plan. As the Government changed hands, a lot of these plans did not come to fruition. The masterplan envisioned the space to be an environment educational park that centers around community engagement from schools, colleges and other institutions.



The site before 2008 | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement

As the spotlight trains once again on the park, he says, "There is a conversation now, among visitors who are beginning to understand what the park was created for originally."

Joss believes that this is that time in history which vehemently demands living with Nature to be the norm. "The future of our species will depend on our relationship with the natural world so don't close it off. And here, in the middle of the city, we have had a chance to create something beautiful in a clever, controlled way," says Joss. "The pelicans seem to love it!"

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