

GREEN KASHMIR
FIELD TRIP REPORT PART ONE
September 2016
By Amber Badyari: President of Green Kashmir

Introduction

The organisation Green Kashmir came about after many years of longing to find creative ways to discover non-political solutions to the problems that modern-day Kashmir faces. After seventy years of confusion, loss of livelihoods, tragic loss of lives on all sides, and the accompanying degradation of the environment due to the on-going conflict, during which time India and Pakistan have fought over who has the right to this land, the realization became clear to us, after attending the International Permaculture Convergence in the UK in 2015, that perhaps Permaculture could shine a new light onto old problems. After completing our Permaculture Design Course, we strongly felt that by introducing Permaculture into the Kashmir Valley, that we could implement the principles of Permaculture as the new torch bearer for hope and creative solutions to age-old and unresolved problems in the region. If the issue is the fight over to whom the land belongs then let's start the healing from the land itself, and the involvement of the people with the land. At the heart of our concern would be earth care, people care and fair share. With this vision of a peaceful, non-political solution to the Kashmir dilemma, which is the result of many years of observation, reflection, and consideration, we set out to establish the NGO Green Kashmir. This report is a record in words and images of how our first field trip to Kashmir to raise awareness about Permaculture and its peaceful principles was carried out.



The UK branch of delegates for Green Kashmir embarks on the initial stage of its journey leaving London Heathrow airport on Monday 19th September 2016. Each member has generously self-funded their air tickets, and accommodation in Delhi, as well as the kind donation of their time, energy, skills and expertise for the project. For all this abundance, Green Kashmir would like to say a BIG THANK YOU to its UK delegates.



After a long overnight flight from London to Delhi the team arrived on Tuesday 20th September to an unusually hot city for the time of the year.



On Wednesday 21st September after one night's stay in Karol Bagh in Delhi where the heat and the mosquitoes took their toll we headed off to the domestic airport for our flight onwards and upwards to Srinagar, the summer capital of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Here we are on the hot tarmac just before boarding our flight.



On Thursday 22nd September, we finally had our first full day in Kashmir, after three days of travelling. It was the start of a whirlwind field trip carried out against the odds during a three-month long curfew that had been in place in the valley since early summer.

As well as a curfew, which was an attempt to curb the civil unrest that had been taking place, with the people of Kashmir taking to the streets to protest about the ongoing situation, there was also a general strike. All the banks, shops, meeting places, and public transport were closed or not running.

Upon our arrival at the airport in Srinagar on 21st September, it was difficult to find a taxi driver who was willing to drive us to our destination across the city as he was fearful of breaking the curfew and the general strike. We were informed however that our e-tickets for the air flight would act as curfew passes and allow us, once shown to the military and the police, to cross the city safely.

On our first full day, we went to visit the waterside fruit and vegetable vendors, or market gardeners as we might call them, who live by the side of Dal Lake, and who had for generations lived, and grown food, on their own land.



As part of our research we wanted to interview the families who grew and sold this fruit and veg locally and find out what their motivation and rationale was behind it. In spite of the fact that the Kashmir Valley is a fertile, alluvial site with rich soil that produces an abundant crop, we had noticed that much of the fresh vegetables and fruit comes up by road from the main arterial national highway from Jammu, bringing much produce from the Punjab, the bread basket of India. This produce arrives in lorries that belch out diesel fuel pollution throughout the entire length of their journey, especially on the high gradient slopes as they begin their climb into Kashmir from the lower lands of Jammu. We wondered why the people of Kashmir, with such a fertile land, were not more self-sufficient in growing their own produce? We were told that the trouble in the region has disenfranchised so many people from their land, and the process of living with and caring for the land. This is why the encouragement and support of these people, and what they are continuing to strive to do in adverse circumstances, is a key area for Green Kashmir to support.



We had the joy and the delight of meeting with two brothers, both very different in nature, one very poetic and lyrical, the other very practical and engaged with the land and growing. Each brother told us how the conflict in the region was impacting on them and their friends, and how many young men in their peer group were suffering from anxiety and stress related health disorders, diseases like heart conditions and sleep and digestive disorders, as well as depression and mental health concerns. These problems were affecting a generation of young men who have seen the loss of lives and livelihoods, as well as the degradation of the natural environment, and who have been left with a feeling of hopelessness.



Merief, the brother who is very involved with the land and growing, who has also studied at the Kashmir University, told us how they grow organically, and that they have campaigned against the introduction of GMO crops. They are preserving the traditional ways of market gardening, as well as the traditional ways of preserving foods, like drying red chillies in the autumn sun, and drying aubergines and pumpkins for use in the winter when there will be a shortage, and the dried vegetables can be reconstituted by rehydration. They also clean and prepare their own rice, and practice pickling vegetables to keep as preserves for the long winter months.



Merief told us that they have guests from all over the world who come for home stays, who in return for help on the land, are offered food and accommodation. Merief also informed us that if the three-month long curfew that was taking place in the valley had taken place in any other state in India that the inhabitants of that state would most probably have died of hunger. He pointed out that the people of Kashmir were still very resourceful and by the tradition of a few families who still grew fruit and vegetables locally that the people of the valley had been fed and protected from starvation. This honouring of the old ways is a real accolade to what is valuable and enduring and acts in perfect harmony with the principles of Permaculture.



We were delighted to be able to invite the two brothers to attend the forthcoming two-day introduction to Permaculture that Green Kashmir would be hosting during the visit by the UK delegation to the valley. I am glad to report that both brothers were happy to accept our invitation. The discussion was sealed with the hospitable offering of a tray of Kashmiri saffron tea for all of the guests.



On the afternoon of Thursday 22nd September, we travelled across the city to SMHS hospital to meet with Dr Bashir, the Chairman of the humanitarian NGO called Athrout, which translates as 'helping hand'. We had been made aware of the work of Athrout before travelling to Kashmir and felt inspired to arrange a meeting with Dr Bashir to find out more about what they do and why. Athrout was set up and funded by local Kashmiri people who felt that they wanted to, and needed to do something to help their fellow citizens who were suffering and struggling during the conflict in the region. In the grounds of the hospital the NGO Athrout had set up a stand, alongside other NGO groups, offering water and tea without charge to the family and friends of patients who had come as visitors to the hospital to care for their relatives from far and wide across the city and beyond. Athrout was also financing medicines, food parcels, transport by ambulance to and from the hospital, as well as arranging for volunteers to get involved. All this was funded by donations from local people. We could see that Dr Bashir is a very spiritual man who was expressing his spiritual practice via practical means by passionately helping those in great need. Whilst at the SMHS hospital Dr Bashir took the delegation to visit a hospital ward where there were patients who were being supported by Athrout. Afterwards he took us to his office and the head-quarters of Athrout, in the down town area of Srinagar.



The curfew was in strict enforcement in this part of town and the soldiers had barricaded the route, so we were obliged to travel in one of Athrout's own vehicles, and it was only because of Dr Bashir's good reputation for the humanitarian work that he and his colleagues carry out that we were allowed to pass and to continue on our way. At the head-quarters we saw how the food parcels were constructed, mainly of flour, rice, sugar, oil, spices, powdered milk, etc. and we mentioned to Dr Bashir that it would be good if some fresh produce was also available to donate, as fresh food is very good for convalescence, with its high nutrient and vitamin content. We suggested that this could become available by community growing projects. He talked about the direct and indirect help that Athrout offers, and that perhaps a food growing project could be part of an indirect form of help, whereas he sees the direct help as a response to urgent and emergency needs. It was clear that due to the urgency of the situation, the priority was being given to availing patients and their visitors of drinks, medicines, and transport. This organisation is well run and achieving good results, and we concluded that the main way to support or help them at present would be by funding and donations. As we do not currently have access to funding the delegation was moved to make a donation towards the very valuable work being carried out.

Dr Bashir was very clear about the fact that the NGO is humanitarian in its ethic and that means not only helping the Kashmiri people in need of help but also offering help to the soldiers and the police should they be in a position to need it. This attitude has contributed to the widespread respect that the organisation has achieved.



This approach and the work that Athrout do is also a demonstration of people care, a valuable principle held dearly by those who practice permaculture. The aspiration of Green Kashmir is that by introducing permaculture into the situation of conflict in Kashmir, that non-political solutions to the current dilemma being faced in the region can be alleviated by a return to peaceful means. Such as creating community, and a dialogue that uses creative solutions like community food growing projects, like environmental regeneration, by creating right livelihood opportunities, and eco builds that people will re-engage with the land, and that a sense of purpose, identity and belonging will bring healing and sustainable progress and regeneration.



The Green Kashmir Delegation with Dr Bashir and his colleague at Athrout Head Quarters downtown Srinagar

On Friday 23rd September, we adapted to the needs of the local situation and held a Green Kashmir meeting for members in the meeting room of the residence where we were staying.

Fridays have tended to be the day where the curfew and the strike have been at their strictest, as Friday is the Muslim holy day, and the day of prayer at the Mosque where the people gather in large numbers.

In times of unrest large gatherings of people, even when for peaceful, religious and cultural reasons, can lead to civil unrest, if there is mismanagement of the situation. At the time of our visit the authorities were taking strict measures to contain any civil unrest, therefore any movement around the city was inherently dangerous, hence we decided as a precaution to hold a meeting in our residence, followed by a training session.



After the Green Kashmir meeting, where members from the UK got a chance to get up to date with members from Kashmir, and to discuss any agendas, the rest of the afternoon was led by Jenny Lynn, psychologist, author and international public speaker and workshop leader. Jenny led a workshop in active listening skills, which was very well received by the group. We chose active listening skills as the topic for the training because we felt, from our observations, that when people are hurt, or angry, or confused, that they do not listen properly to each other, and that communication and understanding on a deep level of human sharing are then hindered from taking place. This was evident from the repeated break down of talks at a political and diplomatic level where different factions representing different aspects of the complex dynamic in the region, from central government, to state government, to local leaders, to political leaders from Azad Kashmir, and from Pakistan, have all been unable, so far, to come to a peaceful, and a harmonious solution for Kashmir. Active listening, and non-violent compassionate communication, supported by skilful mediation, could be one of the keys to the future success of talks in order to bring about a peaceful resolution.

On Saturday 24th September, we set off to stay on a houseboat on Dal Lake for two days in order to carry out a survey of the lake, accompanied by Victoria Woods, permaculture tutor from the UK, and scientist. On the way to Nehru Place Ghat we were obliged to take a detour as there was unrest on our planned route; stone pelting by local youths in protest at their frustration at the ongoing conflict was responded to with tear gas by the J&K police. We were struck once more by the dangerous nature of the city but something good came out of our detour from a permaculture point of view: we saw the rice harvest taking place in the local fields where groups of local people were threshing the wheat sheaths over old oil drums. No machinery was being used and there was an evident sense of community amongst the workers.



Eventually we arrived at Nehru Ghat and took a shikara across the lake to the houseboat where we would be staying for two days. The houseboats are an historical legacy from the days when the British Raj sought refuge in Kashmir from the heat of the Indian plains but were not permitted to build houses on the land, due to an ancient law that is still in place today, article 370, which states that non-Kashmiris are not allowed to buy land. The creation of the houseboat came about as a solution to this problem by the British who then built homes on the water instead.



The heritage of the houseboats has attracted people to Kashmir from all over the world who are looking for a piece of heaven on earth. This heritage has given a massive boost to the tourism industry, and has enriched generations of Kashmiri families but is now in danger of dying out, due to the high levels of pollution in the lake, and due to the chronic on-going conflict in the region, that has led to environmental degradation, and loss of livelihood.

Some scientists have predicted that Dal lake has less than 50 years before the lake will silt-up, and the communities of people who currently live on the lake will no longer be residents of a world-famous lake, that is not only a beautiful and healing place to visit but also a valuable ecosystem that supports local people and local plant and wildlife. For this critical reason, Green Kashmir decided that it was imperative to carry out a survey and to record our observations and findings. It was essential to interview local people on their thoughts, feelings and experiences on this subject. Green Kashmir would like to support the residents of Dal Lake so that the lake, and the houseboats thereon can be registered as a World Heritage site, and for funding, and preservation, and regeneration plans to be put in place. Like Avalon, once Dal Lake has disappeared into the mists of time there will be no going back.



When you get to know the lake, there are a few immediate concerns that strike the concerned environmentalist, namely that untreated sewage from the Houseboats is deposited directly into the lake, that treated sewage from the sewage plants that surround the shore of the lake goes into the lake, and that according to local concerns Dal Lake is known as the cesspool for the entire sewage works of the whole city. I have known Dal Lake since 2001 and have witnessed a lot of changes with my own eyes, but the older generation of great grand parents told us that the water was so clean that you could drink it. Today even swimming in the lake carries a health risk from a variety of diseases. Alongside the sewage, we noticed during our survey that waste water (grey water) from houses on the banks of the lake, and on the lake itself, had overflow pipes where the waste water flows directly into the lake water.



In the grandmothers', and great grand mothers' time the human waste from the houseboats was collected from each houseboat, and disposed of on the land like humanure, after a natural composting process had taken place. There is evidence to suggest that a return to this traditional way of preserving the cleanliness of the lake by organized sewage waste collection could be a way forward. During our discussion with the houseboat owners, Mr Bashir in particular, who showed us the 2000 report The Management Plan of Dal Lake, compiled in conjunction with the Department of Lakes and Waterways, pointed out that it was after the introduction and installation of modern toilets in the houseboats in 1953, as a fashionable asset to attract western tourists to stay on the houseboats, that the sewage was then dumped straight from the latrine into the water from an outlet in the underbody of the boat.



The problem with this exponential quantity of human sewage, both treated and untreated, that finds its way into the lake is that the lake water becomes too rich in nitrogen and pond weed and water lilies then proliferate at unnatural rates until the water is overtaken by these plants, choked even by these plants, as the surface of the water disappears under the weight and the growth of the vegetation. Victoria pointed out that as this continues the lake will turn back into land. This excessive amount of nitrogen-rich accelerated plant growth also means that the water has become de-oxygenated which results in the fish dying out.



The lake is home to many livelihoods, some timeless and traditional, some new. Houseboat owners and shikara men make a living from the tourists who come to visit Dal Lake from India and from around the world, though there is a lot less footfall from foreign tourists nowadays as many outsiders fear to enter Kashmir due to the ongoing conflict.



Traditionally the lake has been home to vegetable growers who have parcels of land on the lake known as floating vegetable gardens, and plots of land on the banks near the lake. At dawn the vegetable growers gather on the lake to sell their produce to vegetable sellers from the city. It is a magical spectacle to behold this little known way of life that is still practised in the back waters of Dal Lake.



The lake is also home to traditional fishermen, who can be seen out on the lake casting their nets. We believe the fish are from the carp family. In the local markets, and on some of the bridges that cross over the river Jhelum the fishermen's wives can be seen selling their day's catch. Sadly, many of the citizens of Srinagar will no longer buy this fish for human consumption as they know how polluted the lake is with human sewage.



The lake is also home to many businesses, from little shops on stilts, to *dungas* that ply their trade of selling apples, flowers, ice cream, or dress material, to floating chemists and lakeside woodyards.





We observed also that there appears to be an issue with household waste collection and disposal on the lake.

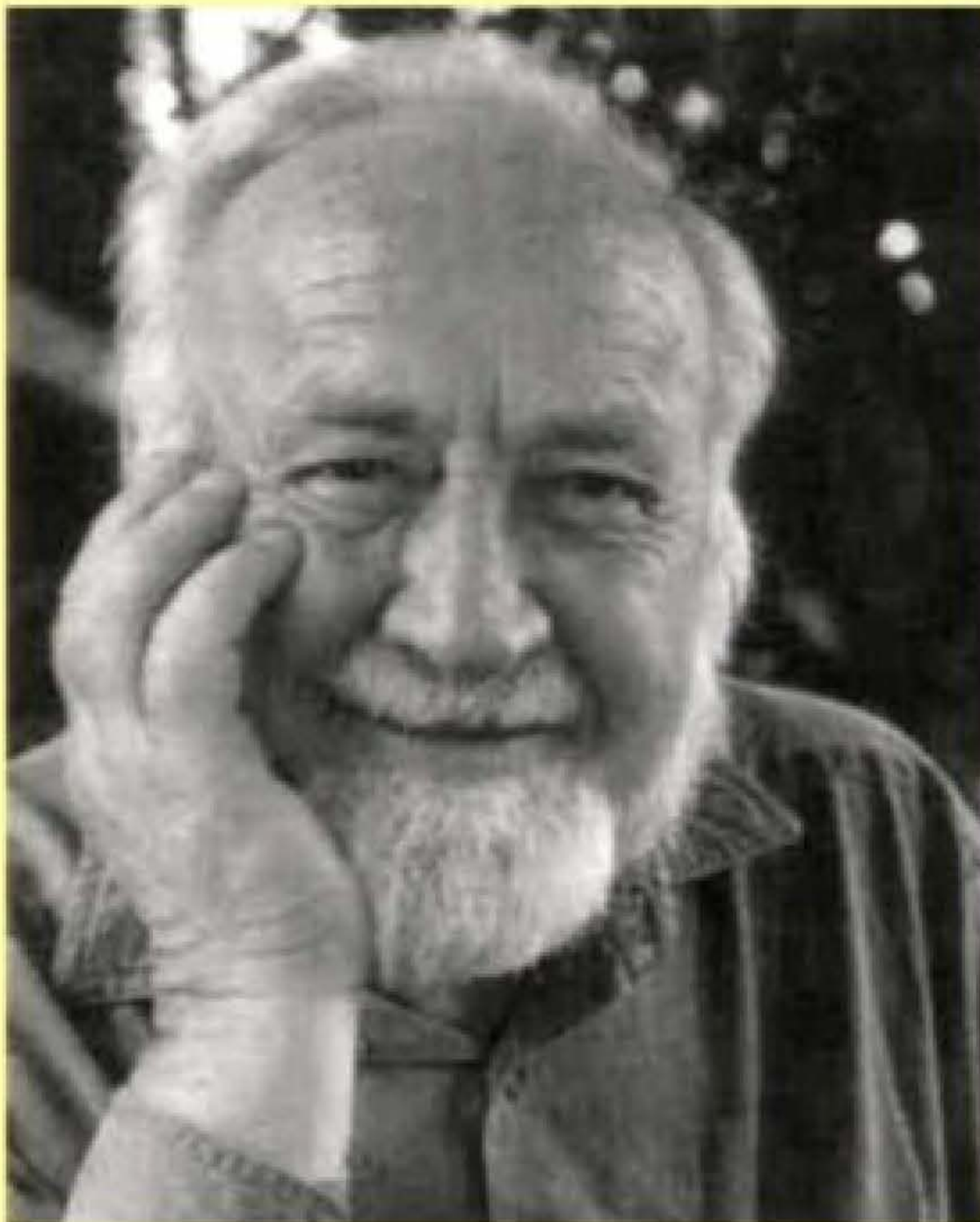
We were unable to travel into the heart of the old town area where the lack of household waste disposal facilities is demonstrated by the piles of rubbish laying in side streets that is then tipped into the lake but we were able to record some less striking, yet still informative images of waste.



Alongside images of environmental degradation there still exists moments of staggering beauty to remind us of the majesty and unforgettable beauty that Kashmir has to offer, the hapless visitor can then dream of how Kashmir once was; a place of mystery, of Sufis and Saints, of mystics and poets who wrote of this extraordinary place: Moghul Emperors from the distant past who used to travel for six months of the year by elephant to arrive in the valley of Kashmir, are amongst those who were bewitched by the magic of this place. A legendary poet who came to Kashmir is well known for writing: 'If there is a paradise on earth; it is here, it is here, it is here.



On this day, 24th September 2016, Bill Mollison, the co-founder, also known as the father of permaculture, passed away in Hobart, Tasmania, Australia aged 88. In 1981 he won the Right Livelihood Award, also known as The Alternative Nobel Prize. The Green Kashmir team would like to pay their respects to his memory and to give thanks for his life's work on permaculture which led to the birth of a global movement, the principles and ethics of which we are introducing into Kashmir on this very field trip.



“Permaculture is a philosophy of working with, rather than against nature; of protracted & thoughtful observation rather than protracted & thoughtless action; of looking at systems in all their functions rather than asking only one yield of them & of allowing systems to demonstrate their own evolutions.”

Bill Mollison

On Sunday 25th September, we got up at 5am in order to go and see the floating vegetable market, where locally produced vegetables from the lake are sold to local vegetable vendors who sell to the people of the city. All of the buying and selling takes place afloat in the back waters of Dal Lake. On the morning we visited the market, we saw on sale fresh Kohl Rabi (local name '*mundi*'), White Radish ('*mooli*'), Kashmiri *Haak*, Kashmiri green pumpkins ('*aal*'), onions, potatoes, lotus roots, cabbages, turnips, cauliflowers, etc. demonstrating the lush abundance of the vegetables that can be grown locally on the lake.





We had the impression of witnessing a living heritage and a traditional, time-honoured way of life that is at risk of dying out. As the daylight increased and the trading subsided we paddled away back to the houseboat in the shikara. As we made our return we were approached by a family of flower sellers: Mr Marvellous and Mr Wonderful, father and sons, who sell flowers grown on the lake to houseboat owners, and to the visitors and tourists who stay with them.

They had a catalogue of seeds and bulbs that could also be purchased. They told us that due to the curfew and ongoing conflict this year many tourists had cancelled their trips to stay on Dal Lake and that their business had suffered greatly as a consequence. I purchased some wild tulip and some bourgainvillea bulbs, and a beautiful bunch of Cosmos flowers.



In the afternoon, we had a meeting with Athar Parvaiz, an environmental journalist based in Srinagar who has published a large body of relevant and important work including articles on the sewage content of the lake, and the building of the dam for hydro-electric power. After lunch, we were joined by Mr Bashir Guroo, a local houseboat owner, and Mr Amin Pala and his son, the owner of the houseboat where we were staying. A discussion took place between those present, regarding the condition of Dal Lake, the history of how the lake got to where it is today, and hopes for the future. Mr Bashir Guroo presented us with a report named The Dal Lake Management Plan 2000. Mr Bashir concluded that the problems with the pollution in the lake started when the western style toilet was introduced onto the houseboats and human waste was dumped directly into the lake instead of being collected and disposed of. He also mentioned the closing of a major canal *Nalimaer* that took water to and from the lake that was closed and turned into a road.



In the evening, we were joined by local lawyer Tahir Majid, who talked to us about the history of Kashmir, and the involvement of the British, and the concepts of culpability and atonement, of rule of law and sovereign law. We were later joined by the President of the Farmers' Union for the lake who expressed his clear concerns as to how the problem with the lake commenced: all the trees around the lake were cut down after a fake theory had deemed them dangerous for the wellbeing of the lake, all of the small boats called '*dungas*', that were used to collect pond weed, and which aerated the water with the natural action of paddling were burnt, and when the floating islands were removed.



We also spoke with some local women during the day on the lake who were out collecting water lily leaves. When we spoke with them they confirmed that green foliage was excellent fodder for their cows, and that from the nutrient rich leaves the cows produced delicious sweet milk that they gave to their families, and that they also sold any surplus milk from this yield. They said that they collected the foliage between 7am and 3pm and that in that time they could collect two boat loads full.



Nowadays there is machinery on the lake that dredges the pond weed and deposits it on the roadside to be taken away in lorries and disposed of on the land. Athar Parvaiz, the environmental journalist, believes that this nitrogen rich plant source is a wonderful form of fertilizer for the land and we agree. The people we spoke to felt that there were not enough dredgers to make any inroads into the rapidity with which the pond weed is taking over the surface of the water.



Victoria Woods, UK permaculture tutor, highlighted the fact that unless the plants, and especially the lilies are removed from the root, they will continue to flourish and spread in the nitrogen rich waters. From a permaculture perspective, Green Kashmir holds the view that the existence of the women who gather this source of fodder from the lake to feed to their cattle, to nourish their cows and to enrich their milk, providing a vitamin and protein rich food source via conversion, is a positive demonstration of traditional methods that benefit the lake. By reducing the excess plant life that is suffocating the lake through proliferation and de-oxygenation, whilst aerating the lake by natural paddling instead of the use of machinery, which also pollutes with diesel usage, these women benefit personally, at the same time as the environment benefits, from their own labour.

This concludes the end of the first week of the permaculture field trip to Srinagar in Kashmir in September 2016, and the end of Part One of this report. The second week of this field trip will be continued in Part Two. Please continue to read to find out about how history was made in Kashmir when the first introduction to permaculture course was held in the valley where over 20 students who attended and successfully completed this ground breaking course were awarded certificates in permaculture.