Pitchandikulam Forest is a community based in the green belt of Auroville in coastal Tamil Nadu, South India, focused on restoration ecology where you can find:

» a seventy-acre forest
» our social outreach and external consultancy offices
» a bio-resource education centre
» classrooms and meeting rooms
» an art studio
» a seedling nursery and display seed room
» a medicinal plant garden
» a museum of rural Tamil life
» volunteer accommodation and communal kitchen
» private housing for the Pitchandikulam community
Another year, another chink or brick in the wall. Light has a way of filtering through any way.

So little rain, one can already feel the anxiousness in the forest as the dry months approach.

In spite of the late news, one rejoices at meaningful acts everywhere. Much time is spent on forest paths invoking a rebirth of wonder, listening carefully to the future when the children of Israel and Palestine will sing to each other and barriers will disappear in the musical light of a new dawn.

Monkeys in the rafters and snakes in the bathroom are seen as healthy signs.

Time tends to cartwheel as one listens to midday explaining itself to midnight.

One walks the gardens we have created with gratitude and a certain foreboding, moving amongst the memory points of this 50 year journey. The orchid here, the lichen there, the points of remembered particularity, the guides, the causes hidden under stones. One stops and in stillness the ask is for time to just idle away some days, distanced from the vast noise of the creative urge.

Lash the sails, the rigging is singing with the approaching storm.
Adyar Poonga Education

During the years 2006/07/08 when the Adyar Poonga was being created in Chennai, Pitchandikulam had developed a vibrant education program involving 20 schools in the immediate vicinity of the Eco-park. After the park was opened the priority moved towards nurturing the restoration processes of the creek and estuary and the human footfall was kept to a minimum.

In February 2018, with the support of the Goethe Institute and Chennai Rivers Restoration Trust, Pitchandikulam formed a team of dedicated Environment Educators in Adyar Poonga Eco-park to bring back the vision of exposing children to the natural environment around them and instill a sense of curiosity and passion regarding the state of the planet. They are currently working regularly with children from the age of 11-13 years old in 8 schools following various curriculums, from Montessori to low-income government schools to explore a variety of environment-related topics through holistic, hands-on, experience-based learning. They also provide creatively designed activity-based manuals for teachers to incorporate into the curriculum.

Upon receiving requests from the schools, they have also created a program for young children between 6-9 years of age—Young Explorers, to inculcate a sense of comfort with nature many urban children may lack in their lives. For instance, it is difficult to show live snakes (it is illegal to catch them). So, we obtained shed skins from the Madras Snake Park, put them throughout the Poonga and the children learned to find them and identify the species.

So far, they have worked with more than 1,600 children and have observed a growing curiosity amongst them, as well as a sharpening in observation and deduction skills and an increased level of compassion and comfort with the fellow inhabitants of this planet (insects and critters to be specific). There is also an increase in curiosity amongst children regarding the subjects of botany and zoology.

They are currently preparing to launch a 3-year program for children of 11-13 years of age, where participants shall be encouraged to interact with their surroundings; meet visionaries and implementers of urban environmental solutions. They will hopefully plan and execute their own projects with support from the environment educators and the school.

The program we developed 10 years ago of urban rural school children exchange is also being reactivated with vigor. Nadukuppam school children regularly visit the Poonga and in the near future will visit our lake restoration project at Siruseri in the outskirts of Chennai. Children from Chennai schools and fishing hamlets are again visiting Pitchandikulam and Nadukuppam.

The idea is to expand the circle of perception amongst children for them to be aware of the Place they live in and to see the price at which their current lifestyle is available to them.
Meeting a super-granny

The Nadukuppam Education Program supported by QSA and the Australian Government, through an ANCP project headed by Lourdes, is going well.

Striving to create new ways for children to engage with their surroundings and create a sense of reverence in their hearts about their traditions and land, 8 children of the 8th grade at Nadukuppam school interviewed a 79-year-old superwoman, a granny from their village, named Rajamal.

Born in the year 1939, she arrived at Nadukuppam, as a 12-year-old bride, came of age at 13 and had the first of her 4 children at age 14. She works tirelessly, cultivating her land that expanded from one acre to 5 acres over time, works as a daily wage laborer and somehow finds time to sell cattle milk and soft grass brooms that she makes herself in the village market.

Having lived her life witnessing a huge amount of changes, this robust, spry superwoman has a lot of knowledge and wisdom to share. When the children inquired about her staple diet, they were surprised to learn that the rice they now ate daily was not traditionally cultivated in their village and was in fact a rare delicacy reserved for the rich. Organically cultivated millets such as finger millet (Ragi) and barnyard millet (Kuthiravali in Tamil) were the commonly consumed grains along with germinated palm tree seeds, palm jaggery, foraged greens, crabs, fish and toddy (delicious, slightly fermented sap from the palm tree).

The dependency on the market for food was very low, and during periods of hardship, receiving help from the village people or going to bed on an empty stomach wasn’t unknown to her either. She also spoke about there being two ponds in the village from where everyone accessed water for all uses and it surprised the kids a bit as they had grown up considering pond water to be contaminated and unsafe for consumption.

Based on what she described, it was also clear that a deep spirit of community and a graceful, interdependence amongst the village folk existed. She described how several children in a large joint family were raised together and often taken care of by the whole community. There were no qualms around even breastfeeding someone else's infant baby! These close-knit ties provided the village with a much-needed sense of warmth and harmony.

Upon being asked about the access to health care and the transportation available in those days. The granny simply explained that the closest hospital accessible in those days was the one in Pondicherry and the only way to get there (due to the lack of motor vehicles and broad, tar/cement roads) was by walking 40 km or by bullock cart. This meant that traditional, herbal medicines were the norm and the worst disease people could contract was Chickenpox!

Finally, a question, that couldn't go unasked in the age of television and smart phones was what were the forms of entertainment back in the old days?

At which point the granny chuckled as she regaled stories of the ancient cinema theatre one could frequent for evening shows of black and white films. The community gatherings in the evenings were also a source of engagement that was precious. Then, when the first
black and white television came to the village in the late ’80s, the norm of paying 50 paise every Sunday evening to watch shows was formed. It is also worth noting that the need for constant entertainment was not a requirement in those times and that the availability of electricity, electronic gadgets along with the internet have vastly changed the pace and content of the present-day life.

As she spoke of the changes that have occurred over time in her village, she noted that despite having lived relatively “primitive” lives, she and her contemporaries are healthier and do not ail from any of the “modern” diseases the proceeding generations seem to have. It also came to light how the government interventions, such as introduction of pesticides in the 1950s, banning of Palm Toddy and replacing it with hard liquor and introducing modern medication, appeared to have detrimental effects instead of positive ones. The number of alcoholics in the community has increased greatly and cropping up of new diseases such as diabetes and blood-pressure irregularities are now common.

As the children reflected on the interview, they realized that while they were being taught about pollution and sustainability, our lovely grandmother and the generation she belonged to had spent most of their lives living in harmony with their surroundings. The nuances of the situation were also not missed by their young minds as they realized the complexity they now had to navigate as modern technology progresses at a dizzying pace.

The children at Nadukuppam are now left with the question: what do we, as individuals and a community want to see happen in this village and in the world?

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**Pitchandikulam-Deepam Special needs school collaboration**

Since its creation, Pitchandikulam has been creating vibrant and inventive education programs for children of all ages. Now, 15 years after the creation of the Nadukuppam Environment Education Center, we are collaborating our efforts with Deepam School, a Kuilapalayam based education center for children with special needs, to create a field outreach center in Nadukuppam.

Started in the year 1992, in a playground under tamarind trees, where afternoon sessions three times a week of physiotherapy, play and handicrafts (with delicious snacks to boot!) were given to children suffering mainly from polio and mental challenges.

After the successful eradication of Polio over the years, the focus shifted to children/youth with autism, hearing/sight/speech impairments and other special needs and the afternoon classes evolved into a well-rounded, lively center.

Here individuals from 20 villages from in and around Auroville are provided everything from basic health care to occupational, speech and physiotherapy sessions to support their growth into vibrant individuals who are empowered to create the life they desire.

The organization, true to its name, has been spreading light, love, and joy through its work for 25 years now. Now, instead of bussing children all the way to Auroville from out far off villages there has been a decision to use the infrastructure Pitchandikulam has created and create a learning center there. Two young ladies from the Nadukuppam area have been trained at Deepam, over the last five months and the first classes will start at the Nadukuppam field center in late January.

The new school will be adjacent to the indigenous plant/tree nursery run by the women’s group.

website: www.deepam-auroville.in
In a 7-day residential workshop; Heal-arity, an introductory immersion training was facilitated by the founders of MeDi Clown Academy; Fif Fernandes and Hamish Boyd.

Our team member Lourdes found in the workshop, vital tools for fostering self-acceptance and deep, soulful, self-expression.

The main purpose was to take the participants on a journey within to discover their own unique clown persona (which are essentially one's authentic emotions that are often left unexplored and repressed). The workshop explained application of this work in health-care, education and corporate environments.

The participants were given the opportunity to embody their dreams, through the exploration of ritual, ceremony, theatre-exercises, puppetry, magic, non-verbal storytelling, play and music. After attending this workshop, Lourdes is driven to curate such experiences for the children in the schools we are working with.

“Our role is to share in a journey. It might be one of tears, it might be one of laughter, it might be one of pure play! A clown is to disrupt the silence, a clown is to disrupt the chaos! The role of the clown is to flip things up, because when we look at stuff in the moment then we don’t see the disease or the dis-ease, right? We see something else, and the clowns supports healing and the wholeness... I've worked with many, many people who have had cancer and passed away, but also many that have survived; and you never know but it's while they’re here, what can we do? We can bring hope, delight and share love-truly, really share love! Its so important they know that they are loved and that we feel their love as well.”

- Fif Fernandes

Many kids in our schools come from traumatic backgrounds. They don’t know how to deal with these experiences, however, with clowning they can find ways to spread love and make merry in difficult situations as well and reduce stress in their day to day lives.

“Besides that it can also help with boosting morale, coping with stage fright and anxiety.” Lourdes says.

There is now work underway to curate such experiences with the kids and teachers of Nadukuppam, Deepam school and the Rural health centres in Marakkanam and Murukeri.

website: www.mediclownacademy.org
People of Pitchandikulam: Parvathy

We here at Pitchandikulam, recently celebrated the achievement of our team member Parvathy Nagarajan, who won the national award for Sustainable Utilization of Biological Resources from the National Biodiversity Authority. It was given for exceptional work as a traditional healer and the training she has given to women that has resulted in the creation of a sustainable forest produce based enterprise.

Hailing from a family of healers, her biggest teachers have been her village and her father, who instilled the value of traditional healing methods and ignited the fire within her to work for women’s welfare. She joined the Pitchandikulam team 20 years ago and has since been working to create livelihoods for women and keeping the healing traditions of her village alive. She has started two enterprises, Amritha Herbal Medicine and Meera Herbal Foods, while supporting others such as Herbal Wellness Beauticians, Evergreen Spirulina and the Nadukuppam Nursery. She has established a shop in the nearby village, selling herbal products and hopes soon to also create a small café alongside, where freshly cooked traditional food is served. Much of Parvathy’s works have been supported over the last decade by QSA and the Australian Government.

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Water Retention Landscapes

With over 45 years of eco-restoration experience, Pitchandikulam has been consistently using landscaping to create beautiful and water retaining ecosystems.

Presently, a series of cascading lakes have been formed on a stretch of 35 acres of previously barren land at Nadukuppam Forest, where a botanical garden is being created. These lakes are situated in a graceful, synchronous manner across the land, in harmony with the topography of the place. They are connected by a series of channels that divert the water side-ways across the landscape to another lake once the previous lake’s capacity is reached. This not only provides irrigation water for new plantations and crops, but also recharges the underground aquifers.

There are currently 12 lakes at the site, more are underway!

Pitchandikulam considers water retention landscapes to be one of the most important ecological interventions to be done anywhere on the planet today.
Pitchandikulam continues to be deeply involved in the seemingly impossible task of trying to clean the polluted waterways of Chennai. Michael Shaw who now lives most of the time at Pitchandikulam with his wife Gail in the Findhorn House, brings a lifetime of engineering experience in resolving polluted water problems.

Pitchandikulam, with Michael and Galen of Biomatrix Water, Chennai Rivers Restoration Trust and the Adyar Poonga team are in the process of launching the project LiveBoat. Three research Biomatrix Floating Islands will be performance tested for treatment of polluted water in the Adyar River. Professional water quality testing equipment is being shipped from Scotland along with the Islands.

Biomatrix Floating Islands incorporate indigenous plants with roots and artificial dynamic media columns in the water, which promote the growth of beneficial biofilms that treat the water through the continuous process of breakdown of long-chain organic molecules. Bacterial processes also treat nitrogen and phosphorous and the result is the creation of a self-sufficient ecosystem that enhances aquatic life, and reduces the availability of resources for pathogens, algae, lemma and invasive weeds to proliferate.

In October 2018 Nadukuppam finally started a computer lab in the school which, till now, had a computer room with no computers! It was made possible by our friends and well-wishers, the 11th-grade students from S.D Somani International School in Mumbai. The school’s principal, Mr. Gardener has been bringing students with him for field visits to Nadukuppam school for a decade now. The students, with help and guidance from their teachers and the principal, fundraised 3.25 lakh rupees to provide the Nadukuppam school with 9, brand new computers.

Pitchandikulam IT professionals are now holding weekly classes for soft-ware and hard-ware at the school for over 100 children from 6th to 11th grades, to complement daily classes from the teachers. The problem is, there are often 6 kids using a single computer.

We are now hoping to raise funds for 10 more computers with the support of well-wishers make the classes more efficient.
Kangayam

The Senaathpathy Kangayam Cattle Revival Foundation (SKCRF) approached Pitchandikulam some months ago, to help develop additional environmental education aspects to their remarkable training center near to Erode and Tirupur. SKCRF educates people about the traditional knowledge and bio-cultural values of cattle rearing, along with reviving the dwindling population of the 2000-year-old cattle breed of Kangayam (Bos Indicus) native to the Kongu region of Tamil Nadu. The bulls of this breed are famous for their use in Jalikattu, an event held during the festival of Pongal, and the cows are known for their high nutrition milk.

The breed has been at a steady decline since the shift to using tractors for ploughing, along with lack of government support and introduction of foreign cattle breeds to dairy farmers.

Pitchandikulam team visited the center and looks forward to working with these dedicated and passionate people of SKCRF during 2019.

website: www.kangayambull.com

Garden of the Unexpected at Matrimandir

With an aspiration to find a new way of manifesting the gardens around the Matrimandir, an open event was announced in May 2018 to harvest ideas from the community, for the children's garden, or the Garden of the Unexpected. After many months of design work by 11 teams, an experts panel and a community assessment process chose the design created by Mona, Andreas, Joss and Greg.

Our team has now integrated the top 3 proposals to create the final implementation design of the garden.

Pitchandikulam feels honored to be part of this creative initiative and hopes that over the next 2 years of gardening at the very center of Auroville, that joy and gentle processes of community collaboration will manifest.

website: www.gou.auroville.org
Siruseri twin lakes/SIPCOT project

Four years ago, during the disastrous Chennai Floods, when 600 people were drowned, it became apparent that such calamities would recur if vital changes were not made. These events led Tata Consultancy Services to involve IIT-M to conduct a hydro-geological survey of the Siruseri watershed. The team, led by Dr. Indumathy Nambi and Dr. Balaji Narasimhan, came up with valuable recommendations to be implemented in 2 phases in the entire 30-sqkm of the watershed comprising of extensive lakes and forests interspersed with the high rises of expanding Chennai. One of the key recommendations was the creation of an Eco Park/Knowledge Center. That is where Pitchandikulam comes in.

With their goal set, Pitchandikulam team is now hard at work, restoring a 75 acre lake and designing a fourteen-acre landscape adjacent to the SIPCOT Industrial Park that integrates the needs of a diverse population demographic. The plan is to create an eco-friendly, multi-purpose, community-driven Eco-park/Knowledge Center to promote biodiversity restoration, environment and energy education, sustainable enterprises and organic food outlets. The park will be a place for artistic and cultural expression for the community in a landscape full of the indigenous coastal vegetation.

Executing such an environmental restoration project in a place that is now primarily an IT hub, is the sort of challenge that Pitchandikulam seems to like.

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Moving into the new year, we would like to thank all our friends and well-wishers for their support while we faced the challenges and the joys of 2018.

- Pitchandikulam Forest Team