Planting seeds of change: an interview with the founders of Treeapp

With Treeapp, you can plant a tree, for free, every day, across a number of global locations. A simple and innovative idea that has landed the three Treeapp founders - Jules, Godefroy, and Leo - in this year's Forbes 30 Under 30, the trio are now on a mission to democratise impact making.

The startup market is diverse in the products and services that it offers, but it is largely influenced by the same consumer motivations. Unhappy with antiquated legacy systems, young consumers want personalised services that are simple, enjoyable, and have a positive impact on the planet. _Treeapp_ ticks all three of those boxes. With Treeapp, individuals can plant a tree, for free, each day, in return for watching a 30-second advertisement for a sustainable brand.

Gamified and addictive, the platform unlocks new locations each time a specific number of trees have been planted. The app also functions as a personalised carbon off-setter, tracking the percentage of an individual's monthly and annual carbon emissions that have been absorbed with reference to the number of trees planted.

Speaking to the founders of Treeapp, Jules, Godefroy, and Leo, it was revealed that the mission behind the company was to "democratise impact making".

And though the story starts with tree planting, the future plan is to diversify the app's offering so that users can "fund more than just trees". The founders "want TreeApp to be the go-to app for impact making."

A meeting of minds

Jules, Godefroy, and Leo are young founders. They all studied for a masters in management from London Business School and found a shared interest in sustainability. "We got thinking," Jules says. "People want to make an impact, but not everyone has the money."

"We wanted to make something that's easy to use, that is fast, and that is for anyone. After some brainstorming, we came up with Treeapp."

The idea lead to a listing on this year's Forbes 30 under 30, listed in the European social impact category.

A simple idea

From the user's point of view, making a difference through Treeapp is extraordinarily simple.

"In a nutshell, the user opens the app and sees a map of the world," says Jules. "At the moment we have a presence across three continents – Asia, South America, and Africa. The user chooses where they want to plant a tree, watches a 30-second ad featuring a sustainable brand, and then the tree will be planted within 90-180 days, depending on the planting site and the planting seasons."

Ensuring a holistic approach to tree planting, the three founders say they maintain a "really close [relationship] with every planting site, to feel as if we are there even though we are thousands of miles away."

The process to become an affiliated Treeapp planting partner is not easy, either. To ensure that they only partner with sustainable and well governed planting teams, the founders consult a board of experts in tropical forestry who

have created a bespoke due diligence process that has to be met by applicants.

"Usually it will take 3-4 months for us to go through the whole due diligence process and approve new tree planting operations. I think to date we have spoken to 100-150 local organisations, NGOs, or Association of Farmers, yet we have only partnered with seven of them, as they're the only ones to have met our criteria."

Founded just prior to the beginning of the pandemic, Treeapp is at the beginning of their journey. But they're ensuring that they do things right.

"We're slowly scaling our activities, and want to eventually be available all across the world. But we don't want to do it too quickly to make sure that there is still a strong approach in every country."

And local communities are already seeing the benefit from tree planting operations.

"At one of our planting sites in Madagascar, a location that hadn't had fisheries for decades, thanks to the mangroves that we planted the fish came back and the local population could go back and fish again in these areas."

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Offsetting carbon consumption

Though an imperfect solution to the climate crisis, Treeapp helps individual users and organisations to offset their carbon consumption. The app takes the UK average carbon footprint, 10.5 tonnes, and then sets the amount of carbon absorbed by the number of trees planted against that benchmark.

Treeapp also offer a service for organisations who want to offset their carbon footprint via carbon credit projects and tree planting.

However, the founders are aware that tree planting alone is not enough to affect the change needed to avert climate catastrophe.

"There needs to be action coming from consumers, from companies and organisations, and from the Government. Consumers need to change the way they're buying things. Companies need to find new ways to produce their goods without cutting down trees. And governments need to put legislation and incentives in place for the other two parties to act."

> *"If all stakeholders come together and act, the action can be successful."*

Making a difference

For now, Treeapp is focused on planting as many trees as possible. And with an estimated 42 million trees cut down every day, reforestation is desperately needed.

And whilst the Treeapp team still has a long way to go until they hit their target of planting one million trees a day, they're confident that they will reach their goal by 2026.

"I think our best advocates have been our users; we've had massive organic growth. The network we are building will help us to reach our target of a million trees a day."

Treeapp is currently raising a new round of funding to be invested into hiring, scaling tree planting operations, and marketing. They also have their eyes on international expansion, with a particular focus on Europe.

Building an ecosystem

A global response to climate change's ecological threat must be united for it to be effective. Disparate tree planting organisations must work in tandem to offer a solution to mass deforestation.

Treeapp records their tree planting activities on restor.eco, an open-source platform developed by Google and ETH Zurich.

"It is based on academic research on deforestation, tropical forestry, and carbon offsetting," says Godefroy. "It is still in its early stages, but it is one of the best ways to show the impact of tree planting across the world. You can map your sites on the platform and then you can see the impact it is having through historical data on carbon absorption in the soil, water, and biodiversity levels."

"It is a nice way for tree planting organisations to come together and map out their activities."

Using restor.eco is further proof that Treeapp is committed to a holistic approach to tree planting, valuing the individuals who plant the trees, the companies who finance the tree planting, and communities that benefit from the reforestation.

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