

Winner 2015



GROWING TREES IN DESERTS

Land Life Company | Juriaan Ruys

Planet earth has roughly 6 billion “usable” hectares to offer, soil where plants and trees can grow in order to provide food and shelter for our ecosystem. Two billion of those hectares have been seriously degraded to accommodate our less than desirable lifestyle (think: deforestation, urbanization and the effects of climate change). Wetlands account for half of those degraded hectares; the remaining one billion hectares are the playground for Jurriaan Ruys’s Land Life Company.

The Cocoon

Land Life Company has created a technology through which trees can be planted in dry areas, thereby restoring and revitalizing our ecosystem. Ruys and his partner Eduard Zanen designed a biodegradable water reservoir or “Cocoon” in which the seedling is planted. The Cocoon is filled with water just once and from there the water is transported to the seedling in tiny amounts by using a wick. As the reservoir degrades and empties over time, the remaining shallow pits will serve as a micro-catchment to collect surface runoff when it rains. Land Life’s technology allows the seedlings to survive their first critical years without external irrigation. Cocoon-trees have a survival rate of between 80-95% and in about four years the trees will have grown to two to three meters.

Ruys and Zanen are – up until today – the largest investors and shareholders in their company. Other funds come in through grants or awards, such as the Postcode Lottery Green Challenge, which they won in 2015.

It might be Ruys’s background as a McKinsey consultant, but he doesn’t believe in spending a lot of time applying to grants or competitions. He’d rather focus on their business. “The most important dollar you receive, is the one from your customer,” Ruys explains. In fact, Ruys wasn’t even that keen to apply to the Postcode Lottery Green Challenge, but a determined colleague, Arnout Asjes, saw an opportunity and asked Ruys if he could apply, promising he wouldn’t bother him with the application process. The rest is history.





SUMMARY

<i>Company</i>	Land Life Company
<i>Country</i>	The Netherlands
<i>Founder & CEO</i>	Jurriaan Ruys
<i>Postcode Lottery Green Challenge</i>	Winner 2015
<i>What</i>	A sustainable and scalable solution to plant trees in arid soils.
<i>How</i>	The Cocoon is designed to support a seedling through its critical first years. By providing water and shelter while stimulating the seedling to produce a healthy and deep root structure, tapping into the sub-surface water supply within its first year. This way, the Cocoon produces independent, strong trees, which are not reliant on external irrigation and can survive harsh conditions.
<i>Founded in</i>	2013
<i>Employees</i>	12
<i>Founders wisdom</i>	“Connect with people and make sure your product or technology does as well. Whatever your invention is, it won’t be successful if it doesn’t speak to people’s imagination and passion.”



“The most important dollar you’ll ever receive is the one from your customer.”

The prize money from the Postcode Lottery Green Challenge allowed Ruys and his team to install large-scale demonstration projects in Mexico, Spain and California to showcase how to effectively restore the natural environment and inspire world leaders to follow their example on a large scale.

“Winning the competition gave us a global platform to tell our story and the media exposure was overwhelmingly positive. Even Richard Branson tweeted about us,” Ruys smiles.

Butterflies

Land Life has a few big projects on the horizon: by the end of the year 40.000 trees will have been planted in Mexico to contribute to the survival of the Monarch butterfly, a collaboration with the WWF and the Mexican Ministry of Forestry.

For the World Expo 2020, Dubai is planning to plant one million trees. If they are convinced by Land Life’s technique, this could be another huge project. “And that is precisely the problem,” Ruys explains, “everyone wants to test if it works for themselves, claiming the unique characteristics of their situation, which takes a lot of unnecessary time. We’ve done all of the research and we know how it works in different environments, so having to wait out the lead-time can be frustrating.”

“Letting go of disappointments is not my strong suit,” says Ruys, “and there have been plenty of disappointments along the way, of course. A big project fell through at the last minute, 5000 holes had already been created but eventually we couldn’t agree on the terms and the deal didn’t happen. This stuck with me for a long time and I kept trying to fix it, which at some point just wasn’t constructive anymore. I needed to learn to let go. It’ll probably never come naturally to me, but I have learned to be content with how far we’ve come. If tomorrow is the same as today, that is ok.”

Stay alert, stay alive

“The main lesson I have learned as an entrepreneur? To stay focused, especially when things are going well. It’s easy – and very tempting – to start freewheeling a bit when everything is looking up, but missed opportunities are hiding everywhere. Ruys remembers a saying from his time with McKinsey: “a day without mistakes is a day on which too few risks have been taken.” “You have to stay sharp and push boundaries,” he says, “only then can we attempt to restore what we’ve damaged.”