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Five trees or a latte? Coastal communities seek crowd funding for mangroves

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KUALA LUMPUR, April 7 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Would you forgo a cup of coffee to plant mangroves aimed at helping coastal communities fend off climate change? A Singapore-based online platform is counting on crowdsourcing donations for projects to add 1 billion mangrove trees by 2025.

The Global Mangrove Trust plans to launch an app and website in the next six months using blockchain technology to fund mangrove restoration projects across India and Southeast Asia.

Users will be able to select a project and, once the funding target is met, track its progress through video, photograph and data updates, and monitor forest growth drawing on satellite images and algorithms.

"We provide an opportunity for people all over the world who have excess money (to) lay off one \$5 latte and plant five mangrove trees with a coastal community," said Ryan Merrill, the trust's managing director.

The trees, together with related employment and conservation efforts, offer an opportunity to provide "a disproportionate benefit for the most vulnerable", he added. Mangroves make up less than 1% of tropical forests worldwide but are vital for the well-being, food security and protection of coastal communities, according to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

They protect coastlines against the ferocity of storms and rising sea levels, absorb planet-heating carbon from the atmosphere and boost fish stocks.

But mangroves are being destroyed at rates three to five times higher than the average for forests, and more than a quarter of the world's mangrove cover has already disappeared, UNEP says.

Some mangrove restoration projects have approached the trust directly to seek funding via its new platform, called GROVE, while others were enlisted with the help of conservation groups.

The projects are located along South Asia's Bay of Bengal and in Southeast Asia, including the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia. The platform plans to add initiatives in Africa, as well as North and South America.

The GROVE funding will reward communities that restore, maintain and expand their mangrove forests over time, rather than just providing one-off payments.

"There have been lots of projects in history where people have planted mangroves and three years later, all the saplings get chopped down and sold for charcoal," said Merrill.

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