

BRAZIL

The couple who planted two million trees

After witnessing war, a heartbroken photographer returned to a barren family farm. Together, he and his wife replanted an entire rainforest from scratch.

WHERE	Aimorés
WHO	Sebastião and Lélia Salgado, who healed a barren valley by planting a forest
WHEN	1998 to today

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

In the early 1990s, Sebastião Salgado was one of the most famous photographers on Earth. He travelled the globe with his camera. He documented miners in deep mud and families walking across dry deserts.

In 1994, he went to Rwanda to document the genocide. What he saw broke his heart. He saw dead bodies every single day. He saw human cruelty on a scale that shattered his spirit.

By the time he returned to Paris, he was sick. His body had developed strange infections. A doctor told him that his immune system was failing. The doctor said he was not dying from a disease. He was dying from sorrow.

Salgado put down his camera. He decided to leave Europe and return to the land where he grew up.

The dying valley

In 1998, Salgado and his wife Lélia arrived at his family farm. The land was called Fazenda Bulcão. It was located in the Rio Doce valley in Minas Gerais, Brazil.

As a boy, Salgado had grown up in paradise. The valley was once covered by the lush Atlantic Forest. Giant tropical trees rose into the blue sky. Clear water springs bubbled out of the ground. Monkeys and colourful birds filled the trees.

Now, the land was dead.

Over fifty years, the old trees had been chopped down for timber. Cattle had eaten the grass down to the roots. The tropical sun had baked the soil into hard clay. Heavy rains had washed the topsoil into the river.

Less than one half of one percent of the trees remained. The valley was silent. The birds were gone. The natural springs had dried up. Dust blew across the bare yellow hills.

Salgado looked at the ruined land in despair. But his wife Lélia had a bold thought.

“Let's replant the forest,” she told him.

Salgado stared at her. Replanting hundreds of hectares of tropical forest seemed completely impossible. People in the area said they were crazy. But Lélia did not back down.

Planting the first seeds

In April 1998, the couple founded a group called Instituto Terra.

They knew they could not just buy random trees from a shop. A real Atlantic Forest needs hundreds of native species. The plants must grow together in a precise order.

They hired a team of local workers and a plant expert. Together, they hiked into the surviving patches of forest in the region. They gathered native seeds from wild trees.

They built a large nursery on the farm. They learned how to nurse tiny seeds into healthy green shoots.

In 1999, they planted the first saplings into the hard, dry soil.

The first year was brutal. Almost three out of every five saplings died. The sun was too fierce, and the soil was too poor. Leaf-cutter ants marched across the fields and stripped the young leaves bare.

Many people would have given up. But Salgado and Lélia refused to quit.

They adjusted their methods. They brought in organic matter to feed the soil. They planted hardy pioneer trees first to create shade. Then, under that cool shelter, they planted slow-growing canopy trees.

The trees began to survive.

> **"The land was as sick as I was. But when the trees began to grow, I was reborn too."**
>
> SEBASTIÃO SALGADO, SPEAKING TO JOURNALISTS

Year after year, the planting continued.

Local school children came to help put roots into the earth. Neighbors joined in. The nursery expanded until it was producing hundreds of thousands of saplings each year.

Slowly, a miracle took place in the valley.

The growing roots broke up the hard clay. When rain fell, the water no longer rushed away in muddy floods. Instead, the forest floor acted like a giant sponge. The soil absorbed the rainwater and filtered it deep into the ground.

Natural springs that had been dry for decades began to bubble with clean water. Small streams began to flow through the valley once again.

Then the animals returned.

First came the insects and butterflies. Then came small lizards and frogs. Birds that had not been seen in the region for generations flew back into the green canopy.

Over one hundred and seventy species of birds made their homes in the new forest. Thirty-three kinds of mammals returned, including pumas, ocelots, and rare monkeys.

1998
the year they began

2M+
native trees planted

300
native tree species restored

A forest for the future

Today, Fazenda Bulcão is completely transformed.

The once-barren cattle farm is now a permanent nature reserve. It is recognized around the world as an official part of the Atlantic Forest Biosphere Reserve.

More than two million native trees stand tall on the reserve. Across the wider river valley, Instituto Terra has helped restore thousands of water springs on neighboring farms.

The forest also healed Sebastião Salgado. Working with his hands in the dirt gave him back his strength. He picked up his camera again. He went on to spend eight years photographing the wildest places on Earth for his masterwork, *Genesis*.

Salgado died in May 2025 at the age of 81. The living forest he and Lélia planted continues to grow under the Brazilian sun.

Their work proved that human hands do not only destroy nature. With patience and care, they can bring an entire world back to life.

How it unfolded

- **1994** Salgado leaves Rwanda heartbroken by war.
- **1998** He and Lélia found Instituto Terra to heal the family farm.
- **1999** The team plants the first saplings into the dry soil.
- **2009** The reserve joins UNESCO's Atlantic Forest Biosphere Reserve.
- **2025** Salgado dies at age 81, leaving behind a thriving forest.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

Most people think a destroyed rainforest can never come back. This project showed that nature can heal if humans give it a chance. It took over twenty years of daily work, but dead springs flowed again and rare wildlife returned.

OUR TAKE

Healing the land also healed the people who worked it. Salgado lost his faith in human nature during war, but the forest gave it back.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1 Start from the soil

They did not just plant trees. They fixed the soil and protected the water first.

Try this: When starting a big project this week, fix the basic groundwork before adding new things.

2 Trust the power of small daily steps

A forest of two million trees grew one single sapling at a time.

Try this: Pick one long-term habit and do one small minute of it every day this week.

3 Turn grief into action

Instead of letting sadness crush him, Salgado poured his energy into life.

Try this: When bad news weighs on you, plant something green or clean up one shared space.

4 Bring the community along

They trained local farmers and shared seeds with thousands of neighbors.

Try this: Share one helpful tool or resource with a coworker or neighbor this week.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

When a land is dying, do not mourn it. Plant a tree.

Sources

UNESCO
Sebastião Salgado, a photographer who regained his vision through his love of nature

Al Jazeera
A lens on poverty and the environment: Sebastiao Salgado is dead at age 81

Instituto Terra
Official Website of Instituto Terra

Fact-check note: Estimates of trees planted on the original reserve stand at over two million, with cumulative regional planting across the valley exceeding three million. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.