

## INTERVIEW MADAGASCAR CONSERVATION &amp; DEVELOPMENT

# Conservation in times of political turmoil – the Madagascar Fauna Group Perspective

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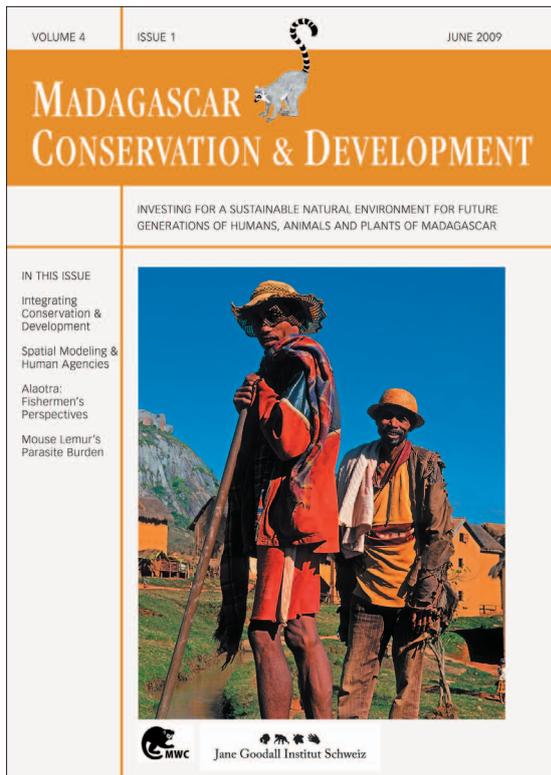
*“Not only people are suffering from 2009 political turmoil, but also natural resources are under higher pressures than usual. How do you envision your future efforts in the conservation of Madagascar? Will it be rather a mitigation approach, or would there be also a chance for a more proactive approach in order to prevent similar pressures in the future?”*

Even under normal circumstances, it remains a tough job to keep conservation high on the priority list in Madagascar. Being one of the poorest nations worldwide, this biodiversity hotspot is facing irreversible impacts by current and increasing environmental crime – facilitated by this period of political instability leading to lawlessness and limited law enforcement. While it may not be obvious at first sight, Madagascar’s biodiversity is one of its most precious riches. Every single human being depends directly and indirectly on all marine, freshwater and terrestrial ecosystems for daily life. For example, people rely on their forests to prevent erosion, to provide oxygen, to protect watersheds, to purify water and air, to control diseases and pests, to give a home to many pollinators and seed dispersers of important fruiting trees and agricultural crops, to eat, build and cook...and for many more ecological services. Current logging and poaching will result in long-term economic damage to the valuable ecotourism industry that Madagascar was developing. Sadly this reality is not yet widely understood.

Madagascar Fauna Group has invested continuously in a multi-faceted approach to conservation for the past 20 years. The MFG’s goal is to conduct applied research of the forest ecosystem in all its different facets, to reach a better understanding on how to consequently improve protection and management of the Betampona Nature Reserve in collaboration with Madagascar National Parks, as well as to conserve and restore the Ivoloïna Forestry Station in collaboration with the Ministry of the Environment, Forestry and Tourism. In addition to directly focusing on research and conservation, MFG prioritizes environmental education and capacity building programs for our local partners, with a strong emphasis on sustainable natural resource management, agro-forestry and conservation medicine. Through our education and training programs, MFG hopes to plant seeds that will give rise to new generations of well informed Malagasy ‘conservation

ambassadors’. Therefore, we target a broad group of stakeholders, ranging from primary school children to university students, and including local decision makers and farmers. In addition, we organize events such as World Environment Day celebrations, the Environmental Circuses, and award ceremonies for our Forest Restoration Project, trying to attract wide audiences. On a more continual basis, we try to make an impression on our 15,000 annual visitors – of which the majority are Malagasy – with several take-home conservation messages throughout Parc Ivoloïna. We will reinforce these messages in a weekly environmental transmission on the local radio Vonio in Tamatave, for six months beginning June 2009.

MFG believes in combining both a mitigating and prompt reactive approach in direct response to urgent environmental events along with a proactive approach where we promote positive change for long-term quality of life and natural resource protection. For example, we have intensified our patrols in Betampona Reserve, ensuring continuous presence to discourage illegal activities. Also we collaborate with Missouri Botanical Garden to create a safety net collection of endangered plant species, and we contribute to wildlife conservation through captive breeding programs at Ivoloïna Zoo. On the other hand, we hope to increase alertness and responsiveness to environmental problems, by widely advocating environmental messages, by increasing understanding of nature’s role in everyone’s daily life, and by encouraging local communities to participate in forest restoration to create a protective buffer around Betampona. At the same time, MFG offers practical training in commercial plant cultivation and in alternative, less destructive and sustainable agroforestry methods. This ‘consciousness’ at the local level is amplified towards national level when joining forces with other fellow conservation NGOs in-country. Together we can get out stronger and more powerful messages, which have the potential to influence conservation strategies designed by the transition and future government. Our efforts need not end there, as there will always be a demand for precious hardwood, rare wildlife and minerals – a demand that comes mainly from abroad, driving the ecological degradation on a larger scale. The traditional but also the newly emerging economic powers that drive this process at the receiving end of the supply-demand chain must also be sensitized and controlled through international legislation and conventions (e.g. CITES), and they should be encouraged



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strongly to operate through regulated and certified sustainable timber and wildlife trade.

Madagascar Fauna Group, being a small grassroots NGO that works mainly at the local level, does not have the ambition nor is in the position to make systemic changes at the national level. However we can function as a local environmental watchdog by reporting on what is happening on the ground and by alerting those in power to take action. Moreover by always operating as a good example of biodiversity conservation together with key local partners to promote conservation and sustainable development, we can make a difference locally and hopefully inspire many more on a broader scale to follow the same path!