

Travelling through time - Voyage dans le temps

In this rubric the journal invites people to speak about those having left their mark in Conservation & Development in Madagascar. Here we call on Margareta Jolly to tell us about:

ALISON JOLLY AND HANTANIRINA RASAMIMANANA: THE STORY OF A FRIENDSHIP

Hanta says to me, 'Your mother has her head in the clouds'.

My mother says to me, 'Hanta has a lot of pots on the boil'.

Hanta and my mother both say, 'We can't stop to chat, we're working on our conference paper.' And they disappear into the study and don't come out till tea time. After that, they disappear to Berenty for a month.

My mother, Alison Jolly, is a primatologist at the University of Sussex in England. For as long as I can remember she has been studying lemurs. She has a story about how it began. Back in 1960 she was a student at Yale, beginning a doctorate on sea sponges. A professor arrived with lemurs sent from the Institut Pasteur in Madagascar. The sponges were instantly forgotten. By 1962, she was on her first field trip to Madagascar, a twenty five year old American on what was to be a life changing journey. Soon she was marvelling at close-up views of ring tails bounding through the extraordinary strip of gallery forest at Berenty. *Lemur Behavior*, 1966, was her first interpretation of the animal society she found there. What astonished her and, subsequently, other evolutionary theorists, was that it was matriarchal, with females wholly dominating the males.

This turned into a fascination with lemurs, Berenty, and with Madagascar that has now lasted almost 50 years. Her early observation of female dominance fuelled further publications and debates, interestingly chiming with a period in which the women's liberation movement supported new perspectives on old human-male dominated orthodoxies. My mother meanwhile sustained her professional work with part time academic positions and four noisy children who (at least in my case) didn't always appreciate her frequent disappearances to what felt like a very distant country. Then again, from our childhood trips with her, flavoured with vanilla and roasted peanuts, I can see why she couldn't let it go.

Her complex attachment to Madagascar is evident from her 1975 *A World Like Our Own: Man and Nature in Madagascar*. This book situates the puzzle of lemur behaviour in the context of Malagasy environment and history. From my point of view, I no longer felt that Mum was a conservative sociobiologist (the subject of hot-headed arguments in my twenties, as I discovered Marxism!). Instead she was ahead of the game, putting biology into society as much as the other way round. Simply expressed, it began to seem obvious that working with lemurs was about conservation and working with Malagasy visionaries, and, more profoundly, that humans and animals' futures depend each other. My mother's work developed as she started listening and watching in new ways. Her latest book interweaves oral histories of Tandroy locals, French/Malagasy land owners and politicians, and American conservationists with the imagined voices of lemurs, all living and struggling together. *Lords and Lemurs: Mad Scientists and Kings with Spears* speaks of the

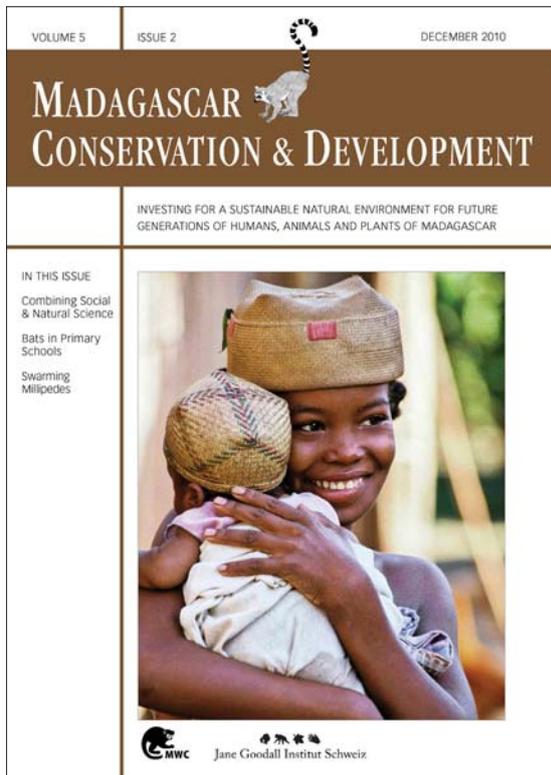
tragedies as well as comedies of this struggle, in the face of appalling political and economic challenges to Madagascar, but also the eccentric, vivid reality of inter-dependence. She has become involved in discussions about development and the politics of conservation: Berenty Reserve has survived but nothing can be taken for granted. My mother, a natural optimist, has had to bring her head out of the clouds.

Hantanirina Rasamimanana has unquestionably been a guide on this road. Hanta first met my mother in 1983. Born and raised in Antananarivo, she is 17 years younger than Alison, and fizzles with an ironic kind of energy. Originally trained in animal



Hantanirina Rasamimanana (left) and Alison Jolly (right).

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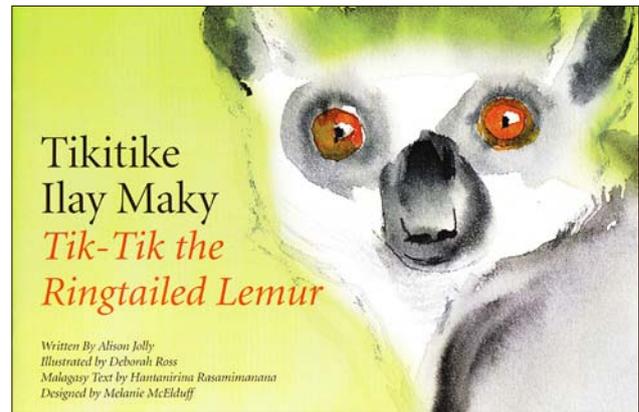
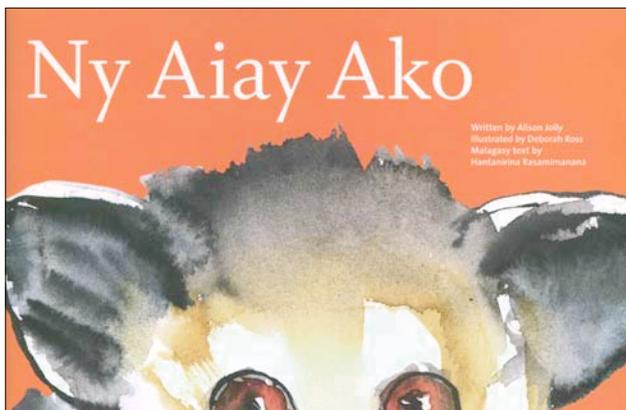
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husbandry at the Veterinary Academy of Moscow, she was part of the generation who were sponsored to study in Russia under Ratsiraka's socialism, and she returned to teach at the École Normale Supérieure. Soon juggling her own family life, Hanta also turned to studying ringtails, publishing on issues as varied as feeding behaviour, energy expenditure and the still unsolved question of why the females are dominant. Recently she had the honour of being dubbed 'Madagascar's Lemur Lady' by the television channel CNN, a typically silly American way of putting it, but one indication of her prominence now as a scientist and spokesperson. Perhaps more important is her Knighthood of Malagasy National Order, and her ever-increasing responsibilities in Malagasy academia, including a new Master's degree in Primate Conservation run in Mahajanga and the Comoros.

How lucky Hanta's students are! For she gives every last drop. I remember her explaining why her students were always round her house at midnight: they were gaining precious access to a computer. For Hanta, the complexity of life and ecology in Madagascar is obviously personal. She has also had to combine research with teaching and the sharp end of global politics. I remember her welcoming house in Tana, and her children's dry humour in the years they have lived with us. But sharing computers is not easy, and I also remember the Kafkaesque difficulties of getting the simplest visa to attend a primatology conference in England. My mother has very often been at the other end of the phone in such situations.

Hanta and my mother have helped each other through the years. Insider and outsider, both of them, they keep a friendship across the inequalities of life in England, America and Madagascar. They share as mothers as well as colleagues who have been there for the long haul and indeed, including some of the worst things that can happen to a mother. As a daughter, what is most important and inspirational to me is how they have together nurtured a new generation of Malagasy primatologists and conservationists, through other people's children, if not their own: the masters and doctoral students who are the future of conservation in Madagascar. Above all, the Ako Project, now widely supported by UNICEF, shares the wonders of Malagasy wildlife with young children through storybooks and posters on six of the hundred-odd species of lemurs. Mum is the English author, Hanta the Malagasy author, and the magic watercolors are made by their friend Deborah Ross. I can say that my mother has been more honoured by the excitement of one five year old girl in Taolagnaro making lemur 'whoop!' noises than she was getting her Life Time Achievement Award at the International Primatological Association conference in Japan this year.



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I will end with a snippet of a letter from my mother to Hanta from Panama, where she was visiting a reserve, because I think it speaks for itself!

"What I have learned about primatology, Hanta: it has gone HI-TECH. One MUST have DNA analysis of male paternity. This can be done from feces, not just blood. One MUST have GPSs and ArcView range maps. One MAY have data loggers and radio-tags, but these aren't absolutely necessary.

But the most interesting thing for you is Ketone Strips. These are available over the counter in US drugstores, used by dieters. If you are actually burning fat, your urine turns the little paper strips purple. So you can figure out if a primate is nutrition-deficient by just running under it when it pees on a leaf, and seeing if the paper strip turns purple. A student can follow this through the seasons.

When I think of all the times I have moved out of the way of peeing and pooping primates, instead of running underneath to catch the stuff--what a waste!"

Hanta, busy with the new MSc in Primate Conservation, just wrote back,

"HELLO Alison

I am in a town where internet is very hectic, Mahajanga, and the rooms contain a lot of mosquitos; but I see you are having a good time!"

Margaretta Jolly, November 2010