

EDITORIAL

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Tartuffe's Madagascar: conservation hypocrisy

THE INTERNATIONAL DONOR COMMUNITY'S UN-SHAKEABLE INTEREST

In this editorial, we would like to review some of the significant events that affected Madagascar in 2017. Madagascar has been featured in the global media in connection with both conservation and development-related activities. For example, every two to three months, Malagasy rosewood is written about in the local or international press. On this subject, a new term has emerged in articles, blogs and reports: the word "palisander". It is used ostensibly to draw the French distinction between precious rosewood (*Dalbergia* spp.) and less precious rosewood-like wood (*Dalbergia* spp.) The main distinction is based on criteria which are very much subjective and biased towards private interests.

Regularly, when the rosewood topic comes up in and outside of Madagascar, people are quick to accuse public officials or elected representatives of complicity in its trafficking. Fighting against the trafficking of precious timber became a poster child of a sad, harsh reality that has increasingly confronted Malagasy people after the 2009 political coup d'état, when a minority annexed wealth, while the majority slid deeper into poverty (Randrianja 2012). Timber trafficking is observed often—it is reported in the local press, sometimes even internationally. However, reported statistics should be taken with a pinch of salt as information can in most cases, not be verified. While the official Madagascar 2017 report to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES 2017a) focuses heavily on the northeast, citing Marojejy and Masoala national parks as the focal areas of rosewood traffic (from sourcing to stocks), many more forests are affected in reality, by these continuing, illegal activities. The latest article published in a local newspaper (Léonard 2017) reported the seizure of a truck laden with rosewood logs originating in the Menabe, along the west coast of the island. The World Bank entered into the arena with a study designed to inventory timber stocks and to find a way to manage the resource. In 2017, these stocks became a nightmare for the World Bank—which, then simply wanted to get rid of them. It called for the covering up the stock, which it can't bear to confront, appearing more than ever like Tartuffe, Molière's hypocrite. In contrast to the World Bank, the 69th meeting of the standing committee of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), rejected the sale of Madagascar's stocks of precious wood (CITES 2017b). The stocks were shown to be variable in number, weight and volume (Moore Gerety 2017); the CITES decision does not look particularly strong and seems more of a call for slightly increased effort with regards to management and declaration of the stocks. As recent past has demonstrated,

sooner rather than later, the ports may be opened officially to formalize the draining of these rich natural resources that no one appears able to contain.

Other projects, that also have involvement of the World Bank are less concerned with measures of intervention to stop illegal activities, and are seemingly more scientifically based, purporting to have some degree of hope attached to achievement of tangible positive results. There is the kind of project to which a blizzard of positive buzzwords is attached; these could be connected with 'recipes' for sustainable development interventions, of course with substantial funding. One such project is "PADAP": *Projet Agriculture Durable par une Approche Paysage*, which translates to Sustainable Agriculture Project using a Landscape Approach¹. This agroforestry-based project aims to restore a forested landscape by engaging closely with farmers. It is to commence in 2018. Here, we want focus attention to the numbers, not the buzzwords: this project will engage 38 thousand people (mostly farmers) including 40% women, 140 km² of irrigated perimeters and 70 km² of forests under restoration—this translates to less than 0.2% of the rural population of Madagascar and some 0.02% of the total area of the island when it comes to irrigated perimeters. The project budget is of 107 million US\$, of which 91.6 million US\$ (85.6%) is to be repaid to the World Bank (65 million US\$) and the French Development Agency (26.6 million US\$). The project thus represents some 340 billion Ariary for 38,000 beneficiaries, which comes to more than nine million Ariary per beneficiary. As a baseline, the latest poverty indices show that 80% of farmers in Madagascar have access to less than US\$ 1.25 a day, most of them surviving on less than one million Ariary a year.

The intentions of this project are commendable. However we do question its feasibility and would ask for a reality check: how are the beneficiaries of this project (the farmers) supposed to pay back the money that they receive? Or, how are they going to produce enough to supply local markets and create further employment vacancies? The PADAP is just one of its kind—the main challenge is that lots of funding in very short time periods all too often has little positive effect where it is most needed. It adds to complexity—and often rigidity—of governance, by creating the need for revised or new administrative structures. Donors believe that it is possible to maintain the ever-growing GDP, increase debts and all the while, produce more and more to shovel increasing amounts of money in the pockets of rich nations (but do refer to some interesting information here <https://goo.gl/uwGUKP> and <https://goo.gl/rcCgst>).

The two examples presented don't illustrate anything new in terms of governance and conservation, but they remind us that patience towards duration of such projects, or interventions, may be overwhelming even for the most committed of practitioners and activists. The struggle for conservation and sustainable development is unequal and oftentimes in-transparent. Money—or decisions based on funding and related mechanisms—will eventually win out and CITES, or committed NGOs, will sooner or later be forced to give way to a general state of oblivion imposed by the "global Tartuffes".



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SOME ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS

Forests remain a central focus of conservation activities since they host famously high levels of biodiversity. Deforestation continues unabated and at a high pace (e.g., Global Forest Watch 2017) despite great efforts being implemented (Waeber et al. 2016) to safeguard the lemurs and other 'flagship' forest-dwellers. A recent study published in *PLoS ONE* by Bamford et al. (2017) based on a rapid assessment of 37 sites across Madagascar, showed that anthropogenic activities have reduced more than 80% of Madagascar's wetlands, mostly for agricultural production (rice). In a country where rice still constitutes the main staple food, and where fertility rates rank still among the highest, globally (current population "estimates" report of some 23 Million inhabitants—though the last official General Population and Housing Census dates back to August 1993!), wetlands remain extremely vulnerable to further, more substantial changes. Therefore, protection measures need to be strictly adhered to and any kind of infractions of park boundaries should be followed up in official accounts.

Allow us to illustrate here with an incidence that we suspect to be just one of several similar cases across the country. Lake Alaotra is a new protected area (NPA) known for its endemic lemur *Hapalemur alaotrensis*. In the first half of June 2017, a member of parliament—henceforth the VIP—since naming names under the current lack of a communication law can be challenging (but, do refer to <https://goo.gl/Y9g7UE>)—has been reported hunting ducks within the core zone of the NPA, right at Park Bandro in Andreba Gare (Razafy 2017a,b). The conservation officer was forced to delete his images and to amend the story, in such a way as to place the VIP hunter outside of the NAP. Other local NGOs were contacted by the higher political echelons and instructed to approach the press with an alternative story (very Trump-like). The VIP hunter assured that he was not aware of infringing the park boundaries. Ironically, however, it was the VIP hunter who was the then member of the Committee for Environment, Ecology, and Forest at the National Assembly, who signed the decree for the NPA Alaotra in April 2015! The VIP hunter was since reported to return with guards and guns to the same place—or to villages just south of it—for more recreational hunting. And the consequences? Not one. Now this has several implications. Firstly, it serves to illustrate very clearly that the law does not apply equally for everybody: VIPs do appear to enjoy political immunity. Secondly, NGOs risk trouble if they dare to report on the 'wrong' person. Thirdly, and arguably the most striking implication: such incidences and their (non-)treatment by the officials, send out wrong messages to the resident communities, i.e., it 'seems acceptable and safe to disrespect park boundaries and to hunt protected species within parks'. These factors in combination increase pressure on the Alaotra wetlands. Additionally, conversion of the marshes into rice fields is often instigated by forces stemming from outside the Alaotra system (cf. Waeber and Wilmé 2013).

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY OF PEER-REVIEWED PUBLISHING

In 2017, some noteworthy articles came to our attention. They are totally independent, but, seen from the Southwestern Indian Ocean, appear to point towards Madagascar, because our visions are necessarily 'altered' depending on where our feet are standing on the Earth. On the other side of the globe, in the Galápagos,

researchers have shown that evolution took a considerable shortcut, producing in only three generations what reproductive isolation would have developed over hundreds of generations (Lamichhane et al. 2017). Undoubtedly, this discovery will force us to rethink many of Madagascar's endemic taxa, even if the Galápagos are composed of small, isolated islands compared with the massive Gondwana Madagascar. The islands of the Northeastern Pacific were never discovered by Austronesian navigators, having been colonized by humans more recently (e.g., Froyd et al. 2010). In this regard, papers published in 2017 serve to furnish us with more information on the origin of the Malagasy. The archaeologist Jean-Aimé Rakotoarisoa and his collaborators showed us that all Malagasy share a common Bantu and Austronesian descendant, with origins in Borneo (explaining at least a quarter), and Southern Africa (explaining at least another quarter). But these two portions of the origins of the Malagasy still do not convey the entire story of the origins of the Vazimbahas and we are still far from understanding it (Pierron et al. 2017). We will probably never know when the first people set foot on the island. This is for an obvious reason: they arrived by boat, but there is no proof that they settled at the time. They could just as easily have left, or, died on the island without leaving any trace for archaeologists. Until proven otherwise, the dates proposed by scientists remains the earliest.

Another question has long preoccupied ecologists and biologists in Madagascar: how can one explain the absence of an extended, frugivorous animal population? Most lemurs have a mixed diet, including leaves, gums and insects. Few rely solely on fruits. The same applies to birds and most other mammals, with the exception of fruit bats. At the end of last October, Giuseppe Donati and collaborators proposed that the low levels of nitrogen found in Malagasy fruits were what drove the evolution of Madagascar's lemur communities (Donati et al. 2017). Another, unrelated story, reports that people are smaller in poorer countries than they are in rich countries. And that this difference can be explained by low nitrogen and phosphorus levels (Peñuelas et al. 2017). These recent discoveries will certainly inspire further research to be conducted in Madagascar, which has high potential to guide or inspire development interventions, so we look forward to receiving articles and notes by researchers who are addressing these issues in the region.

We end this editorial with a note on open access publishing, since peer-reviewed journals are providing the material, concepts, ideas and data for conservation practitioners and others. Therefore, journals are an important source of information and a platform of exchange. While the major publishing companies are offering more and more online open access journals, (Springer Nature included), some are locking up their prestigious journals behind pay walls, which very few African—and no Malagasy institutions—can afford. Until a few years ago, beneficiaries of the Online Access to Research in the Environment (OARE <http://web.unep.org/oare/>) system, could read the journal *Nature*. However, *Nature* has not been available—nor proposed under this formula—for over a year. But the articles are fortunately accessible thanks to Science Hub (Sci-Hub is a website with millions of articles available for direct download). Some two million scientific articles are published every year; the journal *Madagascar Conservation & Development* is but a drop in this growing ocean. Nonetheless, we are proud to publish a twelfth volume; to have several special issues "in the making" and that some articles will

be published at the beginning 2018. You may have noticed a slight change in our publishing frequency: instead of publishing two regular issues a year, we have adopted a proactive formula. Starting in 2017, we publish the articles as they are processed and we include the so-called regular articles into an annual volume.

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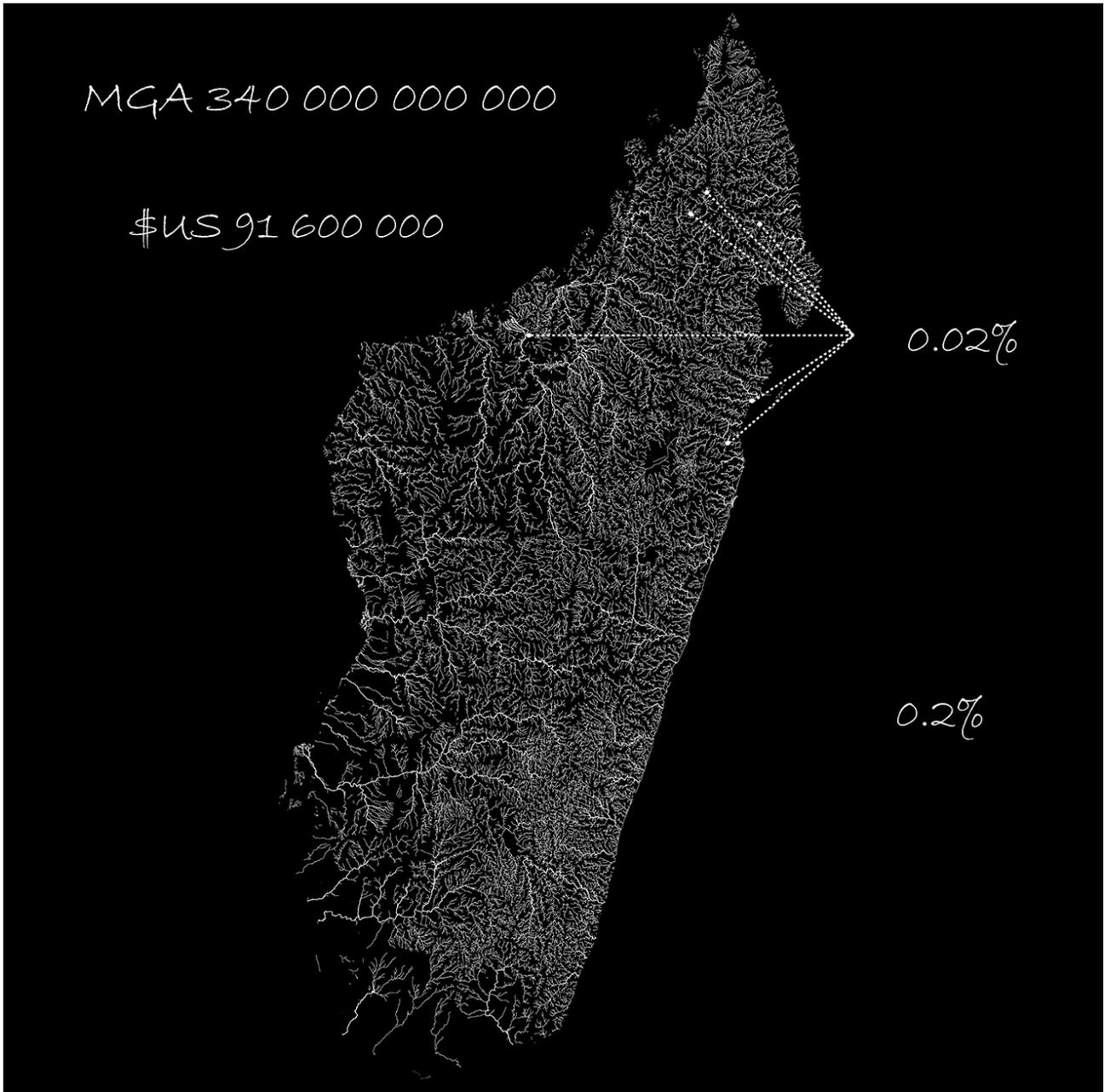
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A question of scale: large funding, increased debt, few beneficiaries, small geographic area.