

EDITORIAL

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/mcd.v17i1.6>

Time to adjust our lenses?

GOOD COPS OR BAD COPS?

Two CoPs or Conferences of Parties were held in November 2022—the United Nations Climate Change Conference or Conference of the Parties of the UNFCCC in Egypt and the CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) Conference of Parties in Panama. With science having clarified that the window for decisive, effective climate action is steadily closing, one potentially encouraging outcome of the Climate Change CoP 27 is the agreement for the creation of a historic fund to compensate vulnerable nations for ‘loss and damage’ from climate-induced chaos. Many critics, however, have lambasted the Climate Change CoP 27 (Global Witness 2022) and it remains to be seen what assistance will be provided by the global north to countries such as Madagascar (Aljazeera 2022), where the island’s semi-arid southern region has been suffering from what the UN (2022) refers to as possibly the “world’s first climate change-induced famine”. While the UN’s World Food Programme and a bevy of smaller NGOs and charities have been hard at work to provide both immediate relief and longer-term preparations to help impacted communities cope with climate-induced shocks and other difficulties, now is the time for the government—in the spirit of the exquisite Malagasy concept of *fiavanana* (cf. Madaliving 2022)—to adopt a proactive stance when it comes to completing further work on pipelines to transport more water into the heart of the southern Malagasy sub-desert (Saholiarisoa 2019). The resources are there. It is also timely for the government to step up efforts directed at dealing with factors other than climate change that have contributed significantly to the scenario presented on international media during the past 4 years (World Weather Attribution 2021, see also video DW Documentary 2022).

Perhaps more pertinent to this post is the second of the two atrociously carbon emission-intensive CoPs, the CITES CoP in Panama. Discussed all-too-briefly at the event was the ongoing issue of Malagasy rosewood and ebony, including the fate of some 40,000 illegally sourced logs that have been held in Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Kenya since 2014 (Roberts 2022, Roberts et al. 2022). The consignment in Singapore—valued at US\$ 50 million at the time it was identified—represents the largest ever seizure of illegally trafficked CITES-listed species. Unfortunately, the likelihood of the consignment being returned to the very people responsible for its illegal export is high.

Briefly, the outcome from the CITES conference thus far, is that stockpiled logs—illegally sourced—across the country, are ostensibly to be used ‘domestically’. By this is meant that the timber will be used for construction, building restoration and for “sale to domestic tourists, with items weighing a maximum of 10kg (Roberts et al. 2022). With regards the latter, questions that go

begging are (a) what kind of items are ‘domestic tourists’ going want to purchase; (b) considering the heavy, dense nature of both rosewood and ebony, is that weight limit realistic; and (c), who will measure and monitor all these items, given the controversial nature of the wood? Whatever the answers to these questions may transpire to be, the message being broadcasted to international criminal syndicates is disastrous: it undermines the credibility of CITES and reinforces the feeling among traffickers of any contraband wildlife and forest-derived products, that it is open season and that they can operate with even more impunity.

Two things transnational criminal rings tend to have in order to achieve their aims, are the necessary resources to wait out unfavourable conditions when it comes to trading specific products, and strategically placed political connections. The latter is known to be the case in Madagascar (Butler 2010). Given the deeply corrupting effects that illegal logging always has on society in supply countries, it is the sincerest hope of many concerned observers that Madagascar’s (as yet unaudited) timber stockpiles will not end up being used either as a laundering mechanism, or to finance the 2023 political elections.

TRUTH

Annually, the international nature enthusiast community is mortified upon seeing images flashed on social media of Madagascar’s forests going up in flames. This is particularly the case when such images are of fires battering protected areas. Perhaps now is an opportune occasion for some clarification when it comes to fires associated with swidden agriculture, as well as their management.

It is now acknowledged that Madagascar was in fact not originally covered in forest as was proclaimed to be the case by early explorers who lacked the appropriately sophisticated technology to qualify such assumptions. Professor Dame Alison Richard eloquently spelled it out in her 2022 masterpiece “The Sloth Lemur’s Song”, for which she drew from 50-odd years of research. One of the messages in Richard’s revelatory 2022 zoom lecture to introduce the book to the Anglo-Malagasy Society, was that the western world now ought to refrain from pointing fingers at Malagasy pastoralists and should stop accusing them of having destroyed approximately 90% of the island’s forests. In her seminal output, Richard outlined how recent, cutting-edge research revealed the falsity perpetuated by previous theories about the extent of Madagascar’s original forest cover. While many of us who have published literature on Madagascar now have revisions to attend to, Prof Richard did warn that the frenzied rate of deforestation during the last 50-odd years is a momentous cause for concern.

Another instance surrounding the examination of data on forest destruction—and in this case also, its management in Madagascar—occurred during the course of 2022. On studying a paper in the journal *Nature Sustainability* by Eklund et al. (2021), a group of us raised concerns about the accuracy of information published. But our meticulously compiled rebuttal was persistently rejected. Now, one would expect of a reputable journal to give ear to—and to respectfully publish—corrections, when information it has showcased, is called to question (Andrianambinina et al. 2022). This is all the more the case when inaccuracies can cause distress to conservation professionals in the profiled country. Apart from



Madagascar Conservation & Development is the journal of Indian Ocean e-Ink. It is produced under the responsibility of this institution. The views expressed in contributions to MCD are solely those of the authors and not those of the journal editors or the publisher.

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demonstrating that the data contained errors, our argument conveyed how Madagascar National Parks (MNP) managed the threat of fires to the Protected Areas throughout the lockdown period by actually intensifying their efforts. The journal has, to date, not published an errata section. All is not lost, however: the rebuttal which Nature Sustainability repudiated is included in this month's edition of MCD.

"Whoever is careless with the truth in small matters cannot be trusted with important matters."

—Albert Einstein, physicist

SHINE ON, LITTLE LIGHT

Somewhere in the depths of the seemingly unceasing, dark tide of collective fear, ignorance and its incessant negative consequences, a delightful little light flickered. On 4 October 2022 I received word from author and wildlife tour leader Daniel Austin of two separate sightings of Madame Berthe's mouse lemur (Truscott 2022), a species which experts, notably DPZ/ German Primate Centre, had feared might be extinct after extensive searches had failed to find it (Vyawahare 2022). What makes these observations that much more meaningful, is that the Critically Endangered *Microcebus berthae* is Man's tiniest relative. Let's pause on that for a while. Our adorable, pint-sized cousin is certainly extremely scarce: as was the case with the DPZ

researchers, my own efforts to locate it in Kirindy and Marofandilia Forests in October 2019, didn't bear fruit. But as this image shows, the species is still thriving right where it belongs. Its natural home, the Menabe Antimena Protected Area—which still provides a mind-blowing wildlife experience for eco-tourists—is desperately vulnerable and truly deserving of increased protection.

Online reviews reflect that the fortunate tour group mentioned, had the time of their lives in Madagascar, illustrating that high end, low volume, nature-based tourism has for the most part, enjoyed a successful post pandemic restart. The vast majority of eco-tourists, who patiently postponed travel through 2020 and 2021, have shared ebullient feedback, despite a catalogue of preventable hindrances. Some of these are being addressed, notably the marked reduction of domestic flights and maintenance of roads. Others, such as the cessation of direct flights between Johannesburg and Antananarivo, are apparently not. Worth mention is an announcement made recently by the incumbent president, who expressed that it is necessary for Madagascar to import East African herbivores such as Giraffes and Zebras (Caramel 2022), in order to boost tourist numbers to the island. This preposterous notion was met with a combination of outrage, disappointment among Malagasy commentators and rip-roaring laughter. The truth is, Madagascar has more than enough in terms of utterly fascinating, endemic animals and plants. Its scenic highlights are second to none. There are more than enough international eco-tourists yearning to explore the island's wild places; appreciate its



Critically Endangered Madame Berthe's mouse lemur *Microcebus berthae* is Man's tiniest relative. Photo courtesy of Mike Lowings.

endemic wildlife and flora and learn about Malagasy culture. There is nothing wrong with the existing supply of accommodation servicing the more accessible tourist locations. What could be incentivised is investment to revamp a number of properties standing partially derelict or closed down, but which have great potential. That, coupled with realistic, empathetic PR aimed at encouraging the right kind of travellers with a responsible ethic, could deliver the boost Madagascar's tourism industry needs. For the most part, the ingredients are already in place.

LOOKING AHEAD

Madagascar's immense resources—minerals in particular—would make anyone wonder why the nation isn't prosperous. Author Nathaniel Adams delved into this frustrating conundrum in his recently published "The Tragedy of Madagascar" (Adams 2022). In an interview, Adams discussed elements preventing the country from flourishing, such as 'elite capture'. He described how the government is not doing what it should be, to address, for example, the state of the southern region where the combination of drought and the unsustainably high birth rate has been devastating. On seeing the recent documentary "Climate Change or Politics—Why Madagascar is Going Hungry" (DW Documentary 2022), veteran Africa journalist Duncan Guy, who covered the same story in 1992, expressed dismay at how much worse conditions appear to be in the 'Androy' the island's remarkable southern sub-desert.

Do things in Madagascar really have to be like a gigantic smash-up? That, only the Malagasy people can answer. It is their situation and exclusively theirs to resolve. Following on from thoughts expressed earlier, it is the most heartfelt hope of innumerable observers, that those currently holding political power, will honour the Malagasy nation by not forsaking the way of fihavanana, something precious which we can all learn from, and something which when observed personally, never fails to leave visitors feeling humbled and moved on a very deep level.

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