

Translation and transformation

Finishing my PhD field research in 1971, the environmental challenges facing Madagascar were already clear and I decided to try to help. At the time, I viewed this as a separate track in my life that had little or nothing to do with my academic career as a biological anthropologist. This was to change over the ensuing decades. At the outset, the then President of the School of Agronomy (ESSA) at the University of Madagascar, the late Gilbert Ravelojaona, encouraged a small group of us from ESSA, Yale, and Washington University, to establish a partnership with a rural community. There would be three goals: conserve the surrounding forests and wildlife, improve community members' livelihoods, and provide a site for training and research. Ravelojaona was ahead of his time: only in the 1980s did community-based conservation approaches gain wide attention (Pollini et al. 2014). His vision took us eventually to Bezà Mahafaly, where the partnership continues and has expanded to encompass neighboring communes (Ranaivonasy et al. 2016).

Conservation biology emerged as a university discipline in the 1980s, founded with a unified purpose and conceptual framework (Soulé and Wilcox 1980, Sodhi and Ehrlich 2010). The separation in my mind between research and practice began to crumble, and the experience of working at Bezà Mahafaly accelerated the process. In the early 1990s, the first Integrated Conservation and Development Projects got underway in Madagascar (Jones et al. 2022). Although their success was mixed, they helped bring together conservation efforts on the one hand and development on the other. The founding of this journal in 2006 signaled another step, and its impact was rightly celebrated in an editorial almost a decade ago (Gardner 2014). Today, evidence and insights are widely shared between disciplines, between researchers and practitioners, and among members of the rapidly expanding community of Malagasy environmentalists and overseas colleagues. This involved developing a shared vocabulary for collaboration, but a more dramatic and literal exercise in translation took place at the same time: much of what was formerly published in English or French now simultaneously appears in both languages (e.g., *Madagascar Conservation & Development*, *Malagasy Nature*). All this is huge progress.

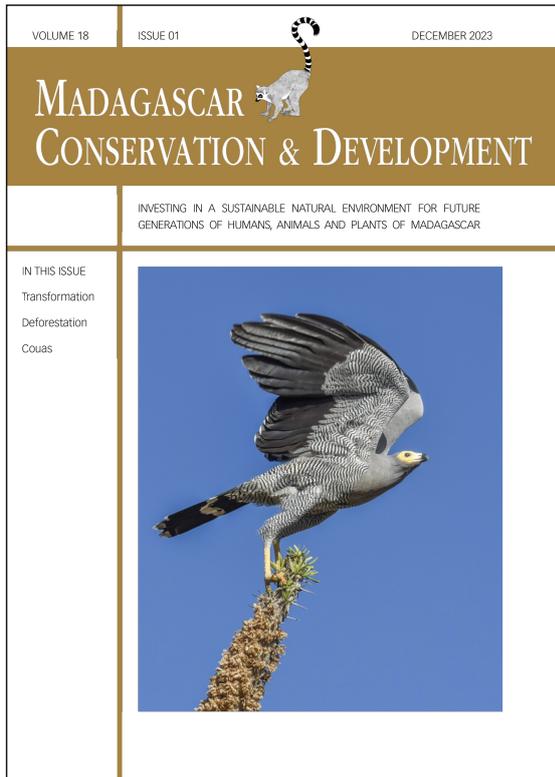
And yet... In March 2022, my book about Madagascar's long history and uncertain present was published (Richard 2022) in English and I brought copies with me to Bezà Mahafaly that summer. The locally recruited monitoring team with whom we have worked for many years were eager to know what was in it. Madagascar was not always an island? Madagascar was home to many species of dinosaurs? The ancestors of virtually all land species alive today are descended from a handful of ancestors that managed to cross the Mozambique Channel millions of years ago? Amazing... Their interest and questions led me to consider further

'translational challenges'. What is the point of a book about Madagascar for general readers if most people in Madagascar have no access to it? Language is one reason for its inaccessibility: many cannot read English (or French, into which I hope it will be translated). Reading skill is another: many would be unable or disinclined to read a whole book, even translated into Malagasy—which is unlikely. To make matters worse, the last chapter of *The Sloth Lemur's Song* includes an extended exhortation to share knowledge derived from different ways of knowing, and yet there I was, absolutely not doing that.

What to do? For many years, WWF Madagascar published several issues annually of an environmentally focused magazine called *Vintsy*. Its format was a mix of comics and text in English, French and Malagasy, aimed at 7–15-year-olds. *Vintsy* was widely read inside and outside classrooms, and clubs grew up around it. Not a one-way transmission of information, it stimulated discussion and engagement. Inspired by *Vintsy* and other comic strips, I turned my attention to pictures instead of the words and numbers that have dominated my career. The Malagasy graphic novelists, Pov (William Rasoanaivo) and Dwa (Eric Andriantsialonina), are now working to translate—and transform—my 287-page book in English into four comic books in the Malagasy language. Sitting on the sidelines, fascinated, the learning curve for me is steep. My purpose here is not to describe the journey with respect to this particular book, however, but rather to raise broad issues that have emerged during discussions with colleagues and friends in Madagascar.

First, who is the target audience and how best can that audience be reached? The audience I had in mind were adults with limited literacy living around protected areas. The environmental education of school-age children is critically important, to be sure, but time is running out and there is not enough to wait for them all to grow up. My particular purpose was to share Madagascar's long history, the preciousness of the island's wildlife, and the deep roots and complex history of the Malagasy people themselves. But the question of target audience holds regardless of particular purpose and so does an associated conundrum, expressed by a friend who said he was trying and failing to imagine what he would say while handing over comic books to grown men and women in the communities where he works: variations of "I suggest you read this" and "this is interesting" felt odd and awkward.

Targeting an adult audience poses other challenges too. The regional diversity of Madagascar is high, with differences in climate and topography giving rise to distinctive vegetation and wildlife, and the history of human settlement encompasses distinctive cultural, social, and economic paths to the present (Wright and Rakotoarisoa 1997). Capturing that diversity within the confines of short comic books so that they resonate widely is not easy, though perhaps less daunting than navigating differences of dialect. There are around 18 regional dialects of the Malagasy language, and most protected areas are located in regions where "official Malagasy" may be understood, but not widely spoken. The inter-intelligibility of dialects is much debated. It undoubtedly varies among individuals, depending on education, exposure to other dialects, and inherent willingness or ability to engage with unfamiliar ways of speaking, but my own experience is that dialect is at the very least an important marker of place and history.



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Yet the idea of producing comics in 18 different dialects is completely unrealistic.

Together, these considerations led me not to abandon the original target audience of adults but rather to reach them indirectly. The recipients of copies will still be adults, but the initial target readers will be 7–15-year-olds, who are taught “official Malagasy” at school. This not only mitigates the dialect issue but also allows for a different conversation with adults: instead of “this is interesting”, the accompanying explanation is that the books are for their children, grandchildren, or other children in the community—but may be of interest to them too.

Reaching adult audiences successfully in this way will depend not only on how captivating the material is—the graphic authors’ challenge—but also on the distribution channel. The usual way of distributing educational materials is through the school curriculum. But many potential communications are not educational in the formal sense and, even if they are, may fit poorly into the national curriculum; the ministerial approval process is lengthy and complex, moreover, and the target audience is people who live around protected areas, not island-wide. The solution, I hope, lies with the extensive and growing network of organizations working with communities in these places, from Madagascar National Parks to national and international NGOs. They are in the best position to know what works in the local context—whether to give copies to team members, award them as prizes in environmental competitions, pass them on to interested primary school teachers, or a combination of all these uses and others besides.

Drafting this editorial, I sought but did not find a better word than “audience”, which lacks reciprocity. The comic books will tell a story embedded in scientific evidence of Madagascar past and present, but I hope they will also stimulate discussion and storytelling in return. Cell phones and social media are widely used in Madagascar today, providing a platform for doing this far beyond the immediacy of a few folks sitting around together of an evening as we did a summer ago at Bezà. We shall see.

One last, not inconsequential issue: exercises in translation and transformation of the kind I describe depend on philanthropic support. Is it likely to be forthcoming on any scale? At this juncture, probably not. But that will change if their value is recognized. Developing a greater sense of shared purpose between people educated into an understanding of the global environmental crisis and those whose understanding comes from lived experience will not alone offer a solution, but it has a crucial part to play. Sharing world views, knowledge and stories more effectively will make a real contribution to that effort.

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Figure 1. Alison, Middle Haddam, January 2022