

## EDITORIAL

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# Madagascar rich and intransparent

"If you shut up truth, and bury it underground, it will but grow, and gather to itself such explosive power that the day it bursts through it will blow up everything in its way."

--Émile Zola--

Madagascar is one of the richest countries when it comes to natural and mineral resources. As is the case in many tropical countries, however, this wealth is bluntly coupled with an ever increasing poverty, where more than 92% of the 21 million inhabitants are living below \$US2 a day. Madagascar has received international aid and conservation interests for years, as part of which, millions of dollars have been donated to the country, but with very little to show for it (Horning 2008). When Madagascar appeared to hit rock bottom in 2009, a political coup d'état took place which led to the international donor community curtailing financial support (Randrianja 2012). During the following years, the transitional government did not receive the international support that the previous government had benefitted from. Here we will analyze the pattern of two cases of natural resource governance, both coinciding with a political event.

Case 1 pertains to rosewood: Since 2009, illegal logging and exporting of rosewood has reached unprecedented levels in Madagascar (Schuurman and Lowry 2009, Innes 2010, Randriamalala and Liu 2010) affecting the entire east coast, with highest intensity of pillage in the national parks of Masoala and Marojejy. In 2011, reportedly over 500,000 tons of rosewood were in stocks; discussions among experts at the global table revolved around a solution finding to best deal with these stocks (Randriamalala et al. 2011). However, the issue then went mysteriously silent to a remarkable degree for almost two years. In the meantime, the African Union supported by the international community pushed the current government to organize presidential elections with a first round on 25 October 2013, and the second and final round scheduled for 20 December 2013. Coincidentally, in mid 2013 the World Bank requested a "Study to Assess the Options of Disposal of the Illicit Stocks of Rosewood and Ebony"<sup>1</sup> issued 31 July 2013 with a deadline for the expressions of interest fixed at 13 August 2013.

During the last year, a new phenomenon has emerged: inventoried rosewood logs have slowly but regularly been ferreted out of the depots they were stored in. During the early months of 2013, traffickers from Maroantsetra visited the Masoala peninsula and generously offered 1 million MGA per household to turn a blind eye regarding any rosewood. Simultaneously, large vessels positioned just too far to be seen from any shore, were collecting logs transferred to them at night in smaller boats. Encouraged by the incredulous ineptitude on the part of the local legal authorities, this process has been ongoing, even during daylight hours, with the 'mother ships' eventually even clearly visible from the shores. The timber stocks in the

known depots have almost been completely cleared out by now. At the end of September 2013 a petition was suddenly circulated by EIA (Environmental Investigation Agency) bearing the message "Urgent Sign-on To Stop Madagascar Illegal Sale of Massive Stockpiles of Rosewood and Ebony" that many people and international and national NGOs have signed<sup>2</sup>. Interestingly, the concerns revolved around the estimated value of stocks, whether they were worth US\$5 billion or only US\$600 million. The question which goes begging is, why is the World Bank suddenly trying to find a legal solution for the stocks, when they de facto have already been removed from Madagascar and transported to Asia? We propose the following hypotheses as some food for thought: (i) There is insufficient information to assess the quantity and value of the remaining stocks. If any stock does indeed remain, it does represent a threat to the natural resources, and in principle, conservation NGOs cannot support the legalizing of the sale of such stocks. This implies that in the past, the legalizing and therefore selling of timber held in stocks represented a threat to the remaining precious trees, i.e., it has led to further illegal logging (Randriamalala and Liu 2010). (ii) The stockpiled timber has already steadily and consistently been exported to China: the government, the conservation community, and the public are all cognizant of this. There is a complex financial arrangement proposed by the international funding agencies and promoters of democracy, to appease all the parties involved in the case of dealing in illegally-felled rosewood<sup>3</sup>.

Hypothesis 1 appears naïve and almost unrealistic, given that the case is well known by all the parties involved. Hypothesis 2 requires a deeper understanding of the financial, legal, and institutional mechanisms involved, since international funding agencies and the World Bank are not allowed to support an illegitimate government (i.e., one which assumed power through a coup d'état). The question which remains alludes to a problem which may be described as "wicked", for lack of a better prescriptive (cf. Rittel and Webber 1973): how can someone make more money from a product which has already been sold?

We will try to shed some light by performing a *reductio ad absurdum*, which entails a step-by-step hypothetical appeasing of every party or individual involved in the rosewood trafficking process. To begin with, we ask the question: where do the interests of the various actors, really lie? This may be answered as follows: (i) Some, such as international funding agencies and NGOs seek a 'green' image. (ii) Others wish to be seen as promoters of democracy (western countries). (iii) Some are in a position of being in dire need of funding: they include certain NGOs and the Malagasy government. (iv) Some are lenders of money: these are the funding agencies and foreign governments. (v) There are some seeking to launder money, i.e., timber sellers and buyers.

To 'green-wash' the illegally-sourced logs, necessitates the issuance of a CITES permit, something which could be lobbied for by NGOs, who would then receive money from the funding agencies, officially to help them protect the wildlife. On the other hand, timber traders and buyers would thereby legalize their business, and push for the supporting of the required democratic process, i.e., the ongoing elections. Therefore, the value of the legalized stocks of wood would lie in its 'greening-up' of the buyers' profiles, and allow some



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of the laundered money to flow back to Madagascar so that 'business as usual' could continue.

Let's take a step back though: Hypothesis 2 appears to be in the realms of the absurd. The World Bank and other international funding agencies should not take such a risk: despite their interests to support democracy, development and conservation, they should not get involved in the green-washing of illegal timber. Furthermore, international NGOs should never invest effort in lobbying for a CITES permit allowing for sale of illegally logged ebony and rosewood. NGOs are well aware of the risks involved in such a procedure, and legalizing illegally-traded logs could potentially once again open up the forests to further illegal tree felling and trafficking. Which takes us back to square one: the million dollar question that goes begging pertains to the true level of transparency when it comes to the intentions of all parties involved in this process.

The second case is on a smaller scale, and concerns wetlands, which are among the most threatened ecosystems in Madagascar (Thieme et al. 2005, Rabearivony et al. 2010).

Case 2: Alaotra marshlands, vanishing in a puff of smoke? The Lake Alaotra wetland constitutes the biggest wetland system in Madagascar and is of national importance for its fish and rice production. About 23,000 hectares of marshlands fringe the lake, delivering crucial ecosystem services (water, plant material, fish stock) while hosting unique wildlife such as *Haplemur alaotrensis*, the only primate species living constantly in marshland, or the recently described carnivore *Salanoia durrelli*, also adapted to wetland. International conservation efforts have been ongoing since the 1990s to sustain this wetland biodiversity and ecosystem, leading to the inscription of the entire Alaotra wetland as the third Ramsar site in Madagascar in 2003. The government of Madagascar then acknowledged the system's biodiversity and conservation values by classifying the wetland as a New Protected Area within national law N°381-2007/ MINENVEF/MAEP on 17 January 2007. Though formally protected, there are increasing pressures on this wetland. The region is dominated by rice paddies, with all the terrain already claimed; the marshlands hence represent a future reservoir for rice production. The increasing scarcity in production capacity is further accentuated by changing hydrologic balance and leads to an underproduction of the existing rice fields. This forces resource users further into the remaining marshlands. For example, the number of rice fields within the lakefront (the so called *riz de contre-saison*) has increased significantly in the past years (Ratsimbazafy et al. In press). The same accounts for the number of fires. According to the same authors, the years 2000 and 2004 have been extreme fire years affecting more than 40% of the entire marshland area. In 2012, the number of fires from October to December exceeded 150 cases (ibid). The year 2013 appears set to break any previous records. According to MWC (Madagascar Wildlife Conservation) and DWCT (Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust), the marshes are being burnt at an unprecedented level with, for example, a few fires affecting several hundred hectares within a few days in October 2013 alone. The local management and monitoring entities such as VOI (*Vondron'Olona Ifototra*) and CFL (*Comité Forestier Local*) are hopelessly overwhelmed by the many fires, while national actors such as DWCT and MWC can only gather evidence to describe the breaches of the legal or regulatory framework that are being perpetrated. It is very interesting to note that marsh (and forest)

fires have reached a peak during this electoral period, where some political actors have repeatedly been observed promising land in exchange for votes. Alaotra represents a case specifically where actors outside of the system, instigate local communities to burn marshland for the sake of rice production (Ratsimbazafy et al. In press). However it is difficult to judge clearly when the smoke is so heavy over the lake. As is the case with many other governments, the Malagasy government is faced with the challenge of balancing the interests of its citizens, which are often in stark contrast with those of players or parties within the international community. The value of Madagascar's resource richness is measured differently by the different stakeholders, and thus governance of these natural resources has become increasingly more complex, and promises to do so even more in the near future. What constitutes a serious hindrance in sound governance is the fact that many of the processes are difficult to trace and assess due to an evident lack of transparency as discussed in these two cases. To strengthen governance depends first and foremost on the political will of the hosting country to improve its governance system, and hence to accept monitors to maintain observation over its performance. This however, requires a marked stepping up of transparency and accountability. At present, the bleak and questionable scenario painted by the above two cases presented here, seem to imply that for the people of Madagascar, its rich biodiversity may be more of a curse than a blessing.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 <http://www.dgmarket.com/tenders/np-notice.do?noticeId=9679530>
- 2 <http://eia-global.org/news-media/madagascars-transitional-president-threatens-to-sell-illegal-wood-worth-5-b>  
<http://eia-global.org/news-media/urgent-sign-on-to-stop-madagascar-illegal-sale-of-massive-stockpiles-of-ros>
- 3 [http://eia-global.org/images/uploads/English\\_Version\\_of\\_Madagascar\\_Draft\\_Decree\\_to\\_Authorize\\_Illegal\\_Sale\\_of\\_Massive\\_Stockpiles\\_of\\_Rosewood\\_and\\_Ebony\\_%C2%AC%E2%89%A0\\_Translated\\_using\\_Google\\_Translate.docx](http://eia-global.org/images/uploads/English_Version_of_Madagascar_Draft_Decree_to_Authorize_Illegal_Sale_of_Massive_Stockpiles_of_Rosewood_and_Ebony_%C2%AC%E2%89%A0_Translated_using_Google_Translate.docx)  
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