Shadows over the Masoala National Park in Madagascar
Why the park jeopardizes local people's basis for life

by Eva Keller*

The Masoala National Park, created twelve years ago for biodiversity conservation and sponsored by the zoo in Zurich, jeopardizes many local farmers' basis for life. Only by shifting the park's boundary could the conflict be eased.

Rakoto is a friendly young man. His family originates from the village of Ambanizana on the Masoala peninsula in the northeast of Madagascar. Ambanizana is one of many villages where life is directly affected by the Masoala National Park. This is where Rakoto's 'land of the ancestors', his *tanindrazana*, is. Together with his wife and their two children, Rakoto lives in a house that is no more than a few square metres in size. Inside there is a double bed with a foam mattress opposite a small bench for visitors along with a pile of pillows and a metal trunk for keeping clothes. In between all this there is a little free space for sewing clothes, weaving baskets and doing other daily chores. Rakoto belongs to one of the poorer families in the village not owning any wet rice fields on the plain. Together with his parents, he cultivates a small plot of land on a steep slope directly by the sea 'où la forêt rencontre la mer', as the park flyers state.

Swiss and American sponsors

The park, which encompasses half the peninsula, was created in 1997 and is administrated by the Malagasy Protected Areas Agency together with the American 'Wildlife Conservation Society'. One of the most important sponsors is the zoo in Zurich which, through its Masoala exhibit, has made the park well-known. The Masoala project aims to protect the peninsula's extraordinary biodiversity from human interference. On the west coast of the peninsula in particular, however, this issue does not involve large-scale commercial deforestation so much as the small-scale slash-and-burn cultivation carried out by subsistence farmers.

In order to generate a livelihood for his young family Rakoto cleared a piece of forest less than half a hectare in size within the boundaries of the property belonging to his parents in 2006. He intended to grow sweet potatoes, cassava, bananas, sugar cane and other crops for subsistence purposes as well as vanilla as a cash crop. Three years previous to this, however,

his parents' land had been included within the strictly protected 'hard core' of the park (see map) which represents by far its largest part and which begins only a few kilometres beyond the village. The local population is now not allowed to enter this core zone of the park and to make any use of the natural resources therein is illegal. Rakoto was caught. Upon returning from work one day he was arrested by some of the park staff who are permanently stationed in the village and was detained for two days like a felon, arms strapped behind his back, under the guard of armed men. Later on, Rakoto was sentenced to one month in prison in the nearby town – a prison from which inmates often emerged with their skin covered in vermin bites.

Other people in the village have similar stories to tell. Since Madagascar tightened its environmental laws in 2005 – according to a number of political scientists, this happened because of pressure from Western donor countries and environmental organisations – seven men in Ambanizana alone, which is a village of about 1,000 inhabitants, have received at times very long prison sentences (in one case, five years) because of offences similar to that committed by Rakoto.

For many generations the local population administered land ownership according to customary law, in almost all cases without the state registration of land. Most people in Masoala, therefore, do not have any official claim to their land. Only with the creation of the park, however, has this situation led to people like Rakoto being dispossessed.

Loss of land and livelihoods

A quarter of the population of Ambanizana depends for its existence on land that has been included within the park's 'hard core'. Sixty percent of the concerned households do not own any other land while, for the rest, the land inside the park represents at least half of their livelihood. None of these households have received financial compensation or other land outside of the protected zone. The present park director recognised that this was a socially unacceptable situation and accordingly wrote a convention in 2005 (one that is, however, according to him, not legally binding) that allows people to continue to use land that is inside the 'hard core' but that they had already cultivated before the park's boundaries were defined. This convention was to apply until the government provided a solution to the situation but was made under the condition that neither trees nor secondary vegetation – bush and perennials – would be cut down on the land in question. The latter condition makes it impossible to grow rice, the most important staple food, however. The unofficial convention

between the park management and the families concerned is precious, even so. Nonetheless, the farmers are reduced to being merely tolerated on their own land for an undetermined length of time while access to forested land is lost altogether. Rakoto's parents find themselves in this situation as do, for example, Jean-Aimé and his wife Beby.

The banana plant and the moon

Early one morning Beby and I set out in the pouring rain towards their piece of land which we reach after an hour-and-a-half's walk along the coast. Their camp is located at the top of a grassy hill where their six zebus graze. It is a tiny shelter with a hearth and a few clothes. On one side of the hill the meadow almost reaches the sea, while on the other side grow vanilla, coffee and other things. In the forest immediately behind their three to four hectare plot we hear lemurs scream. For some thirty years Jean-Aimé and Beby have invested all their energy and resources in this piece of land creating, with nothing apart from their physical strength and a bush knife, the basis for a livelihood on which ten people, including their children and grandchildren, now depend. All their land now lies within the 'hard core' of the park, though. They, thus, live in constant fear because of the uncertainty of their future. 'Those who say the park is good for us lie!', Beby remarks indignantly as innumerable other people do, too. 'We are not against the park as such but it is far too close! Our children and grandchildren will have no land on which to live.'

For the population living on the periphery of the park, and in some cases inside it within so-called *Zones d'occupation contrôlée*, the loss of their land does not only represent an enormous economic insecurity. For the farmers in Masoala the fact that the majority of the forested area on the peninsula has become a no-go zone (except for paying researchers and tourists) also presents a threat to what they consider to be a meaningful life. 'Do you prefer to die like the banana plant or like the moon?', the Creator asked the Malagasy in a myth. 'We chose the banana plant because when it dies, many new banana plants still grow from its base. But when the moon dies, it leaves no children behind.'

The desire to have many descendants is extremely widespread in rural Madagascar. The reasons for this are complex and cannot be reduced to a strategy of ensuring material security in old age, much less be explained by 'underdevelopment'. The basis of Malagasy society is the family or kin group, these including not only living but also dead relatives, the ancestors. These ancestors can exert considerable influence on the lives of their descendants. The

foundation of society is based on the good relations existing between the different generations of living and dead relatives and it is primarily a person's place within this network of relations that constitutes his or her identity.

From the point of view of the local population, therefore, the most important goal in life is to care for and to strengthen kinship ties. This is achieved in a number of ways in daily and ritual life but particularly through the generation of children. On the one hand, the birth of a healthy child testifies to the good relations one has with one's ancestors since angry ancestors may punish their descendants with infertility. In this way children link the present to the past. On the other hand, it is the descendants who will foster the relations among kin in the future that will produce new children who, in turn, will continue this task. In this way children link the present to the future. The desire to have many descendants does not follow a simple 'the more, the better' logic and, indeed, not all families have many children. But because children represent the glue between the generations of the past, of the present and of the future each new life strengthens the relations among kin and is thus seen as a positive event.

Without land, however, these values cannot be put into practice. Therefore, for the farmers in Masoala the most constraining aspect of the park is the fact that, since its creation, forested land must not, under any circumstances, be turned into agricultural land. This is the land that was meant to be the basis of their children's livelihoods. The park, thus, not only represents an economic threat, it also hinders local people from realising their ethos of life.

According to the dominant conservation discourse Madagascar was once a tropical paradise, a paradise which is becoming increasingly sterile due to the activities of an ever increasing human population, however. Although it is true that there is an annual population growth of about three percent, this argument has shaky foundations. First, the issue of how much of Madagascar was forested prior to the arrival of humans some 2,000 years ago is controversial. The paleo-ecologist David Burney talks of a complex mosaic of forest, savannah, bush and grassland. Second, historians like Jean Fremigacci point to the immense destruction of forests in Madagascar during the colonial era and to people's flight to formerly unpopulated forest areas. Third, ever since Esther Boserup's groundbreaking study of the 1960s, any conclusively causal link between population growth and deforestation has been called into question, not only in Madagascar. Fourth, as the tropical agronomist Jacques Pollini shows in an up-to-now unpublished study, the dominant conservation discourse concerning

Madagascar is marked by a number of stereotypes. Slash-and-burn cultivation, for example, is shown not to be the result of a stubborn adherence to tradition but to represent the most secure strategy for food production under the given circumstances. And finally, it needs to be said that the Masoala peninsula is a sparsely populated region where the settlements, at least on the west coast, are limited to the coastal areas.

The boundary must shift

The Masoala National Park raises many fundamental questions such as what right the North has to control the natural resources of the South. At the same time, if the conflict in Masoala is to be eased the park has to be designed in such a way as to make sure that the human population is not deprived of its livelihood. A few micro projects involving the construction of schools or the odd job created in the tourism industry can never replace the loss of land. Only the shifting of the park's boundary away from people's living space, even if this was only a shift of two or three kilometres, could approximate a just solution for the people of Masoala. This is, indeed, what they themselves demand. As one of the most important sponsors of the park the zoo in Zurich would be in a position to exert pressure to honour the motto of the Masoala Hall – to create 'space for life' by supporting the park in Madagascar – by applying this objective not only to the flora and fauna but also to the people. As long as the boundary remains unchanged people like Rakoto or Jean-Aimé and Beby will fear for their lives and will be virtually forced to illegally cut forest or bush in order to create an existence for their families.

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