

Final Report
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Ecotourism in Madagascar: Trading Gold for Ecotourists

The project not only met its objectives of bringing positive local environmental and social change but also influenced decisions made at the national level concerning small-scale gemstone mining.

Through our research and involvement with mining communities, we learned the opportunities for and limits to ecotourism as an alternative to gemstone mining. We met with people involved in mining and ecotourism at all levels of governmental and non-governmental organisations, conducted on-site ecotourism trainings for interested community members, helped with the conception of a welcome center at one of our sites, and contributed to the inception of a new national strategy focused on minimizing the environmental impact of small-scale mining.

As planned, during the first two weeks in country, we met governmental and non-governmental officials working on gemstone mining issues. They represented organisations including: Ministry of Mines and Energy, Mining Cadastre and Permits, Department of Mines and Geology, Mineral Resource Governance Project, Conservational International, The World Wildlife Fund for Nature, Madagascar National Parks Association, National Office for the Environment, and the Environmental Management Support Service. Only a few of these organisations had representatives who spent a significant amount of time on the ground at the proposed study sites. Therefore, all of the people from these organisations were interested in the information we would gather while doing our project. Several organisations provided useful preliminary statistical information that put small-scale gemstone mining into the context of national development and the international market economy.

We spent three months at each site on our first visits in order to acquaint ourselves with the area, meet local authorities, and hold meetings with local conservation and development organisation officials. When we first arrived we held community meetings to introduce ourselves to the villagers in our two project sites. We explained that we were there to learn their customs, and especially to look at how they use their natural resources. After two months of participant observation and talking with many individuals and groups, we held a mini-conference on the benefits of conservation and sustainable resource use. At this point we also introduced the potential economic and social benefits of ecotourism. Many people at our first site were familiar with ecotourism due to the village's proximity to a well-known pre-established ecotourism site. During the following months at this site, we chose to focus our efforts on talking about and showing the importance of conservation.

We also held bi-weekly workshops on tools of ecotourism. A core group of 18 miners, seven of which were native to the project site area, and eleven of which were migrant miners, diligently assisted with these workshops. A total of 46 people over the course of the project helped facilitate these workshops. We taught two levels of English and French. We also photocopied pictures and taught those who assisted with workshops the scientific, French, and English names of all lemur species in the area and the ten most interesting native plant species.

At the second site we held similar workshops, yet we also helped initiate the inception a welcome center. We were unable to harness additional financial assistance during the project from the Rural Development Support Program (PSDR), part of a World Bank initiative, yet we were still able to erect information boards and build an open-air kiosk. This kiosk will now serve as a meeting site and a place where the village “treasurer” will collect an entrance fee of 4,000 MA (~1£) from each tourist that visits the site. We were also able to roof and furnish two small pre-existing houses, donated to the community from a large family in the village. These houses are now available for tourists to sleep in if they do not have tents. The small houses are furnished with double beds and mosquito nets. Although we were unable to attain World Bank funding during the project we helped a group of villagers generate a proposal that is currently being considered. Also, this village committee is now educated on how to access the PSDR funding and submit other “development” proposals.

We collected much data at both sites concerning how gemstones are mined, where the mining sites are located over time, the environmental impact of gemstone mining (documenting erosion, the mineral and bacterial content of fresh water upstream and downstream of the mining site, the number and types of trees cut over time, and what animals are hunted), the number of migrant miners to the area over time, villager’s opinions of the policies and laws concerning small-scale gemstone mining, and the supply chain of gemstones in Madagascar.

We wrote a brief summary of our results and presented them in both our sites to the villagers. We also made a power-point presentation for the organisations we had contacted upon arrival. We gave one presentation to the regional directors of these organisations, and several presentations to the interested parties at the national level of these organisations.

Due to the information we provided for several of the national environmental organisation directors (Conservation International, The World Wildlife Fund for Nature, Madagascar National Parks Association) have pledged to budget into their upcoming year’s funds work that addresses the environmental impact of small-scale mining. Currently, large-scale mining endeavors must comply with environmental standards set forth by the Malagasy government. Additionally, large-scale mining projects must include in their agendas the preservation of a certain amount of land within their proposed area. It essentially trades nature protection in one area for exploitation rights in an adjacent area. The Malagasy government adopted this strategy to increase environmental protection while decreasing the negative environmental impact of large-scale mining. What the current policies ignore is the multitude of environmental degradation caused by small-scale mining. The empirical data concerning this phenomenon is greatly lacking, hence the widespread interest in the results of this Rufford Project. Conservation International and the Ministry of Mines and Energy are now interested in implementing a system where, even at the small-scale mining level (artisanal gemstone mining in particular), there is a national policy to preserve forest and unspoiled waterways when a nearby area is designated or “sacrificed” to small-scale mining exploitation.

The results of our study span several areas of interest. We are currently writing a draft of this project and research to publish. We will submit our material to The Journal of Political Ecology, The Online Ecology and Society Journal, or any other journal that accepts our work.