Project Update: June 2010

Here we are past July's time for fleece, hat and socks, wouldn't you believe! Manintsy - cold (25/16 °C day/night or less) was the semiarid southwest Madagascar in winter; winter in the dry southwest where 'it never rains'. Well, never say 'never' and/or be prepared for rain in the no rain season and for beautiful double rainbows arching gently over the glowing morning skies …

Since our last update in February, ho avy has been on a 'high season rainbow ride', exciting in a way, admittedly speedy and bumpy some of the times, more like and downhill slalom race against time, where falling over exposed tree roots is unavoidable. Retrospectively, it's been a valuable growing time: our trees are growing and we are growing with them. We especially enjoyed the rainbow of colors left behind pens, pencils and brushes of Eco-Explorers, talented undergraduate students of the University of Michigan's School of Art and Design. These young students overflowing with creativity came to Madagascar expecting no rain. Although they got quite some, they seemed to greatly enjoy this mad ride, and so did we on ho avy & Madagascar Eco-Explorers' tour and project service work in Ranobe.

Some truly beautiful pieces of art were born on this three week long trip from mid May to June, exploring Madagascar and spending five days doing projects with ho avy in Ranobe. The students painted two interpretation panels: one for the native tree nursery and another one for the reforestation research center. Several oxen carts (and finally also oxen horns) were colorfully painted. Without doubts, the favorite motive is the Star Wars. With pride this cart has been riding to the next village and the city of Toliara! Bar relief sculpturing on cob walls on the reforestation center has adaptively used the wet walls leaving our planned spiny forest mural for another occasion in the future. A treadle pump for easier and playful water access has been built during the days of the group visit and another one completed in even shorter time by one volunteering student staying beyond the expedition.

Needless to say, the depth and breath of the experience may still be underrated and may only come with ample reflection. Quite deep impressions have anchored in minds and hearts of these young people exploring Madagascar, on their first step out of their secure homelands to the unknown - which you cannot change, it changes you though; Madagascar certainly does.

The art students were our largest, 19-person group hosted in Ranobe since last December, adding significantly to 4 Czech, 2 American, 1French, 4 Israeli, and 2 Spanish visitors spending with us up to several weeks, sharing their skills and expertise to advance various aspects of our program, from forest habitat description, GIS to business development. They have been a refreshment for ho avy as well as our hosting community.

The most recent partner of ho avy was a team of four Masters of Science students from the School of Natural Resources and Environment at the University of Michigan (www.hazomanga.org) coming to Madagascar with the group of the art students, interested in sustainable energy assessment and conservation management recommendations. They collected solar data, built housing for ho avy's solar system, designed and built a solar dryer, water filter and evaluated the feasibility of biofuels. The students interviewed the Ranobe

community on wood, charcoal and water use issues. Mapping of land use, deforestation and forest recovery, set a good ground for a long-term monitoring research. Being a well organized, dynamic and enthusiastic team with women in majority, they creatively filled their free time with experimental baking in our solar box oven. Banana bread, chocolate chip or oatmeal raisin cookies, among others, turned out being delicious field yoummies. Nicely done!

Ho avy's daily interactions with the villagers since October 2009, international visitors and cultural and language exchange have been raising environmental awareness and building capacity. Needless to say, information starvation and curiosity is apparent among villages of all age groups. Ho avy has been collaborating with the GTZ and Sokapila organizations on implementing the Kit Mad' ere, a tool introducing environmental education to schools and community. A workshop was held in early April for teachers from the schools in Ranobe and Ambolimalailaka. In March, ho avy organized a workshop to improve farming methods: introducing system of rice intensification (SRI). The workshop has been well attended and the method is now practiced on several FIMPAHARA fields.

Improved and alternative technologies brought by ho avy seem to be adopted: the fuel effective stove was in full operation, the biogas digester has been producing methane used by the ladies for cooking for several months now. The output of the biogas digester is an excellent fertilizer and FIMPAHARA used it for their crop fields. Ho avy's well, installed in December last year got a manual pump and has been in non-stop use by the villagers. Results of interviews show, the pump is greatly appreciated for easing everyday chores. Solar box oven has not have a break and delicious variations of bread, cakes, muffins, or roasted peanuts for snack indicate a growing appreciation of solar energy as a passive cooking option.

Speaking of solar - ho avy's solar system is now located on the second floor of ho avy's research center. Ho avy spiny forest research center will generate knowledge about how to conserve biodiversity through research, sustainable development and forest restoration. The center has been under construction over the last months – largely natural building, designed by Anthony, who has worked closely on it with the FIMPAHARA men. The building progress has been exciting, considering the tool limitations, e.g. a several month non-functional drill, so much of the building was done creatively - by hand and off the grid, with local wood, rock, roofing material, bamboo and adobe mix. The building is not far from being done; we target an inauguration to the end of this year. The center's surrounding is getting developed into a demonstration site of integrated sustainability, home gardening, multi-crop plots, agroforestry and more.

Agroforestry has been our focus activity since March. We raised fruit trees along with native trees in three tree nurseries on an area of 184 m^2. Nearly 10 000 native trees and 5500 fruit and multi-purpose trees have been nurtured. FIMPAHARA collected 75 species of native and 5 non-native species for medicines, non-invasive fast wood propagation and oil-rich seeds. While many of those are still nurtured, to June 2010, over 800 native and 750 fruit trees have been planted on 1.35 ha of FIMAHARA land: on edges of forest, in agroforestry polyculture plots and in live fences/hedges. Jointly with FIMPAHARA, we planted diverse fruit trees on ca 3 ha of crop fields. These efforts, i.e. planting indigenous and fruit species

on disturbed forest edges and reforesting in belts, aim to assist ecological forest recovery. We want to create 'ecotones' (transitional habitats) favoring wildlife colonization and assisting seed dispersal. Planted trees have been monitored for survival and growth.

The local community has been enthusiastic to participate and support these agroforestry trials. The planted species included native fruit trees ofen harvested from the forest, locally planted bananas, papaya, mango, guava, lemons and tamarinds and tested variety of species that are on the market, but not grown in Ranobe, such as litchi, clementine and orange, cashew, annona, passion fruit, pomegranate, avocado, loquat, date and coconut palms.

Ho avy's involvement on site for consistent three quarters of the year by now has been an invaluable experience which allowed observing and figuring the seasonality in terms of food growing. One has to skin-experience it, especially when coming from completely different climate. By living through the 'cold' parts of the year – we got it right now with April/May potato planting time. Besides potatoes, a 1 ha of garden has onion and garlic, tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, red beets and radishes, carrot and parsley, basil, lettuce and spinach, swiss chard, a variety of beans, peanuts, sesame, flex, several kinds of squash and melons. A few sunflowers have made our gardening efforts more cheerful. Malagasy people like rice, but they also like flowers and so do we. This is indeed a very exciting step forward to community-scale gardening, greater diversity of food production and important dietary supplements, that have been largely lacking.

For filling these gaps, we need to continue our mission; we let the exciting energy of the upcoming spring enter: rising temperatures, new beautiful flowers and fresh leaves or magnificent courtships of birds, bring inspiration to the next phase of ho avy's efforts in Ranobe. We have a few exciting goals and future prospects and will mobilize our efforts to reach them before this year's end, moving step by step towards sustainable future. Stay tuned if you'd like to hear more in few months…

forest, wildlife and research:
http://picasaweb.google.co.uk/mad.hoavy/Forest?authkey=Gv1sRgCMymx42X3dGdPA#

Eco-Explorer's art student trip:
http://picasaweb.google.co.uk/mad.hoavy/EcoExplorers?authkey=Gv1sRgCPPonbnmw5mtzgE#

MSc. students:
http://picasaweb.google.co.uk/mad.hoavy/MScStudents?authkey=Gv1sRgCJ__-tm8yu3KlwE#

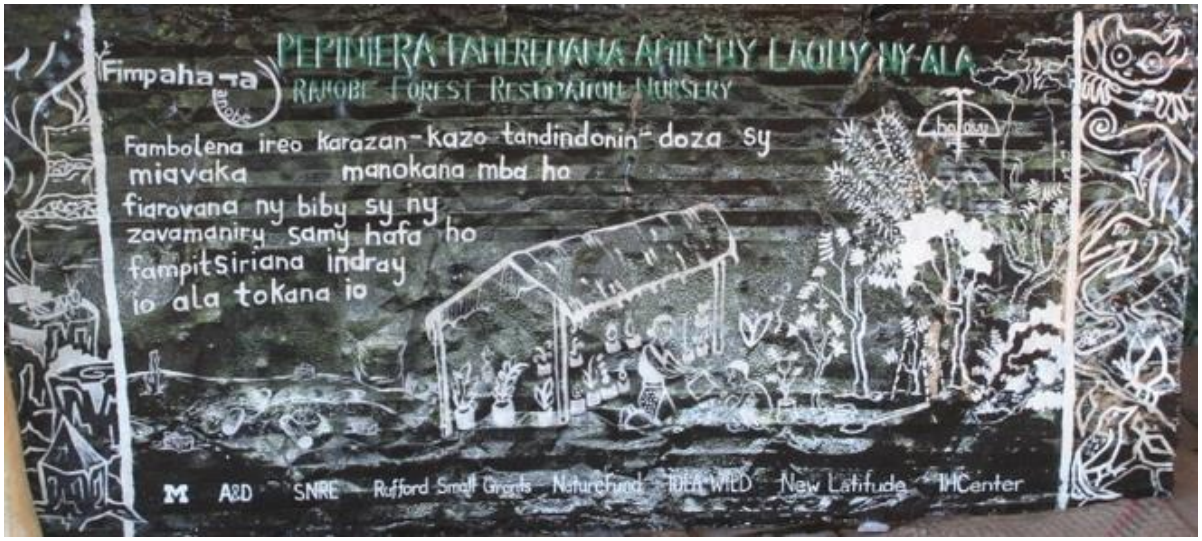
ho avy and community interactions:
http://picasaweb.google.co.uk/mad.hoavy/HoAvy_CommunityInvolvement_small?authkey=Gv1sRgCKvOyKfHxsj5jgE#

technical alternatives:
http://picasaweb.google.co.uk/mad.hoavy/TechnicalAlternatives?authkey=Gv1sRgCIOjpcuInprdjAE#

center construction:
http://picasaweb.google.co.uk/mad.hoavy/CenterConstruction?authkey=Gv1sRgCLXsh5r26rewgE#

nursery, agroecology, agroforesty & gardening:
http://picasaweb.google.co.uk/mad.hoavy/Agro?authkey=Gv1sRgCK-u6-G71MbQUQ#


Left: Biogas storage tank. Right: Gas meter for evaluating biogas production.



Native tree nursery interpretation panel.

Left: Diversity of native trees in tree nursery. Right: Native fruit and multipurpose tree nursery.

Left: Tree planting and construction of protective fences. Right: Seed sorting for planting.