Madagascar’s Pierced Heart

The island’s geographic isolation created a wonderland of biological richness. Now population pressures and political turmoil speed the plunder of its rosewood, minerals, and gems.



**By Robert Draper**

The young man in the shorts and sleeveless T-shirt stands in his pirogue and pulls it upstream with a long bamboo pole. The Onive River is shallow and moves swiftly against him. Overhead a brooding sky opens up and dispenses barrages of rain, then sunlight, then more rain. The young man, whose name is Remon, is as heedless of the weather as the crocodiles lying prostrate on the shore.

Gliding past him in the opposite direction, one every three minutes, are other piroguemen. Remon calls out to them; they holler back. They are his river mates, each ferrying a dark, monstrous log of illegally harvested rosewood downstream from the rain forest to the lumberyards in the northeastern Madagascan city of Antalaha. There a paycheck awaits. Once Remon drops us off at the edge of the forest, he will do the same.

Remon doesn't like the work. The timber boss who employs him—but whose name he does not know—has told Remon that he must paddle all day without pause because the rangers have been bribed to stay away for only a finite period, after which another bribe will be expected. Still, transporting the fallen trees is better than cutting them down, which had been Remon's previous job. He quit after concluding that the risks had become too great. While illegal logging had been going on for years, the pace had suddenly escalated: The forest was unpoliced and filled with organ­ized gangs, a free-for-all of deforestation spurred by the collapse of Madagascar's government in March of 2009 and by the insatiable appetite of Chinese timber procurers, who imported more than 200 million dollars' worth of rosewood from the country's northeastern forests in just a few months. One rosewood cutter Remon knew had been robbed of his harvest by forest thugs who told him, "There's 30 of us, one of you." And he's just heard that two men were decapitated with a machete over a timber dispute a few days ago.

The river grows still, and Remon lights a cigarette of tobacco and marijuana. He speaks of the *fady,* the taboos that protected the forest for centuries. There is always anxious talk among the timber thieves whenever an errant tree crushes a skull or the river rapids shatter a leg: *We have angered our ancestors. They are punishing us.* Elders have lectured Remon about pillaging sacred turf.

"Fine," he tells them. "Try feeding the trees to your family."

Remon used to feed his family by working in the vanilla fields outside of Antalaha, a coastal town that is, like the island itself, rich in resources and poor in every other way. Two decades ago Madagascar's president at the time, Didier Ratsiraka, was so proud of Antalaha's reputation as the world's vanilla capital that he dispatched an official to pay tribute to the town. "He thought we would be full of big buildings and paved roads," says a longtime vanilla exporter, Michel Lomone. "The president was very disappointed by the report his counselor gave him."

Since then a succession of cyclones and slumping prices have conspired to jostle the crown from the vanilla king's head. Today Antalaha is dusty and somnolent, and though its main boulevard, Rue de Tananarive, was finally paved in 2005 with funding from the European Union, the street's traffic consists largely of a few dinky taxis, rusty bicycles, chickens, goats, and, above all, pedestrians striding barefoot in the rain and holding over their heads the elephantine leaves known as traveler's palms to stay dry.

Or such was the traffic until the spring of 2009. During that season the streets of Antalaha suddenly began to roar with motorcycles. The one store on Rue de Tananarive that carried such vehicles promptly sold out. Responding to the demand, a second store opened up down the street and began doing crazy business as well. The buyers were rawboned young men, and everyone in Antalaha knew where their fleeting cash came from. It wasn't the vanilla fields. The same young men could be seen driving into town in the backs of pickup trucks astraddle great loads of illegally harvested timber, systematically filling their pockets by selectively cutting Madagascar's precious rosewood trees from the forest.

Madagascar is an island—the world's fourth largest, at over 225,000 square miles, but an island nonetheless. Though all islands are blessed with their own unique biosphere, Madagascar (which was dislocated from Africa some 165 million years ago) is a special case: Roughly 90 percent of its flora and fauna is found nowhere else on the planet. The extraterrestrial spectacle of carrot-shaped baobab trees, ghostly lemurs, and whole "forests" of towering stone spikes is inclined to make the world-weariest of visitors grow wide-eyed with innocent delight.

Its rare and haunting beauty coexists with a desperation among its people that defines everyday life. The Malagasy, the island's major ethnic group, have an expression that is elegant in its fatalism: *"Aleo maty rahampitso toy izay maty androany,"* or "It's better to die tomorrow rather than today." The typical Madagascan lives on about a dollar a day.

And considering that Madagascar's population of more than 20 million is growing 3 percent a year—one of the most rapid rates in Africa—the tension between rich land and poor residents on a finite landscape increases by the day. For this reason alarmed ecologists have termed Madagascar a biodiversity hot spot, deploring, in particular, the Malagasy practice of slash-and-burn agriculture, in which swaths of forest are torched and converted to rice fields. Just as the global environmental community rejoiced in 2002 when Marc Ravalomanana assumed the presidency on a green-friendly platform, so did they react with dismay in the spring of 2009 as the military routed Ravalomanana from office and installed a constitutionally underage former radio disc jockey in his place. As one veteran aid worker stationed in Madagascar said, "I feel like the past 25 years of work has been undone."

In September 2009, after months during which up to 460,000 dollars' worth of rosewood was being illegally harvested every day, the cash-strapped new government reversed a 2000 ban on the export of rosewood and released a decree legalizing the sale of stockpiled logs. Pressured by an alarmed international community, the gov­ernment reinstated the ban in April. Yet log­ging continues.

The outside world is in no position to lecture, given its own voracious appetite—sometimes benign, sometimes less so—for Madagascar's won­drous resources. The raiding of the forests illus­trates how easily the frail balance between human and ecological imperatives can be undone. But that balance has always been wobbly in Madagascar. Various foreign-owned holding groups own most of the rights to prospect and mine the country of its gold, nickel, cobalt, ilmenite, and sapphire (which once supplied a third of the world market). ExxonMobil began deep offshore oil exploration in Mad­agascar four years ago. Some of the finest Amer­ican guitar makers have long featured finger­boards con­structed of rare Madagascan ebony. In recent years the island's federal government has attempted to lease arable land to the South Koreans and sell water to the Saudis. In this come-and-get-it climate, much is extracted but little is gained on behalf of the average Malagasy. Small wonder, then, that local miners loot the countryside of precious gemstones to be sold in Asian markets. Or that animals such as the leaf-tailed gecko and the endangered plowshare tortoise are smuggled by small operators off the island to collectors. Or that the rawboned young men of Antalaha would decide it's better to die tomorrow while taking the money of Chinese rosewood buyers today.

"It's good for the economy, bad for the ecology," observes one man involved in the illicit rosewood business, smiling and shrugging as he hops on his motorcycle and speeds off. But the boomlet in Antalaha has proved to be a false one. Even leaving aside the devastating, long-term consequences of a plundered forest—the disappearance of precious wood in as much as 25,000 acres of the country's 11.3 million acres of protected areas, the extinction of lemurs and other endemic species, a plague of soil erosion that silts up rivers and wipes out nearby farmland, the loss of tourism revenue—the perverse side effects of the rosewood raiding are more immediately felt. The residents of Antalaha who suddenly found themselves dodging motorcycle traffic also began to notice the price of fish, rice, and other daily goods begin to climb. The reason was simple: Fewer men were out at sea or in the fields.

"They're in the forest," says Michel Lomone, the vanilla exporter. "Everyone's gone to the forest."

To go from Antalaha to the forest—meaning Masoala National Park, Madagascar's largest—requires a journey no one would undertake who does not need to do so. It begins with a three-hour drive southwest from the town, along dirt roads so badly mangled from the weight of lumber trucks that vehicles sink into the muddy ditches, and locals must be rounded up to help push them out. Then comes the four-hour pirogue trip up the Onive River, followed by a four-hour slog on foot through spongy rice fields, and another two hours along a slippery mud trail up and down the granite spine of dense primary forest—all of this under sporadic rainfall. Thus does one arrive at the edge of Masoala. But to find rosewood that has not yet been cut, one must push deeper, for many hours.

The park's southwestern border is Antongil Bay, where humpback whales noisily give birth between July and September. Within the wild, green womb of the 580,000-acre tropical rain forest, a stranger's doggedness may be rewarded with cameo appearances by orchids, carnivorous plants, serpent eagles, the dazzling Parson's chameleon, and the red ruffed lemur. Masoala offers a seeming infinity of medicinal herbs, wild berries, and firewood to villagers, who stride barefoot in and out of the forest daily, singing and chatting. In contrast, the young men who are here from the city on business appear lost in this damp, mysterious thicket.

For weeks they camp out in small groups beside the trees they've singled out for cutting, subsisting on rice and coffee, until the boss shows up. He inspects the rosewood, gives the order. They chop away with axes. Within hours a tree that first took root perhaps 500 years ago has fallen to the ground. The cutters hack away at its white exterior until all that remains is its telltale violet heart. The rosewood is cut into logs about seven feet long. Another team of two men tie ropes around each log and proceed to drag it out of the forest to the river's edge, a feat that will take them two days and earn them $10 to $20 a log, depending on the distance. While staggering through the forest myself, from time to time I come upon the jarring apparition of two stoic figures tugging a 400-pound log up some impossible gradient or down a waterfall or across quicksand-like bogs—a hard labor of biblical scale, except that these men are doing this for money. As is the man the pair would meet up with at the river, waiting to tie the log to a handcrafted *radeau,* or raft, to help it float down the rapids ($25 a log). As is the pirogueman awaiting the radeau where the rapids subside ($12 a log). As is the park ranger whom the timber bosses have bribed to stay away ($200 for two weeks). As are police at checkpoints along the road to Antalaha ($20 an officer). The damage to the forest is far more than the loss of the precious hardwoods: For each dense rosewood log, four or five lighter trees are cut down to create the raft that will transport it down the river.

At a bend in the river, the pirogues pull up to shore. A man with a mustache squats in a tent, smoking a hand-rolled cigarette. His name is Dieudonne. He works with the middleman, the boss on the ground, entrusted by the timber baron to select the trees for cutting and oversee the logs from the riverbank to the transport trucks. There have been 18 trucks this morning. Thirty or so rosewood logs lie scattered around Dieudonne's tent. His cut is $12 a log. I ask him what he'll do with his money. He reflects for a moment.

"I'd like to buy a motorcycle," he says.

The man who entranced the West with his pledges to usher in an eco-conscious era of *"Madagascar naturellement"* was Marc Ravalomanana, a former yogurt vendor who ascended to mayor of the capital city of Antananarivo, toppled the socialist President Ratsiraka, and formed the Tiako I Madagasikara (I Love Madagascar) political party in 2002. The president built roads and hospitals, distributed school uniforms, and symbolically cut the cord from the country's French colonialists by switching the currency from francs to Malagasy ariary. He also strengthened the ban on slash-and-burn agriculture (to no apparent effect, unfortunately), announced the Madagascar Action Plan to promote the country's biodiversity, and made a commitment to triple the size of Madagascar's protected reserves. Utterances such as "our most important asset is our environment" were music to the green community's ears, and, as one environmentalist said, "I felt like we had a seat at the table."

Alas, different kinds of "action plans" were transpiring under the president's table: He reportedly confiscated harvested rosewood from the timber barons only to sell it for personal profit. He demanded, in the presence of reporters, a 10 percent cut of an oil company's exploration costs. As the president's wallet grew fatter, the purchasing power of his countrymen plummeted. Thousands of protesters stormed the presidential palace on February 7, 2009. They were met by gunfire, which left at least 30 dead. But a month later the military turned on Ravalomanana, who fled to Swaziland. Once in exile, he was convicted of confiscating city land for his family's business and using public funds to purchase a $60-million plane from Walt Disney's nephew.

The world community refused to recognize the new government, led by 34-year-old former Antananarivo mayor Andry Rajoelina. The World Bank, the UN, USAID and other donors withdrew funding, and Madagascar achieved the dubious distinction of being the first country to receive a $110-million U.S. Millennium Challenge Account grant and then, four years later, be kicked out of the program. Western countries issued travel advisories against going to Madagascar. Ravalomanana's green hand had been slapped away. The new government had no money to pay for enforcement of park regulations.

One group was plainly delighted by the turn of events. On March 17, 2009, the day Marc Ravalomanana signed his resignation papers, as many as 20,000 packed Antalaha's soccer stadium. Twelve zebu cattle were roasted, beer flowed in abundance, and villagers danced to live music all night. The tab was paid for by the area's 13 timber barons. The forest was unprotected.

It was theirs.

The timber baron sits behind a desk of ebony, in a palisander chair, surrounded by palisander walls and ceiling and floor. Though his parents came over from China in the 1930s, and as he observes, "the Chinese people are crazy about rosewood," he himself was born near Antalaha and is partial to the russet brown color of palisander, a species closely related to the more beet-colored rosewood. His office is redolent with vanilla, owing to his adjacent warehouse, filled with bundles awaiting export. The growling of timber saws comes from his lumberyard, where piles of rosewood lie unhidden. Lean and muscular young men sit on benches outside the office door, where a note says, "People coming to pick up their paycheck must present their I.D."

His name is Roger Thunam, and it is widely believed that he is among the biggest rosewood businessmen in Madagascar. He is a compact, bespectacled man of middle age with distinctly Asian features, calmly self-possessed in the way of those who wield great power. The country's small population of Chinese émigrés are thoroughly assimilated into the community. Thunam is proof of this: He is a gregarious pres­ence around Antalaha, a soft touch when a local peasant needs help paying for a funeral, not to mention a good man to see when gainful employment is sought. Still, despite the many fees paid up the timber chain—to the cutters, the draggers, the rafters, the piroguemen, the middlemen, the truck drivers and cops along the highway en route to the ports at Iharana and Toamasina—the lion's share reverts to men like this one who, as he confesses, "can't remember when I was last in the forest."

"Thunam isn't a businessman—he's a trafficker," says one local official. "He cuts what isn't his. He's taken from the people's park. And now others think it's acceptable to take what's forbidden." Unsurprisingly, Thunam asserts otherwise. Born into the vanilla business, he expanded into timber 30 years ago. Since that time, he says, the government has issued him various permits.

Indeed, the government has lifted the ban on exporting rosewood when cyclones ravage the forest along the eastern coast of Madagascar, allow­ing trees damaged by the storms to be cut and traded. This fluctuating policy has allowed timber barons to stockpile illegal logs when the ban is in effect and then sell them as "salvaged" timber when the ban is temporarily lifted. The loophole only encourages further illegal cutting in the national parks—where the most rosewood can still be found.

Thunam insists he cuts only legal timber—though yes, his lumberyard is currently cluttered with rosewood logs, and he can explain this: "You wouldn't believe all of the men out there cutting. They're the same ones who've done slash and burn in the past. They've never been to school. They don't care about the next generation. They're the destroyers … But this lumber is already cut. If we don't buy it from them, someone else will."

He acknowledges that the rosewood-crazy Chinese are "the most important buyers." (A rosewood dining room set produced in China retails for upwards of $5,000.) And even when the new government allowed a temporary rever­sal of the ban to expire during the summer of 2009, the Chinese continued to place orders with Thunam for rosewood. To let his competitors have all that business would diminish him, he says. "In six months, we'd be very small."

The timber baron's wife, an ample middle-aged woman, enters the office and listens to the exchange. When her husband departs, she confesses, "I don't like to destroy the forests. I'd prefer to stop cutting and to just export what's already been cut. A few weeks ago I was on a plane, and I flew low over the forest. I could see the destruction. That's when I decided it should be stopped."

But how? Later I ask Antalaha's mayor, Risy Aimé. "To stop it is easy," he replies. "Go arrest 13 people"—referring to Roger Thunam and the other timber barons.

Every so often, the government has done just that, bringing charges against timber barons suspected of illegal trading. But the traders wield enormous power and have been able to take advan­tage of the chaotic legal status of logging. According to a report by Global Witness and the Environmental Investigation Agency, Thunam was one of only two barons (out of six known cases) found guilty of exporting rosewood; he was released from custody in 2008 after paying an out-of-court settlement. Charged again in 2009, Thunam was found not guilty. The timber baron can once more be found behind his ebony desk, presiding over a humming lumberyard.

My guide in Masoala, a former park employee named Rabe, has been into the forest over a hundred times in the past decade. He keeps up a brisk and barefoot pace through a tangled, claustrophobic wilderness, seeing it with intimate familiarity. But to his surprise, something has changed since his last visit a few months before.

"No lemurs," he says. "They've disappeared."

The rosewood thieves are behind this. Weary of a rice-only diet, they have begun to lay traps. We learn of one team that captured 16 lemurs in a single day. Not all of them are being eaten on the spot. In the town of Sambava, just north of Antalaha, three restaurants feature lemurs on their menu, despite federal laws. In this way the rain forests of northeastern Madagascar are rapidly losing the red ruffed, the fork-marked, the greater dwarf, and the aye-aye. Lemurs are found in no other country on Earth, save the nearby Comoros islands.

"We don't want to conserve an empty forest, where the only thing you can come to see is trees," says primatologist Jonah Ratsimbazafy of the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust. For all of Madagascar's ecological richness, central to its multimillion-dollar tourist trade is its quintessential mascot, attested to by the thousands who visit the Analamazaotra Special Reserve. These bug-eyed, tree-dwelling primates fascinate not only because they are here and only here, but also because they are here in such diversity. Though virtually all 50 species of lemurs are polygamous, have luxurious tails, and many tend to grunt like pigs, there's also the black-and-white indri, which is monogamous, has no tail, and rocks the forest with spectral wails. Incredibly, scientists continue to discover new species of lemurs on the island. But each species is few in number, and in the meantime, five different lemurs inhabit the list of the world's 25 most endangered primates.

As yet, no national outpouring of sympathy for the lemur's plight has emerged. The Malagasy "should be proud of lemurs because Madagascar's the only place for them," says Ratsimbazafy. "But some people here don't know or care. The Malagasy who don't live near tourist areas think that lemurs are just for the *Vazaha* [white people]—they don't see the benefits." In fact, although some tribes consider certain species of lemur to be sacred, the rather alarming-looking aye-aye, with its outsize eyes and ears, is believed by tribes in the north to be an evil omen and is therefore killed on the spot.

Such taboos have governed Malagasy conduct for centuries. They're admonitions from the ances­tors, believed to linger on Earth as inter­mediaries to the afterlife and, therefore, to be heeded and appeased—sometimes, as I witnessed, through *famadihana,* a ceremony in which ancestors' bones are dug up, ceremonially wrapped in fresh white shrouds, and danced with around the tomb before being returned to the earth. In different tribes, it's fady to touch a chameleon or to talk about crocodiles or to eat pork or to work on Thursdays. Numerous fady prohibit the desecration of a mountain, a large boulder, a stand of trees, or even an entire forest—all evidence of a deep, if complicated, connection to the land and a spiritual investment in its good health. Nonetheless, the fady that tend to be heeded most reliably are those that do not collide with the Malagasy verity that it's better to die tomorrow.

"You see that bald patch?" says Olivier Behra, pointing to a conspicuously deforested swath amid acres of trees. "There's a guy over there who's been cutting. I'm trying to get him to stop."

"How do you propose to do that?" I ask.

Smiling, Behra says, "Employ him."

Behra's efforts represent an enlightened, if localized, solution to Madagascar's resource dilemma: Promote the immediate benefits of a vital forest to villagers. The Frenchman first came to Madagascar in 1987 on a UN project to save the unloved but seriously depleted crocodile population. Realizing that "if you give value to crocodiles, then people will become interested," he began to pay the locals to harvest crocodile eggs. Since 2000 Behra has been applying the same formula to the endangered forests of Madagascar through his NGO, Man and the Environment. In the woodlands of Vohimana a hundred miles east of the capital, Behra encountered a forest that had been halved over the previous four decades. Using the expertise of the locals, he cataloged 90 medicinal plants, then set up schemes to market them overseas. The French fragrance company Chanel became interested in extracts from Madagascan leaves like *marungi*. By 2007 the deforestation in Vohimana had ceased. Instead of hundreds of villagers slashing and burning, they're now collecting and selling leaves never thought to have economic value.

"I built myself a house here," says Behra. "The people see I'm not leaving tomorrow, so they can trust me." He's been a resourceful but unimposing presence. Recognizing that "you can't just take a lifelong woodcutter and expect to train him in agriculture," Behra persuaded the Madagascan government to allow the locals to continue to use a portion of the forest to harvest wood for domestic charcoal use. Having learned that there was a lemur hunter in the village, Behra employed the man as a guide for lemur-obsessed tourists. Another man who had made a living harvesting the forest's rare orchids is now the head of Behra's orchid conservatory. When Behra considered a project to farm the forest's wild pigs, which were destroying the cassava plantation he had set up, the Betsimisaraka tribesmen informed him that pigs were fady, and "you have to respect that." He has persuaded Chanel to donate money for medical staff and school lunches in Vohimana.

"Working on a small scale the way Behra is doing may be more effective than these dreams of saving the whole forests," says Jean-Aimé Rako­toarisoa, for 30 years the director of the Museum of Art and Archaeology at the University of Antananarivo. "Most of the environmental programs say, Don't burn the forest because this is your future. But these people can't wait for the future. They're hungry now. You have to show the immediate benefit to the community."

That's a message getting through to a handful of large-scale resource extractors. Rakotoarisoa now serves as a consultant to the Ambatovy project, a $4.5-billion nickel and cobalt mining operation led by a foreign consortium and located near Olivier Behra's forest. The project, though controversial because it has not yet deliv­ered on all of its promises, has taken care to avoid fady sites, compensate (and, where necessary, relocate) affected villagers, and continually engage with the community. These efforts aren't altruistic, Rakotoarisoa readily concedes. "For the sake of the company's image, they have to take care of the environmental and social concerns. They can't do business here if there's social protest."

On the southeastern tip of the island near Tôlanaro, the Anglo-Australian mining company Rio Tinto is attempting an ambitious good-neighbor policy to offset its $940-million project along the Indian Ocean coast extracting ilmen­ite, rich in titanium, a common ingredient in paints, paper, and plastic. The activity has involved gutting unique littoral forests containing 19 endemic species as well as medicinal plants and basket-weaving reeds. Still, in contrast to the timber barons several hundred miles up the coast, Rio Tinto is trying to preserve every single species. The company has set aside forestland for conservation, launched an agricultural training program, built a public seaport, and has plans to begin rehabilitating the land next year.

"We have high standards, and we'd like to influ­ence other mining companies to be the same way," says Manon Vincelette, a forest engineer hired in 1996 to direct Rio Tinto's biodiversity program. Though the residents of Tôlanaro have a new road, new and renovated schools, and, in some cases, new jobs at the mine, local skepticism remains as to whether the foreign company is looking after any interest other than its own. "Rio Tinto is doing good things," says the ethnologist Jean-Aimé Rakotoarisoa. "But I've heard the rumors in that community—and from a social standpoint, rumor is more important than facts. You can't just deal with engineers and experts. There is no other way; you must know exactly the mind of the people."

The Antalaha airport is small and wholly unadorned. Dogs and chickens poke around for scraps of food. Several dozen people await the incoming flight from Antananarivo. Through the doorway steps Roger Thunam, accompanied by his assistant. The timber baron walks from one side of the building to the other, shaking everyone's hands, hugging women, trading fond words.

Then he strolls outside and, until the arrival of the plane, leans contentedly against a fruit stand and drinks from a coconut with the other vil­lagers—no different from the rest of them, a man of the people, one who knows their mind … and one who provides, at least for today.