

Madagascan Islander Awarded for Heroic Conservation Effort

One man's mission to protect and restore his local environment

Rabary Desiré, a research and eco-tourism guide from northeastern Madagascar, has been honoured for his remarkable forest conservation achievements by Seacology – a leading environmental group working to protect the biological diversity of the world's island ecosystems. The Seacology Prize is awarded every year to recognise

the heroic efforts of indigenous islanders, who might not otherwise receive any publicity, but who have dedicated their time or risked their lives to safeguard the local environment and culture.

Rabary Desiré has been using what little money he saves to buy and protect forested land. Yet, he has few possessions, other than books and some clothing, and he shares his two-room home with five other family members. Years of dedication have finally culminated in his own small, private, nature reserve – Antanetiambo, which means 'on the high hill'. It is the only reserve in northern Madagascar that has been created, from start to finish, by a single local resident.

Madagascar, the fourth largest island in the world, has been recognised as one of the top eight mega-biodiverse countries on the planet and one of the top five most threatened ecology hotspots. Around 80 per cent of its plants and animals can be found nowhere else on Earth. And since human arrival, 2,300 years ago, over 90 per cent of the island's original forest cover has been lost.

During a political coup in 2009, habitat disturbance greatly increased while the government was otherwise preoccupied. Park rangers and forest guides were forced to abandon their posts by the armed groups who moved in to cut down valuable rosewood trees. At this difficult time, Rabary emerged as a true conservation hero, taking huge personal risks to speak out against the rising tide of illegal logging.

Today, thanks to his vision, Rabary's reserve is a small zone of protected forest surrounded by rice fields, in the shadow of the mountainous Marojejy National

Park – a World Heritage Site. Managed by a local co-operative, Antanetiambo has become a sanctuary for the remarkable variety of indigenous plants and animals, as well as a natural laboratory for study, research and enjoyment.

Rabary is also regarded as one of the world's leading authorities on the ecology of the critically endangered silky sifaka lemur – the flagship species of Marojejy. Less than a thousand of these primates are estimated to remain and they can only be found in this region. Known as 'angels of the forest', if they were to vanish from Madagascar, they would be gone from the world altogether.

An enthusiastic educator and one of few locals fluent in Malagasy, English, and French, Rabary still finds time to co-teach environmental education classes at local schools and spread the message of conservation. He has also helped establish a women's income-generation project in his home village and has played a key role in the development of the region's eco-tourism – vital to the nation's economy.

Still living in the village where he was raised, Rabary had never been overseas until travelling to California in October to attend the Seacology award ceremony. Receiving the prize of \$10,000, he said: "I feel lucky for myself and Madagascar. I plan to use these funds for projects such as reforestation, developing tourist infrastructure and purchasing the land around Antanetiambo Nature Reserve to increase the size of it and the amount of protected land in the region." He continued: "This award will help to preserve the precious biodiversity of Madagascar ... as well as fight the ongoing battle against massive

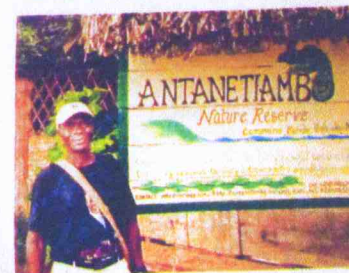


deforestation and the possible extinction of many beloved species." After thanking Seacology for the prize, he added: "The whole region will never forget it."

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Left: Rabary Desiré with his five year-old son, Oceano
Photo: © Rachel Kramer
Top right: the silky sifaka lemur
Below: Rabary at the entrance of Antanetiambo Nature Reserve
Photo: © Erik Patel / erikpatel.com



“ We are extremely proud of Rabary's achievements ... and we are honoured to support his continuing efforts to preserve the unique biodiversity of Madagascar ”

Duane Silverstein
executive director, Seacology