

# Not Your Average Yard Work

**A Madagascar villager puts nearly all of his earnings toward buying and reforesting unprotected lands—including the \$10,000 prize he recently won.**

By **Jeffrey Allen**

posted Dec 28, 2010

A self-educated naturalist from Madagascar has been awarded a prestigious international prize after spending almost all the money he's ever earned to purchase and protect endangered tropical forest.

At the award ceremony, Rabary Désiré announced he would use the \$10,000 prize money to reforest denuded landscapes near his home in Madagascar's Andapa valley, build up eco-tourism infrastructure, and purchase more land around the **Antanetiambo nature reserve**, which he created entirely with his own funds, bit by bit over the past 10 years.

Antanetiambo means "on the high hill." The private reserve "sticks out dramatically as a small island of forest in a sea of rice fields," says Seacology, the California-based nonprofit that awarded its annual prize to Désiré this year.

Madagascar is considered one of the most threatened natural areas in the world. The island nation split off from all other land masses over 60 million years ago, leaving its plant and animal species to evolve in total isolation. As a result, about 80 percent of its plants and animals are found nowhere else on Earth. But more than 90 percent of the country's original forests have disappeared since humans arrived on the island, causing the extinction of untold irrecoverable species.

Désiré has devoted vast amounts of his time and resources to try to halt and reverse that trend—at least in the area around where he lives. The soft-spoken guide and teacher has an encyclopedic knowledge of plants and animals despite never having gone to school to study them—he learned it all from reading books and helping researchers working in the local forests. He can identify many plant species by taste alone.

Though he was born, raised, and lived his entire life in a traditional village, he speaks both English and French fluently.

Désiré has worked as a tourist guide and research assistant in the area for over a decade. He has almost no possessions—other than books and a little clothing—and shares his traditional two-room house with five other family members. With the money he makes from guiding, he buys forested land in order to protect it.

While Désiré's protected nature reserve covers about 60 percent of the forest where it's situated, the remaining 40 percent is under constant threat from the surrounding inhabitants.

Though the region is very rural, its population density is considered quite high. And Madagascar has one of the highest population growth rates of any country in Africa.

Farming provides the primary sustenance for almost all the local families, and so cultivable land is extremely sought after—to burn, flood, and fill with rice, which the Malagasy consume at a higher rate than any other people in the world. Plus, most families cook on traditional wood stoves—adding to the pressures facing the small tracts of remaining forest.

Désiré hopes to purchase the remainder of the forested area around his Antanetiambo reserve and initiate a reforestation and monitoring program.

Working against him are the entwined forces of poverty and political instability—forces that have been growing since a 2009 coup left Madagascar with a weak and disputed government. As the fragile economy made scant livelihoods even more tenuous, local residents, desperate for more land to farm, began to move the boundary markers of the protected national forest in the hills outside Désiré's Andapa valley. No one was there to stop them. Overnight, rice fields shaved the edges off the World Heritage Site.

International timber barons began exploiting the unpoliced forests at unprecedented rates as well, enticing impoverished local residents to cut precious 500-year-old and older rosewood trees and transport them to ports a few hundred kilometers downstream. The timber businessmen would then arrange to ship most of the endangered logs to buyers in China, where a rosewood dining set can sell for more than \$5,000.

During this period of instability, Désiré has worked as an investigator and spokesperson against illegal rosewood logging—when he's not guiding tourists, helping lemur researchers, or teaching environmental education classes in communities around the forest.

"After many years of hard work and political instability, finally we are having some local conservation success," Désiré said as he received the Seacology Prize earlier this month. "This award will help preserve the precious biodiversity and high

**Working against Désiré are the entwined forces of poverty and political instability... Local residents, desperate for more land to farm, began to move the boundary markers of the protected national forest in the hills outside Désiré's Andapa valley.**

endemism of Madagascar, as well as fight the ongoing battle against massive deforestation and possible extinction of many beloved species."