

Title: Conservation Through Color
Project Country: Madagascar
Sponsoring College: University of Florida
Student Leader: Laura Haynes (USA, University of Florida)

A two-sentence summary of the goals of your project

Conservation Through Color aimed to fund women artists in Andasibe, Madagascar to illustrate a children's coloring book for local schools. This book intended to supplement environmental education, raise awareness of this island's biodiversity, and create positive outlooks on conservation through art.

Did other fund-raising efforts contribute to your project? What were they?

We originally had additional funding for travel and living in Madagascar through the Research Tutorials Abroad grant with UF's African Studies department. Since our travel was canceled, we relied entirely upon the Projects for Peace funds to accomplish this project virtually.

How did you come up with the idea for your project?

The idea for this project began when we took a class on primate conservation taught by our advisor, Dr. Kim Valenta. We learned about the dire need for conservation in Madagascar, a biodiversity hotspot with critically endangered wildlife and one of the world's highest poverty rates. In early conversations on project ideas, Dr. Valenta brought up the schools in Andasibe, Madagascar, where she conducts her research. She conveyed that there was a need for environmental education in Andasibe that could not be met with current funding in that region. Local schools had been asking the Mad Dog Initiative (MDI), a non-profit that Dr. Valenta co-directs, if they could help. With our shared background in anthropology, Dominic's expertise in wildlife ecology, and Laura's passion for the arts, we determined that we wanted our end product to be an educational coloring book illustrated by artists in the community.

Why do you think the issue your project is responding to exists?

The lack of environmental education in Madagascar's rural communities stems from systemic issues in their government and economic systems. Madagascar's federal government underwent a coup d'état in 2009, which had cascading effects on stability and infrastructure. Madagascar is burdened by immense poverty leading to a lack of internal funding for schools and biodiversity conservation.

Why did you choose your host site to work in?

We chose Andasibe, Madagascar for the people's eagerness to develop environmental education opportunities. Local schools lacked the funding necessary to sustain such a program on their own. When the idea for a coloring book arose, we learned about the local Andasibe artists whose work focused on the biodiversity of the region. We saw this as an opportunity to work alongside these artists to create materials by the community for the community.

Did you feel at any point that the project was not going to work? In what ways?

When the Davis Foundation asked us to resubmit our proposal with a remote option, there was some concern. Could a remote option work? How could we connect with our stakeholders in a meaningful way? Who can help us on the ground—across the world—in Madagascar? It was only after we answered these questions that we felt comfortable moving forward with our revised proposal. However, there came another point when we wondered, "Given the current state of our world during the pandemic, is our project what the world currently needs for peace?" We had numerous discussions about the value of science education and its role in our current world. We both realized soon after how vital environmental education can be in promoting conservation and ecosystem health, which can have cascading effects on human-wildlife interactions and global health.

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What were the challenges you encountered in communicating with people?

Due to travel restrictions, Conservation Through Color planning and management occurred remotely in Gainesville, Florida, USA. The project's supply purchasing and implementation occurred in Andasibe, Madagascar. We had to communicate from Florida with our partners in Madagascar while combating a seven-hour time difference. Fortunately, with the guidance of our advisor Dr. Kim Valenta, a person experienced in successfully coordinating projects with this same temporal challenge, we found our solution: Facebook Messenger. We coordinated most of our efforts in Florida days in advance—recognizing the possible consequences of the time difference—so that implementation in Madagascar would be on schedule.

How do you define peace?

Peace means we can each do a little bit to help make the world a better place. In the face of overwhelming despair from the near-constant onslaught of tragedy worldwide, small actions can make a difference. Our project helped make things better for hundreds of families whose children now have educational resources to learn about their environment through art.

How does or will your project contribute to peace? Short-term? Long-term?

Our project contributes to peace in both a short-term and long-term sense. Short-term, the results of our project are a tangible coloring book and school supplies. Teachers and students will be able to use these throughout the school year and can continue to reprint the book for use in interactive activities. These are special educational tools normally unavailable to students in the rural villages where these schools operate. Long-term, we hope that by empowering students through engagement in the arts and environmental education, Malagasy students will be able to make informed decisions about their local wildlife as they grow into adulthood. Education offers children a voice to express their experiences and understanding of their surroundings. There are many long-term effects we are unable to measure at this moment, but even the reduction of poaching, positive outlooks on the national park, and inspiration to study art and science are potential impacts we look forward to.

Please describe changes created by the project during the summer:

In early June we assembled our team of artists: six individuals who we would be working with to develop the illustrations for our coloring book. For their time and work, we compensated each of our artists the equivalent of a year's worth of income. This is particularly impactful during the pandemic because the main source of income for many artists—ecotourism—is simply unavailable. With their permission, we also credited them in our coloring book and printed a color photo of all of them, something many of them have never had. By openly attributing the work to them, their artwork is advertised, and we hope for the potential that they could receive future commissions as a result. From translation to transportation logistics, we compensated everyone involved. For printing the coloring book, we invested in a printing company near the community rather than outsourcing and shipping in the books. We wanted as much of the funding as possible to be invested in Madagascar. The books will be distributed to nine primary schools in the Andasibe region as part of the upcoming school year. Including illustrations of local mammals, birds, insects, and reptiles/amphibians and informational captions, this book is an educational resource that children can engage with to learn more about Madagascar's diverse wildlife. Throughout the course of implementing this project after so many years of planning, we were still surprised to learn about differences in currency and the costs of supplies. The funding went a long way and so we were able to create an addition to our project, being a "Conservation Through Color Scholar" fund that teachers can draw upon for school supplies, to provide for the future.

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Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has it changed you?

Carrying out our project put so much into perspective about the realities of the community we were working with. On paper, we understood the situation in Madagascar, but that pales in comparison to actual experience working with people who struggle with poverty and food insecurity. There were many things we had to learn along the way to accomplish this project as we developed our leadership and communication skills.

Was your project impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?

To overcome challenges with communication and remote working, our partners on the ground carried out our project in Andasibe and the surrounding communities. People such as Radoniaina Rafaliarison and Irène Toutoune Ramanantenasoa coordinated with vendors, artists, and local community leaders on our behalf to forward our project's progression. A highlight of conducting a remote project was the increase in available funds since many of the original student expenses were unnecessary. Initially, we wanted to purchase more school supplies, however, up to this point, we had met the current needs of the community. Purchasing more crayons, books, and art supplies at the same time could create storage issues for the schools. So, we proposed we set up a Conservation Through Color Scholar Fund in association with the nonprofits we are working with in Andasibe. This fund effectively donates to our partner organization, the Mad Dog Initiative (MDI), in association with Association Mitsinjo towards our project's sustainability. Throughout the year, when more coloring books, art supplies, and school materials are needed, teachers can request the supplies from our partner, MDI. Since 2017, MDI has worked alongside Mitsinjo to find the funding to pay teacher's salaries, provide school supplies, and provide free meals to all school-aged children each day. Typically, when basic needs like this arise in the region amongst the schools, teachers or community leaders will directly reach out to MDI's project manager, Radoniaina Rafaliarison, for assistance. Overwhelmingly, support for education and school programs has only been possible thanks to private donations – many conservation organizations do not fund this type of work, though it is clearly important. With Radoniaina Rafaliarison being so active in the community, this would address the logistics of communicating the need for school supplies and allocating funds to be dispersed. We expect that school/community leaders will approach Radoniaina for help as needs materialize. With these additional funds aside, Radoniaina would confirm the appropriateness of the request with Dr. Valenta and Dr. Randriana, and then disburse funds to schools on an as-needed basis.

If future Projects for Peace grantees experience similar pandemic-related challenges (or perhaps wish to simply propose a remote project), we suggest building your team network and lines of communication early.

“Implementing and adapting our project through two years of the pandemic changed my perspective on my strengths and capabilities to create impact for conservation and people alike.” -Laura Haynes

Contact

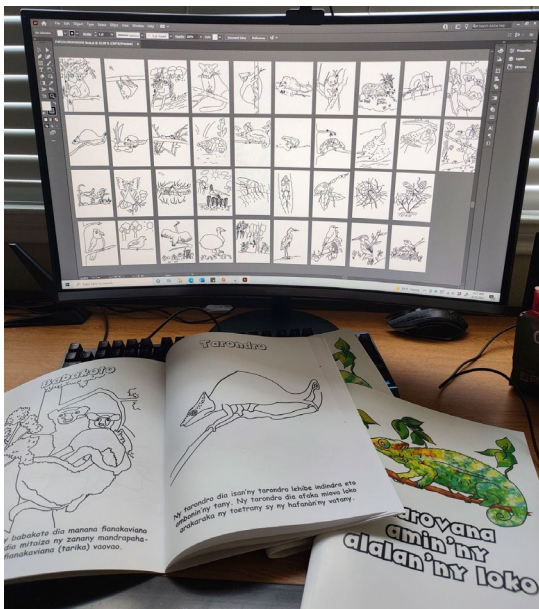
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Section II: Photographs



Our six artists who created the illustrations for our coloring book.



Our virtual workstation where we digitally traced the artist's illustrations and formatted them. Scientists from MDI helped us translate the captions into the regional dialect of Malgasy. We chose a chameleon for the cover to represent the biodiversity of Madagascar.