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Territory of Life in Madagascar: How a Community is Reclaiming Its Future

In the highlands of Madagascar, in the Vakinankaratra region, Lake Andranobe is surrounded by mountains, forests and farmland. Its name, which translates to "Water of All," reflects its significance: it has always been more than a source of fish. It is part of cultural memory and collective responsibility, a place of belief, ritual and identity. "The lake has cultic value for the people, some even go there to ask for blessings," explains Rakotoson Henri. Having grown up around the lake, Rakotoson is now one of its community leaders. According to local history, the lake was formed many generations ago by twelve ancestors who built a dam, creating a shared resource to sustain their descendants. As the community grew, so did the number of villages. Today, around 1,200 people live in the area surrounding Andranobe. For years, the community fished, farmed and passed down knowledge rooted in tradition and respect.

This balance began to shift in 2002: "We observed a serious deterioration in the lake and its biodiversity," Rakotoson recalls. Fish species declined. Catches shrank. The balance that had sustained generations came under threat.

Faced with ecological decline, the community organised itself. Local grassroots initiatives emerged to restore rules for resource use. "At first, it was about managing fishing," Rakotoson says. "But we realised that simply transferring the management of fishery resources wasn't enough." The lake could not be protected in isolation, it was connected to forests, farmland and the social fabric of the community itself. This realisation led them to broaden their perspective and become what is known as a 'Territory of life', or more formal: Indigenous and Community Conserved Area (ICCA).

Rebuilding governance from the ground up

ICCAs are governed and protected by local communities, ensuring that biodiversity conservation is linked to culture, values and livelihoods. Their human rights–based approach recognises the central role of communities and makes their historical and current conservation efforts visible and valued. In this way, they represent a means of reconciling community governance and sustainable development. If nationally recognised, ICCAs have the potential to contribute to the implementation of the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), particularly to achieving its Target 3: protecting 30% of land and sea by 2030.

For a community, being recognised as an ICCA requires structure, commitment and consensus. Rakotoson, now vice-president of the TAFO-MIHAAVO national network and coordinator of Indigenous and Community Heritage Areas in the Indian Ocean, explains the three main criteria: "The first concerns strong governance with rules and assemblies, and respect for cultural dimensions. The second criterion relates to shared assets, including natural and cultural resources, and thirdly, communities need a long-term vision for biodiversity protection and sustainable management."

In Andranobe, this meant mapping the territory, agreeing on a five-year action plan, and strengthening the sense of belonging. "This process transforms not only the rules and structures," Rakotoson says, "but also the way residents perceive themselves as part of the same territory. All stakeholders should be involved – from the Ministry of Fisheries and the Ministry of the Environment to traditional and religious leaders." Ultimately, the strength of Andranobe lies in its people, according to Rakotoson: "At the local level, we are a true community of destiny, united by common rules and showing solidarity in times of difficulty as well as in times of joy." This unity is visible in everyday life: in community work to restore ecosystems, in the protection of sacred sites, and in the transmission of knowledge about medicinal plants and sustainable fishing practices. At the heart of this transformation is the community itself.

> "Communities need a long-term vision for biodiversity protection and sustainable management."

Global policy meets local reality

The story of Andranobe is part of a much larger effort to address the global biodiversity crisis. Around the world, ecosystems are under pressure, threatening food systems, water security and climate stability. In response, countries have committed to ambitious targets through the Global Biodiversity Framework, supported by initiatives like the NBSAP Accelerator Partnership. Projects such as *Strengthening National Implementation of Global Biodiversity Targets*, implemented by GIZ on behalf of BMZ and NORAD, aim to turn these commitments into action by supporting communities like Andranobe.

In Madagascar, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Laos and Peru, Indigenous Peoples and local communities receive context-sensitive support from GIZ while leading efforts to have their territories recognized as Other Effective Conservation Measure (OECM) or ICCAs. GIZ recognizes that conservation is not only about formerly designated protected areas imposed from above – it often emerges from Indigenous Peoples and local communities, who have long stewarded their environments through sustainable use. There is a need for stronger recognition of customary rights, enhanced technical capacity for ecological monitoring, and improved access to financial and technical resources. An ongoing challenge is building partnerships without creating dependency. “Setting up other ICCAs depends first and foremost on individual awareness, determination and perseverance in the face of obstacles. Solidarity, unity and, above all, transparency are essential to maintain trust and ensure the success of our actions,” Rakotoson notes. “But partnerships need to be carefully managed, because the ultimate goal is autonomy and sustainability, without excessive dependence on external aid.”

In Andranobe, the new rules that govern the lake are rooted in tradition, in the stories of the twelve ancestors, and in the shared understanding that the land and water belong to everyone – including future generations. This process has strengthened both governance and community identity. Residents now see themselves as part of a shared territory, connected by common rules and collective responsibility for restored ecosystems and protected sacred sites. In the end, Andranobe is not just a place; it is a commitment – and that commitment flows through everything, like the water itself.

Andranobe
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