Balancing conservation and cash cropping in Madagascar

**MADAGASCAR** is home to unrivalled natural beauty and unique species richness of worldwide significance. These attributes and concerns about local deforestation led to creation of several protected areas – including the Masoala National Park (1997) and the Makira Natural Park (2012) – with funding from various national and international actors. Located in the island’s northeast, the Masoala and Makira parks are two of the largest conservation zones in Madagascar and harbour major shares of its endemic biodiversity, including endangered animal species and numerous plants with medicinal qualities.

The protected areas provide global benefits such as biodiversity preservation and carbon storage, but they create serious challenges for the local Malagasy people who rely on these landscapes. They limit the land and forest resources available for food, shelter, income, and more. A better alignment of the visions and actions of the various land users is needed to enable sustainable regional development.

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**KEY MESSAGES**

- In north-eastern Madagascar, the competing interests of conservationists, actors participating in cash-crop value chains, and local farmers put pressure on local land resources.
- Deforestation related to subsistence farming and cash cropping remains ongoing.
- The well-being of local people overwhelmingly depends on ecosystem services from surrounding forests, subsistence farming, and cash cropping.
- The competing land users have distinct land-related visions and values. Aligning them is crucial for sustainable development. But coordination and negotiation between the concerned stakeholders is lacking.
- Distant and local conservation and cash-crop actors must make their land-related visions explicit, negotiate on behalf of consensus or compromise, and be transparent about the “winners” and “losers” of different pathways. Targeted projects could help to test different pathways towards shared visions of development.

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**Tension between conservation and agriculture**

Since pre-colonial times, farmers in north-eastern Madagascar have practised shifting-cultivation subsistence farming to ensure rice supplies in the villages. Authorities have long blamed shifting cultivation for local deforestation and species loss. This and other factors galvanized high-level support for creation of protected areas.

The “telecoupled landscapes” project investigated land use changes in two case study landscapes in north-eastern Madagascar. Results showed that between 1990 and 2017, deforestation continued in our study areas at an average rate of about 1.25%, albeit with strong fluctuations from year to year. With few other options available, local populations depend on subsistence farming, forest resources, and income from cash cropping to ensure their well-being. Park-related access restrictions that limit their ability to farm or hunt bush meat, for example, can eventually become food security issues.

Crucially, our research shows that in addition to shifting cultivation, cash cropping is now driving deforestation in north-eastern Madagascar. Between 2015 and 2019, booming global vanilla prices fuelled a local resurgence in vanilla growing. There are now about 80,000 vanilla farmers along the country’s east coast, and vanilla exports are a major contributor to the country’s economy.

In addition, the establishment of the protected areas themselves also caused some initial deforestation. They triggered a scramble to secure land by clearing areas for cultivation and staking claims before the protected status went into effect. Finally, cyclones and national political instability were also responsible for forest loss.

Overall, looking ahead, our analysis of land use decision-making suggests that farmers will continue growing cash crops well into the future. However, a recent sharp drop in vanilla prices highlights the risks of market dependence for Malagasy farmers.

**Lack of collaboration exacerbates difficulties**

Research by our team also took a detailed look at the broader, geographically distant international networks behind conservation and cash cropping in north-eastern Madagascar. In particular, we...
Bringing stakeholders together and balancing goals

Local people’s visions for the future

Telecoupling: A new perspective on land use governance

Telecoupled Landscape Briefs feature highlights and policy implications from research and practical work conducted in the project “Managing telecoupled landscapes” of the Swiss N4D programme (www.n4d.ch), funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). At sites in Laos PDR, Myanmar, and Madagascar, researchers investigated ways of securing ecosystem service flows and human well-being in and between telecoupled landscapes. 

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FURTHER READING

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