



## MADAGASCAR, THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

T R SHANKAR RAMAN

*'That's the effect of living backwards,' the Queen said kindly: 'it always makes one a little giddy at first –'*

*'Living backwards!' Alice repeated in great astonishment. 'I never heard of such a thing!'*

*'– but there's one great advantage in it, that one's memory works both ways.'*

*'I'm sure mine only works one way,' Alice remarked. 'I can't remember things before they happen.'*

*'It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards,' the Queen remarked.*

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

The sound of rushing waters, the whistle and chirp of frogs and insects, the quietness of trees whose shapes he can barely discern in the dark. As the night swaddles the rainforest in Ranomafana, he finds the sounds soothing after a day spent in a headlong rush through a blasted, burned landscape. From the morning, when they left Antananarivo on the four hundred kilometre drive, through the hurtling day, they have looked out in earnest, she more than he, for traces of the life they have travelled far, from India to Madagascar, to see. But they see little, very little. A few kestrels over the paddy fields are what they see the most – one perches on the roof of a house of red-brick rising from the earth. The rounded red tiles on the roof are like wavelets lapping a shore, and on the kestrel's breast are red teardrops.

He has seen nothing like this in his life, he thinks – no place with such extensive, endless denudation. Hill after hill, mile after ugly mile, the land marks an ecological holocaust from horizon to horizon. There are pines and eucalyptus and wattle, tall and short, scattered or clumped, leafing green or burned red. The soil appears bare with little more than lantana weed for company, along the road. Where the land is not beaten into terraces and held by earthen bund or stone revetment, it is furrowed, gullied, gouged. The rivers run brown, run red, carrying the eroded soils. All around there are signs of fires, there is smoke, and smouldering wood. At every little town and in front of every cluster of mud-brick houses, bags and bags of charcoal are stacked.

Where are the other trees in the countryside, he wonders? They see only a single palm tree during the drive and stop to photograph it. A few mango trees, Chinese guava, and that is all. Everything else is eucalyptus or wattle or pine. He feels something deep and significant is missing but cannot put his finger on it. Is it the absence of the great forests and other trees that were here once? The missing lemurs, even the giants, and the birds, like the elephant bird *Aepyornis maximus* – the mythical roc? Is it them? Were they even here, a millenium, two millenia ago? What was here then? He does not know. Does anybody know, he wonders. There appears no trace, no trace at all that he can see or sense, no memory of the past, of life before loss. He has never before



seen an entire landscape that has lost its memory.

There is only wattle and eucalyptus and pine. And more pine. Yet, when the landscape has lost its memory, it seems as if there is nothing left even to pine for.

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How does one know the native from the alien, he wonders, the next morning? Could the pine, that he sees as alien, as the scourge of a blasted countryside, be in fact native, and the scattered, growing pine is the stubble emerging on the shaved face of hills? The guide books on Madagascar mention vegetation zones but do not speak of the names of trees or their provenance. There is no mention of pine. As an ecologist, he could have looked it up, or googled it as they say, and figured out that it was in fact alien, before he came. But he comes here not as an ecologist. He is here as a tourist, a consumer of a wilderness experience – an experience in nature, in the forest of the lemurs. And so it appears that it is through the eyes of a tourist that he must see the land and the lemurs. The privileged and accursed and wide-open and blighted eyes of a tourist.

The tourist's day begins at the park entrance. To enter Ranomafana National Park, he pays the entrance fee, half of which goes to the local community. It is a significant act. At the gate, the local community is a nebulous entity, the money he pays feeds into it, as it does into the larger tourism industry in Madagascar, a key driver of the country's economy. He pays to get them in to the park, to see what they came to see. Then, the guide fee is paid, rates measured by hour and route.

Now, the guide they have hired and his assistant, the 'animal spotter' he has hired, lead them into the park and they follow. There are a dozen tourists ahead and many more behind them. They tell the guide that it is not just lemurs

that they like to see – birds, plants, reptiles, amphibians, insects, in fact anything the forest has to offer, is welcome. In Ranomafana, they are in a rainforest, and the path through the forest, the nature trail, should have much to offer just about anywhere. They know because they are biologists who work in rainforests, in India. One can see something interesting anywhere at all.

They see birds as they enter the park, crested drongo and Madagascar bulbul, but they are ushered on. Here, in this forest, one can see the golden bamboo lemur, they are told. Sure enough, their first stop is at a pair of the lemurs, one wearing a radio-collar, both sitting mute, not moving, looking at the tourists below with dully expressive eyes. They are resting, the guide says. This

species was discovered here in 1986 by Dr Patricia Wright, the founder and Director of the Centre ValBio research station near the gates of the park.

They move on. There is word of more sightings ahead – their spotter who has gone ahead calls on their guide's cell phone. A leaf-tailed gecko. It is beside the trail with a cluster of tourists photographing it. They must await their turn. Here it is – it is pointed out to them – curled up against some dry leaves on a shrub. Their guide uses a laser pointer with the bright green dot of the laser dancing over the gecko's body, like the red laser dots dance on the forehead of people about to be shot in Hollywood movies. They tell him not to cast the laser on the animal's body, but point just above or below or circle around it, or just use his finger and that is enough they tell him, and he agrees to do so, in future.

They can now take as many photographs as they want, before it is the turn of the next group of tourists. There is no time now to marvel at this remarkable creature of evolution. Only a flash of wonderment can pass as they estimate, for their cameras, the best combination of exposure, film speed, and shutter speed. And the frame – the frame of the picture. There will perhaps be time for wonder, later. Not later in the day, when they preview the day's 'catch', deleting the blurry images, recharging the batteries – not theirs, the camera's. Not later during the trip, when they are busy in a continued harvest of photographs, but later when they see it on computer screens, share with friends – then, perhaps. Or even later, still.

Another lemur ahead. A red-bellied lemur, also wearing a radio-collar. And more tourists, trampling a path through the vegetation to look up at the lemurs. The lemur is resting, of course.

Their guide pulls out an electronic device from his pocket, hooks it to a small speaker, and plays the calls of

Malagasy birds. He is trying to provoke a response from the birds, in effect, fool them into showing themselves. He plays it again and again as he walks. They tell him to stop. The idea is to find birds, not fool them with technology, they tell him. Or mess with their territory and social behaviour or merely make them lose interest out of habituation. He stops playing, but he seems to stop looking for birds, too, for they find more than him from then on.

The cell phone vibrates in the guide's pocket. A third species of lemur. But now, they tell him they have no wish to see lemurs like this. Let us just walk and we shall see what we see. They stop to see plants, the fan-like traveller's tree *Ravenala madagascariensis* that Madagascar takes as its symbol, and an epiphytic cactus with tube-like leaves. They admire mosses and fungi and delight in a chance encounter, on the path, with a small brown chameleon. The calls of the newtonia and the brush warbler sound to a pulsing but erratic rhythm of frogs emerged with recent rains. The guide tells them the names of the species he knows, plant and reptile and bird and frog, but the path he leads them on brings them inexorably to the red-fronted brown lemurs in the trees. They watch the lemurs, admiring their dangling bushy tails and their faces – dark wedges on muzzles, contrasting white eyebrow patches, and red caps – and the baby leaping playfully across the branches.

In the afternoon, they resume their walk, a casual, open-eyed walk on a slightly different trail. At the river, unannounced by spotter or guide, they find lemurs. The red-fronted brown lemurs on one side, the red-bellied lemurs on the other. The other tourists are all well ahead on the trail and there is no one else around. The lemurs are feeding, playing, and as it seems to him, exploring the trees. He sits on the path and she at the river and they watch them for nearly an hour.

But the day does not end on that note, there is a night walk on which one can see the nocturnal mouse lemur and chameleons. They are taken to where the night walk starts. As dusk falls, some tourists are already there and more arrive in vans and on foot. Why here? he wonders. This is a main road and many kilometres of road go through similar forest. So why this point? Their guide says, we will see the mouse lemurs here first, then go for the chameleons.

When they reach the mouse lemur point, the lemurs are already there and the cameras are clicking and flashing. Several tourist guides are busy orchestrating the event for their customers. One guide smears pulpy ripe banana on one thin branch and another branch of a sapling at the edge of a road: at waist height, at eye height, at camera height. One guide commandeers the LED torch. Now, he says, as the lemur jumps to the banana-smeared branch, clicking on the light. The cameras click away in response.

He is astonished to see the mouse lemurs – there is at least a pair. The smallest, daintiest primate he has ever seen. He tries to take a photograph, too. All he captures on his image are the feet of a lemur – feet suspended in mid-air at the top of the image as if the lemur, whose body is cut off at the top of the frame, is levitating. Yet, this is no levitating lemur. It is only a leaping lemur, a diminutive, LED-lit, branch-licking lemur, leaping away from the tourists and their cameras into the welcoming dark undergrowth.

He does not want to see the licking, leaping lemur anymore. He is frustrated with his photographs – frustrated now with all photographs, photography itself perhaps. He packs his lenses and looks up into the tree – his duller torch picks a pair of eyes shining back at him. She sees it, too. A mouse lemur surrounded by a leafy tapestry of green, punctuated by pretty pink flowers of a mistletoe. The beauty of a little lemur surrounded by flowers holds them in thrall. He is tempted to try to photograph with his camera again, but it is no good. He is no good. The tourists look up, too. They admire the sight in the canopy above, but it is not a perfect photo-op. Their interest flares briefly, fades quickly.

In the next half hour, they see half a dozen chameleons and then, more. Some they watch, some they photograph. Some they merely walk past. There is a snake on a low branch – a tree boa – with a gaggle of tourists at it. We can come back for it later, their guide says, it will still be there. When they do come back later, the snake is gone.

Still, they are happy with their first day in the forests of Madagascar, as perhaps all biologists would be. He is tired as he walks up with her for their dinner. In his mind, he still sees the lemur ringed by flowers. Then, he also sees the blue-legged chameleon they found in the dark of the rainforest. The chameleon, coloured in pastel blue and forest green, which transformed before their eyes into a mottled and dour brown, as the white light from the LED flashlight shone on it and kept shining on it.



They return to the research station for dinner. They sit with some students and researchers and the conversation veers towards tourism. One student is doing a project examining whether the number of tourists in a group influences what tourists get to see. The more the tourists, the fewer lemurs they see, her data seem to suggest. Another student is studying the effects of tourism on bamboo lemurs. Her eyes are clear and concerned as she rattles off studies on other primates – tarsiers, macaques, gorillas – that have documented drastic effects of tourism on their survival, ecology, and behaviour. He notes the touch of dismay in her voice as she speaks of tourism and lemurs. It is clear there are benefits from tourist dollars streaming in as ariary into the local economy. A potential for lemurs to transform a modernising Madagascar rather than for an advancing Madagascar beating its forests and lemurs into oblivion. Yet, is this the best way for ecotourism to work, to progress, to grow? Is this the best experience one has on offer for a tourist?

At the table, they recount their experiences from India, about issues that parallel those in Madagascar. About tourists feeding macaques, attracting them to roads and into houses, and the resulting roadkills and so-called 'menace' of monkeys. About the temporary ban effected by the Supreme Court of India on tiger tourism. About the consequences of a new mode, a new industry, of humans looking at nature – at the rest of nature, seen apart from themselves. They are the observers behind the tinted glasses and the rest of nature is on the other side. Madagascar and India may be separated by millions of years and the breadth of an ocean, but their problems mirror each other even now.

How is it, they discuss, that although there are no fixed



monuments, no immutable constraint that something can only be seen at a specific spot, when one can, in nature tourism, unlike in some forms of cultural tourism, see something anywhere at all – how is it, why is it, that despite all this, nature tourism is also converted into a series of points? Points that one must go to, cluster around, to see, to take away as memory and photograph, some evidence of having been there, done that? That's not how it should be when one is in nature, he says. Nature tourism should be – pointless. He is grimly satisfied with his own pun, but in the flood of conversation and concern at the table, no one notices.

Photographs are the new trophies, someone says. One shoots, one takes, one captures – and displays as signs of prowess. It seems inseparable from this form of tourism. Perhaps the solution is to ban photography, ban the cameras altogether from the remaining wild places on earth, like they ban photography in the *sanctum sanctorum* of temples back in India. *Take only photographs, leave only footprints* would then become *Take only memories, tread softly, and leave*. Would such an indictment of tourism, of tourists, be absurd or apposite?

At his side, she strikes a more moderate, reasoned note. If you ban photography, she says, then a lot of people who can never come to see these places will never get to see or appreciate what there is. Take David Attenborough, for instance. His movies and serials are wonderful and inspiring. They have motivated so many to care for nature. Although, she admits, they also bring more people into those places to see for themselves, as it brought us. That may be true, he returns, but Attenborough does not speak of people and conservation in his movies and serials. He glosses over that

as if the world was only a pretty place and there are no real conservation problems. No, she bristles, rising to the old man's defence – the old man who is not even there, who she has not even met. He does talk about it, especially in his more recent serials. And besides, if it is too much of the grim stuff, many would be turned away and would fail to be inspired by nature, to care for nature. Grudgingly, he admits she is probably right. If people could be shown and shown well, told and told well, the beauty and intricacy and fragility of what exists, then perhaps they can grasp and sense for themselves what they stand to lose if they were to be parted from it forever. If they could consider knowledge and memory not merely as something that they look back on as past experience, but project their knowing into the future, to continuously learn, to see, to act.

The deadening shallowness of tourism, when entertainment supplants immersion, is inevitably marked by experiential loss. It is then that the thought comes to him – he does not know from where – that there is even more perhaps to the sense of loss than that. Perhaps, one can make an empathic leap above and beyond this – the image of the levitating lemur appears before his eyes – into a sense of what the lemur and the chameleon and the macaque and the tiger each stands to lose, what nature itself loses, is losing, under the unceasing gaze of human eyes.

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Dawn breaks early in Madagascar. In the austral summer, the grey outlines of the hills emerge from the dark at 4:30 in the morning. They are up early to watch birds along the

road. Even on a single road, there are at least two choices, two directions, and they turn right rather than left.

Quietly, slowly, attentive to sound and movement, they walk the road together, birdwatching. Birding like this, he thinks, not expecting anything, not even knowing what to expect perhaps, has its own relaxed charm. It has the quality of experience such as sitting quietly by a river or a fire, waiting for fish by a lake but not really fishing, or watching rain. They find birds or the birds show themselves, he cannot really tell. A stunning blue coua with an oddly frog-like call, a tiny jery bursting with song in the canopy, a cheerful flock of Madagascar white-eye busy at the flowers, a skulking scrub warbler churring in the undergrowth, and a stately buzzard on his morning hunt perching and scanning from the top of a tall tree. The birds are like gifts – gifts that one does not ask for or expect but which one receives, accepts, gratefully, gracefully. Across the valley, the fan-like leaves of a tall traveller's tree emerge over the forest and catch the morning light, like arms outstretched to receive the day's glory. The plant is doing nothing of the sort, he thinks. It is just busy with the business of photosynthesis, of being alive. Yet, he takes it as a suitable metaphor for the morning.



In the early hours of the next morning, they go birding again in the forest near Vohiparara with Dr Patricia Wright. They feel privileged to walk with her. They admire her for her long and persistent efforts at research and conservation in Madagascar, centred on lemurs, and for her role in building and running a world-class field research station. On the walk they see several bird species new to them – dark newtonia, Pollen's vanga, velvet asity. Pat takes them to where a rare and endangered bird, the slender-billed flufftail, was rediscovered by scientists in 1987. A marsh bird in a marsh of sedge and grass at the edge of the forest – only, there is no marsh there now, only paddy fields. They see a Madagascar wagtail and a malachite kingfisher in the fields. The flufftail still exists somewhere near, but they see none.

It is not what they see that occupies him, but what they do not see. Madagascar's missing lemurs, the lost birds and reptiles, its sorry legacy of extinction. Seventeen species of giant lemurs, including the gorilla-sized *Megaladapis* and the *Archeoindris*, the giant ruffed lemur and giant aye-aye, the sloth lemurs and the archeolemurs: gone. The elephant bird – the legendary roc, giant tortoises, huge crocodiles, hippopotamuses: all gone. The giants of Madagascar have vanished from the land. He is not trying to see the forests as they were prior to the extermination of those species at human hands. In his mind, he tries to place the extinct species back here, now, in the forest before him, to see what he cannot see. This is bible speak, he thinks: *For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.* But he fails. He knows no force can bring them back, he knows – nothing. Still, he cannot help himself from thinking back, projecting ahead.

Pat talks about the giant lemurs, one as large as a chimpanzee, and the great elephant bird that stood three metres tall. Later, in the display cabinet outside her office on the top floor of the new building in the research station, she shows them the skull of the lemur and the fossilised

egg of the elephant bird. The largest known single cell in the animal kingdom, she says, pointing to the latter. Sure, the largest known single cell a few hundred years ago, he thinks, now just a smooth, egg-shaped rock. In a museum these would have been objects of scientific study, but here in a small display cabinet the skull and the egg appear to serve a different purpose. They are subjects, provoking a remembrance, acting as a marker of connectedness to things past – it is more memorial than museum.

Standing there, looking at the display through the glass of the cabinet, he sees their own images appear like surreal spirits hovering over the skull and egg. He knows that this is just due to a simultaneous reflection and refraction of light through glass, but it is momentarily unsettling. He looks at the cabinet in front and turns to see the panorama of rainforest through the window. A thought arises as if suggested by someone, something, not actually present there: as we begin to grasp what we still have, we cannot forget what we once had – the extinct, the irreplaceable.

The rest of the afternoon is lost to him in a mind-numbing, throbbing headache. He feels too tired to do anything about it. He has never had a headache this bad, this long. He tries to sleep. She is tired, too, but cannot miss a chance to be in the forest, see something new perhaps, so she heads off into the forest with the biologists. His sleep, if he sleeps at all after she is gone, is restless, troubled, visited by demons. He sees bizarre creatures that do not really exist, pin-points and streaks of light, and a ravelling of strange events that never happened. They are connected, tenuously, as if by a thread, but the thread snaps as he wakes from the ephemeral dream to see the darkening forest through the window.



It is a very thin line – the line that separates the forests from the fields – he notes the next day. With a small step, he straddles it. It is about half a metre wide and about as much deep, that is all, with water seeping from wet soil collecting and flowing along in it like a tiny, deliberate rivulet. It marks the boundary of the Ranomafana National Park. On a map, the line of separation is thinner still, than on the ground. On a map, the line, the border, has no width or depth – it is meant as a two-dimensional and strict separator of park and non-park, forest and field, preservation and pillage, or more charitably, of protection and production. On one side the forest stretches through degraded and primary rainforest and secondary forest back to the research station, their point of departure. On the other there is degraded forest and plantations and slash-and-burn *tavy* fields around Ranomafana village, and the road that will take them back to the research station, their point of return. It is a circular path on which the narrative arc of journey and landscape may depend on where one starts, and which way one goes.

The boundary line squiggles around and also connects only to itself, but it marks a polygon rather than a path, a bounded box in green or grey, set off against the brown or white countryside, outside. A red signboard marks the boundary – this area is protected, it announces to the space outside the line. The map is meant to compartmentalise and characterise the land. Straddling the line, looking at the earth beneath his feet and the forest canopy above, on

## THE GREENING

The mountains, the built-up, lit-up valley  
drink the sky.

After a full night of summer thunder  
rattling from one end of the sky to the other,  
of lightning and rain battering  
the hard, cinnamon-coloured earth,  
everything dreeps green again.

Clouds hunker among the summits  
of lower mountains  
and the high Alps are hidden.

Grass stands up again in the garden  
as the tree-furred mountainsides drink up,  
bringing the sky's darkness  
into every leaf tip,

And, already,  
near bare summits,  
gentians have turned thunder  
into blue velvet.

MOYA CANNON

both sides, he sees the map here as caricaturing rather than characterising the landscape. It is a projection of viewpoint and value onto a two-dimensional surface.

The day began as a trek into primary forest in the early hours of the morning. They enter the park as before and walk the first two hours slowly, looking for birds. In the first stretch, the forest is short-statured, with few large trees: a secondary, successional forest regenerating from a past disturbance. As the forest changes to primary forest, they find a pillar of stone set in the earth by the side of the trail. It appears to be an old stone, a phallic, flattened slab of granite. He stands six feet in his shoes and the stone is a bit taller than him. It is like a long, flat-sided, solid rectangle less than a foot wide. It is a memorial stone set by the Tanala people, they are told. He has read of these stones that the Malagasy call *vatolahy*, markers of the deceased or of chieftains and battles, of people and events on land. The forest itself is regarded *tanindrazana*, the land of the ancestors. Whether it be people or lemurs, he thinks, it is a fitting description.

Now, they are in primary forest. All around is the kind of forest they like to see, to be in, with tall trees and trees of large girth mixed with younger ones of all ages. The ground is covered in a thick layer of leaf litter and the earth beneath is soft underfoot. Streams

of clear water flow and one can see the bottom clear with rounded stones, sand, and river plants.

She smells lemurs before they see them. The lemurs must have passed this way, their droppings splattering somewhere around. A minute later they find the lemurs – at least four black-and-white ruffed lemurs in the trees. Two adult lemurs are busy feeding on the fruit of a Sapindaceae tree and two others are engaged in play. They do not seem disturbed by the human presence below. Standing in the understorey, on the soft earth, he looks through his pair of binoculars at one of the lemurs, hanging by her hind legs, bushy black tail dangling, and eating something held in her black-gloved hands. Her face is dark and fringed in white and she seems to be looking at him, at them, as she eats.

He lifts his binoculars to his eyes. Through his looking glass, he sees a world as if reflected. Dark pupils set in yellow eyes of a being gazing back, her feet in the green canopy, at another being gazing up, whose feet tread brown earth. Yet, it is the lemur, in her startling black-and-white pelage contrasting with her surroundings, that seems to be at home, grounded in place, the *genius loci* of the Ranomafana rainforest. He, dressed in dull green fatigues, is the transient traveller, the tourist, far from his place, roaming in unfamiliar surroundings. Across the invisible plane separating the reflected worlds, the two primates look at each other.

A photograph freezes the moment. It makes it appear as if it is the lemur looking. But he knows it is not the lemur's gaze, it is his, invisible, on the other side.

The forest is primary in appearance, but the cattle dung they see along the route and the presence of the *vatolahy* suggest that there is more to the history and nature of this forest than the size of the trees and the species of lemurs. The places marked by the *vatolahy* are considered sacred, just as they consider the primary forest special. As he walks the forest, he wonders how the landscape would have been parcelled in the past, across space among communities and across time among ancestors and descendants. How will it be in the future, in a future that may need to accommodate very different needs, peoples, uses?

They walk a short distance through primary forest and reach the park boundary, reach the line he straddles, which they must cross to traverse the landscape on the other side.



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Images: Divya Mudappa and T.R. Shankar Raman