**7c Page 87 READING TEXT**

Upper Intermediate Student’s Book

Life

A world of its own

Madagascar is an island – the world’s fourth largest, at over 225,000 square miles – but an island nevertheless. Although all islands have their own unique ecosystems, nature has blessed Madagascar with exceptional riches. Roughly 90 per cent of its flora and fauna is found nowhere else on the planet. The spectacle of its carrot-shaped baobab trees and ghostly lemurs make even the most well-travelled visitors wide-eyed with amazement and delight.

But its rare beauty hides the desperate situation of its people. The typical Madagascan lives on about a dollar a day, even though you would not guess this from the attitude of the Malagasy, the island’s main ethnic group, who are a cheerful and optimistic race. Since the first humans arrived in Madagascar some 2,300 years ago, loggers and developers have destroyed nearly 90 per cent of the island’s original forest habitat, harvesting it for timber or burning it down to create room for crops and, more recently, cattle.

Considering that Madagascar’s population is growing by three per cent a year, this tension between rich land and poor residents is increasing day by day. Alarmed ecologists have named Madagascar a biodiversity hot spot, deploring the practice of slash-and-burn agriculture. In 2002 the global environmental community rejoiced when green-friendly Marc Ravalomanana was elected president. But only seven years later, in the spring of 2009, the military replaced Ravalomanana with a former radio disc jockey who seemed to have little interest in protecting the environment.

Needing money, the new government reversed a ban on the export of precious hardwoods, making it legal to sell wood from trees which had already been cut down or had fallen during the cyclones that regularly hit the island. Yet in reality they did little to control the loggers who continued to rob the forests of new wood. The main targets of this environmental crime are the rosewood tree and the ebony tree. The wood from these majestic trees is in high demand: in China it is used to make exotic imperial-style furniture for the new middle class; in Europe and America it is a valued material in the manufacture of expensive musical instruments.

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The locals are caught in a trap. Poverty and the high value of rosewood – at $3,000 per cubic metre it is ten times as valuable as oak – have driven them to cut down trees that are traditionally believed to be sacred. It is dangerous and back-breaking work. Using hand axes, in a few hours they bring down a tree that has stood tall for many centuries. Then they cut the trees into two-metre logs and drag these several kilometres to the nearest river.

The rare hardwood trees are not the only casualties. In order to transport the heavy rosewood logs downriver, rafts must be built from other wood. For each raft the loggers cut down four or five lighter trees from near the riverside, causing the earth to erode and silt up the rivers. At the same time animals’ natural habitat has been disturbed, putting their survival at risk.

In this bleak landscape what can bring hope? One man’s work may offer a possible route out of the darkness. Olivier Behra who first came to Madagascar from France in 1987 believes that the only solution is to give local people economic alternatives. Almost single-handedly, he has stopped deforestation in the Vohimana forest by encouraging the locals instead to collect medicinal plants, which they never imagined had any monetary value, and sell them overseas to companies like Chanel. The village lemur hunter has been retrained to act as a guide for tourists obsessed with lemurs. The same tourists also pay to visit the wild orchid conservatory that Behra has set up. Can small-scale and sensitive initiatives like this compete with the rosewood mafia of Madagascar? Only time will tell.

MADagascar in numbers

4th largest island in the world after Greenland, New Guinea and Borneo

90% of its flora and fauna is found nowhere else on Earth

Number 1 producer of vanilla in the world

22 million: population of Madagascar

70 different species of lemur live only on Madagascar

18 different ethnic groups of Asian and African origin

300 years: the time it takes a rosewood tree to reach maturity

24,560 tonnes of ebony and rosewood exported in 2009, much of it illegally

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