

BEYOND THE FOREST

RYAN LEE



THE HUMAN SIDE OF NATURE CONSERVATION

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Beyond the Forest: The Human Side of Nature Conservation

Madagascar—a land of ancient forests, vibrant creatures, and ecosystems found nowhere else on Earth—transformed me. The island nation is home to playful lemurs and brilliantly colored chameleons, and more than 200,000 species—80% of which are endemic, which means they exist only on this island. But while I was mesmerized by its biodiversity, my journey to Madagascar revealed something more profound: the fragile bond between this wondrous wildlife and the people who call Madagascar home.

As I wandered through the lush forest, I saw firsthand the delicate balance between the island's unique ecosystems and the encroachment of human activity. It wasn't just the breathtaking wildlife that struck me—it was the mounting pressure placed on their habitats. Expanding

agriculture, illegal logging, and the demand for resources were carving away the very environments that these species depend on for survival.

In the absence of sustainable income, local communities are often approached by illegal animal traffickers, who offer quick cash in exchange for rare and exotic species. These traffickers specifically target Madagascar because its highly coveted unique species fetch high prices on the black market. These actions, while devastating for the environment, are often acts of desperation in a corrupt system that offers little to no alternatives. For the locals, it is a matter of survival.

People here, in many ways, are as vulnerable as wildlife. They, too, depend on the forests for their livelihoods. Yet, they find themselves trapped in a cycle of dire poverty that pushes the locals to exploit the very land they rely on. And the irony is, their participation further accelerates the destruction of Madagascar's fragile ecosystems.

This new-found knowledge broadened my understanding of what environmental conservation truly means. It's not just about protecting wildlife—it's about supporting the people who live in harmony with that wildlife. Without addressing the economic realities faced by local communities, conservation efforts, no matter how well-meant, are bound to fail.

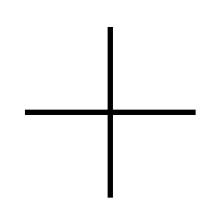
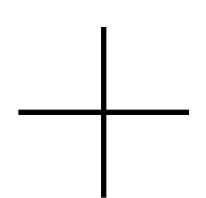
During my visit, I had the opportunity to speak with members of local wildlife associations working tirelessly to protect endangered species and restore their habitats. Community-based conservation efforts have shown remarkable results here—empowering locals through sustainable livelihoods such as fishing and farming, involving them in the decision-making process, and fostering a sense of ownership over the land they've lived on for generations. These efforts are what will ultimately protect Madagascar's forests and the creatures that inhabit them. Challenges that are still prevalent, such as the lack of funding, limited access to modern conservation tools, and the struggle to compete with more powerful forces further ingrained in me the importance of working alongside the locals.

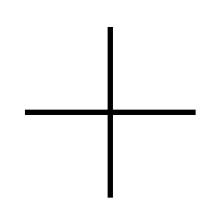
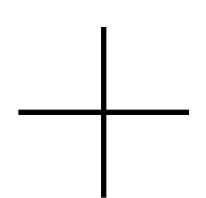
However, these initiatives cannot thrive without external support. The world needs to step up—not just with financial aid, but with technical expertise and a commitment to promoting sustainable practices. Infrastructure and regulations to support and empower the locals are necessary to foster an environment where making real change is possible. By lifting the people of Madagascar out of poverty and equipping them with the tools, knowledge, and purpose to safeguard their surroundings, we can ensure that Madagascar's unparalleled biodiversity endures for generations to come.

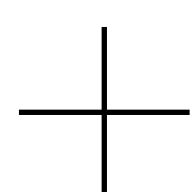
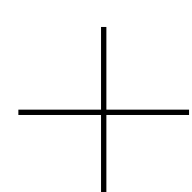
As a 16-year-old reptile enthusiast visiting Madagascar, I came to understand the power of awareness. Though I may lack the ability to make changes on my own, I realized that I could still tell my story. What I offer to the world is my word—my journey and newfound understanding. If I could inspire even one person to care about what matters to them as deeply as I cared about reptiles and environmental conservation, the ripple effect in their respective world could be transformative.

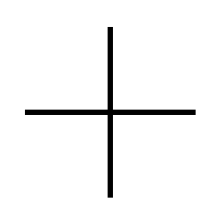
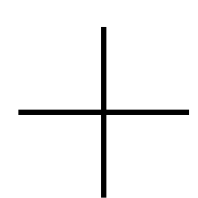
But passion alone is not enough. To truly protect and preserve what is important to us, we must immerse ourselves in all facets of the subject—studying it, experiencing its nuances, and, ultimately, taking action. This deep engagement with what moves us most is the key to making a difference.

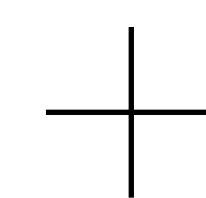
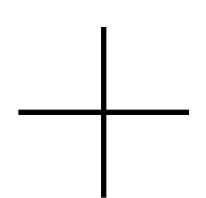
The lesson I carry with me from Madagascar is this: to save the world's most vulnerable ecosystems, we must begin with the people who live alongside them. It is through empowering people—through knowledge, support, and respect—that we can hope to protect what we hold dear.





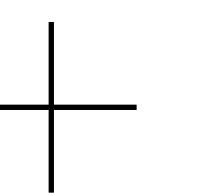
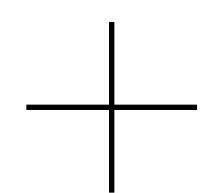


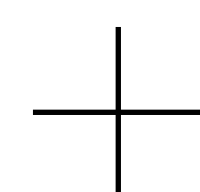
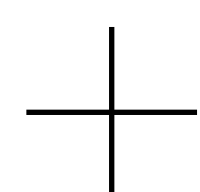






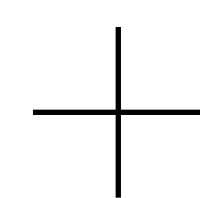
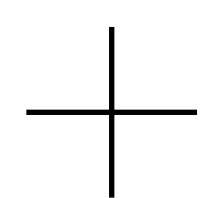




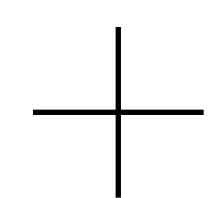
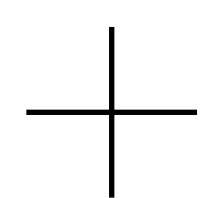


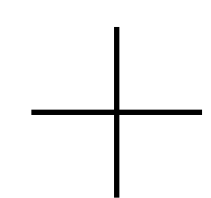


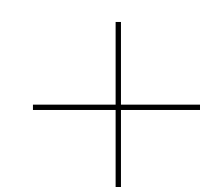
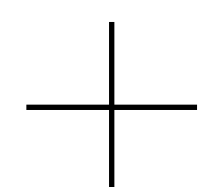


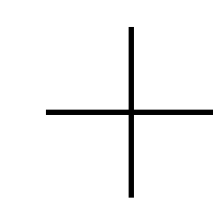
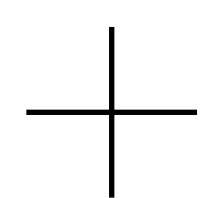


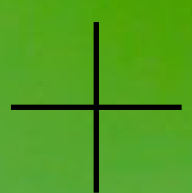
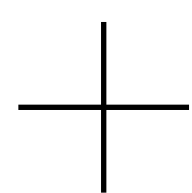
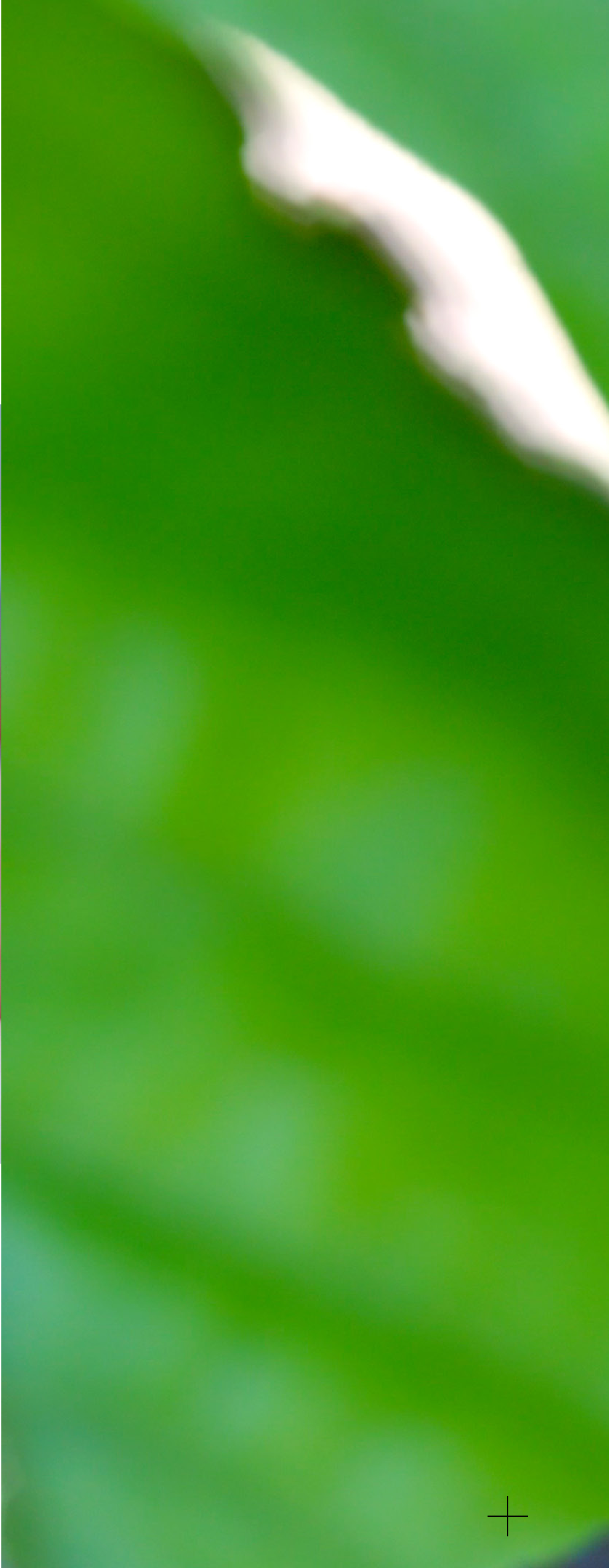












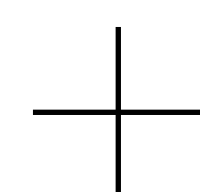




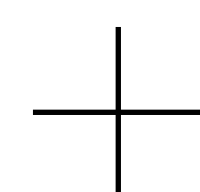
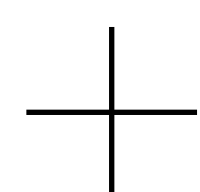


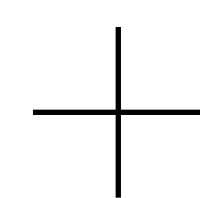
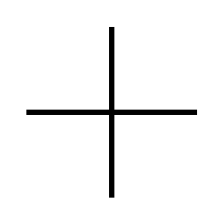












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