**Madagascar: Crime threatens biodiversity**

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Madagascar’s new president, Andry Rajoelina, was elected on a promise to improve living standards for the millions who live in poverty (*1*). To achieve this goal, he must address the declining rule of law. Madagascar fell eight places in the Rule of Law Index between 2016 and 2018 (*2*), and it is 155th of 180 countries listed in the Corruptions Perceptions Index (*3*). Weak governance slows development by reducing the willingness of citizens and foreign companies to invest (*4*). Since his election President Rajoelina has expressed a desire to make Madagascar a model of conservation and a destination for ecotourism(*5*). The solutions to the country’s poverty—strengthening Madagascar’s government and reducing crime—are also key to turning around the country’s precipitous loss of biodiversity.

The threats faced by Madagascar’s protected areas and species are increasingly linked to criminal networks and corruption (*6*, *7*). Illegal extraction of high-valued timber from protected areas greatly increased a decade ago (*8*). Repeated gem mining “rushes” and gold mining threaten the integrity of protected areas in the east (*9*); in the west, migrants escaping drought in the south are rapidly clearing theoretically protected forests for large-scale cultivation (*10*). Many species are illegally traded internationally (7) [with the ploughshare tortoise facing imminent extinction in the wild (*11*)].

Madagascar, like all nations, has the right to use its natural resource wealth, but the increasing exploitation of protected areas and species without regard to national laws does not benefit the country. Illegal activities, especially mining, are often linked to local violence and insecurity (*12*), discouraging legitimate investment. If urgent action is not taken, some of Madagascar’s most iconic habitats and species may reach a point of no return. By restoring the rule of law, President Rajoelina would help deliver a Madagascar with both an inclusive, growing economy and effective biodiversity conservation.

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