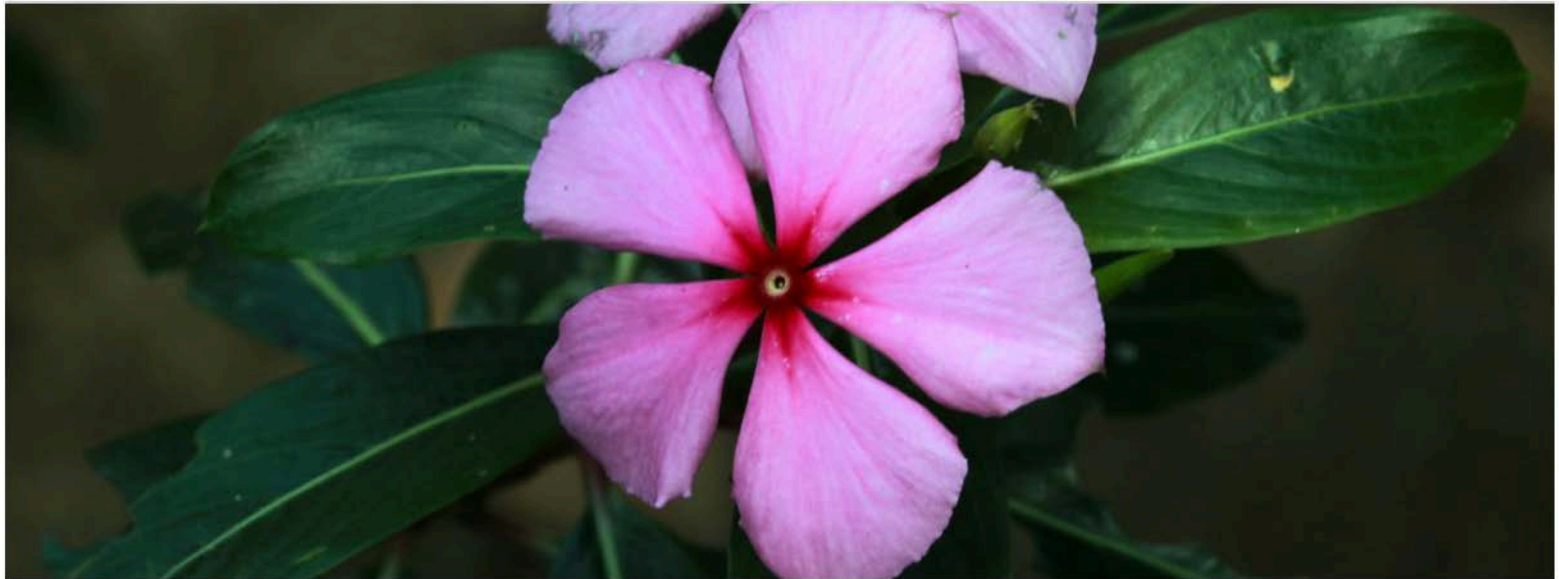


Mongabay Series: Conservation in Madagascar

Bandits raid village near Madagascar park, killing conservation worker

by Edward Carver on 27 August 2018



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- *They robbed residents and killed a technician for the Centre ValBio research institute.*
- *The incident is part of a growing pattern of banditry, both in the*

Ranomafana area and across Madagascar, where instability has increased in the run up to presidential elections scheduled for later this year.

Armed bandits attacked a village on the edge of Ranomafana National Park in southeastern Madagascar in late July. They robbed residents and killed an employee of the Centre ValBio (CVB) research institute, Jean François Xavier Razafindraibe, a 40-year-old father of two.

The incident is part of a growing pattern of banditry, both in the Ranomafana area and across Madagascar, where instability has increased in the run up to presidential elections scheduled for later this year. Many conservationists and tourism operators in the country are frustrated that the government has not maintained law and order and has failed to root out corruption in the ranks of the police and gendarmerie.

"My heart goes out to the people of Ambatolahy," Patricia Wright, CVB's founder, wrote in an email to the institute's supporters immediately following the incident. "Such sadness." "We are trying to put pressure on the government to prevent this lawlessness," Wright later told Mongabay. "That's what government is for."



Bandits killed Jean François Xavier Razafindraibe, a technician with the Centre ValBio research institute and father of two, during a raid on the village of Ambatolahy outside Ranomafana National Park in Madagascar. Image courtesy of Patricia Wright/CVB.

Late in the afternoon of July 31, the bandits swept into Ambatolahy, a seemingly safe village on the well-traveled road between CVB and the town of Ranomafana, a tourist destination. Most of the villagers immediately fled into the forest. Razafindraibe, a technician with CVB, was slower to emerge from his house because he had been napping. He exchanged words with the attackers, and they shot him at close range, Pascal Rabeson, CVB's national director, told Mongabay. Ironically, Razafindraibe had just returned

home early from a mission to Isalo National Park in the southwestern part of the country due to reports of banditry in that area. The bandits, between eight and 20 of them by most accounts, divided up into groups and ransacked houses and shops for money. They collected about 3.6 million ariary in all, the equivalent of about \$1,100, more than half of which came from Razafindraibe's father, also a CVB technician.

Gendarmes arrived about 45 minutes after the attack began and exchanged fire with the bandits. The gunfight could be heard at the CVB office, just one kilometer away, where staffers and researchers went into a sort of makeshift lockdown, Rabeson and Wright said. The gendarmes were outnumbered and did not catch any of the bandits, who managed to flee into the forest. So far, no one has been arrested for the crimes.

Ranomafana National Park, established in 1991, is one of the most popular destinations in the country. Tourism brings in more than \$3 million a year to the area, Wright said, and many local people work at the park or for CVB. A number of Ambatolahy residents work for CVB, and that may have been what drew bandits to the village, as the employees had just received their monthly pay in cash.

"They work for Centre ValBio so the gangsters think they have money," Jonah Ratsimbazafy, a Malagasy primatologist, told Mongabay. After the attack, CVB opened bank accounts for its employees, according to Wright.



The village of Ambatolahy outside Ranomafana National Park in Madagascar, where bandits robbed residents and killed a conservation worker in July. (The photo was taken in 2017, just after electricity was introduced via the newly installed pole, center.) Image courtesy of Patricia Wright/CVB.

"This is terrible for the image of Madagascar," Russell Mittermeier, a leading conservationist with the Texas-based NGO Global Wildlife Conservation, who has worked in the country for decades, said of the attack in an interview with Mongabay.

"Everyone is focused on elections and the bandits have free reign."

It is not easy to plan conservation projects amid the climate of instability in Madagascar. Daniel Whyner, director of USAID's Environment and Climate Change Office in Madagascar, said that security challenges are present in many parts of the country. Whyner's office is just launching two major projects after shuttering in 2009 because of a *coup d'état*.

"We are concerned for the well-being not only for the communities with whom we partner, but for all communities confronting the issue of increasing lawlessness," Whyner wrote in an email to Mongabay.

Madagascar's government has sent military and police units to combat banditry in rural areas, and in December, then-Prime Minister Olivier Mahafaly Solonandrasana announced that 30 percent of the government's 2018 budget would be used for fighting insecurity, a threefold increase. Solonandrasana was replaced by a new prime minister amid political turmoil in June. The prime minister's office did not respond to a request for comment for this article.



Ranomafana is famous for its rich diversity of lemurs, like this mouse lemur, which is a major draw for ecotourists. Photo by Rhett A. Butler.

Tourism groups say increased crime, along with other factors, such as a recent plague outbreak and bad weather, is already hurting their businesses. This year

saw a significant reduction in the number of tourists going to the Morondava area on Madagascar's western coast, normally a favorite destination. A newly formed tourism lobby recently pleaded with Madagascar's president to fix the crime problem. However, Madagascar has long been a peaceful country and a safe one for foreigners to visit. The country lacks reliable statistics indicating whether this has changed. But conservationists worry that news of incidents like the one last month near Ranomafana will keep tourists or even donors from coming to Madagascar. Tourism is one of the country's main sources of foreign exchange, bringing in about \$700 million in 2016, and many communities, such as those around Ranomafana, have come to depend on the income. Beyond any possible economic ripples, the recent attack also shook local people's sense of security. People in Ranomafana have been jumpy ever since. "Ranomafana used to be a really, really safe place," Rabeson said. "We're not used to something like this. Since July 31, when there's even a little sound or something, everybody gets scared."



Andriamamovoka falls on the Namorona River in Ranomafana. Photo by Rhett A. Butler

Banner image: Rosy periwinkle (Catharanthus roseus), the source of vinblastine and vincristine, compounds used to treat Hodgkin's disease. Image by Rhett A. Butler/Mongabay. The original header image featured non-native orchids photographed in Madagascar, likely Vanda tricolor. Editor's note: Mongabay founder and CEO Rhett Butler is a member of the Centre ValBio's advisory board.