

Project Update: February 2010

Days have been blown away like autumn leaves, it feels, by strong winds that have been finally bringing some mild cyclonic weather and needed moisture in this high summer time in south-west Madagascar. It's mid-February: hot times - times of growth; growing native trees from the spiny forest; growing subsistence crops.

How refreshing has it been when the temperature dropped full 10 degrees (from 40 ° to 30° C) and even to a record low of 27° C at night, the lowest record in the last couple months, which is truly a pleasant feeling. We've had 50 mm of rain during the second rain storm since Christmas, enough to plant rice yet not enough to plant corn, manioc, beans, squash, melons nor native trees on our reforestation sites. We are holding off for now and hoping this will happen with the next substantial rain storm so as to ensure seedling survival.

The great challenge has been keeping healthy in the hot weather and unsanitary rural conditions. Overheating, water contamination and swarms of flies are more of a daily problem for the villagers and us than ever before. Outbreaks of sickness have been proliferating and spreading with an average of every three out of five children are sick in each family with sick bellies, respiratory and sinus infections. A couple of weeks ago an 8-year old boy lost his life after 4 days of being sick, complaining of stomach pain; life has been hard, yet the villagers keep their spirit up and keep up with dedicated work.

The lack of rain during the 'official' rainy season has been a continuous struggle for the villagers. The farmers' survival adaptation seem to be extensive channelling of the only source of water for their rice fields - the Ranobe Lake to a large area of new fields created on the lake edges. FIMPAHARA has been splitting their time between work in their rice fields and work in tree nurseries and hoavy activities.

At the end of January 2010 we completed a training seminar for 20 adult FIMPAHARA members and 20 youth members ranging from age 4 to 16 years with practical sessions held in our extensive nurseries filled with over 4000 new pots planted with nearly 65 species of both native and cultivated tree species, fruit and medicinal trees. Until now we have planted over 10,000 pots with almost 100 different species, 80% of which are native trees raised from seeds, sustainably collected in the Ranobe forest. We are very pleased with this and also have initiated the first trials to grow the native species from cuttings for fast vegetative propagation.

The growth in our nurseries has accelerated with the recent rain, all nurseries and the forest sanctuary look lush and green and beautiful and so does the forest. We have made our nursery in an interpretation botanical garden, labelling the planted trees and seedlings and regularly monitoring their growth. Abundant wildlife has been emerging after the rain, especially reptiles. Collaborating researchers working currently on forest biodiversity surveys found our sanctuary to be by far the most diverse from all of their survey plots around the Ranobe forest and lake. Twelve species of reptiles along with 22 frequently recorded bird species have been seen during our morning counts and these are not yet the final counts.

Fresh growth in the nursery after the rain and subsequent hot days seem to be a paradise for a lot of insects and we have noticed vast amounts of caterpillars chewing on sprouting field weeds and slowly crawling into our nurseries. One needs to put up with few caterpillars if want to see the butterflies, right? - and we've been seeing some spectacular ones. Yet we are searching and testing for all possible sensitive and herbivore control using extracts from locally grown insect repelling plant species, such as neem and katrafay. Nursery maintenance is an on-going job in responsibility of FIMPAHARA, taking a great lead.

Besides intensive nursery work we have been concentrating our energy to building our reforestation station, a centre for reforestation education and practice. Our two biogas digesters have been producing gas and garden beds and fences are now set-up which has been a big theme to go forward with so we can plant food when the rain comes. For the next months we will launch into environmental education and forest regeneration surveys.

Please view our field progress in pictures here:

http://picasaweb.google.com/martina.petru/Favorites_midFeb#