

Title In a joint operation with police, local communities and Government officers, and forestry officials, Asity Madagascar (BirdLife in Madagascar) has struck a blow against illegal loggers in the Tsitongambarika forest IBA in the far south-east of the island. Several trucks loaded with rosewood logs have been seized. Evidence of the extent of illegal logging was provided by the local communities around Tsitongambarika, who supplied photographs and video material. Asity Madagascar has been working with these communities to develop sustainable ways of using the forest, which was suffering encroachment from slash-and-burn agriculture. As part of the project, Asity Madagascar has trained local people to monitor the state of the forest, and provides incentives such as investment in developments chosen by the villagers (such as schools or improved water supplies) and goods such as fertilizers, when monitoring (independently verified) demonstrates successful forest conservation. More than 800 rosewood planks and 100 logs were recovered by the operation. Asity Madagascar praised the prompt and effective action by the local authorities, which followed a series of workshops organised by Asity Madagascar to increase awareness of the social, economic and environmental damage caused by illegal logging. Tsitongambarika is the largest remaining area of lowland rainforest in southern Madagascar, and home to many bird species endemic to Madagascar, several of which are globally threatened, as well as other biodiversity unique to this part of the island. After years of work by Asity Madagascar, Tsitongambarika has been granted temporary protected status, which is expected to be made permanent within the next two years. "The success of this action demonstrates that, given appropriate support and incentives that enable them to see themselves as joint beneficiaries of protected areas, local communities can be highly effective in working with conservation organisations and Government authorities to police violations of environmental law", said Roger Safford, Senior Programme Manager at BirdLife International. Asity Madagascar is part of Voahary Gasy, an alliance of national conservation organisations set up to combat the plundering of Madagascar's natural resources after the overthrow of the previous government in 2009. Rosewood and other timber is being stripped on a much larger scale from the protected areas in the north-east of Madagascar, and the loggers - some of them in possession of "official" permits for their activities - boast of being unafraid of any authority, including the state. Voahary Gasy is asking the government to ensure that existing laws covering protected areas and other aspects of environmental governance are strictly enforced. "Asity Madagascar joins Voahary Gasy in calling for a decree prohibiting the exploitation and export of precious native trees to be published in Madagascar's Official Gazette", said Vony Raminoarisoa, national coordinator of Asity Madagascar. The conservation programme at Tsitongambarika resulting in this achievement has been supported by several organisations, most notably Rio Tinto and Rio Tinto QMM through its partnership programme with BirdLife International. Rio Tinto has long-term interests in safeguarding this critical area of humid forest, which forms a vitally important contribution to their overall commitment to minimising and potentially offsetting biodiversity impacts of its activities in the region; highly valued support has also been received from Conservation International, the Waterloo Foundation, the Wetland Trust and the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria, all recognising the enormous biodiversity value of this forest.