

“I hope that the risks I’ve taken in the name of conservation and curiosity and adventure help to serve as a source of inspiration for my students - lending more credibility to the environmental ideas we discuss.”

Polly Sepowitz, August 2009

Day 1: Posing with the children of Volobe upon arrival

Building Energy-Efficient Stoves in a Madagascar Village

Polly Sepowitz, August 2009 / NYC Program

This summer I spent two weeks camping in Volobe, a remote village in the southeastern region of Madagascar while working with a UK-based charity called Azafady. Our team of three women worked with three Malagasi guides to build energy-efficient stoves in the homes of the people of Volobe. Throughout the villages of Madagascar, food is traditionally cooked on open fires, a method that leads not only to respiratory problems within household members, but also requires nearly twice the amount of firewood as does cooking with the energy-efficient stoves. The excessive use of wood for both cooking and building has led to serious deforestation throughout Madagascar, and an attendant loss of the island’s precious biodiversity. It was primarily this threat that drew me to this particular project, but I was also drawn by the potential to experience an exotic place that I’d otherwise never have had the opportunity to see. Once in Madagascar, however, I was mostly motivated by the incredibly joyful and generous and hardworking Malagasi people whose hamlets and homes we encountered. The stove-building became a collaborative effort, with villagers gathering the materials needed and both watching and lending a hand as we built. Their eagerness to learn, their laughter, their skills, their singing and dance, inspired all of us throughout our experience there. I felt a deep connection to the Malagasi people and feel as though I must return as soon as possible.



Our whole stove-building team with the chicken given to us as a thank-you gift



Feeding a lemur



Posing with a stove



Posing with the team in a Volobe home over a just-built stove

Personal and Professional Growth

Going into this adventure, I was absolutely terrified. I'd never been as far as Africa. I'd certainly never lived for weeks at a time without electricity and a toilet. I'd never so much as spent a night at an upscale camping site. I didn't know how I'd react to the people of Madagascar, or how they'd react to me. Would I be seen as a self-entitled do-gooder? An obnoxious tourist? Would my work be appreciated? Would I feel useful? Would I be useful? My fears were quelled fairly early. The relationships we built with the Malagasi people were unquestionably the most memorable aspect of my trip. We'd work in the same hamlet for several consecutive days, build within the walls of Malagasi homes, among pots and blankets and cassava, we'd learn Malagasi dances and teach English words, and we'd work alongside small children who would observe and then mimic each step of the stove-building process. The volunteers would go to bed each night to the sounds of nearby villages singing and playing music and dancing, and we all felt touched and inspired by how joyful and cohesive these people are, these people who - by our own Western standards - seem to have so little.



Smoothing the surface of an almost-done stove



First step in the stove-building process: sifting clay

Benefits to Students and School Community

I hope that the risks I've taken in the name of conservation and curiosity and adventure help to serve as a source of inspiration for my students - lending more credibility to the environmental ideas we discuss, encouraging students to leave their comfort zone in order to explore and make changes in their world, inspiring students to improve the sustainability of their everyday decisions, and transforming foreign places into faces and first-hand stories. This experience will allow me not only to share with my students the innovative ways in which people around the world, of all backgrounds, can change their lifestyles in the name of environmental conservation, but also the ways in which the changes that increase sustainability can also positively affect individuals' everyday lives. Furthermore, I'd like to open my students' minds to the possibility of pursuing similar work themselves.

Works in Progress

My experience this summer has left me wanting to do much more. I feel committed to the people of Madagascar, and hope to return within the next 5 years in order to continue to give back to a place that has taught me so much. As part of my new curriculum, I plan to have students research strategies employed throughout the world - like energy-efficient stove-building - in order to make living more sustainable. I hope that my experience in Madagascar will help to motivate them to think creatively about small changes that can make a big difference.



Dancing with the children of Volobe