



Photo credit to Vatosoa Rakotondrazafy: Going fishing with small-scale fishers to better understand their lives

From the Field

From the Village to the Regional Table: What Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) have taught me

By Vatosoa Rakotondrazafy,
IUCN ESARO IPLC Champion

Some of the safest places I have ever felt are in remote fishing villages in Madagascar.

After more than a decade working with Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs), I have learned that safety is not always about where you are. Sometimes, it is about who you are surrounded by.

I never planned to build a career working with communities. I wanted to become a lawyer. But I grew up in a humble family, and from an early age I developed a strong empathy for people who were marginalized, vulnerable, or whose voices were often not heard.



Photo credit to Vatosoa Rakotondrazafy: Planting mangroves with local communities

That eventually brought me to Madagascar's coastal communities.

In 2015, I became the first National Coordinator of MIHARI, Madagascar's network of locally managed marine areas (LMMAs). I was given the opportunity to lead what would become a national movement advocating for the rights of small-scale fishers and supporting communities to manage their own marine resources.

For five years, I traveled across Madagascar, organizing more than 20 community forums and spending time with fishing communities. I sat in fishing boats, joined village meetings, shared meals, listened to concerns, and worked alongside people facing very real challenges. We advocated for recognition of LMMAs, worked to address conflicts between small-scale and industrial fisheries, and helped communities strengthen their collective voice.

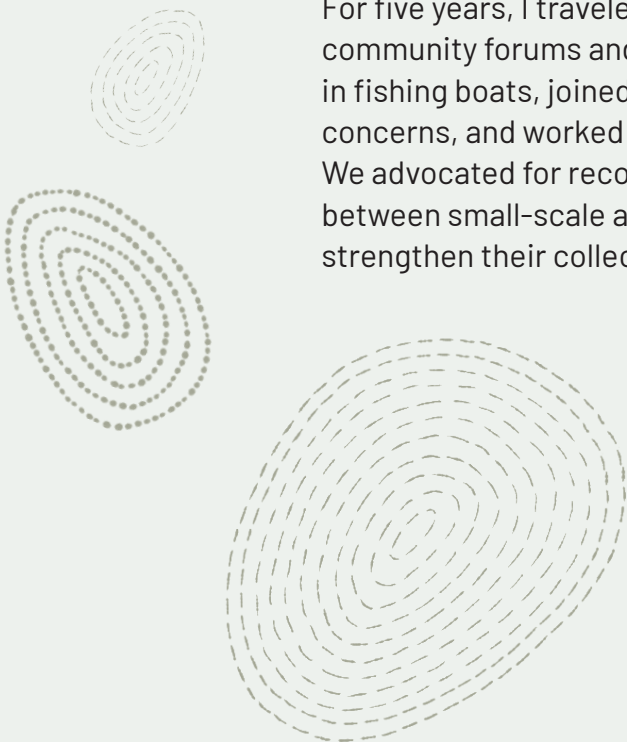




Photo credit to Vatosoa Rakotondrazafy: The Steering Committee of the WIO LMMA Alliance

In 2019, I was honored to receive the Whitley Award for this work. But the recognition that has stayed with me most is not an award. It is the trust that communities gave me.

Working from the ground taught me something that continues to guide me today: **you cannot truly understand communities from behind a desk.**

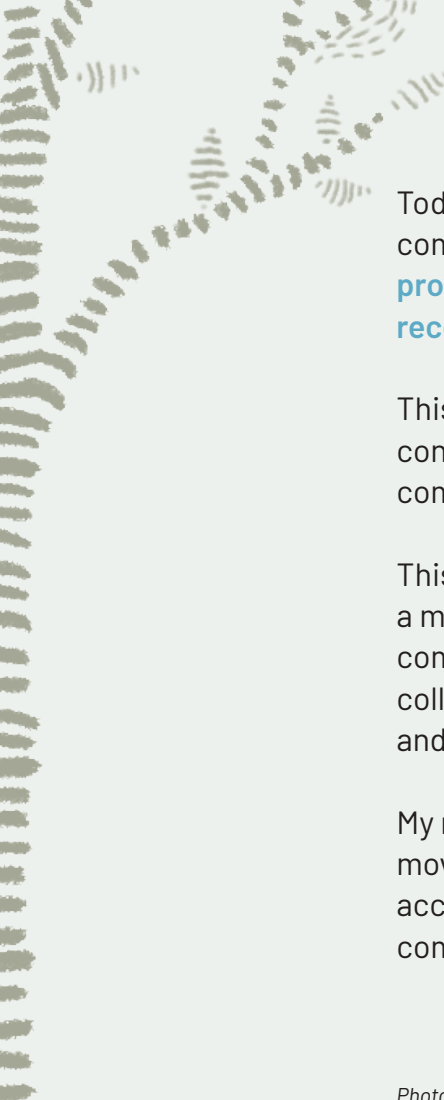
You need to spend time with them.

You need to share food, travel together, laugh together, listen, sometimes disagree, and simply be present.

And when you do, you discover how extraordinary IPLCs are.

I have always felt incredibly welcome and safe when I am with communities. There is a generosity, warmth, and solidarity that is difficult to describe unless you have experienced it yourself. Their knowledge of the ocean is extraordinary. Their resilience is inspiring. Their humor and ability to find solutions, even in extremely difficult circumstances, continue to amaze me.

In 2023, I joined IUCN as Regional Coastal and Ocean Governance Manager. I moved from leading the LMMA movement in Madagascar to working at the regional level across the Western Indian Ocean.



Today, one of my biggest ambitions is to help change the systems that communities have to navigate. **Communities should not have to constantly prove that they deserve to be part of conservation work. They should be recognized as leaders and rights holders.**

This means working for stronger legal recognition of community-led conservation, including LMMAs, and creating mechanisms that allow communities to access funding more directly.

This is part of what motivates me in supporting the **WIO LMMA Alliance**, a movement shaped and led by community leaders themselves, who are coming together across the Western Indian Ocean to strengthen their collective voice, learn from one another, and advocate for the recognition and support of community-led conservation.

My role is to help create the space, connections, and opportunities for this movement to grow, including stronger legal recognition of LMMAs, greater access to funding directly for communities, and greater representation of community voices in regional and global decision-making.

Photo credit to Vatosoa Rakotondrazafy: Winning the Whitley Award



But changing systems is also about changing **how we work together**.

One initiative that has deeply influenced me is the **Snow Leopard Trust's PARTNERS Principles**. I am proud to have been among those trained on the approach in 2022. I love the principles because they offer a practical way to reflect on how we build partnerships, share power, communicate, and work respectfully with communities and other partners.

I try to apply these principles in my own work and in the collaborations I lead. They constantly remind me that good partnerships are not only about delivering projects together. They are about trust, respect, listening, transparency, and recognizing the value that each partner brings.

And I have a dream: to see this way of working spread much further. I would love to help bring these principles and similar approaches to more organizations and conservation practitioners around the world, through training and practical learning, so that we can collectively change the future of how conservation works with IPLCs.

I am proud to have helped build the LMMA movement in Madagascar. And I am excited to now support communities as they build and strengthen this movement across the Western Indian Ocean.

The table is different now. The conversations are more regional. But the foundation of my work has not changed.

**I may have moved from the village forum to the regional table.
But I carry the village with me.**

