

The AKO Project: The importance of storytelling in lemur conservation



Image 1

The Ako Project began humbly with the 2005 Lemur Conservation Foundation (LCF) publication of a bilingual children's book (English and Malagasy) titled *Ny Aiay Ako* (*Ako the Aye-Aye*), written by the late Dr. Alison Jolly, noted primatologist and lemur biologist, illustrated by Deborah Ross and translated into Malagasy by Dr. Hantanirina Rasamimanana. It was originally intended to be used by teachers at and around LCF's partner reserve, the Protected Area of Tampolo, to teach local children about their own amazing environment, of which the majority are completely unaware. Its success, however, extended beyond the community of Tampolo. The Ako book initiative gave birth to a bilingual (English and Malagasy) six-book series with accompanying posters and teacher materials about different types of lemurs and their habitats illustrating Madagascar's fragile environment, exploring different ecosystems and the species of animals that live there. The book series ultimately developed into The Ako Project – an international environmental education program funded by LCF, UNICEF, the Liz Claiborne and Art Ortenberg Foundation, the

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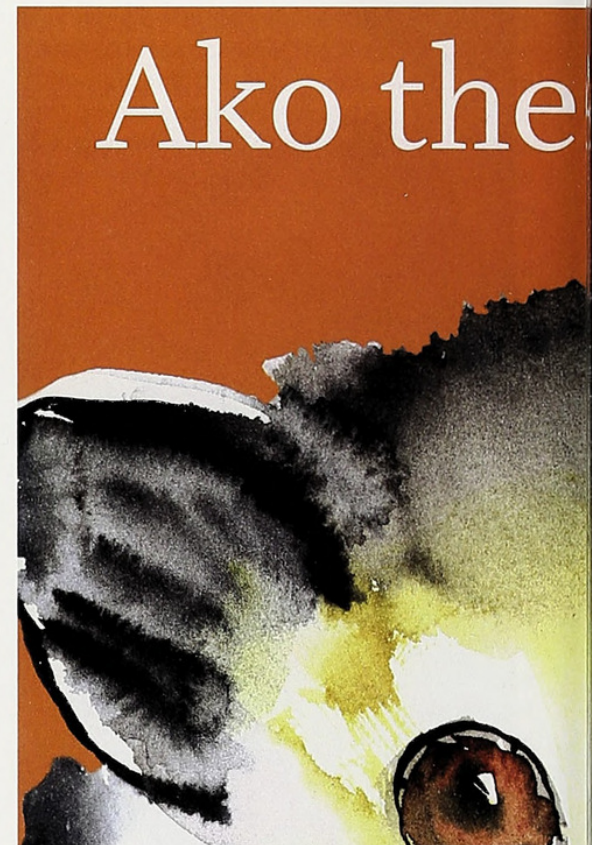


Image 2

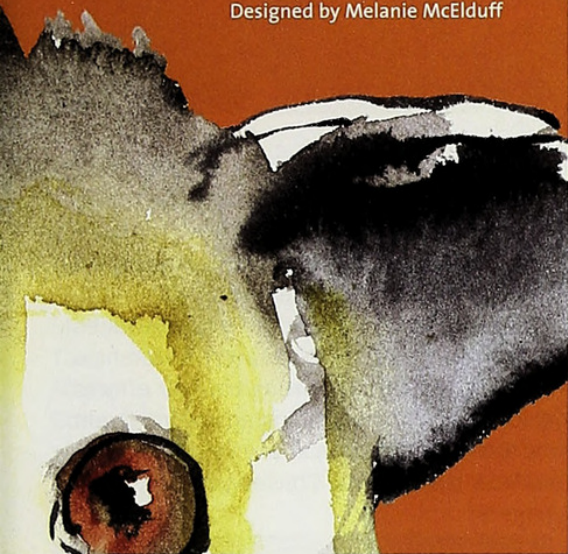
McCrae Conservation and Education Fund, and Nature's Path EnviroKidz.

The Ako book series offers a convergence of art and fine storytelling to convey the lives and environments of different lemur species. More than just stories however, they inspire empathy and concern for the world around us. The books' illustrations and the posters are entrancing as well as instructive. The bilingual presentation fascinates children (English and Malagasy alike) and provides a unique language learning opportunity. The overarching message is that lemurs can be seen as representatives of all that is rare and beautiful in the world and that we have the responsibility to save them for future generations. (Image 1)

Within Madagascar, for historical reasons and as a result of overseas bias in biodiversity curriculum, there has been minimal teaching about this island nation's incredible biodiversity in their own, Malagasy primary schools. The colonial French curriculum imposed in the late 1880's onward led to the decline of primary school enrollment from 140-160,000

Aye-Aye

Authors Alison Jolly and
Hantanirina Rasamimanana
Illustrated by Deborah Ross
Designed by Melanie McElduff



Bitika the mouse lemur

Authors Alison Jolly and
Hantanirina Rasamimanana
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children to just 40,000. Added to this, few Malagasy have ever seen a lemur or live near natural forest. While forest edge children do learn the medicinal plants and uses of the forest, they generally do not know about the richness of different habitats in Madagascar, or that most of the species they see do not exist in other parts of Madagascar let alone in different countries of the world. In addition, many rural teachers in villages near forests are often not trained with a depth of background knowledge about biology and ecology or environmental concerns. The Ako Project was developed to fill this void, aiming to produce children's storybooks on the lemurs of Madagascar, to involve and aid primary school teacher's professional development, and to provide teaching materials on conserving Madagascar's forest habitats.

The Ako Books

The Ako books are story picture books, each with a named endangered species lemur hero or heroine. While maintaining scientific accuracy, they are aimed to be fun and create empathy while also being educational in an

indirect way. The accompanying posters are detailed painted portrayals of each of the six different habitats with information boxes on the edges of the poster. Each shows the differing landscapes with inset regional species of plants and animals. These are teaching tools with more and more to discover as children look closer.

Ako the Aye-aye (Ako means Echo) is a little aye-aye who really likes to play. His species is solitary so he plays with his food and his mother's tail. He finds and loses a brown lemur playmate. Finally he is so busy hanging by his feet that he forgets to be scared of humans. Visitors to the reserve see him playing and stop being scared of the ill-luck supposed to be brought by aye-ayes. (Image 2)

Bitika the Mouse Lemur is a baby lemur of the smallest species in Madagascar. (Bitika means Tiny.) She ventures out of the nest and meets all the larger lemur species of the baobab forest: the chorus is "Bitika felt small." Then she saves her mother's life from a white-browed owl. She ends up feeling like the biggest lemur

in all Madagascar! (Image 3)

Tik-Tik the Ringtailed Lemur is an adolescent male ring-tailed lemur growing up as a species where females are totally dominant, and young males must emigrate to new troops. Tik-Tik means "Let's go!" in ring-tailed lemur sounds. He leaves his mother's troop to travel alone through the cactus-like spiny forest. He fights his rival, Longtooth, and wins the beautiful Feather-Fur. Ring-tailed lemur social calls appear in context so children can click, meow, purr, howl, squeak, shout war-cries, give alarm calls, and sing the male sunset song. (Image 4)

Fuzzy and Furry the Red Ruffed Lemur Twins live on the Masoala Peninsula where the rainforest goes down to the sea, and the trees are so tall that even their mother has never been to the ground. The branch where she parks them breaks in a cyclone. They fall by a forester's hut. The forester's wife wants to cook the baby lemurs, the twin children want them as pets, but the forester says "Suppose you were lost and the lemurs wanted to make pets of you!" (Image 5)

Image 3

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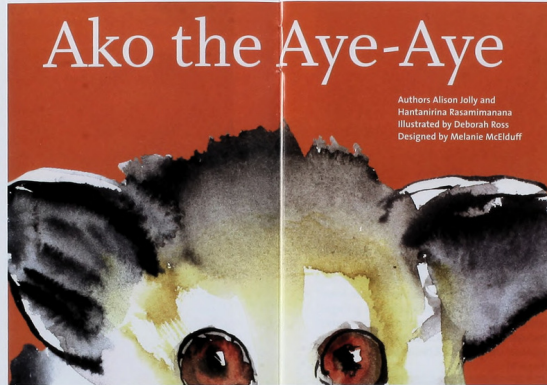


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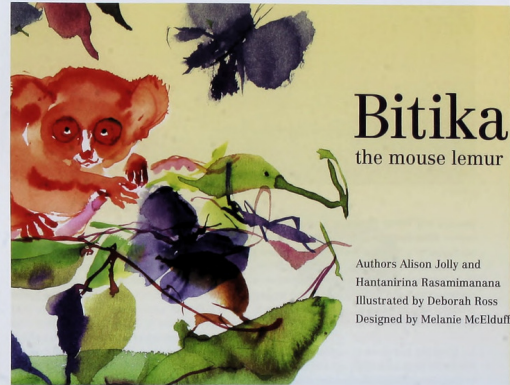


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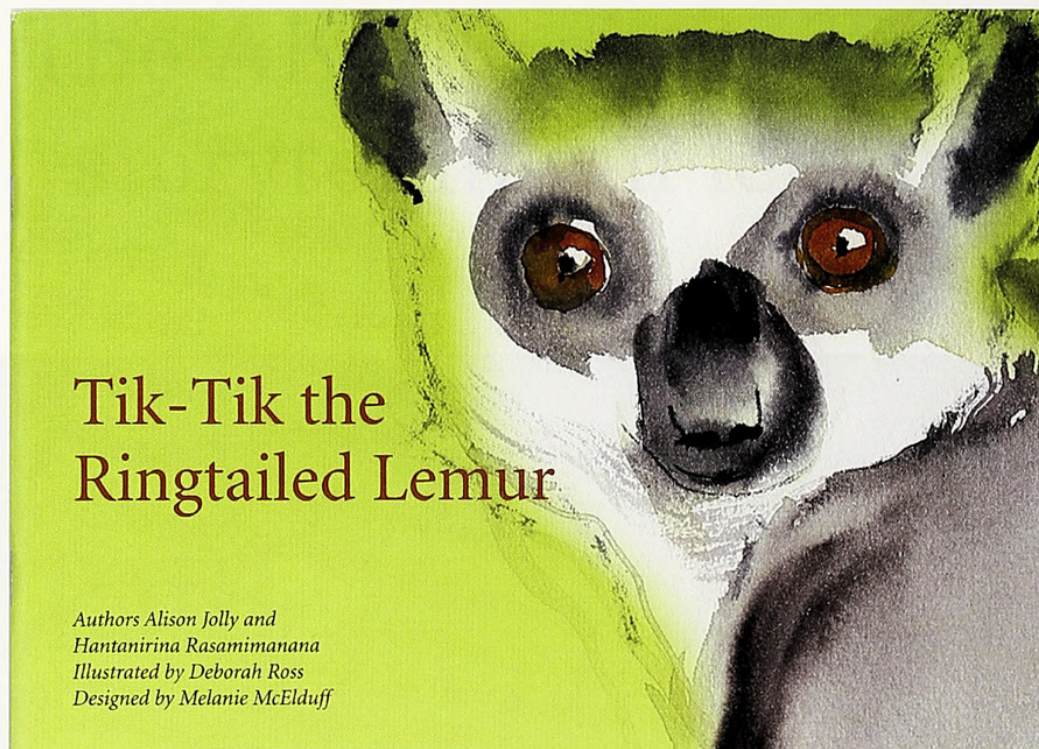


Image 4

Bounce the White Sifaka is a young sifaka lemur who lives among karst pinnacles, Madagascar's "stone forest." He falls down a crevasse where his family cannot reach him. He is frightened by bats, a snake, carnivorous cockroaches, and lastly a fossa, the largest predator of Madagascar. He finally leaps to safety on his mother's back. (Image 6)

No-Song the Indri lives in highland rainforest. Her family sings beautifully but she is too young to sing. Everything in the forest makes noises: trees, bees, birds, frogs, even a mosquito, but No-Song cannot sing. She finally understands what the indri songs mean during a territorial battle, and at last finds her own voice. (Image 7)

The History

The early initiative behind the Ako project came from artist Deborah Ross who, with the idea of story picture books, then approached Dr. Alison Jolly to work on the project with her. Dr. Hantanirina Rasamimanana joined the team, translating the books into Malagasy. After creating and publishing the first book, *Ako the Aye-Aye*, in 2005, two workshops were held in Madagascar in 2005 and 2006 with Dr. Jolly and professors from the University of Winchester.

The McCrae Conservation and Education Fund (MCEF) joined with LCF and Dr. Jolly in 2007 to develop print materials to accompany the illustrated story-books. In collaboration with Ecole Normale Supérieure of Antananarivo (ENS), Durrell Wildlife Conservation Preservation Trust (DWCPT), and GERP (Groupe d'Etudes et de Recherche sur les Primates, the Primatological Society of Madagascar),

two thousand books of *Ako the Aye-Aye* were distributed in dozens of rural primary schools in six areas of Madagascar in 2007-2008. With continued support from MCEF, the following five story books were developed along with the accompanying poster series, leading to the distribution of 15,000 of each of the Ako books and 6,000 of each poster by UNICEF to 200 primary schools in 2010. Dr. Rasamimanana conducted a series of workshops in three rural areas to develop a teachers' handbook for primary schoolteachers using the Ako books and posters. (Image 8)

The first Ako Workshop in the United States was held in 2011 at the University of Michigan-Dearborn School of Education and College of Arts, Science and Letters. Presented by Drs. Alison Jolly and Francine Dolins, the workshop sought to design a comprehensive program that can help educators teach conservation education principles. The two-day pilot program focused on Detroit area school teachers, exploring environmentally-based online learning in the classroom, especially in connecting Michigan to the Madagascar rainforest. It combined the use of Ako materials and work on tele-conferencing from field sites.

In 2013, the project achieved a significant education goal by producing Ako-based lesson plans and teachers' guides and an 'Ako Certified' continuing education program for teachers, museums, and zoo educators in the US. LCF engaged Kris Whipple to produce education materials for the US-based portion of the project. Ms. Whipple produced a comprehensive curriculum based on the Ako Book Series and Posters, providing a K-5 Education Curriculum Framework. Ms.

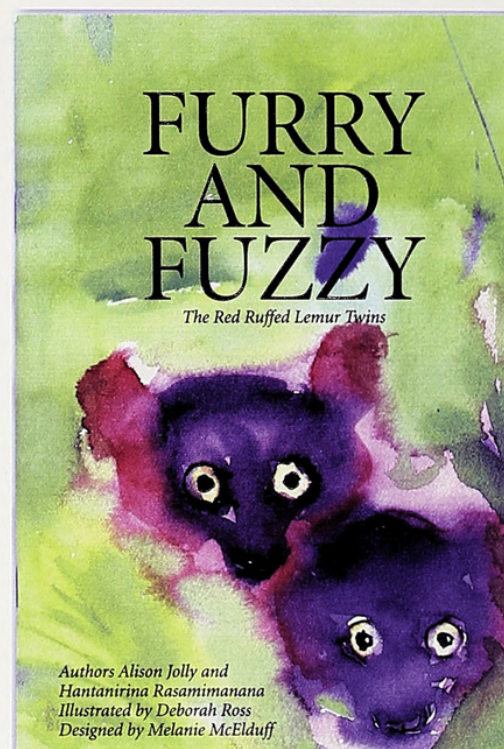


Image 5

Whipple's work helps teachers identify which Ako book can be used in their classrooms to enhance standards-based learning in reading by suggesting which books are most appropriate for each grade and reading level. This curriculum based on the Ako Book Series and Posters allows LCF to deepen partnerships with Florida schools through many efforts including teacher continuing education credit programs, classroom materials, and the Teachers Institute for Conservation Ecology. (Image 9)

The Lemur Conservation Foundation introduced the Ako Conservation Education Program in 2014 to Zoo Educators. The full-day workshop, held at the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens, focused on introducing the educators to the Ako book series and the accompanying educational posters and lesson plan. The workshop, led by Pattie Walsh, Kris Whipple, and Christina Dembiec (Jacksonville Zoo and LCF Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee Member), guided educators through the curriculum content and provided background information about lemur conservation and the history of the Ako Conservation Education Program. The interactive section of the workshop allowed attendees the opportunity to model, practice and evaluate the conservation lessons and activities from the *Ako the Aye-Aye* curriculum. Participants received conservation education materials including posters, books, and a teaching guide from the Ako Project to use in their zoo education programs. (Image 10)

In 2015, Dr. Francine Dolins (University of Michigan-Dearborn) implemented an initiative in the Detroit Public Schools to utilize Ako materials to connect Michigan students to

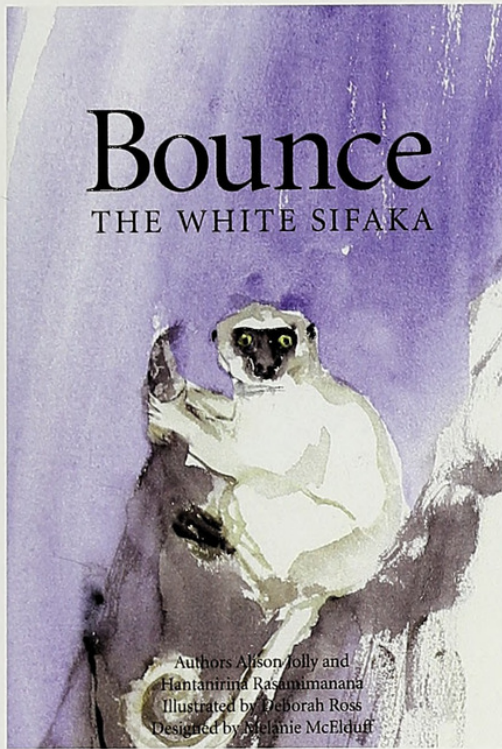


Image 6

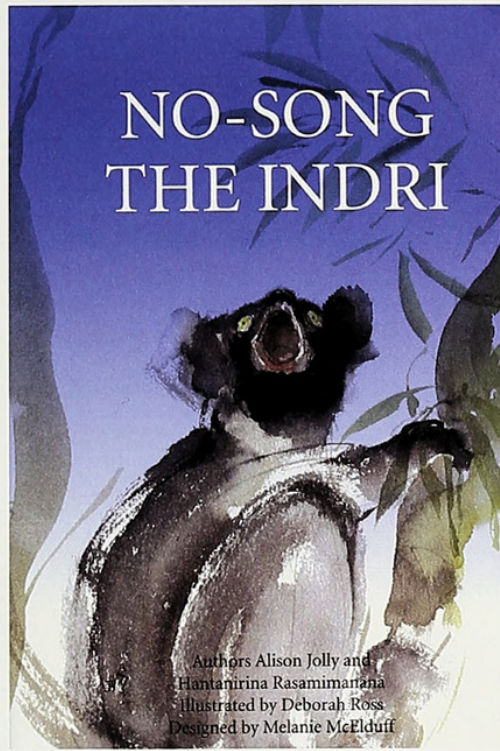


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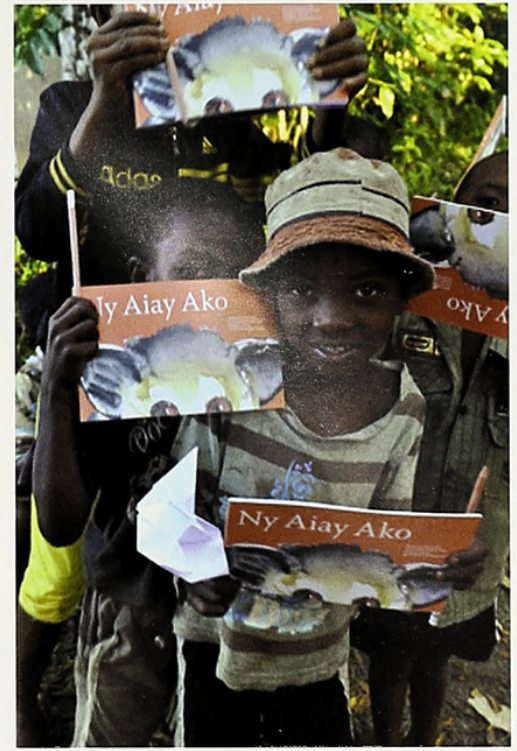


Image 8

Madagascar and lemur conservation. LCF is currently partnering with Dr. Dolins to develop a pilot program to implement some of the new lessons at three primary schools in Madagascar. In partnership with the Prosimian Taxon Advisory Group (PTAG) Education Advisors, Christina Dembiec, Mandy Fischer, Corey Romberg, and Jessica Slater, a second workshop for zoo educators will be held at LCF in the spring of 2016 to introduce the Ako



LEMUR
CONSERVATION
FOUNDATION



ENVIROKIDZ



Project to our local zoo partners. Our goal is that by working together we can help spread the conservation message about lemurs through the engaging tales of Ako, Bitika, Tik-Tik, Fuzzy and Furry, Bounce, and No-Song. 🐒

For more information about the Ako Project and how to get involved, please contact Caitlin Kenney at AkoProject@lemurreserve.org.

Learning about
Lemur Life

2nd - 3rd

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A LEMUR

LEARNING GOALS: Students will understand the types of activities that ring-tailed lemurs participate in during a typical day and compare these daily activities to their own.

STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO:

- Compare a day in their life to a day in the life of a ring-tailed lemur.
- Define an activity cycle.
- Describe how scientists use activity cycles to study animals.
- Determine how behavioral adaptations and activities help lemurs survive in the wild.

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Day in the Life of a Lemur Activity Sheet (one per student).
- Pens/pencils or markers for each student to complete their activity cycle.

DESCRIPTION

Students compare their daily activities to the daily activities of a ring-tailed lemur. They create an activity cycle and graph it on a pie chart to show the differences.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

SET-UP: Make copies of *A Day in the Life of a Lemur* Activity sheet (one per student.)

Create the Activity Cycle

1. Read Tik-Tik the Ring-Tailed Lemur to the class or instruct students to read the book independently.
2. Once the students have read the book, introduce the activity by asking students to describe the types of activities the ring-tailed lemurs participated in during the story. Use the following questions to guide the discussion:
 - How did Tik-Tik and the other ring-tailed lemurs in the story...

(cont'd) Their troop provides them with protection from predators, companionship, and even warmth at night. For this reason they spend both their days and nights with their troop-mates.

3. Write their answers on the board. Tell students that they will now participate in an activity to learn how lemurs spend their day.
4. Distribute and review the *A Day in the Life of a Lemur* activity sheet.



Kenney, Caitlin. 2015. "The AKO Project: The importance of storytelling in lemur conservation." *Animal keepers' forum* 42(12), 352–355.

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