

# Endeavour and Stepping into the Unknown

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Since the School introduced its Core Values of Creativity, Aspiration, Responsibility, and Endeavour back during the first lockdown in 2020, “Endeavour” is the value that I have pondered over the most. On a day-to-day basis there are plenty of opportunities for you to strive for excellence: to try your best in a hockey game; to put lots of effort into a prep; to do your utmost to help a friend. These are all really good examples of daily life endeavours, but alone are these enough to push yourself so that you can truly “become the best that you can be”? Am I just bumbling along in mid-life mediocrity? Am I endeavouring to stretch myself to really “become the best that I can be”?

On the last day of the summer term, twelve pupils, Mr Barnard and I set off on the journey of a lifetime. Feeling very excited but also quite nervous, we departed for Madagascar to spend 2 weeks learning about biodiversity and conservation on this extremely special and unique island. Our itinerary included a week performing biodiversity surveys for lemurs, birds, butterflies, spiders, reptiles and amphibians in the dry Northern forests followed by a week of scuba diving to explore the island’s amazing coral reefs and marine life. On paper it all sounded fabulous - like being in a David Attenborough documentary, living with the lemurs, and swimming with the turtles. But Madagascar was a huge unknown and running a trip to this tropical island was at the far limit of my comfort zone. But driven by a strong desire to gain new experiences and broaden our horizons, we ventured together into the unknown - this was a huge endeavour for us all.

Located around 250 miles off the east coast of Africa, Madagascar is the world’s oldest island. Around 90 million years ago India split from Africa, and the island of Madagascar was set adrift. Isolated for longer than any other island in the world, life has had time to evolve on Madagascar in the most surprising of ways. It boasts more unique plants and animals than any other island on the planet - amazingly, 80% of the species that are found on Madagascar are found nowhere else on Earth. However, the loss of habitat due to deforestation is now threatening to wipe out 20 million years of evolution. With only 10 percent of the country’s forests remaining, Madagascar’s extraordinary biodiversity is in jeopardy. One of the main aims of our trip was to experience being part of a conservation project first-hand - to be involved in getting the data with scientists, to learn about conservation from experts in the field and to be part of something important - something big - something that mattered.

Looking back now - I can see that my previous perspective of how conservation worked was rather naive. It seemed straightforward - if we stopped destroying the forests, the habitats would be preserved and the species would be saved. Simple. Yet from the moment my feet touched the red, dusty Madagascan soil, I saw and experienced things that helped me to understand the complexities of the fine balancing act between biodiversity conservation and human survival.

Madagascar is one of the poorest countries in the world - over 75% of the Malagassy people live in extreme poverty and almost half of the children are malnourished. 90% of houses do not have a toilet and only half of Madagascar's population has access to clean water, although this is not necessarily nearby. Rural communities may have to travel up to 40 km to access water from wells or rivers. We saw this as we drove through the dry, arid central highlands - seemingly in the middle of nowhere, miles from any village or town, young children, often shoeless, carried water in large containers from some mysterious source back to their families. In order to survive, the Malagassy people have to use every resource available to them - the largest resource being the land. Using a technique called "slash and burn" farming, they cut back trees and burn the land. This provides them with charcoal to sell in the towns, and land that can be used to either feed their cattle or grow crops. Although this farming technique has led to deforestation on a large scale, it has meant that rural communities have enough food to live. How can you tell these people to stop cutting down trees when their alternative option is starvation?

One of the most special and unexpected things about the trip was spending time with and learning more about the Malagassy people. The children had beaming faces and loved to interact with us - everywhere we went we could hear children shouting "Salama", keen to receive a response from the strange-looking foreigners. The adults were generally stern - more wary - consumed with their daily battle for survival. Whilst some spoke French, most only spoke Malagassy, but with the help of locals working with our organisation, we were able to communicate and interact, slowly chipping away at the cultural barriers. Our pupils were quick to notice that every village had a football pitch and orchestrated a game of football against some locals, in which we just about held our own against the bare-footed Malagassy talent.

Our final night in the forest camp was spent singing, laughing and dancing around a bonfire with our local Malagassy guides and their families - the stern faces were gone - any cultural differences cast aside - we were united by music.

Nothing holds greater power in our life than the unknown. The unknown pulls us towards new life experiences, new knowledge, and new relationships. We took a huge leap into the unknown in Madagascar. It was wonderful to experience the forested paradise represented on wildlife documentaries and play a part in monitoring biodiversity in these extremely special habitats. But we also experienced the stark reality of the "real" Madagascar and I now have a better understanding of how conservation projects focus their efforts on the local communities, providing training and education, giving them alternative sources of income and jobs - giving them the tools for survival without relying on destroying the land.

My overall experience in Madagascar has had a huge impact on me - I found that I was able to accomplish things that I never thought that I could achieve - my overall perspective on life has changed and my priorities are realigned - I feel better equipped to take on new challenges. It's the biggest endeavour that I have ever taken on as a teacher and the one that has had the biggest impact on my personal growth. Some of you will know that I have a huge fear of public speaking, but I stand here today with a new found inner strength to face my fears.

You all have it within you to step into the unknown. I urge you to find the courage to try something new and step outside of your comfort zone, to push yourself to do things that you never thought were possible. Whether big or small, the unknown beckons you to move forwards into a sea of possibilities.