Post Fellowship Reporting - Project Summary

Report Title:	Ecological Conservation and Community Development in Madagascar	**Name:**	Rebecca Weissman
Other Team Members:			
Program:	Oakland Program		
Trip Dates:	11/30/-0001 - 11/30/-0001	**Location Visited:**	Madagascar

Post Fellowship Reporting Template: PFR Template 02

Project Summary: On June 30th, 2010 my plane touched down in a land I knew virtually nothing about. I had come to Madagascar to study lemurs, biological and botanical conservation, the scientific process, community development, and Africa itself. Having just completed my third year teaching, I was starting to feel proficient in teaching reading, writing, and math. My confidence in teaching science, however, was severely lacking. The first grade science standards produced more questions than answers for me. I decided to volunteer for the non-profit organization Azafady in remote Southeastern Madagascar to build an interest in teaching science, develop my knowledge of the science content I was responsible for teaching, and to understand and identify critical concepts and bigger ideas for my students to investigate.

As I reviewed environmental volunteer programs for my fellowship proposal, I became increasingly uncomfortable about going to a country to help fix damage done by its inhabitants (who are only trying to survive) without acknowledging their need for development. I chose Azafady because they recognized the complex and inseparable relationship between conservation and community, between plant/animal life and human life. I wanted to learn about how conservation and development could go hand-in-hand, and how they could be implemented in a culturally responsive and sustainable manner. How can we preserve the environment while also improving human conditions? How could I teach my first graders about environmental science without ignoring human society? How could I use existing conservation and development models to help my students identify problems in their own environment or society, then build and implement plans to make responsible change?

As I camped for four weeks on the edge of primary rain forests and remote villages my questions were answered not only by my first-hand, hands-on science learning, but more significantly by observing the community in which I lived and the plethora of interrelated conservation and development projects in which Azafady was involved.

Six weeks later my plane whisked me back home. Guidebook soundbites had morphed into powerful experiences and blurry plans on how to implement my learning had become as sharp as the photographs on my camera.

Career Impact: For the duration of my fellowship experience I struggled with questions I constantly posed for myself regarding my science learning and how I would implement it in my classroom. I also learned about the local community's challenges. I played with and taught local children. Poverty now had a face--many faces--that touched me. I learned about Azafady's projects. I read about the world from my hammock, and through Jeffrey Sachs' The End of Poverty I found my interest and attention veering away from science standards and onto human development. The existentialist in me stirred and I gained clarity about science education in my classroom: the content of our district's "Plants and Animals" unit would be a vehicle to develop my young students into responsible, aware, caring, and helpful global citizens. I decided how to blend science and community development. I planned how to present the complexities of the environment and human poverty to my first graders by using one of Azafady's projects--a tree farm intended for villagers to use as an alternative to rain forest deforestation--as a model. I feel equipped and motivated to teach my students how to care for all the life in their world.

Classroom/Community Impact: The students are wiggly and inattentive. In our discussion about why it's important to develop their reading stamina, I start talking about my marathon training. The spontaneous personal story about my life, almost immediately and with incredible ease, draws the student engagement and attention for which all teachers strive. The students perk up, their eyes are bright and glued to my face.
My fellowship experience in Madagascar will bring the real world, by which all students are fascinated, into the classroom. My stories and photos of plants and animals in the jungle and children in the villages, my real-life experiences with the scientific process, my friendships with actual people, and my examples of current and urgent development projects will engage all the first graders at my school and give them a reason to learn. They will have role models and cross-cultural friends.
I wrote in my journal one night that I now knew (and would always remember) what lemurs eat, not because I read the fact, but because I observed it ten feet in front of me. My students will now learn science authentically and meaningfully by moving beyond the classroom walls, both literally and figuratively.

Open Response: *I am collaborating with my grade-level team to create a science and social studies unit based on my experiences in Madagascar.
*I am creating a portfolio of artifacts, pictures, souvenirs, and stories to be used during the curricular unit, and which will be available for any teacher at my school to use.
*I am developing of a slide show to show my colleagues about my fellowship experience and Fund for Teachers.
*I am designing a fundraising project for my students to make possible a new library at the school in the village where I stayed while in Madagascar.
*I am planning several field trips during which students will experience and observe plants and animals in their ecosystem. Students will reflect on their learning and teach others.
*My students are identifying a problem in our society or environment and creating a volunteer project to help solve the problem.

Quote: My personal and professional growth are inseparable. When I learn, my students learn; when I am educated, I can educate.

Photos:

Learning local weaving techniques

Playing games and getting to know the local children

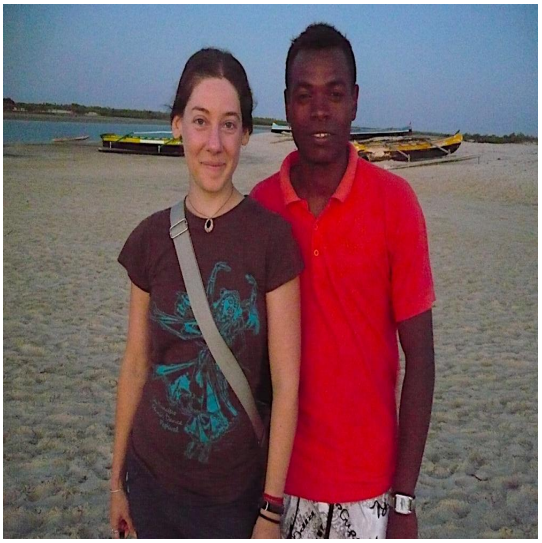
Fellow volunteers and Azafady staff members

The local well: where we got our bathing and dishwashing water

One of the smallest living species of chameleon

My birthday in the bush: Malagasy-made banana toffee pie

Me and a Malagasy staff member with whom I worked on education development



A guide with whom I made friends