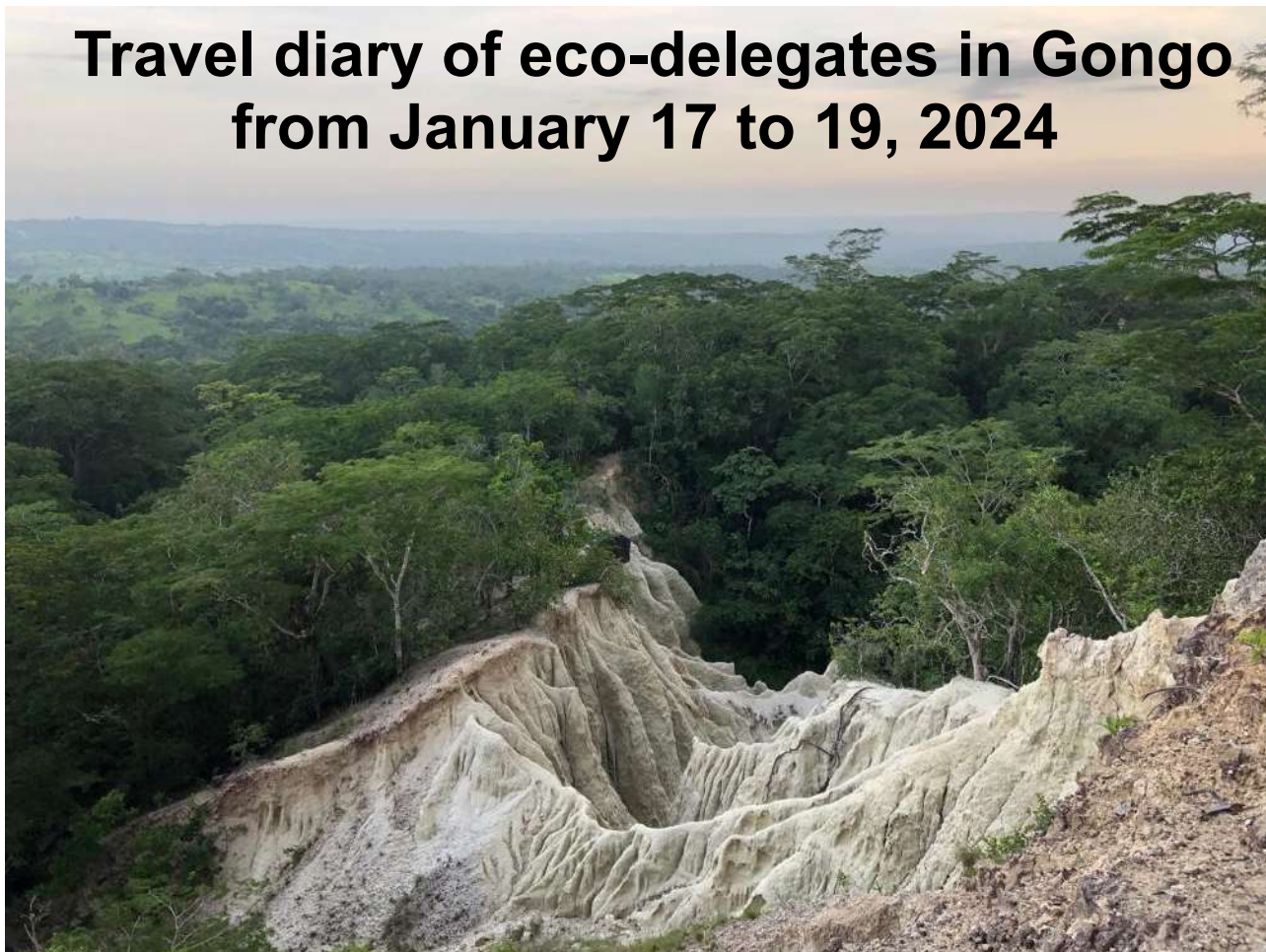




Travel diary of eco-delegates in Gongo from January 17 to 19, 2024



Fight deforestation and protect wildlife

For 3 days, **18 students** from the French school, elected eco-delegates by their classmates, went to discover environmental preservation actions in the **Saadani region**.

Organized for the 3rd consecutive year, this trip is an opportunity to confront students with the reality of Tanzanian life outside the cities, and to participate in nature protection actions carried out by grassroots associations:

- SANA (Save African Nature),
- HISA (Human Initiative to Save Animals)



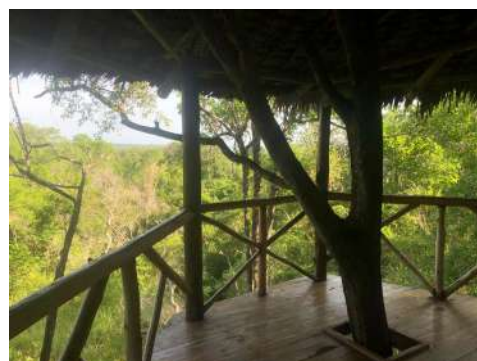
Wednesday January 17: From Dar-Es-Salaam to the village of Gongo

At 8 a.m., everyone meets in front of the school. It's the excitement of departure and goodbyes to parents...



The journey goes without difficulty, despite the heavy rains of recent weeks which have caused so much damage to the region's roads. We will still take more than 6 hours to reach the **village of Gongo** and the **Miseni retreat lodge**...

We are welcomed by Elysabetha who shows us around the site, and we have our first lunch. The children are excited at the idea of starting the adventure, and everyone is impressed by the beauty of the place: the Miseni lodge is made of ten small buildings scattered on the top of a hill which offers magnificent views of the surrounding forest and Saadani Park. Due to the rains, the atmosphere is very green and you really feel like you are **in the heart of the Tanzanian jungle!**



The access path to the lodge winds around a natural quarry where erosion has dug real limestone canyons which suddenly appear behind the dense vegetation: it is easy to understand why the inhabitants have made this place a **"sacred hill" which challenges time and the elements...**



After lunch and exploring the rooms (and numerous discussions about the choice of locations for each and every one!), we meet the first members of the SANA association, Johnson and Stefania, who will accompany us for **a hike in the surrounding area**, to discover the local flora and fauna.

In single file in small groups, we wind up the hillside among acacias and "miseni trees" (which gave their name to the site).

We come across **very beautiful trees** such as tamarinds, cacti, and also the very curious "cocodile tree" whose large thorns make it look like crocodile skin. Amarula trees also catch our attention: their fermented fruits are full of alcohol... and are particularly appreciated by elephants!



We come across several old traces of the passage of antelopes (bushbucks), and even elephants, and come across the bed of a small river that we go up to the top of the hill.

Multicolored butterflies, spiders with large horns, birds that flee as we pass by, impressive rows of processionary ants... and even a family of "Colobus guereza" monkeys, black and white and of beautiful size, which give us an impressive jumping spectacle from tree to tree... We are starting to understand that we are here **in wild animal territory!**



The hike ends with the ascent of **the sacred hill**, where local tradition requires that you access... barefoot! The couple who welcome us to the site even wash the feet of the whole little troop, and willingly answer the thousand questions from the students.

These are representatives of the Wadoy tribe which is established on site, and for whom this hill has great powers, particularly meteorological... We thus touch upon the multiple local traditions and beliefs (all the more impressive as it seems that the region has known in the past the presence of tribes practicing cannibalism!)

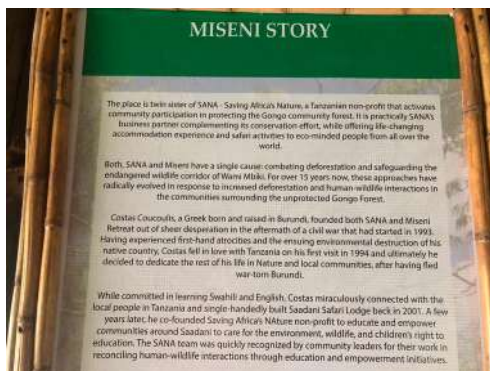
At the top, the low-angle view of the limestone canyons is dizzying, and we overlook the immensity of the Saadani park. A magnificent stormy sky offers us one last spectacle, and it is time to return to the lodge...





Miseni retreat is an “eco-lodge”, whose founder (Costas Coucoulis) intelligently negotiated the establishment with the local communities, allowing both the development of this exceptional site and committing to its protection. When it was created, the lodge even received a visit from Jane Goodall herself (and Costa Coucoulis is now a member of the board of the Jane Goodall Institute Tanzania)!

Here we save water and electricity (no air conditioning or fans in the rooms... obviously a first for some students!), and for the « petit coin », we go to the dry toilets (sources of great astonishment for the children of school accustomed to comfort...).



Saadani Park

Protected as a nature reserve since the 1960s, Saadani became a National Park in 2002, and its surface area was doubled. The park now covers an area of 1100 km².

If the reserve suffered greatly from poaching before the end of the 1990s, a positive turn has been taken in recent years thanks to the concerted fight against poachers and the integration of villages in the process of nature preservation.

Most of the park is made up of savannah with very dense vegetation. To the southwest lies the thick equatorial forest of Zaraninge with marshy soil. Saadani is the only Tanzanian wildlife sanctuary opening onto the Indian Ocean.

Thursday January 18: Plant acacias and scare away elephants

In the morning we go to Gongo, where we are welcomed by Isabella, Naima and Stefania, members and volunteers of the SANA association, who explain to us the work of the association and its impressive achievements: **in 2 years, more than 94,000 trees were planted to fight deforestation.**

The association raises awareness among residents about the **protection of forests** (against the sale of charcoal massively used in Tanzania for cooking, what is called "dirty cooking", which poses problems linked to fumes from charcoal combustion , harmful to the environment and to health).



We visit the **“seed bank”**, installed in a container and powered by solar panels (financed by the Terraformation foundation). Stefania explains the different steps to us: collecting, sorting, cleaning, drying, and vacuuming the seeds. This process makes it possible to store vital resources for the environment by preserving endemic species and being able to provide local farmers with the seeds appropriate to their needs.



The children are then invited to get their hands dirty! Water the young plants in the greenhouse, make small reservoirs to accommodate the young shoots, and above all plant acacia seeds which will be intended to be planted in the open field. You must check that the seeds are well covered with soil, organize your work to be sure that each pot has been prepared (“pinch” to soften the soil) and planted... Excess water from watering is collected and put back on the plants that need it.



Before us stretches a magnificent field of coconut trees with pineapple plantations at their feet, a fine example of **agroforestry**, or **syntropic agriculture** advocated and implemented by the Sana association (still too little known, agriculture syntropic is based on the functioning of natural ecosystems, by meeting the production objectives of farmers, that is to say by introducing edible and marketable species. The principle: returning the plants to the conditions of light and fertility that 'they would have in their natural environment.)



We then walk to **the association camp**, where the village mamas are expected to prepare lunch for us. Balloon, freesbee, pingpong, Uno... there is what you need to wait, and we take the opportunity to visit the site: a previous team constructed a very interesting building using a technique of earth-filled bags, to form an elegant, naturally ventilated dome. Benson also shows us the construction site of a future library-computer room which will be very useful to the association and the inhabitants of the village..



He also shows us the **bicycles** provided thanks to Africraft, which aim to facilitate the mobility of the inhabitants of the village.



After lunch, Johnson introduces us to the construction of the famous **elephant-scaring cannons**, the aim of which is both to make noise to keep elephants away from the village and plantations, and to throw bombs of pepper seeds which will protect crops.

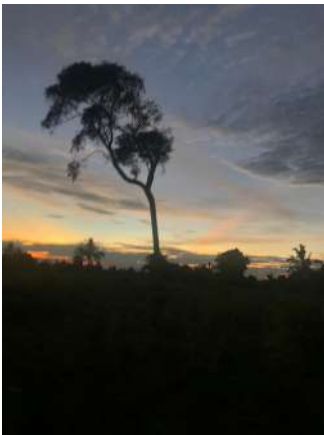
The children must sand plastic pipes to fit them together, then glue them, and finally pierce them to be able to inject a flammable liquid, which will create a small detonation on contact with an igniter... **A great DIY session** with the means at hand, and in the end more than 5 beautiful cannons which will be given to the inhabitants of the village



These cannons are part of several devices created by SANA and HISA to allow **better human/wildlife cohabitation** and preserve fields, crops and reserves from the passage of elephants. The association also deployed chili bricks, as well as barriers made of beehives or sheets coated with chili pepper to prevent elephants from damaging crops.

The heart of the SANA project is indeed to reconstruct passage corridors for elephants between the different parts of the park, through wooded continuity. Hence the importance of replanting trees, the co-benefits of which are immense (CO2 absorption, protection of ecosystems, etc.).

To end this afternoon in style, we cross the village and walk to a magnificent viewpoint over the surrounding valleys... Nice spot for a group photo!



In the evening, after dinner, it's time for a **wild marshmallow party** around the fire under a magnificent starry sky...



Friday January 19: Looking for treasure with the school children

For the last day in Gongo, we meet at the village school, where Margaux has organized a big treasure hunt!

Gathered in a class, the eco-delegates discover educational conditions very different from theirs... Isabella explains to them that this school has 357 students, for whom until recently there were only... 2 teachers! Thanks to the support of the association, the government then created a few positions, and there are now 9 teachers in the school, who manage 7 classes.

A major difficulty for the school is linked to the distances to be covered for the students, some of whom live more than 5 kilometers away, and who must travel this dangerous journey on foot (among wild animals and without any public facilities: no protected passage, no lighting, etc.). Unfortunately, accidents have already happened.

The association also intervened on this subject, by creating a canteen to prevent certain students from having to return home in the middle of the day. She also contributed to the school having 10 toilets (whereas there were only 2 toilets initially).

These improvements are significant, but we can only be struck by the rudimentary appearance of the buildings and equipment, and by the great general deprivation in which the local population lives. The contrast with the students of the French school, with their new clothes, watches, hiking shoes and other smartphones, is particularly striking.

Education about otherness and the fight against inequalities are fundamental elements of sustainable development. We hope that in addition to participating in ecological actions (planting trees, observing nature), the eco-delegates will have been made aware of this theme through their trip and their discovery of the daily reality of Tanzanians in Gongo, very far from that of the inhabitants of the Dar-Es-Salaam Peninsula...

The stay ends with this great quest for clues hidden in the surroundings of the school, which will lead the students to unearth a treasure (candies and memory games on the theme of elephants!)... The teams made up of eco-delegates and Gongo students run in all directions, helped by other students happy to participate (who mix up the clues a little and confuse the tracks, but the adventure is all the more difficult!). A large bazaar which is a pleasure to see, and which will surely leave an impression on both sides of the participants!



Finally our journey ends and we have to face the return road... tired but full of memories of this great experience!

The eco-delegates who participated in the trip:

Philippine (CM1)
Erica (CM1)
Amaury (CM1)
Aidan (CM1)
June (CM2)
Green (CM2)
Jonada (CM2)
Flora (CM2)
Akim (6ème)
Rabah (6ème)
Barik (6ème)
Luan (6ème)
Ianis (5ème)
Yasmina (5ème)
Pauline (4ème)
Prunelle (4ème)
Nawal (3ème)
Cyril (3ème)

Accompanying adults: Margaux « mama tembo » Babola / Léo Mascarielli / Julien Hederer

To know more :

<https://hisaproject.org/en/home/>

<https://www.karibusana.co.uk/>

<https://www.terraformation.com/>

