

Press Release  
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### **Zurich Zoo warns:**

## **ILLEGAL DEFORESTATION – A MAJOR THREAT TO MASOALA NATIONAL PARK IN MADAGASCAR**

*Zurich, November 4, 2011* - Zurich Zoo is greatly concerned that a leading manufacturer of music instruments continues to purchase and process wood felled illegally in Masoala National Park.

The documentary „Tatort Regenwald – Undercover gegen die Holzmafia“ („Crime Scene Rainforest – Undercover against the Wood Mafia“) (WDR 11.14.2011 22:00) by Alexander von Bismarck impressively demonstrates how wood felled illegally in Masoala National Park is exported to China, Europe, and the U.S. Manufacturers of instruments, e.g. the world famous company Gibson Guitars, are among the most important customers of such wood. In his documentary, thanks to meticulous detail work, often disguised as a wood trader and subjected to great danger, Alexander von Bismarck of the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) unveils the deceptive schemes behind the illegal felling of precious woods.

### **The felling of precious woods leads to the killing of lemurs and flying foxes**

The illegal felling of precious woods in Masoala National Park has led to a spiral of destruction: In order to transport the wood, paths and tracks need to be built in the intact forest. An additional five trees need to be felled so that the precious woods (that do not float on their own) can be rafted to the coast. The wood-fellers toiling away in the rainforest for daily wages of between two and five Swiss Franks hunt forest lemurs and flying foxes for food.

What remains is a hunted-down tropical forest in which there are hardly any more lemurs and flying foxes to spread the seeds of the trees. Even the most hard and resistant trees, rosewood and ebony, are affected – and in an area often subjected to hurricanes, this is absolutely fatal. Erosion and flooding are the consequences – and also a threat to the settlements along the river shores.

### **Gibson distorts the facts**

The U.S. state attorney's office suspects Gibson Guitars, icon among all guitar manufacturers, to be a customer of such illegally felled precious woods and has already carried out two searches at Gibson company sites. Gibson's Director, however, pretends to be unknowing and innocent. He did not even shy away from mobilizing the conservative Tea Party movement to protest against the Lacey Act\* - an act prohibiting the importing of illegally procured natural products, such as wood, and duly tightened by the Bush administration.

The facts tell a different story: Together with other major instrument manufacturers, in 2007, Gibson visited Madagascar and the Masoala region in order to obtain a closer impression of the local wood market<sup>1)</sup>. The result was clear and unambiguous: It will take years until wood for instrument manufacturers can be exported legally from Madagascar. Today, only prefabricated fingerboards and other components for violins and guitars may be exported legally from Madagascar. Consequently, all other manufacturers refrain from procuring raw

precious woods from Madagascar. Gibson, however, purchased raw precious woods from Madagascar on the grey market in 2009<sup>2)</sup>.

### **The facts speak for themselves**

In 2010, staff of Zurich Zoo, Masoala National Park and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) verified the forestry license and quota for the wood supplied to Gibson<sup>3)</sup>. The facts speak for themselves: It is simply impossible that the quantity of wood exported stem from such a small quota. The quota was exceeded by far, with seven out of eight trees felled illegally. Moreover, Alexander von Bismarck also proved that Gibson's supplier also has precious woods cut in the protected area of Masoala National Park<sup>4)</sup>.

„Zurich Zoo sees itself as the ambassador of Masoala Rainforest in Madagascar. Therefore, we endeavor to put an end to the illegal felling and unscrupulous trading of these precious woods as well as to holding accountable the persons responsible“, explains Dr. Alex Rübél, Director of Zurich Zoo.

#### **Not to be missed:**

„Tatort Regenwald – Undercover gegen die Holzmafia“  
(„Crime Scene Rainforest – Undercover against the Wood Mafia“)

A documentary about Alexander von Bismarck

WDR, November 14, 2011, 22:00 h

### **Bibliography**

- 1) Investigation Into the Global Trade in Malagasy Precious Woods; Global Witness and the Environmental Investigation Agency; October 2010. “According to trade data, in recent years Gibson imported tons of high-quality Malagasy ebony from a German company, Theodor Nagel GmbH & Co., for use in high-end guitars such as the Gibson J-45, an instrument used by the likes of Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan. (...) In 2007, procurement officers from three major American guitar companies – Gibson, Taylor and Martin - were taken by Tropical Forest Trust (TFT) on a fact-finding trip to Madagascar. The trip found that it could take years to create a sustainable managed supply of ebony, and confirmed the dubious legality of wood available for purchase at the time. Despite these warning signs, trade data indicates that Gibson continued to purchase wood from Nagel even after the Lacey Act protection came into effect in May 2008.”
- 2) Plaintiff Tennessee, Case 3:10-cv-00747 Document 30, Filed 06/04/11
- 3) Bauert M. 2010. Field Report on the Forest Concession (Permis d'Exploiter) of THEODOR NAGEL TIMBERTRADE, HAMBURG for Exporting Ebony from the Masoala Peninsula. Zoo Zurich.
- 4) Kohlhöfer, P. & Smith, T., 2010. Operation geplündertes Wald („Operation plundered rainforest“) GEO 04/2010: 44 -60.

The corresponding documents can be downloaded from [www.zoo.ch/medien](http://www.zoo.ch/medien)

### **Links**

EIA Environmental Investigation Agency: [www.eia-global.org](http://www.eia-global.org)

WCS Wildlife Conservation Society: [www.wcs.org](http://www.wcs.org)

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Media information and pictures can be downloaded from [www.zoo.ch/medien](http://www.zoo.ch/medien)