Volunteer research assistants: Community-based forest restoration in Kianjavato, Madagascar

Hiring Organization: Omaha’s Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium

Project Description: Investigators at the Omaha’s Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium (OHDZA) seek qualified and highly motivated volunteer research assistants to contribute to an on-going reforestation program in southeastern Madagascar in the second half of 2015 and again in 2016. The restoration effort is led by OHDZA and its partner, the Madagascar Biodiversity Partnership (MBP; a Malagasy nongovernmental organization), and is designed to reconnect natural habitats over the mountainous terrain in the Kianjavato-Vatovavy landscape. Nine lemur species, several of which are critically endangered, are present in the remaining yet unprotected forest fragments, as is a rich variety of other endemics (birds, chameleons, tenrecs, etc.). The long-term goal of this project is to expand animal habitat while sustainably benefiting the 12,000 area residents.

Depending on the job tasks for the day, you may be working at the primary field station or at the multiple tree nurseries; you could be collecting seeds within an established forest; or at a field site preparing for a community planting event. Duties may include sorting compost, placing seedlings into growing bags, organizing the tree inventory, transplanting trees with the local community groups or school children. The ultimate goal of the reforestation program is to plant one million trees as a means to establish corridors between forest fragments and restore ecosystem services. In order reach this substantial goal, there is a need for streamlining the reforestation effort – from seed collection, germination, and transplantation – and this is where the volunteers can make a significant and lasting contribution to the project.

The schedule for the reforestation volunteer may vary, but will operate during daylight hours, with members of the reforestation team and nursery staff arriving at the job site around 7:00am. The daily work location will fluctuate, but you will have a normal work Monday through Friday schedule, though some days may extend beyond an 8 hours. You will typically work with three other volunteers and a team of knowledgeable Malagasy field guides. The reforestation team consists of rotating OHDZA employees, Malagasy MBP field assistants and graduate students, along with numerous nursery managers and assistants from the local community. Current volunteers and the nursery staff will show incoming volunteers their procedure for growing seedlings and related activities in the nurseries, while the reforestation field personnel will demonstrate procedures for planting in the landscape. Some of the field personnel have basic English or French skills, but are more comfortable with Malagasy. However, as they work with an increasing number of volunteers, their language skills are rapidly improving which has allowed some to become fluent English speakers.

Ultimately, the goal for the MBP volunteer program is to improve communication between the field efforts and office MBP and OHDZA staff. Volunteers should be prepared to operate as a project manager and conservation partner – you’ll need to focus on a variety of tasks, such as: data collection standardization; ensure the team is on track to reach final goals; compile data into reports; address minor personnel issues and report concerning behavior; handle the weekly or monthly budget for the reforestation project and prepare budget reports; evaluate the functionality of the tasks at hand; compile and submit reports regarding field data, making interpretations as necessary; be proactive in responding to requests from Omaha regarding necessary information or pictures – these are often requested to complete grant reports and should be seen as a priority. The role of facilitating communication is paramount to the program success and volunteers must take this component very seriously.

The terrain of the Kianjavato region is very steep, thus adequate physical fitness in these conditions is required. The climate is typically very warm and humid, with a rainy season (late November through April), and a slightly cooler dry season (May through November). There are no dangerous fauna, except the rare spider or scorpion. However, precautions should be made to avoid tropical diseases (e.g., malaria, schistosomiasis) – volunteers
should ensure that they have the proper vaccinations and malaria prophylaxis, which are the responsibility of the successful applicant.

Research is based at the projects field station which was established in 2009. Infrastructure upgrades are ongoing, however conditions are currently relatively rustic. Volunteers will sleep in self-provided tents under a fixed shelter which is shared with other volunteers, and meals are basic camp fare (be prepared to eat rice at each meal). Purified well water is readily available. Solar power and a generator is present to power laptops, recharge batteries, etc. on a restricted basis. There is generally good cellular phone reception at the station and in some parts of the forest. Volunteers will need to obtain their own phones and will have to pay for their own calls (even international rates are reasonable). Internet will largely only be available during monthly reporting trips to larger towns.

Qualifications/Experience: As indicated, adequate physical fitness is required. We prefer volunteers with at least a BA or BSc in the biological or environmental sciences, tropical restoration and forest management experience is a plus. Some independent research experience will be an advantage, as will work or travel experience in tropical countries. A willingness to work in isolated conditions, the ability to solve problems independently, and dedication to a positive and respectful working environment are required.

Cost of the program: Volunteer costs are $420 USD per month, which are for accommodation and basic camp fare only. These costs do not include flights, in-country transport, food, drink, and any other additional personal costs. For a more detailed budget on the additional costs to volunteer, please contact the Madagascar Biodiversity Partnership website at http://www.madagascarpartnership.org/home/costs-to-volunteer

Term of Appointment: A minimum of six months is required, and longer stays may be possible at a discounted rate. Please inquire for details.

Application Deadline: immediately; the positions will be filled by the first qualified applicants. This is an ongoing call for volunteers, with known placements to begin in approximately July and October 2015, then again in January and March 2016.

Comments: Applicants should send a letter of interest, curriculum vitae, and contact information for two references to Dr. Ed Louis (genetics@omahazoo.com).