

URBAN

INSPIRATION LITTLE DIFFERENCE

Written by Sophie Stevens and Pete Oswald
Images by Pete Oswald

May 2017 - Antananarivo Airport Madagascar

The hot air hit us like a hair dryer as we stepped through the cabin door on to the airport tarmac in Antananarivo, Madagascar. We had been donating money for tree planting in Madagascar for over a year prior and finally got an opportunity to go there and see it for ourselves.

My name is Sophie Stevens and I am the Co-Founder and Sole Artist of Little Difference, an international Art Business that has planted over 50,000 trees towards desperately needed reforestation in Madagascar.



Sophie Stevens and Pete Oswald, Monte Cinto, Corsica - Image by Pete Oswald

November 2014 - Innsbruck Austria

My fiancé Pete Oswald and I were in Innsbruck Austria doing a ski season. Pete is a professional skier, which at that time paid very little, and I was intermittently teaching skiing, which paid less. With Christmas coming up and time on our hands Pete and I decided to try and sell Christmas Cards with my art designs on them. I whipped up some Christmas looking designs with a slightly Austrian flavour and had them printed at the local print shop while struggling with our terrible German as we learnt the method of turning hand drawn art into a digital image to reproduce on to cards. We managed to sell nearly 1000 cards before Christmas, which paid for our rent, ski passes and food for the next couple of months! The concept was born. Christmas in Innsbruck proved that we had a product that could work and more importantly it seemed people, at least the Austrians, liked my Art! But after the Christmas sales the cards went idle as we were distracted by skiing, powder days, adventures, partying and just being in Austria.

May 2017 - Antananarivo City, Madagascar

Like most people, all Pete and I new of Madagascar before starting to donate there was what we had seen on the Animated movie. Our first night was spent in the centre of the Capital, Antananarivo, a city of over 1.5 million that sits in the middle of

the country on a plateau at 1200m above sea level with not a piece of vegetation or animal in sight apart from pieces of fly ridden flesh for sale on road side stalls spoiling in the baking heat of the day. At night-fall we were warned not to go out side of our cheap accommodation for risk of violence and “disappearing”.

May 2015 - Taghazout, Morocco

After that season in Innsbruck where we first sold cards Pete and I took a short trip to Morocco where we surfed badly then travelled inland to climb North Africa's highest peak Toubkal 4167m. A heat wave hit. We were on an over crowded bus, 2 people per single seat with the isle packed with people standing. We quickly realised there were no opening windows and no air conditioning, then we passed a digital sign saying the temperature in the shade was 53°C. We could do nothing but try to stay still and not speak due to danger of our bodies over heating. We arrived in Marrakesh and immediately charted a taxi to get into the mountains and above the heat as soon as possible.

It was while we were climbing the 4167m peak of Toubkal that we had the idea of planting one tree for every card sold. Through our travels we had seen so much harm from products made by irresponsible business practice that we thought if we are going to profit from our business then it cannot be at the expense of anyone or

anything else. We wanted to be able to feel good about the effects our products had on the world and if it was successful we wanted it to be without any negative results so that we could feel purely proud of that success.

Maybe it was because we were a little euphoric after dreaming up this outlandish idea of planting 1 tree for every card (for which had no practical plan of implication to indicate it was even possible) that we found climbing Toubkal surprising easy... until I got delayed altitude sickness and was bedridden in the tiny mountain town of Imlil for two days. Once I recovered we hitch hiked back to the coast with 7 people in a 5 seater car and learnt about the phenomenon of “wind heat effect”, the opposite of wind chill. When the air temperature is higher than your body temperature (37.5° C) the wind actually works to heat your body not cool it. So there we were again in an over crowded vehicle in about 45°C with the windows up!

Once back on the coast we rented a stand up paddle board, just one between the two of us because we were too cheap to pay for a board each. Pete and I were way out to sea standing up getting the neck double balancing on one board when we were trying to think up a names for our naive new business idea when it came to me – “Little Difference”.

May 2017 - Betsiboka, Madagascar

After our first night in Madagascar we



were frustrated to learn we were not able to rent a car for ourselves and we had to have a driver. As always we were on a super tight budget and had to make this trip to Madagascar viable for the business and not put us in debt. As soon as we got driving we learnt why we needed a driver. Due to political unrest in Madagascar no roads had been maintained since 1999, there were potholes the size of elephants, washouts on cliff edges, temporary wooden wheel width planks across rivers and all with no road signs or markings. To get anywhere in Madagascar you need to know when you can drive fast and more importantly when you can't. If not, you'll destroy your 4X4 in a matter of metres. You also need to know who to pay where to gain access and to avoid potential kidnapping. In some small villages where the only buildings are a few mud huts with grass roofs the road is maintained by local children who constantly fill the massive potholes with dirt. The kids then ask for tips through the vehicle window in return making the journey faster. Roads have no names, most maps there are wrong and needless to say Google Maps is useless there. We have spent month cycling around Sri Lanka fundraising for a school and Madagascar makes Sri Lanka look like London.

June 2015 - Isle of Wight, UK

Back from Morocco we set about producing our cards again but this time in the UK under the brand name Little Difference. We started with a small printer on the Isle of Wight and sold into a range of shops across the small Isle. The tree planting was still a pipe dream but we were determined to make this happen.

May 2017 - Mahajanga, Madagascar

We arrived in Mahajanga after a 14 hr drive that, had we driven, would have taken us several days. Mahajanga is where a lot of the tree planting happens and is facilitated by an American based reforestation charity called Eden Reforestation Projects.

While there, we stayed with an American family living in Madagascar for 1 year

volunteering for the charity. The Directors of the Eden Projects Madagascar spent a week showing us exactly how things worked there. Jamie Shattenburg, an American by birth, grew up in Madagascar and was schooled with the Malagasy. He knows the country, the languages, the culture and the people. He is Eden Projects International Director for Madagascar and the crucial link between Malagasy people and people like us who want to help.

What Jamie showed us in Mahajanga could never have been explained to us over a video call and I'll never do it justice in this text. The trees we have helped plant are a drop in the ocean of the grand problem but locally in Mahajanga it is transforming the damaged environment back to a functional ecosystem, creating life and livelihood, pulling people out of poverty and literally saving lives of the local people.

The average wage in Madagascar is \$2 USD a day; many people including children live on a handful of rice a day. These people do what they can to survive and feed their children, which often includes chopping down trees to sell as charcoal for cooking at the market – the root cause of deforestation in Madagascar is 2000 years of humans basically trying to survive. Eden Projects employs these very same people as tree planters or seed collectors, and pays them a good living wage. Suddenly the very people who used to cut down the trees are the ones protecting them for a seed source to maintain their new dignified life reforesting the land and away from hardship. The trees grow, rainfall increases, desertification ceases, wildlife returns to the forest, sediment disperses from the coast and sea life returns. They learn the cycle of the ecosystem to maintain a food source and their children can go to school. The word has spread, Malagasy people come from villages far and wide wanting a better life protecting and growing the forest. The cycle of poverty and environmental destruction is broken.

We saw this first hand, we collected seeds with the Malagasy people, planted trees with them, went to their schools, visited their homes, met their families, we ate meals with them and they told us their stories of extreme hardship and their journey to a better life replanting the forests. It was the most powerful thing Pete and I had ever experienced.

October 2015 - New Zealand

After searching extensively we found there are a few organisations that do tree planting with donation money. Because we had a set criteria we wanted to satisfy like only planting indigenous species, only for reforestation not plantations for industrial use and only in countries that it is desperately needed environmentally we soon

had the organisations narrowed down to just a few. We had a certain level of scepticism, as we knew it would be quite a long time before we ever had the money to be able to go see this tree planting with our own eyes. So video calls were set up. After several long video calls with the CEO and other directors we signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Eden Reforestation Projects. On the 16th of December 2015 Little Difference was officially a reforestation partner.

May 2017 - Nosy Be, Madagascar

After seeing what we had seen in Mahajanga with Eden Projects we made a trip further north to see some of the very few and tiny remaining primary forests left in Madagascar to see with our own eyes what Madagascar was like and what it could be restored too. To get to one of them we had to paddle an outrigger canoe a couple of hours as there are no roads to this forest. We were so lucky to see this beautiful world. Lemurs swung from trees, turtles swam by the shore, tiny chameleons the size of your finger nail roamed the forest floor, huge boa constrictor snakes slept in hollow logs, disguised lizards hide in plain sight, birds swooped and giant trees dominated. It was both impressive and sad to think that all of Madagascar was once covered in this glory.

From Antsiranana in the far north we took an internal flight right down the middle of Madagascar back to Antananarivo from where we flew out of Madagascar a few days later. From our jet at 25,000 feet all I could see from each side of the plane for over an hour of flying was barren deforested land turning to desert which once used to be flourishing forest. The rivers run red with the eroding soil washing to the ocean. 90% of Madagascar has been deforested and with it most of the wildlife. It all hit home, I cried. The enormity of the problem, the destruction, the beauty that was lost, the extinct species gone forever, but also the glimmer of hope we had witnessed, the little difference we had helped make, the forests replanted, the lives saved. If it can happen in Mahajanga then it can happen all over Madagascar. It can happen all over the world.

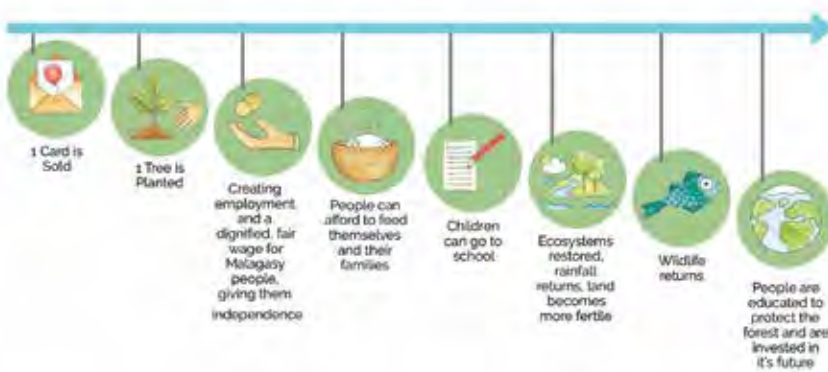




Sophie planting Mangroves in Mahajanga, Madagascar



Sailing across the English Channel, UK



An artist in action, Purakanui, NZ



McKenzie Country NZ

January 1st 2016

After many months of work on our hair brain idea, our far flung dream was made a reality - Little Difference began planting one tree for every product sold.

July 2018

As of writing, our customers have now enabled us to plant over 50,000 trees and create 500 days of well paid meaningful employment for previously impoverished women and men. The people now have the knowledge, tools, inspiration and motivation to plant more trees and protect the ones they have. Their children now eat balanced meals, they can now go to school to become an educated generation and break the destructive cycle of poverty and environmental destruction.

The tools are in place, we just need to do more.