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## MANGROVE ENVIRONMENT IN NORTH-WESTERN MADAGASCAR: CASE STUDIES OF MAHAJAMBA AND BOMBETOKA BAYS

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### INTRODUCTION

Northwestern Madagascar, usually called “large bays area,” has been densely populated for c. 1000 years and has been the scene of different activities. Many archaeological sites, the majority being Swahili and Islamised (Verin, 1975), are located in this region. One of the largest sites and the first Malagasy town - Mahilaka (Radimilahy, 1998) - was also located in the bay of Ampasindava further north. Activities have thus affected the environment of this region. In fact, palaeoecological research results indicate that human action began c. 1000 ago in this region of Madagascar and the surrounding landscape has been more disturbed during the last 500 years. Archaeological surveys conducted have also located sites showing evidence of herding and cultivation in the region. Eutrophication in Lake Mitsinjo began about a century ago (Matsumoto & Burney, 1994).

Nowadays, 98% of the Malagasy mangroves are located in northwestern Madagascar, covering c. 330,000 ha (PNUE, ANGAP and ONE, 1997), which represents 0.5 % of the whole island and almost 2.6 % of its wooded area. It also represents 20% of the African mangroves in the Indian Ocean zone and 2% of the world zones. Two bays, those of Mahajamba and Bombetoka, covering 47,500 ha and 46,000 ha respectively (MinEnv./ONE, 1999) were chosen to carry out a study between man and environment, and to make a diachronic analysis of the mangrove ecosystem.

### THE PROBLEM AND AIMS

To develop a thorough knowledge of the mangrove environment in this part of Madagascar, anthropological inquiries and reconnaissance were undertaken. What is a mangrove forest? How do people know and perceive the physical environment? How does the population make use of the available resources (wood, shellfish, marine resources) of the mangrove? What is the impact of their activities on the mangrove environment? Anthropological inquiries carried out in different villages focussed on how the local population perceived it and how it is used. Finally, is the mangrove being degraded, is it disappearing, or expanding?