

New IT Schools Madagascar Programme

Megabytes in Madagascar

UK schools asked to donate their used computers

Article in The Independent by Anne Giacomantonio, 9 December 2008

Christmas is approaching fast, with all the associated tinsel, trimmings and turkey sandwiches. One of the best things about this time of year is the box office cinema releases, and 2008 sees the return of the city-hardened menagerie of New York's Central Park Zoo – that we first met on screen in 2005 – in the form of

Madagascar : Escape 2 Africa. While this is the closest most of us will come to the island nation off the south-east coast of

Africa , someone who is much more familiar with the country is Nigerian-born travel writer and broadcaster Christina Dodwell. She spent time there while writing her travel guide Madagascar Travels, and fell in love with the country.

Fifteen years ago Dodwell started her own charity, the Dodwell Trust, to bring connections and education to the people of

Madagascar . "It is as magical and enchanting as the films portray and has incredible biodiversity, but it is also very poor," she says. "It's bypassed by the main trade routes and is well off the popular tourist trails. This is a place where firemen fight fires in their bare feet because they can't afford to buy shoes."

This Christmas, to coincide with the movie release, Dodwell and the charity IT Schools Africa are launching a campaign to encourage schools to donate old computers to help provide facilities to Madagascan children. "Used computers have almost no value in the UK, but in

Madagascar they can really transform lives," says Dodwell. "Ordinarily, school leavers can expect to earn no more than 70p per day working on the land, but with computer skills they can access far better job opportunities."

IT Schools Africa sent the first container of 480 refurbished and recycled computers this week, but many more computers will be needed to complete the project; the aim is to recycle 10,000 in total. Over the course of the next seven years, IT Schools Africa, in partnership with the Madagascar Ministries of Education and Decentralisation, plans to set up 500 regional IT resource centres across the country, each containing 20 computers and a library of information. They will be used by schools, community organisations and NGOs. "The number of people who will use each computer is massive, and the benefits are huge. The only thing we need is computers for recycling," says Dodwell.

Four years ago, Dodwell sent 40 computers to

Madagascar and was overwhelmed by the response she received. "They tied bows and ribbons on them and put them on national TV – they were so touched. This is why I continue to work with the people from

Madagascar , because their response is always far greater and sweeter than you had ever imagined. The difference you make by doing what seems like such a small thing to us is so much greater than one could ever understand."

IT Schools Africa is seeking donations of desktop computers or laptops of Pentium 3 and above, and the computers can be dropped off at IT Schools Africa's warehouse in Leckhampton, Gloucestershire. For more information visit www.itschoolsafrica.org or, to make a donation, contact Tim Barnes or Catherine Richardson on 01242 228 800 or info@itschoolsafrica.org