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Protecting Lake Tanganyika

Hidden away in the mountains of western Tanzania is one of the largest lakes in the world: Lake Tanganyika.

Environmentalists want to protect the beauty and biological diversity of this area from the harmful effects of overfishing and deforestation. However, in order to do this, they need the cooperation of people in the nearby village of Mahale. In this impoverished community, malaria and typhoid are rampant, there is little access to doctors, and 13% of children die before age 5. How can we expect people who cannot save their own children to care about saving the environment?



While it is true that the Mahale villagers are suffering, environmentalists argue that Lake Tanganyika is in an equally critical condition. This lake is home to hundreds of fish species found nowhere else on the globe. Eighty mammal species live in the surrounding forests and mountains. Ninety percent of Tanzania's endangered chimpanzees reside in this area. Irreparable damage to this ecosystem will result in untold losses.

Furthermore, environmentalists see the destruction of the environment as a direct function of the villagers' poverty: as the fish population decreases, people are forced to clear more land to grow rice and corn. As they clear more land, the soil run-off from deforestation further reduces the fish population, making it even more difficult for people to survive on fishing alone. This vicious cycle harms both the Mahale villagers and the environment.

To meet their objective of protecting Lake Tanganyika, environmentalists are now using a multifaceted approach in Mahale: helping the villagers gain access to healthcare, educating fishermen and farmers about the impact of deforestation and their own role in the dwindling fish population, and protecting areas of the lake where fish spawn. Since natural resources can be the tool by which the people of Tanzania work themselves out of poverty, it is essential that these resources are managed well. By integrating health services with conservation activity, we can begin to heal the suffering in western Tanzania, for people and the land alike.