

BRIDGING HEARTS AND HABITATS: CHILDREN, GELADAS, AND THE FUTURE OF THE ETHIOPIAN HIGHLANDS



Elisabetta Palagi (ABS fellow, elisabetta.palagi@unipi.it), André de Santa Bárbara Beirão da Cruz, Martina Francesconi, Alice Galotti, Giorgia Goglio, Alberto Quartesan
Department of Biology, University of Pisa, Via A. Volta 6, 56126, Pisa, Italy. www.geladasbridges.org

Background: Geladas are primates endemic to the Ethiopian highlands, characterized by their mostly graminivorous diet. In many areas, habitat loss and anthropogenic disturbance has driven gelada to feed near cultivated lands, leading to a negative perception of this species in rural communities, where they are seen as “pests” and considered highly damaging to crops. The purpose of this project is to transform this aversion into fascination and respect in children living in **Debre Libanos**, an unprotected area where geladas live in proximity to farmlands and grazing areas used daily by the local population. Through hands-on learning, creative exploration and field experiences, we aim to reveal to children the complexity of these primates’ social world, point out similarities between humans and geladas and ultimately reshape local perceptions. By fostering curiosity and a feeling of connection, we hope to facilitate peaceful coexistence and replace hatred with interest and respect.

Over the past years, our research group has built strong ties with the **Debre Libanos community**, supporting six schools with materials and classroom improvements. This trusted presence lays the foundation for a structured educational project, both in classrooms and in the field.

The story-telling: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tqo5hFIPpOQ>

THE STEPS OF OUR PROJECT (February-March 2026, two days per week)

The project engages students in collaboration with local schools (**Finoota Tsidiq & Dahaana**) through a series of active-learning tasks aimed at understanding the complexity of geladas’ behaviour and social structure. Two “grade 2” classes (5-8 yrs) and two “grade 7” classes (10-14 yrs), for a total of ~80 students took part in the project. Before the start of the hands-on activities, the students received, through the help of the local cultural mediator, an introduction on the characteristics of the species as well as the reasons behind our research team’s interest in geladas: the study of animal behaviour.

ACTIVITY 1

MATCH THE MOOD: GELADA BEHAVIOUR GAME

(5–8 & 10–14 yrs)

First, children are divided into groups and are provided with plasticized cards (size A4 or 8.3 x 11.7 inches) representing different emotions (Figure 1.). Then, photographic cards (size A4) of several geladas’ behaviours (Figure 2.) are showed to the class. Each group must discuss and select which emotion better matches the shown behaviour. After that, a dual-language (Amharic / English) card with the description of each behaviour is given to each group and read out-loud by one of the children. While explaining the various behaviours and their emotional value, emphasis is put on parallelism to human behaviour and the animals’ ability to feel complex emotions. The aim of this activity is, on one side, to foster the perception of geladas as fascinating animals and their similarities to humans, and, on the other hand, to introduce children to fundamental concept of animal behaviour research, such as the importance of understanding the function and motivation behind certain behaviours.



Figure 1. Children showing the cards representing the various emotions.



Figure 2. Plasticized photographs of gelada behaviours, including social play, resting, aggression, grooming and feeding.



Figure 3. Children colouring a male (left) and infant (right) gelada.

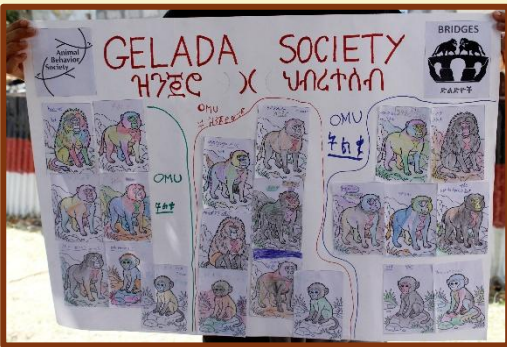


Figure 4. The poster created by the "grade 2" class of Dahaana school (21 students) depicting a Team composed by 3 OMUs.

ACTIVITY 2

BUILDING GELADA COMMUNITIES (5–8 & 10-14 yrs)

In this activity, students are provided with coloring pages (A6 or 5.8 x 4.1 inches, Figure 3.) depicting male, female and infant geladas. After colouring their individual, each child also gives them a name, mirroring how researchers are able to recognize specific geladas and give them names. The pictures are then glued together to form OMUs (One-Male Unit), the basic unit of geladas' Multi Level Society, grouping one male, several females and infants. Multiple OMUs are then combined in a poster (to be hanged in the classroom, Figure 4.) to illustrate the second level of gelada society (*teams*). The aim of this activity is to display the complexity of these primates' society, as well as to promote feelings of connections towards geladas, as each student personally colours and names one.

ACTIVITY 3

FIELD DETECTIVES: OBSERVING GELADAS

(10-14 years)

After learning about the society and behaviour of geladas, a **field visit** is organized at the research site (conveniently located next to the schools), in order to ground the learning experience in direct observation (Figure 5., 6.). Children are familiarized with the equipment necessary for behavioural observations (binoculars, video cameras, notebooks...) and are encouraged to recognize the behaviours they witness and to classify them in the various emotional values they were introduced to in Activity 1.

Furthermore, individuals and groups are identified with the help of the researchers, showing how their composition mirrors the poster created in Activity 2. The aim of this activity is to let student experience directly the daily life of researchers, to solidify the knowledge gained in the first two activities through an immersive experience, and to show how fascinating and rewarding the observation of animal behaviour can be.



Figure 5. Students spotting geladas on the field, with the help of researchers...



Figure 6. ...and filming them with the same equipment used by our team.

The project goes beyond formal education by giving children positive, structured interactions with geladas, fostering a feeling of connection and encouraging appreciation and respect of the local biodiversity. By showing geladas as interesting animals with complex emotions and behaviours, rather than as pests that need to be driven out of places frequented by humans, we hope to facilitate more peaceful interactions with these primates and, over time, to change the perception in the local community.

ABS financial support was vital, covering all school materials and the salary of a local mediator. This role is crucial for bridging linguistic and cultural gaps, ensuring that activities are engaging and respectful. By employing a local specialist, we provide direct economic support to their family, reinforcing our commitment to both conservation education and community well-being.