



Ethiopia

Introduction

The Bale Mountains, in the Oromia Region of south-east Ethiopia are a biodiversity hotspot and the Bale Mountains National Park (BMNP) was established in 1971. The park is approximately 2,200 km² and is the most important conservation area in Ethiopia. [1] The BMNP encompasses the world's largest afro-alpine area, and the second largest moist tropical forest in Ethiopia. The Bale Mountains are a centre of endemism and comprise the most important habitat for species such as the Ethiopian wolf (*Canis simensis*), the rarest canid in the world, as well as the mountain nyala (*Tragelaphus buxtoni*). The IUCN [2] lists both of these species as endangered and the Bale Mountains contain over 50% and 66% of their global populations respectively. [3] This highland area is also a hydrological system of wetlands and rivers. It is the origin for rivers, and the swamps and lakes retain water in the dry season. Thus, this area is of critical importance to the estimated 12 million downstream users. [4]

For generations, local communities in this area have stewarded their natural resources through Sacred Natural Sites (SNS). SNS are biologically diverse natural cultural

centres where local communities gather to help one another, resolve conflicts, establish common law, and worship. They represent deep spiritual relationships between communities and nature. Communities from the kebeles [5] of Dinsho-02, Mio and Abakera, in Dinsho District assessed the roles and resilience of SNS for community conservation in and around The Bale Mountain National Park.

The CCRI assessment utilised participatory mapping to determine the location, area and biophysical aspects of both existing and destroyed SNS in the area. Typically located on hills or knolls, the SNS contain a range of biophysical features including springs, streams, wetlands, indigenous forests and wild animals. The majority of SNS lie outside the boundary of Bale Mountain National Park and receive no formal government protection. SNS are not formally recognised under Ethiopian law and fall under the forest or communal land category.

Historically inhabited by seasonal pastoralists, the government has encouraged permanent settlement and intensive agricultural production in this area since the 1990s. The

population has steadily increased and today the main livelihood is agro-pastoralism with farmers cultivating a variety of grains and legumes as well as rearing cattle and sheep. Approximately 90% of the land is allocated to individuals with remaining land areas classified as forest or communal lands. Ethiopia has a long history of gender discrimination in property rights. Research indicates that female-headed households own less land and fewer livestock than male-headed households. [6] However, the reform of the Family Code in 2000 and Community-Based Land Registration in 2003 has favoured gender equity, and land reform has increased tenure security among women. [7] Nevertheless, they still face challenges securing their land rights due to limited awareness of their rights and low participation rates in land related processes. [8]



Community Conservation Resilience in Ethiopia

The CCRI used participatory mapping, spatial data collection, focal group discussions, and semi-structured interviews to examine both biophysical aspects and threats to SNS within the three kebeles, which cover a relatively small area of Bale Mountain National Park. The assessment revealed that historically there were 72 SNS located within the three kebeles, but today only 18 remain.

In the past the flora and fauna within the boundaries of all SNS were protected and harvesting or damaging resources within the sites was prohibited. SNS acted as refuges for wildlife. Community members listed 15 species of mammals, including the endemic mountain nyala, lions, leopards, and wild dogs associated with SNS areas. Indigenous trees, shrubs, herbs and medicinal plants were also recorded. Of the historic SNS covered in forests, 60% were associated with water sources (springs, streams and wetlands) and thus they played an important role in the provision of ecosystem services, especially fresh water to the surrounding communities. SNS have been governed by custodians and elders for many generations and play a key role in enhancing the communities' spiritual connection to nature.

Women made up 26% of the participants and highlighted that they have clear rights within SNS cultural practices. For example, women who

carry a 'Sinqe' [9] stick are especially respected. If a woman's husband attacked or hurt her, she and two other women will gather in an 'illite' ceremony within the SNS. They yell and shout, and other women will hear and join in, raising their voices together and thus husbands would be publicly shamed. The husband will then slaughter a bull as an apology to his wife. Within SNS there is a customary norm of non-violence towards women, and no SNS ceremony is considered complete without the participation of women.



Women highly value their 'Sinqe' stick. They treat it with oils to keep it beautiful, and when attending SNS ceremonies they carry it together with a piece of uncut grass. When other members of the community see them with their sticks, they give them right of way. Women interviewed said that when they carry their stick and give prayers these prayers are answered quickly. [10]

Overall, despite all the barriers of patriarchal power, Oromo women historically have had an influential

position in the community, although this has now declined following the decline in the people's indigenous cultural practices. [11]

Key internal threats centre on community perceptions and attitudes. Many community members failed to understand the true meaning and value of SNS. Some have sought to undermine and marginalise SNS custodians. The land allocation system within the kebeles, which allows SNS land to be allocated to individuals for farming, has resulted in the

destruction of SNS—SNS have been converted to agricultural land and wetlands have been drained. Land shortages have also pushed some religious faiths to begin to use SNS as burial grounds, which threatens their integrity.

A significant external threat is the lack of formal recognition or protection for SNS within Ethiopian

law. SNS are not recognised in Ethiopia's legal framework and the contribution they make to biodiversity, conservation, ecosystem services provision, and the nation's cultural heritage is not acknowledged. Globalisation, modernisation and acculturation also threaten SNS. The traditional knowledge systems that gave rise to SNS and the customs and traditions that maintain them are often regarded as backward.



Preliminary Conclusions and Recommendations

Community-initiated solutions include the raising of awareness within the community regarding the value and significance of SNS. The CCRI has already produced some successful examples of SNS conservation that can be used as models. For example, in Mio kebele, a fence was built around the Gedebgela SNS. As a result, there has been a reduction of incursions onto the site and harvesting pressures. Peer-to-peer learning exchanges between communities are required so that these successful approaches can be shared and adapted. [12] Awareness raising should include information exchange about the value of SNS in adapting to climate change, because SNS are important water sources and provide essential fresh water for humans, livestock and agriculture. These services are especially important as communities experience changing rainfall patterns and increased water shortages due to climate change. [13]

To counter internal threats, the capacity of SNS custodians should be enhanced to enable them to fulfil their roles and responsibilities. Additionally, a SNS elders group should be formed to revive customary laws, norms and ethics regarding SNS and to develop new by-laws for the conservation of SNS.

To counter external threats, existing conservation legislation, cultural heritage policies, and relevant articles in Ethiopia's 1995 [14] constitution that support SNS need to be enforced. However, these

mechanisms do not specifically target SNS and are insufficient to ensure their full protection. Therefore, a national level policy that addresses SNS is also required. This could be modelled upon the national law (Interministerial Order No. 0121) in Benin, which is the first law in Africa to recognise sacred sites and communities' role in protecting and governing them. [15] At the regional level, the 'Statement of Common African Customary Laws for the Protection of Sacred Sites' [16] could be utilised. This calls for the custodial governance systems of SNS to be recognised and respected and provides other important guidelines. International human rights and environmental laws that recognise the value of SNS and the roles of custodians and communities in conservation should be harnessed. [17] The internationally recognised UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, which promote reconciling the conservation of biodiversity with its sustainable use, could be employed. Indeed, this approach has already been successfully employed in Ethiopia to register and protect the Sheka Sacred Forest.

Preliminary recommendations from the assessment include a range of



Munamuno Sacred Natural Site, Dinsho-02. Drainage of the surrounding wetland area allowed the lower slopes to be ploughed for agriculture. Cath Traynor/CIC

initiatives. First, create a network between the SNS custodians from different communities with quarterly meetings to plan community-led strategies and activities for SNS conservation. Additionally, scale-up the assessment to include other kebeles in Dinsho District and the Bale Zone. Communities also need financial and technical support to manage SNS, for example, through fencing initiatives and reforestation efforts. Finally, advocacy is needed at all levels within the Cultural and Tourism Office, Rural Land Administrative and Environmental Protection Office and the Bale Mountain National Park authorities. All of these initiatives will strengthen community conservation and resilience in the area and need support from outside actors.



Testimony

After the assessment, which showed the loss of SNS sites in the area, the community was pained to see what they have lost, and now we have to consider how to conserve and ensure the sustainability of the remaining SNS for the future. The assessment reminds us of the legacy of the past 12 generations, and now we are starting to revive the conservation activities that they practised. The assessment was a wake-up-call, and each of us saw what we had lost.

- Adam Haddijasso, Dinsho-02 kebele



Cath Traynor/CIC



Ethiopia CCRI group photo. Cath Traynor/CIC



Community mapping, Ethiopia CCRI. MELCA/CIC

References

- [1] Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. 2005. Sustainable Development of Protected Area System in Ethiopia (SDPASE). UNDP/GEF Project Document, 183pp.
- [2] International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)
- [3] Frankfurt Zoological Society. 2007. Bale Mountains National Park General Management Plan 2007-2017. Frankfurt Zoological Society, Frankfurt, Germany.
- [4] Ibid
- [5] A kebele is the smallest administrative unit of Ethiopia and refers to a well-defined collection of settlements or villages.
- [6] Kumar, N. & Quisumbing, A.R. 2015. Policy Reform toward Gender Equality in Ethiopia: Little by Little the Egg Begins to Walk. World Development Vol. 67: 406-423.
- [7] Ibid
- [8] USAID. 2015. Ethiopia. Land Administration to Nurture Development (LAND) Update No. 3, April 2015.
- [9] A Sinqe is a ritual stick granted to women by their mothers, to perform ritual, as "well as to symbolize her hanfala (feminine) migra (rights) and wayyoomaa (respect)." [Hussein, 2004: 113.]
- [10] Hadjo Hussein & Seada Inbrahim, Dinsho-02 kebele.
- [11] Hussein, J.W. 2004. A Cultural Representation of Women in the Ormo Society. African Study Monographs, 25(3): 103-147.
- [12] Teshuma Abera, Community member from Mio kabele
- [13] Adam Tura, Elder from Abakera kabele.
- [14] Articles 39(2), 44, 51(5), 90, and 91
- [15] Interministerial Order setting the conditions for the sustainable management of sacred forests in the Republic of Benin. Unofficial English Translation, available from the [Gaia Foundation website](#)
- [16] African Biodiversity Network. 2012. Statement of Common African Customary Laws for the Protection of Sacred Sites. [Available here](#)
- [17] For example, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Articles 8(j) and 10(c) and the: Akwé: Kon Voluntary Guidelines

