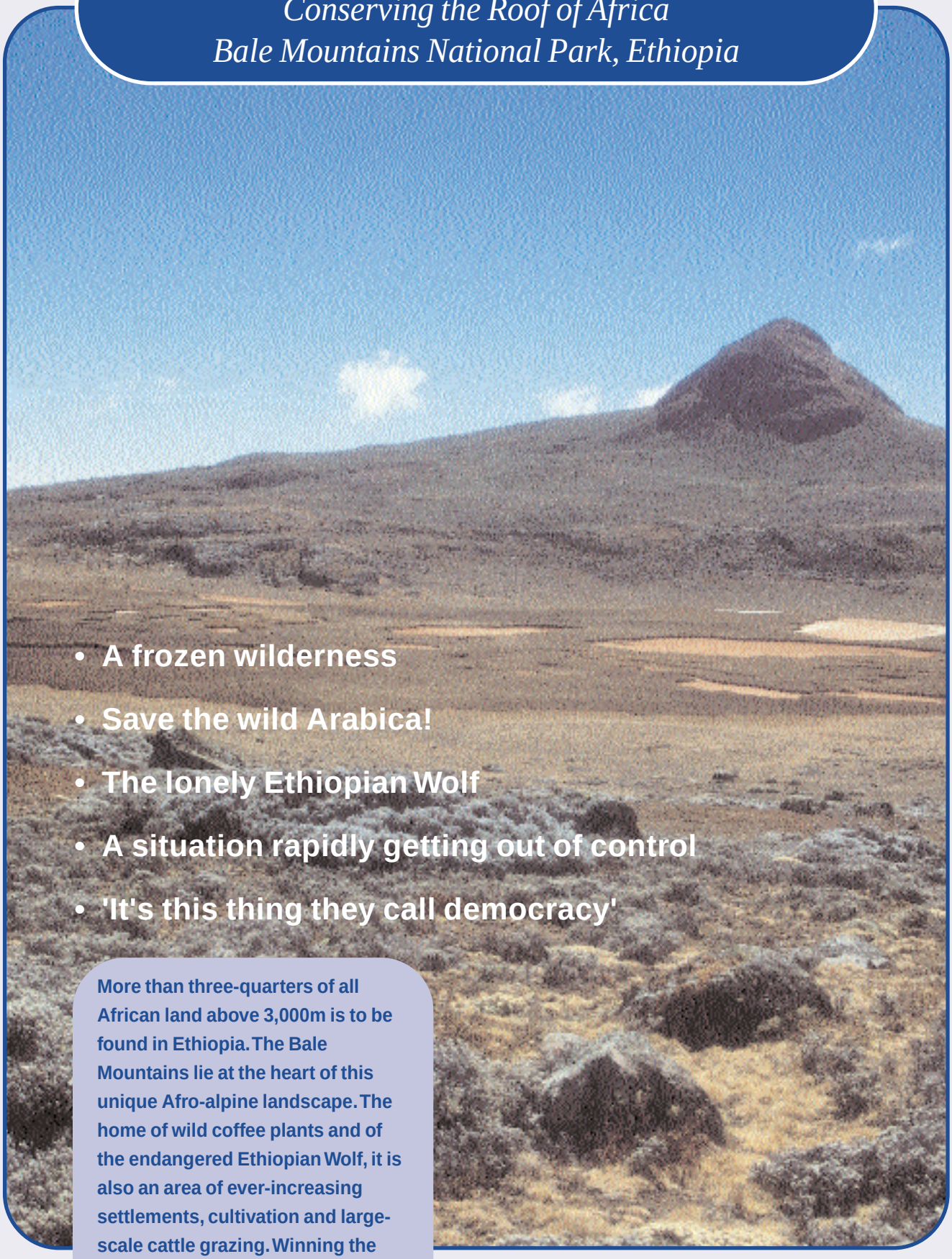
‘Land is Given by God’

Conserving the Roof of Africa
Bale Mountains National Park, Ethiopia



- A frozen wilderness
- Save the wild Arabica!
- The lonely Ethiopian Wolf
- A situation rapidly getting out of control
- 'It's this thing they call democracy'

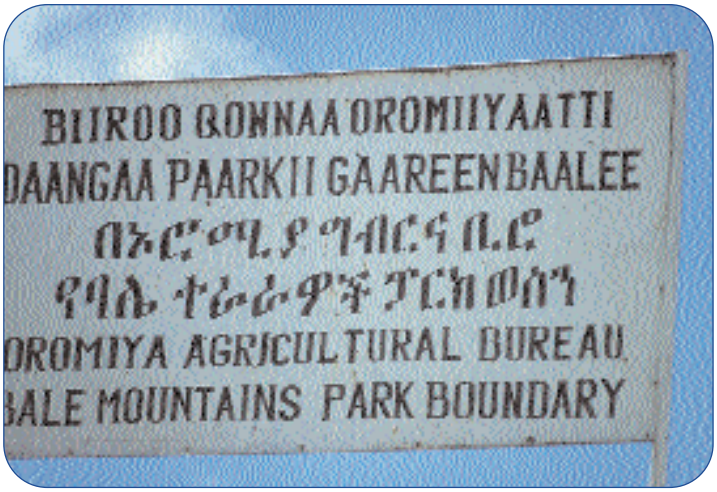
More than three-quarters of all African land above 3,000m is to be found in Ethiopia. The Bale Mountains lie at the heart of this unique Afro-alpine landscape. The home of wild coffee plants and of the endangered Ethiopian Wolf, it is also an area of ever-increasing settlements, cultivation and large-scale cattle grazing. Winning the hearts of local people is the challenge for the Bale Mountains conservation project.

‘What we actually do is crisis management’

Asked whether Ethiopia’s protected areas will ever become exclusion zones, where only tourists and scientists can go, Tesfaye Hundessa’s answer is resolutely negative: ‘Forget it.’

In the eyes of Hundessa, who is the General Manager of the Federal Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Organisation (EWCO), the whole idea of recreating a kind of pristine situation is nothing more than the fantasy of Europeans and North Americans. ‘Those people hope to establish here what they’ve destroyed themselves at home. But it’s completely unrealistic to try to create islands of conservation areas in a poor developing country like Ethiopia.’

Over twenty years of experience with nature conservation in Ethiopia has made Hundessa a pragmatic man. ‘Conservation is not a priority in



Ethiopia and it will not become so in the near future. The actual situation is that there are eight million people in this country who need food aid. That’s the priority. Over ninety per cent of the population live at the subsistence level. Poverty and backwardness are the issues.’

The inevitable result of this - fully justified - priority-setting is that Ethiopia’s protected areas are in bad shape. The Bale Mountains National Park for instance - the second-largest of Ethiopia’s national parks and one of Africa’s most important centres of biodiversity and endemism - not only suffers from inadequate and demoralised staff, but also the continued lack of road and buildings maintenance. As yet, the Park has not even been gazetted.

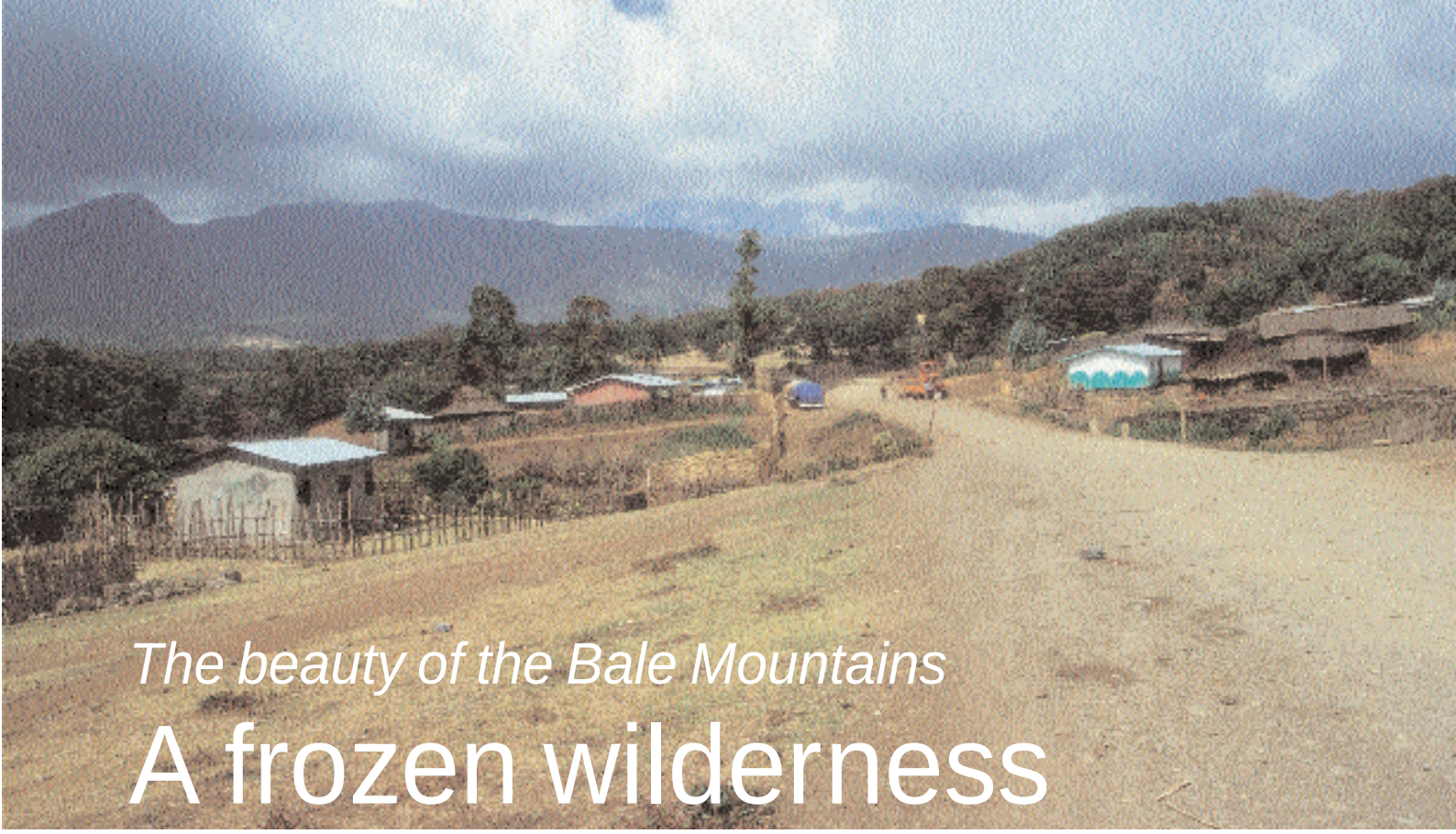
‘What we actually do is crisis management’, admits Hundessa without hesitation. ‘That’s really all we can do for the moment. The lack of funding means there is no way we can work towards a structural build-up of capacity in parks like Bale Mountains. Without external assistance we can’t produce conservation goals effectively.’

The main problem facing the fragile ecosystem in the Bale Mountains is the heavy settlement within the Park borders. The activities of the Park’s 7,000 strong population include cultivation, livestock rearing and tree cutting. That’s why outsiders have sometimes expressed the view human settlement and exploitation should be totally prohibited in parks like the Bale Mountains NP. From a purely ecological point of view they’re probably right. But it’s not the approach that will work in Ethiopia. Hundessa can only shrug his shoulders.

‘People have always been in the parks. The military Dergue-regime did in fact try to chase them out, but the main result was increasing the people’s hostility towards the government and the conservation cause.’ During the changeover from the military regime to a civilian government, this attitude resulted in the destruction of Park buildings and a sharp increase in wildlife killing.

‘We have to accept that people are there’, says Hundessa. ‘Of course conservation of the last remaining forests in Ethiopia is of great importance. They should be managed properly to ensure that their unique biodiversity is not lost. But the only suitable way to move forward here is to work with the people living in and around the protected areas and to address their problems. Projects supporting specific protected areas in this country cannot succeed unless they find a balance between human activities and the maintenance of natural ecosystems. The present DGIS-WWF ‘Forest Conservation in High Priority Areas’ Ethiopia Project, which encompasses the Bale Mountains NP and the Mena-Angetu National Forest Priority Area tries to do so and therefore we whole-heartedly support it, as long as it holds this realistic approach.’

▲



The beauty of the Bale Mountains

A frozen wilderness

Late in the morning we enter the village of Rira, one of the larger settlements in the Bale Mountains National Park. After the chilly atmosphere at the Sanetti Plateau, the temperature in Rira - located at some 2,500m in the Harenna forest sector of the Park - is much more agreeable. This is starting to look like Africa again.

Approaching the settlement while descending from the Plateau, the signs of human activity are obvious. The numerous brown spots in the landscape mark where large herds have grazed, while the many yellow-coloured fields show how much of the forest has already been cleared for agricultural use. My travelling companions can see a clear difference in the present scene from that of just one or two years ago. 'These activities are gradually occupying more and more of the forest,' says Fetene Hailu of the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Organisation. 'More and more residents are looking for a piece of land, while the lack of resources means people are not capable of maintaining soil fertility. So the clearing of forest land is steadily expanding.'

Rira itself is not much of a village. There's one pub-cum-restaurant and a bus stop. Some hundred houses are scattered along the hillside. People greet us in a friendly way but maintain an air of reserve. We meet Haji Khamal, one of the elders of Rira. 'Yes, of course we know this is a protected area and that we are not supposed to live here. But there's no other place we can go,' he says.

Haji Khamal tells us about the history of Rira, which was first settled some fifteen years ago with the arrival of five extended families consisting of some hundred people. Now approximately 700 people are living here. 'The growth has been autonomous,' insists Khamal, 'we've only brought some women from elsewhere, because there were not enough of them.'

While serving tea and fresh honey on saucers, he prudently enquires about the reason for our visit. Has it to do with plans to enhance the status of the Park and consequently push the people of Rira out of their homes? The explanation of Fetene Hailu about the present situation and plans of the project, as well as the promise that he and his fellow-elders will be consulted, seems to satisfy him for the time-being. More honey is served. Bee keeping is a common form of subsistence in the forested parts of the Park. 'There may be little direct impact on the forest,' Fetene Hailu softly explains to me during our chat with the Rira residents, 'but occasional fires have been reported when the hives are being smoked for honey collection. Also, the numerous paths leading to the hives may inhibit wildlife.'

After an hour or so we end our visit and continue our trip to the lower parts of the Harenna forest and the town of Delo-Mena. Our new friends in Rira wave us goodbye, relieved that there is no danger of immediate removal, but still uncertain about their long-term fate. At that moment none of us knows that later that same day we will return with feelings of considerable relief that this protected area is not totally uninhabited.

A thin layer of night frost

We had begun our day's journey at sunrise, setting

10-year old Abderraham Hussein herding grazing cattle inside the Park, near Tulu Dimtu mountain

out from the Dinsho lodge, which is also the headquarters of the Bale Mountains NP. Dinsho is situated on the Gaysay Plain, at the most northern part of the Park at some 2,500m altitude. At that early hour it was still freezing and everything in the immediate surroundings of the lodge was covered with a thin layer of night frost. Only the abundant flora and the signs pointing to the wildlife trails made us aware that this was indeed tropical Africa, and not some place in the Alps or similar mountain region with a temperate climate.

The cold lingered in the air throughout the morning as we gradually followed the main road running through the Park up to the Sanetti Plateau, which ranges from 4,000m to the peak of Tulu Dimtu at 4,377m. This is the second highest point in Ethiopia and one of the highest peaks in Africa. A savage wind howling over the empty plain, made us reluctant to leave the car for more than a few minutes. Now and then a truck passed us by, with groups of passengers shivering in the open back, their faces and bodies covered with blankets. This road, leading from the larger settlements of Dinsho, Robe and Goba - which lie just outside the Park - through the Plateau and the adjacent forest, is a major route for pastoralists practising trans-humance or taking livestock to the market.

Notwithstanding the temperature, it's hard to miss the beauty of this unique area. The plateau supports the richest Afro-alpine vegetation in existence. The dwarf-montane heath landscape is dotted with white cushions of everlasting helichrysum and giant lobelias, which blossom for a year and then die. There are numerous lakes, which support large colonies of waders, ducks and cranes. The area is deeply dissected with sheer-sided gorges. This is also the home of the threatened Ethiopian Wolf, which feeds on the numerous rodents, mainly the also endemic Giant Molerat. We spot several lone wolves, hunting for their daily meal. In the evening the animals regroup in packs to spend the night together.

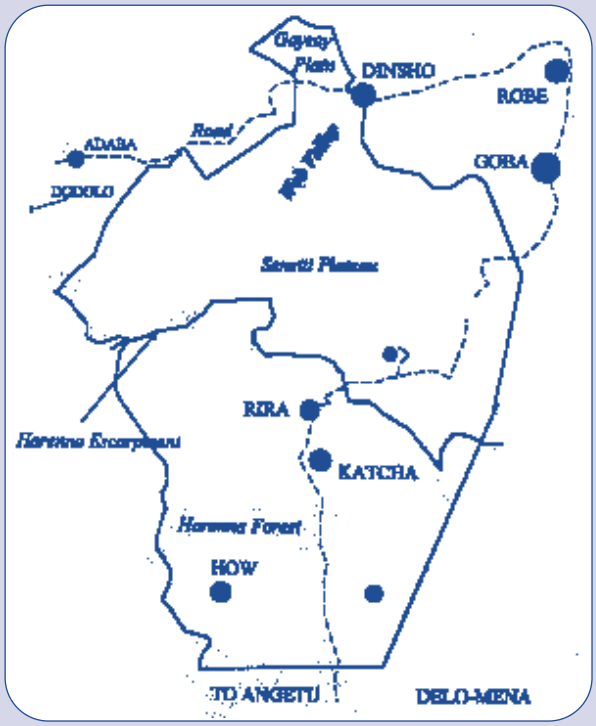
At the summit of the Tulu Dimtu (meaning 'red mountain' in Oromigna) is a short wave radio station. Four men guard the installation against robbery, 'mainly bandits from neighbouring Somalia,' as one of them explains. At present the men live nearby in an unnamed settlement where they have temporary homes and members of their family guard cattle and goats. Actually they are from Rira, where they still have their farms. But at this time of the year they drive their herds to this part of the Park, where the vegetation is greener and more water is available. When asked, they deny that grazing has a negative impact on the Park. 'This area is so large, nature always recovers from the grazing.' In the few existing studies of the Sanetti plateau it is asserted that grazing cattle and goats has a disastrous impact on the fragile Afro-alpine vegetation, but research which would

Bale Mountains - physical and biological wealth

The Bale Mountains massif rises to 4,377 meters from a 2,500m high plain in the north, and from an altitude of approximately 1,600m to the south and east. It includes some of the highest peaks in Africa. The massif has an extensive plateau supporting Afro-alpine vegetation, the largest in existence. This Sanetti plateau ranges from 4,000 to 4,100m, has numerous lakes, which are important for waders, ducks and cranes, and is deeply dissected by sheer-sided gorges.

The slopes are typically covered in closed forest, varying in composition. The northern slopes have a single annual wet season while the south has two. Juniper, Podocarpus and Hagenia dominate the northern and north-western slopes, with numerous endemic species. The southern and eastern slopes are highly variable and form the most extensive intact continuum of altitudinal variation in forest in Ethiopia. Few comparable tracts exist elsewhere in Africa.

The higher altitudes are dominated by dwarf montane heath, giving way to arborescent, ericoid and Hagenia dominated forests. Steeper slopes are cloaked in dense bamboo. At middle altitudes, Celtis and Cordia become common giving rise to a 25m high canopy. On the lower slopes (1,800m and below), the canopy rises to 30m with taller emergent, and Podocarpus as the most common tree. These lower elevations of the Park, together with the Mena-Angetu NFPA, are important for wild Arabica coffee, which is abundant. The forest also varies structurally and in term of flora from east to west, following a rainfall gradient, and the highest levels of endemism occur in the west. Recent surveys conducted by the Ethiopian National Herbarium place the Bale forest among the most diverse and rich in endemism within the country. For convenience, the forest continuum running as a band from the north-west across the southern slopes to the eastern flanks is called here the Harenna Forest, although in reality different sectors have specific names (see Map). This forest is the second largest natural forest block in Ethiopia and its extent and high diversity mean that it is among the highest priority conservation areas in the country.



The Bale Massif is also important for animal species. Of the 64 known mammal species, 11 are endemic. These include the threatened Ethiopian Wolf and the Mountain Nyala. Other notable species are the giant forest hog, lion and African hunting dog (the latter two are unusual in being forest residents). Some 220 bird species have been recorded and 16 are endemic. The massif is important as a breeding site for wattled cranes and the endemic spot-breasted plover, and has golden eagle and chough, species generally restricted to much colder, northern regions.

substantiate this assertion has yet to be conducted.

A few kilometres further on we meet 10-year old Abderraham Hussein who is guarding a herd of 25 cows and 214 sheep. Adderraham tells us that he has lived all his life here on the Sanetti Plateau, together with his family of father, three wives and seven brothers and sisters. The family also owns a farm in Rira. Later, in the car, we talk about the life these people live, spending most of the year alone in this inhospitable climate, without any amenities such as schools, medical care or places for amusement. However, our guide Abbay Taddesse envies them: 'These people live the healthiest life you can imagine,' he says. 'They live in the highlands, drink fresh milk and have meat everyday. They reach ages which you will not find in any other place in Ethiopia.'

The danger of fragmentation

Back in the car, Fetene Hailu of the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Organisation, gives a short lecture on the population pressures on the Bale Mountains NP. The biggest problem is, of course, posed by the 7,000 or more people living within the Park. In addition to this group there is a threat from those living outside the Park boundaries who use it

regularly for access to wood and pasture. Further, there are an unknown number of seasonal nomadic herders who bring their cattle, sheep and goats to graze or to visit the mineral springs (*horas*).

The Park's resident population have grown substantially since the estimated 2,500 people of the mid-1980s. Local people and the staff of the Bale Mountains NP claim that it has grown most rapidly over the past five years, but may now be stabilising. The main concentrations are in the Weyb Valley (in the north-west, near Dinsho) and at three other sites - Rira, Hawwo and Malgnata - all within the Harenna Forest sector. Family units are also scattered elsewhere in the Harenna, together with the small settlement on the Afro-alpine Sanetti Plateau which was home to the people we had just met.

Pressure on the Park from these people varies in relation to the size and distribution of settlements and the type of prevailing habitat. In the Weyb Valley, forest has been cleared for cultivation of cereals, and high altitude vegetation is under severe grazing pressure. On the Sanetti, cattle and goats graze the Afro-alpine vegetation but its true impact - as we have seen - is difficult to assess.

Parts of the Harenna forest within the Park have been cleared for agriculture, particularly around the larger settlements. The amount of forest being cleared to meet local needs is expanding steadily. Cattle, sheep and goats also contribute to forest degradation by browsing the regenerating lower canopy strata. In addition, the forest people burn cleared land and the high altitude heather heath to expand the areas available for grazing.

Those living in the forest sector, harvest wood and bamboo, either for their immediate needs or as a cash crop to supplement income. Most of the timber is sold for firewood at the side of the Goba-Delo-Mena road, and is consumed in Goba and Robe to the north.

Much of the forest within the Park is not permanently settled. The real danger is, that unless the uncontrolled growth is brought to a halt, the forest will eventually fragment and disappear as more people establish themselves there.

Population pressure outside the Park is greatest along the northern boundaries where towns such as Dinsho, Robe and Goba continue to expand. While there are limited controls on the use of the Park by people in this area, demand for basic commodities such as firewood and pasture mean that pressure on the natural ecosystems can be expected to increase.

The forest areas to the west, south and east of the Park are more lightly populated, and some tracts have no permanent settlements. However, the higher rainfall and the 'free' land of the forests are attracting people from the surrounding areas and, in some cases, from a considerable distance.

A lonely forester

The city of Delo-Mena is located some 20 km outside the Park, in the middle of the extensive southern parts of the Harenna forest. We meet Alemu Lema, head of the Mena Angetu Woreda Agricultural Department, which has also the responsibility for the Mena-Angetu NFPA. He is alone in his small office,

Save the wild Arabica!

Only an international emergency programme can save the surviving remnants of the wild Arabica coffee plants growing in the highland rainforests of south-west Ethiopia. This was the unambiguous message that Ethiopian ecologist Tadesse Gole took to an international conference on Plant Genetic Diversity in the 21st Century, held in June 2000 in Kuala Lumpur. Gole, who was quoted in *New Scientist* magazine, added dramatically, 'we gave the world coffee, now we hope the international community will collaborate with us to save its genetic base.'

Some 90 per cent of the coffee we drink world wide is Arabica, making it the most valuable international commodity apart from oil. Most of it is grown on plantations outside Ethiopia from a handful of cultivated varieties created from a few individual bushes.

But these plantations are at risk from disease, such as the coffee rust that hit Brazil in the 1970s. And when disaster strikes, plant breeders turn for genetic help to Ethiopia, home of the largest coffee gene bank at Jimma and the even greater genetic reserves scattered through the forests, where Arabica bushes make up much of the undergrowth.

But these highland bushes have lost more than half of their trees in the past thirty years, and today they cover less than 2,000 square kilometres, says Gole. They are being exploited for timber, and razed to make way for tea plantations and to allow for mass resettlement of people from the northern districts of Ethiopia, such as Wollo, that were devastated by drought in the 1980s.

'These forest fragments possess enormous genetic variability of Arabica coffee. They are the best available source of germ plasm for the crop's improvement and pest control', Gole says. Despite the seed banks and plantations, 'as yet we know very little about the biology of wild coffee,' the scientist, who is currently at the University of Bonn in Germany, adds. Local farmers who cultivate about one hundred traditional varieties in their own gardens may know more about wild coffee than anyone else, he says.

Land clearing for coffee production in the Harenna Forest

his only colleague - the local forest officer - is attending a course elsewhere. Together they are responsible for an area of more than 190,000 ha. He smiles resignedly in response to our question whether there is enough manpower in his office to do the job. 'Of course not. We have no people, no funds, no vehicles. So although this is a classified forest area, the only thing we can do is educate people and raise awareness about the fragility of the forest ecosystem.'

Delo-Mena lies at the heart of the world's major genetic reservoir of wild Arabica coffee. On our way to the city, we've already seen the many clearances in the forest and the rows of coffee plants in the fields. 'Because prices are high, the interest in cultivating coffee is rapidly growing,' says Alemu Lema. 'Consequently, many people come to the forest, encouraged by traders, to find a piece of land for themselves. In areas where coffee is abundant, settlement is eventually encouraged, as it becomes economically viable to live in the immediate area rather than walking from distant villages.'

The coffee-production in the forest is considered one of the principal pressures on the southern and lower elevation of the Bale Mountains NP and the Mena-Angetu NFPA portions of the Harenna Forest.. 'The most common practice,' says Alemu Lema, 'is that people look for a piece of land where coffee plants are abundant, and then clear the undergrowth to make space. The other practice is that they totally clear a piece of land and plant the coffee plants they've collected somewhere else. Both ways destroy the natural regeneration of the area. Most of the times it is accompanied by a selective clearing of larger trees. The forest is thus progressively degraded and eventually becomes fragmented. Some forest wildlife may be inhibited by the regular presence of people and by changes in the habitat.'

Long-distance runners

On our way back from the town of Delo-Mena, the car breaks down. Gear box problems make it impossible to go any further. After several hours of trying to push-start the car, we decide to leave it there and start walking. Not a single car or truck has passed us in the meantime. The transportation of people through the Park mainly takes place in the early morning. The only settlement in the neighbourhood is Rira, the place we had visited early in the morning, supposedly some 10-12 kilometres away.

What follows is a lesson in exertion at high-altitude. This is the area where some of the world's most famous long-distance runners originate, but when you're not born here it's something different. While the sun is burning on our heads, we slowly walk the road which is climbing up to the Sanetti Plateau. The breaks needed to restore our normal breathing pattern become longer and longer. In the trees, groups of curious Black and White Colobus monkeys follow our progress. In the meantime, our guide Abbay Taddesse regales us with inspiring stories about other animals living in this area, especially lions. Within an hour all the available drinking water has been used, and it's only two hours further down the trail that we find a crystal clear brook. Eventually we arrive in Rira, just before darkness falls.

Our welcome is heart-warming. Within minutes there's tea and honey again. Meals are prepared and beds spread out on the floor of the pub. Two men on horses are sent to guard the car during the night. The next morning, we pass the Sanetti Plateau again, this time in the manner of local travellers: huddled up on the back of a large truck, covered with blankets and shawls to keep out the cold. Just before arriving in the city of Goba, a cloud of dust and approaching car horn signals the return of our car, which had been fixed by a passing truck driver. ▲

The lonely Ethiopian Wolf

When asked if he knows that large amounts of cattle and goats can destroy the fragile Afro-Alpine vegetation of the Sanetti Plateau, Najib Kadir flatly denies it. 'I never heard that story'. Remarkably though, this middle-aged herdsman who lives in a settlement on the border of the Bale Mountains National Park near the city of Goba, is quite aware of the difficult position of one specific species within the highlands ecosystem, that of the endemic Ethiopian Wolf.

'One day these foreign people came to us and told us about the wolves', he remembers. 'They told us that the wolves have almost disappeared and that they wanted to stop that. So they asked us to castrate our dogs to stop them from breeding with the wolves. We considered this request and decided we could do that. And we also stick to no more than one dog per family.'

It is confirmed by others too: the wolf protection programme in the Bale Mountains did a good job so far in raising awareness with the local population and actually protecting the threatened specie.

The efforts of IUCN/WWF as well as of Born Free, an international NGO which promotes the conservation of wildlife, seem to have helped bring about a revival of the Bale Wolf population.

The Sanetti plateau is the stronghold of the endangered Ethiopian Wolf. Experts consider the presence of domestic dogs to be one of the main dangers to these animals. The dogs - which guard the cattle and goats grazing in the area - may interbreed with the wolves and introduce diseases which the wolf cannot resist. An additional problem is that herders are reported to occasionally kill wolves to protect newly born sheep and the like.

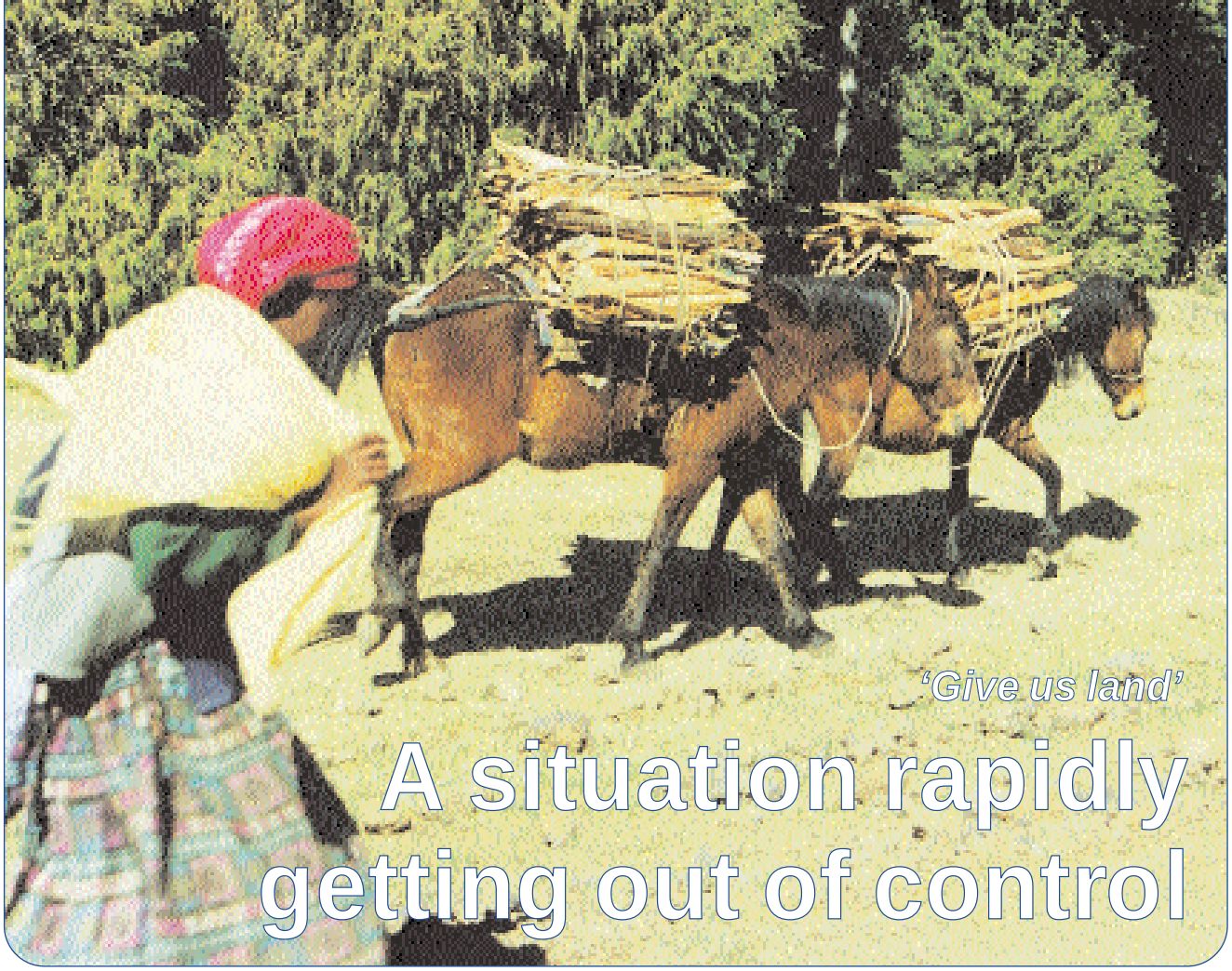
While noting the successes of the protection programme, it is far too early to celebrate victory. With less than 700 individuals, the Ethiopian Wolf is still on the verge of extinction and therefore listed as Endangered by IUCN (meaning that their survival is unlikely if the cause of its decline continues). In the northern part of their range, Ethiopian wolves probably will not survive, so the last viable - but fragile - Ethiopian Wolf population of 200-300 in Bale Mountains NP needs to be monitored closely.

The bright red Ethiopian Wolf (*Canis simensis*) lives in packs of up to 13 animals in the Ethiopian highlands. Eating exclusively Afro-alpine rodents, the wolf is a key predator in the food chain and may regulate rodent populations. Besides the threats from herdsmen and their dogs, the loss of habitats - mainly due to the settlements of people looking for a piece of land in the Park - is the other main danger.

Conservationist have decided that efforts should therefore be directed in two directions: starting global captive breeding programmes as well as establishing conservation areas, such as the Bale Mountains National Park and Simien Mountains National Park.

WWF and IUCN are both carrying out research into canids and the threats they face. Both organisations believe that if wolves are to survive in the wild, most populations will require legally enforced protection measures. It is also necessary to protect and conserve their natural habitat, and to devise ways in which people and canids can live in close proximity. And finally, it is essential to increase the public's awareness of these animals, where they live, and the problems confronting them.

On its website, early 2000 Born Free commented on the situation of wolves and men in the Bale region: 'The present drought has not affected the wolves whatsoever. We have had more and larger wolves litters this year than in the last five, and the Bale wolf population is rebuilding its numbers. People in the Weyb Valley and in Dinsho have got enough food for the time being, although they have lost a substantial number of their livestock, which is hitting their economy quite hard. Paradoxically, these losses may actually benefit wildlife in Bale and elsewhere in Ethiopia, since a reduction in livestock numbers reduces overgrazing and allows natural habitats to recover somewhat.' Until the livestock populations build up again....



'Give us land'

A situation rapidly getting out of control

It's Wednesday morning, 9 am, a dusty road some five kilometres from the city of Goba, near the Bale Mountains National Park. It's market-day. A steady stream of people are descending from the hills that lie within the Park on their way to the region's commercial centre, Goba's market.

They come, young and old, the women in colourful clothes, groups of children in their blue school uniforms. Some carry bags of potatoes or beans to sell on the market, others drive herds of bleating goats, or carry chickens strung together on their backs. However, the vast majority of these market traders clearly have only one commodity for sale: wood. Ranging from small packets of firewood to large trunks for construction (bamboo trunks are also popular). Most of it is carried or dragged along by horses and donkeys. The amount of this precious forest resource being carried to the market is stunning. All the more so considering the scene is re-enacted at each of the twice-weekly markets held here throughout the year. Standing on this dirt road on the outskirts of the city, the necessity of finding more sustainable ways to exploit the Bale Mountains NP is all too obvious.

Later that morning we drive up through the hills into the Park. Descending the road and taking a walk into the fields, we come to a place where several farmers are busy collecting the first barley harvest of the year. Horses are threshing the cereal by walking in circles, spurred on by a few young boys. The atmosphere is friendly. While the work goes on, jokes are told and during the conversation we are invited to lend a hand. One of the farmers, Najib Kadir tells us about their settlement, Hangesso Adewee, which lies nearby. According to his estimate, it consists of some hundred heads of family.

'All this was dense forest twenty years ago,' our guide Abbay Taddesse comments. Looking around we see that, whereas in other areas clearance for settlement is patchy, here it is complete. This is cleared land. As far as one can see the hillsides are denuded, except for some isolated trees. Grain fields, grazing cattle and scattered houses, dominate the scene. Nature has been driven back and supplanted by cultivated land. 'We were forced to move here,' explains Najib Kadir, 'because on the other side of the hills, where we used to live, we had serious grazing problems. There was no land available for our cattle.' Here they found the land they needed, but ran into problems with occasional droughts as well as floods. Najib Kadir thinks he knows the root causes of these problems. 'We know that deforestation causes rain problems. We've experienced this. But what can we do?'

WWF-CANON/JOHN E. NEWBY

High level of deforestation

Back in Goba we pass the huge market which sells virtually everything which can be bought in Ethiopia. Because of the volume of trade, firewood and timber are sold on a separate market held on another site. At the nearby Bale Zone Agricultural Department, the local representative of the Oromiya Bureau of Agriculture - we meet agricultural officer Abdulkadir Hassen. His natural resources management related staff comprises two foresters and one environmental officer. Together, they are responsible for seventeen *woreda's*, (community groupings), containing approximately 174,000 families. The office wall even displays sheets detailing the amount of livestock in the area: 2.1 million cows, 328,000 goats and 500,000 sheep.

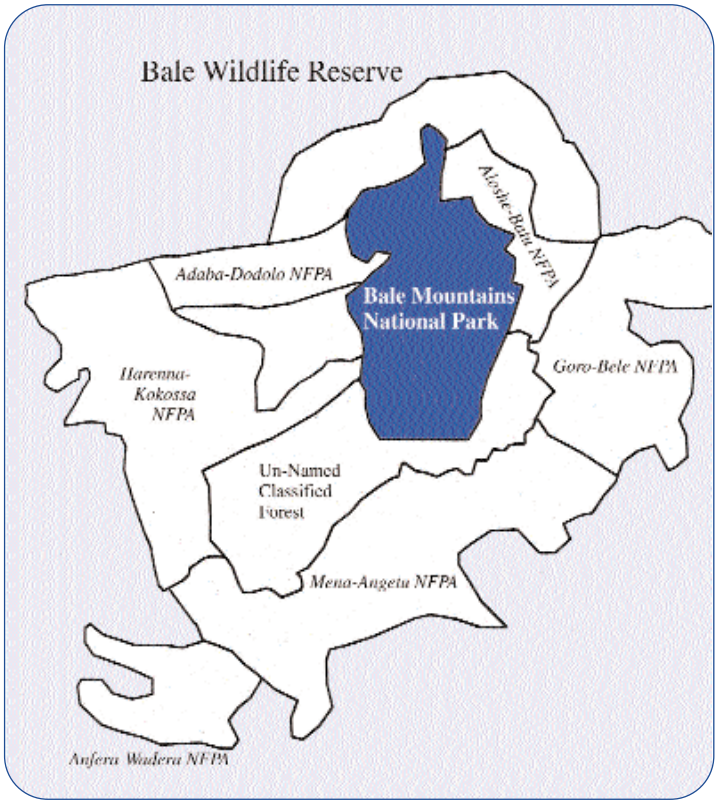
When asked about the main environmental problems in the Goba area, Hassen immediately identifies the high level of deforestation by local people, and the consequent soil erosion as the biggest problem. This office tries to tackle these problems by promoting a more sustainable use of the natural resources in the area. One way to do this is by convincing newcomers not to settle in the vulnerable areas. However, figures about the present inflow are not available. 'It's hard to stop people from settling or from exploiting the area,' says Hassen. 'People have to supplement their income with forest products because agriculture is too poor. Development is needed, otherwise deforestation can't be stopped.'

The proximity of the Park and the surrounding Harenna forest to urban concentrations like Goba, Robe and Dinsho in the north, and Delo-Mena and Angetu in the south, inevitably means that the forest comes under considerable pressure. Firewood and timber for construction are the main products taken

Ethiopia's protected areas

Forest coverage in Ethiopia is reduced to an estimated 3 per cent of the country's surface area. The average annual deforestation in the period from 1990 to 1995 was 0.5 per cent. Most of the remaining forests are included in the National Forest Priority Areas (NFPAs). There are 57 NFPA's, covering, on paper, 4.8 million ha. The forest priority areas are under the management authority of the Regional Governments. They are generally under-resourced and, as a result, many of the forests are being steadily degraded, encroached or fragmented and/or completely gone by clearing and unsustainable exploitation.

Protected areas in Ethiopia comprise approximately 2.1 per cent of the land surface. Several categories exist, which are generally re-grouped into two. The *principal* protected areas comprise 9 National Parks and 3 Sanctuaries. Only 2 of these, however, are gazetted: Awash NP and Semien Mountains NP. The *secondary* protected areas include 8 Wildlife Reserves and 18 Controlled Hunting Areas. Almost all of the protected are facing considerable threat from settlement and uncontrolled natural resource use, leading to the inability to fulfil the original conservation function.



The Bale Mountains Natinal Park and surrounding NFPAs

from the forest, but in addition, trade in honey and coffee encourages settlement of the forests and production of commodities.

The settling in the forest and clearing of land for agricultural use - especially expanding and starting new coffee plantations, as coffee is rapidly becoming the main cash crop in the area - is without any doubt the main reason for the ongoing deforestation. Commercial logging in the area is not considered to be a major problem by the Bale Zone office. There is a government-owned sawmill in the Mena-Angetu part of the Harenna forest, which started operations in the early 1980s. The working capacity of the sow mill has been reduced highly when compared to the period of the previous regime. Only over aged, dried out and fallen trees are allowed to be utilised under strict supervision, emphasises Abdulkadir Hassen. 'This improves the quality forest, reduces the chances for forest fires and the spread of diseases. Besides, it makes forest exploitation rational.' The income generated from the timber sale is used for forest development and protection. Local communities have not directly benefited from the commercial logging, Hassen agrees. 'We aim to create new mechanisms which could change this situation in the future.'

His colleague Alemu Lema, Department head of the Mena Angetu Woreda Agricultural office, whom we had met some days earlier, was more outspoken on the logging activities. 'We don't appreciate this activity because it has never given any advantage to the local communities,' he told us. 'Also it teaches the people to cut trees. Paths are being introduced, the forest really is laid out for exploitation. De-activating the factory would really help discourage people from going into the forest.'

Aldulkadir Hassen doesn't agree: 'We have no evidence at all that the introduction of roads and paths by loggers may have induced local people to exploit the forest. We have seen though in recent years in one of the woreda's, where loggers never have been yet, that people cleared and burned the forest at an alarming rate.' Besides, Hassen emphasises, the introduction of a certain amount of roads and paths is stimulated by his office, because it gives easier access to monitor the forest, and to implement development activities. Hassen: 'The importance of forest roads has been confirmed last year when there was a large fire in the forest. It was much easier to combat the fire in those areas which had accessible roads.'

Give us land

Divided on the impact of logging, the two agricultural officials do, however, agree about the main obstacles confronting them. In Delo-Mena, Alemu Lema told us, 'we are unable to answer the main demand from the local people, namely: give us land. Government policy in this respect is not very clear, so we are stranded. We are unable to give answers. If trained educators were available, we could teach the people more sustainable ways to carry out agriculture, which would relieve the pressure for new land. But we do not have that capacity.' His colleague Abdulkadir Hassen in Goba agrees about the 'the existence of uneven land holdings among peasants and the need of redistribution.'

In the meantime, both officers try to stop further exploitation by talking to local authorities in order to persuade them to give small pieces of land near the villages to newcomers, hoping to stop them from further penetrating the area.

In principle the local offices are fully qualified to implement sound agricultural policies in their territories. They are hampered, however, not only by the fact that they are under-staffed and under-resourced, but also by a lack of policy directives from the regional authorities. Although all forests around the Park are assigned as National Forest Priority Area (NFPA) - as most of the remaining forests in Ethiopia have been - no specific forest policy has yet been approved. Only when such a policy has been approved will gazetting of the areas be possible. The main reason for the delay is undoubtedly the process of decentralisation and the

transfer of authority for NFPAs and National Parks from the federal to the regional level.

A lack of everything

The problems facing the Bale Mountains National Park are not so different from those in the surrounding forest areas. They are all rooted in the lack of funds, transport and other resources necessary to cover such a large area. Further, the Park has yet to be gazetted and the laws which would enable proper management have still to be enacted. Consequently it is difficult for the Park staff to control settlement, grazing and other forms of incursion. Insofar as patrolling is possible, it is largely centred on the northern part of the Park. Scouts visit the Weyb Valley, the Gaysay Plain and the northern parts of the Sanetti on horseback. However, the vast majority of the Sanetti Plateau and the entire Harenna forest section are patrolled only irregularly. Within the forest sector only the areas along the roadside are visited. Vehicles are not available and if they were petrol shortages would render them useless.

A lack of outposts and facilities is a major part of the problem. Only two posts are currently functional - the headquarters in Dinsho and a second outpost on the Gaysay Plain. An additional outpost has recently been funded by the WWF to monitor access and receive visitor fees on the main access road from Goba to Delo-Mena, at the Park's north-eastern limit. 'By building a sub-headquarters in the centre of the Harenna forest at Katcha, and some smaller outposts in the other forest areas and on the Sanetti Plateau, we would be much better able to control developments in the Park as well as the surrounding forest,' says Fetene Hailu. 'However, it would also be vital to ensure that these posts are given adequate personnel, transport, radio communication and equipment. That's a pre-condition.'

Open checkpoints

On our way back to Addis Ababa we pass the site of the former outpost on the Gaysay Plain. The only reminder of its existence is a small roadblock, with a barrier pole pointing to the sky. No one is there. 'That used to be a very important checkpoint which people wouldn't dare to pass carrying anything illegal,' says project leader Dr. Ermias Bekele, back in his office in Addis. 'But now that our resources have been cut back, the checkpoints are open and there is no longer any control. Wild animal meat, charcoal, everything can pass. Fortunately the havoc has forced the regional authorities of Oromya to try and improve the situation. At the moment there's heavy tree felling all over the area, which is completely illegal. But people cut in the evening and night and take the trunks to town immediately.'

The situation in the Bale region is getting out of hand, believes Bekele. 'Settlements appear to be steadily increasing as local people grow ever more confidant that they will not be prevented from entering the NFPA. Others move in from more distant areas lured by the promise of the largely uncultivated forest soil. People displaced from land now occupied by state farms used to be reluctant to challenge the authorities and invade the NFPAs. However, this inhibition is rapidly changing.' Here the lack of a coherent forest policy is painfully felt. Because the land- and resource user rights pertaining to NFPAs have not been fully legislated, local officers are unable to tell people about the do's and don'ts regarding the forest. In some cases, this problem is said to have been exacerbated by local political authorities encouraging settlers to move into the NFPAs.

The decentralisation process is causing major problems, agrees Tesfaye Hundessa, General Manager of the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Organisation, which is located in the same office building as the DGIS-WWF project 'Legally we're

Settlements inside the park, near Goba

still in control,' he says Hundessa's organisation is responsible for national parks and wildlife at the federal level. 'Regions have to obey the federal laws, and with respect to the national parks at least there are clear federal laws. But I do admit, the situation is unclear. In a petition to the government we have protested against the transfer of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries to the regions. This is still under consideration, as yet no decision has been made. Personally I feel that most regions feel it's not their top priority. They do not have the time, budget nor capacities to conserve the areas.'

Closer collaboration

In light of the unclear political situation, improving the institutional capacity to manage protected areas such as the Bale Mountains NP and Harenna forest at a federal as well a regional level is all the more challenging. The Project has established a small capacity-strengthening unit within the federal Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Organisation (EWCO). 'The purpose of this unit,' explains Tesfaye Hundessa, 'is to provide training and other support which will build EWCO's capacity for protected areas and wildlife management. A special emphasis will be placed on strengthening forest conservation capacity within EWCO, a need that was identified in the Ethiopian Forestry Action Plan.'

At the same time, the new unit hopes to facilitate collaboration between EWCO and the Oromya natural resource management agency. 'We have to deal with the present situation,' says Hundessa, 'which is that regional authorities have assumed responsibility for managing all National Forest Priority Areas. The Oromya region is extremely important for forest conservation in Ethiopia, having the second largest forest block in the country - the Harenna Forest on the slopes of the Bale Mountains - and several other important forest areas. So we should give them all the support we can, apart from our feelings about the best possible solution for the future. We hope that by promoting closer collaboration between EWCO and the Oromya authorities we can also provide a model for regional protected area management elsewhere.'

▲

‘It’s this thing they call democracy’

‘In half an hour we will see Mountain Nyala’s as well as bushbucks. I’m pretty sure about that. They used to come here every evening.’ With a guide like Abbay Taddesse it’s not hard to fall for the beauty of the Bale Mountains National Park. After arriving at the Park’s HQ at Dinsho, just north of the main road at about 7km from the village, and installing ourselves in the guest rooms of the beautifully located lodge, it’s Taddesse who comes to tell us it’s not time for relaxation yet. After making a trip of some ten hours from Addis Ababa to this remote area, it would be stupid to miss the day’s reward. The evening is rapidly falling, so it’s high time for some game viewing.

BUREAU M&O

Abbay Taddesse

Taddesse, in his fifties, well-humoured, the head covered with an American baseball cap, nowadays works as a guide for a privately-owned tour operator in Addis which specialises in trips to the Ethiopian part of the Rift Valley. Abbay Taddesse was also the third Warden of the Bale Mountains National Park, where he worked for six years, living at the Dinsho lodge. For him our trip to the Park is a sentimental journey, a confrontation with almost forgotten memories and people. Many inhabitants of Dinsho as well as staff of the Park come to greet him. The typical Ethiopian way of embracing consisting of 4-5 hugs follows, as well as a prolonged bout of handshaking and the exchange of the latest information.

Nature in the direct surroundings of the Dinsho lodge apparently hasn’t changed much. Without hesitation Abbay Taddesse leads us to the best places for viewing game, in the meantime pointing to the many endemic plants and some of the more than 200 birds species which have been counted in this area. With respect to the large mammals his prediction proves inaccurate only in the amount of animals we see: there are also warthogs and antelopes (duikers) to be admired. The largest impression though is made by the large Mountain Nyala’s, considering that this is an animal which can be found in no other country than Ethiopia.

‘So, not much has changed since you were here as a Warden?’ we ask Taddesse. ‘Far from it,’ he replies. ‘Listen to the many human voices which can be heard on this quiet evening.’ Taddesse is right. At regular intervals one can hear people shouting greetings to each other, or calling their dogs. Cows moo loudly, and cocks also make themselves heard. It all shows just how many people and their livestock have settled in this protected area in recent years. Still more living just outside the boundaries of the Park use it regularly for wood and pasture, bringing their cattle, sheep and goats to graze or to visit the rivers or mineral springs.

The growing human pressure on the Bale National Park saddens Taddesse. ‘My heart fills with sadness when I see all those people here. Twenty years ago nobody was allowed to settle here. Everybody was aware of this. I guess they still are, but nobody gives a damn anymore.’

Why has this changed? For Abbay Taddesse the answer is clear: ‘It’s that thing they call democracy. Because of that, the fate of the Park is now in the hands of local interests. These politicians hand out favours to their voters, including the silent permission to enter the Park.’

People did use the Park even in his days, he admits. ‘Of course, local Oromo people used to cross the Park now and then to visit relatives at the other side of the Sanetti plateau, or for trading goods. And sometimes they came to take wood or bamboo for construction work. But this was all strictly regulated. People who even walked on the grass near the road could be fined.’

The controlled human presence was abruptly ended by the military regime, the Dergue. Local people were violently chased away if they dared to enter the area.

‘You could disagree with their methods but for the Park it was very good’, Abbay Taddesse says. ‘Then, when a civil government was installed, the situation rapidly deteriorated. Resentment towards the Park had grown during the Dergue-period. When the military regime was finally chased away, people turned against government properties. They destroyed Park buildings and fences and started to kill wildlife. People said: this is the land of the Oromo. Our grandfathers used to live here, now the military are gone we move in again. And the new regional politicians didn’t do anything to stop them. They worry about the next election, not about the Park. They don’t want to disturb people.’ ▲

WWF-CANON/MARTIN NICOLL

Oromo horsemen

'We need results now'

Winning hearts

Conservation of the Bale Mountains ecosystem and its species is impossible without the support of local people. The problem consequently, is how to gain their support? Winning hearts is a big problem in a region where, after twenty years of war and civil strife, people are fed-up with government and external interference. It's an attitude typified by one farmer who, when asked who had given him permission to settle in the Bale Mountains National Park, replied: 'I didn't ask anyone for permission. Land is given by God. Not by politicians.'

Slowly the meeting room of the Dinsho lodge fills with farmers and herdsmen. They greet each other and push forwards to the fireplace in the middle of the room, warming their hands. Not much is said. It's 8 p.m., outside the tropical night has fallen and the temperature is rapidly approaching zero degrees. This is Alpine Africa, at 2,500 m. Most of the men are middle-aged, some, with grey beards, are clearly older. They wear black boots and coats and carry walking-sticks. These are proud, independent men, used to living their own lives without being told by others what they should do. They were invited to come to this place, well, here they are, saying, 'tell us what you want, we are ready to listen to your story'.

Earlier that day we had entered the Bale Mountain National Park in a four-wheel drive vehicle, travelling in the direction of the Weyb Valley. The conditions were rough, the whole area is intersected by rivers which run through steeply eroded valleys. On the banks of the rivers, laundry was spread out to dry in the sun, children played in the cold water. These were not the only signs of human presence in this protected area. There were cows grazing, many plots of land planted with the yellow-coloured staple food barley, and a scattering of small houses. Men

and boys worked in the fields, women busied themselves around the houses. Each time the pattern was the same: people talked freely about their situation and when they came to this area. However, when the questions turned to the future, and their position in this protected area where nobody is supposed to settle, we were told to ask the elders. That is not a question we can answer, they said, it is up to the community, and the elders are the ones who speak for the community. Fetene Hailu of EWCO then invited people to send representatives to the Dinsho lodge that evening, for a first meeting.

The meeting itself takes several hours and develops along the familiar lines of an African meeting, in search of some consensus. There are long introductions by the representatives of the conservation project giving a detailed account of their trip, what they've experienced so far and the plans for the coming days. Observations the participants agree with are greeted with a drawn-out 'eeh'-sound signifying approval. After these introductions, several of the herdsmen stand up and tell their story. They begin by telling of their ancestors who had already lived in this area, followed by their own experiences under the regimes of the Emperor Haile Selassie, the military Dergue and the present civilian government. Then it's time for the project people to explain their plans in a bit more detail, which is essentially a search for an acceptable balance between human activities and the maintenance of the natural ecosystem of the Park. 'What is your reaction?' the elders are asked. The oldest herdsman stands up and formulates a final statement: 'We know about the problems of the Park,' he says, 'and we are aware that conservation is needed. But so too there can be no doubt that we need the land. And this is our land. We have lived here in the past, we were chased away by the military and when they were gone, we came back. And now we are here to stay. But we will think about your proposal and meet again, some time later.'

Pilot projects

'This is our strategy,' explains Fetene Hailu of EWCO after the meeting. 'You have to win the hearts of the chiefs first, and then convince them. That's the most difficult part. After that, you can go on. First you have to make clear to them that you fully respect the Oromo traditions, which includes the importance of living on the land of the ancestors. That's a profound feeling and cannot be denied. But then you argue that their coming back to this protected area attracts other people too, and that this exacerbates the problems in the area. They are quite aware of the problem of population pressure here. I use the example of Tigray, where people have completely

denuded their land. Now they are struggling to reforest the countryside, and carrying bricks to protect against flooding. These people here can learn from that.'

Once the elders' objections to the start of the project have been removed, the idea is to set examples, create models, says Fetene Hailu. 'If that is successful, you can convince people. So we will start the work with small groups, at the periphery of the forest, the people who earn a living with bee-keeping or coffee-planting. We will educate them to work in a more sustainable way. The idea is to start with five to ten families. Give them a piece of land, supply them with fertilisers, etc. From there on, you can slowly expand.'

Back in Addis Ababa, Project Leader Ermias Bekele confirms this strategy: 'Our basic approach is to test and promote the active and full participation of all key stakeholders, particularly local residents living in and around the protected areas in the

Hygenia Abessina

conservation, management and sustainable utilisation of the forest and wildlife resources in these protected areas. In practical terms, this is to be realised by implementing this approach in two or three selected villages, both in the Bale Mountains NP and the Mena-Angetu NFPA. On a *pilot* basis. In this phase of the project we have to find out if this is the right approach.'

First priority for the Project however is to get to know the situation and the people better. Says Dr. Ermias Bekele: 'Our documents are several years old and may no longer be very realistic. We really need to know the actual situation. The amount of people using the area, their actual activities and the real damage caused by that, etc. So our first priority is researching the actual situation, by means of interviewing people, which will also give them an opportunity to speak out about their preferences and needs.'

Realising the goals of protecting the Park and its environment will undoubtedly take time. However, says Bekele, 'there are critical issues which need to be addressed immediately. Community development is one of them. This is something the people desperately want. A health-clinic. A tree nursery. Flour mills. Important items, especially for women. Here we have to come in as soon as possible. Of course there will be 1001 requests for help. We have to be realistic. We will explain to people that we are a small project which cannot solve all their problems. But we have to act. If we don't do so, the Project will merely be planning for the future and that's not appropriate. We need results now, and we need the support of the local people. Winning their hearts is the only way to make this a success.'

It is hoped that future forms of self-regulation through the local communities can be achieved by assisting Conservation Committees in the four *woreda's* bordering the protected area. These Committees could work with the Park to generate

Giant lobelia

activities and projects, which would then relieve the pressure on natural resources, and help the communities to develop. So far however, the only functional Woreda Committee is in the northern sector, at Dinsho. The concept of 'Forest Block Allocation Contracts', i.e. leasing forest blocks to forest dwellers collectives - which has been proposed in another conservation project in Ethiopia - is another challenging idea which needs to be closely monitored. Greater awareness could also be stimulated by helping to establish wildlife clubs, says Bekele. 'Young people, especially, have shown interest in taking part in such an activity. Also, scholarships for further nature-study could be made available for some of the brightest students.'

'The Bale Mountain National Park is in a bad condition, of that there can be no doubt. But I believe there are still plenty of opportunities to reverse the situation. But first of all we need the active participation of local people,' concludes Bekele. 'Which means we have to convince them that the Project is good for them. That conservation can bring in revenues and that they will share in those benefits. At the same time we have to start working to build capacity, at the federal, and the regional as well as the local level. Management plans for the Park and its surroundings have to be developed. And all this has to be complemented by policy measures. That's the road ahead.'

▲

Forest conservation in high-priority areas

The DGIS-WWF Ethiopia Project objectives

The *long-term* development objective of the Project is the conservation and sustainable management of Ethiopia's priority biomes, especially forests. Its *immediate* objectives are:

- to strengthen the institutional capacity to manage Ethiopia's important protected area, with emphasis on forests, by:
  - building the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Organisation's capacity for protected areas and wildlife management, with emphasis on forest conservation;
  - strengthening the capacity for management of the Bale Mountains National Park and adjacent Mena-Angetu National Forest Priority Area;
  - facilitating collaboration between EWCO and the Oromya natural resource management agency as a model for regional protected area management.
- to conserve and manage sustainably the forest and wildlife resources in the Bale Mountains NP and Mena-Angetu NFPA, by:
  - adopting improved natural resource management practices, which favour conservation and improved living conditions for local communities;
  - conserving the Afro-alpine and montane forest ecosystems on the Bale Massif.

Food security AND forest conservation

Seeing the large grain fields on the fruitful plains when approaching the Bale Mountains, as well as the abundant natural riches of the area itself, it is hard to believe that at the same time some eight million Ethiopians are in a desperate need of food aid. However, this fact alone fully justifies the Ethiopian government's decision to give priority to food security for its people. The conservation of wildlife and natural biomes can only be considered in this light.

It's an enormous challenge for the DGIS-WWF 'Forest Conservation in High Priority Areas' Ethiopia Project to produce evidence that wildlife and forest conservation may be realised without endangering local people's welfare and security. Or better, to show that local people - by being involved in the whole endeavour from the beginning - may even draw considerable benefits from conservation measures. One of the problems that may potentially arise from the proposed collaboration with the communities is that they are likely to push for a trade-off between development and conservation, which could ultimately become increasingly conflictual.

Through the elders, the community of Dinsho has already requested a school, clinic, and the provision of electricity. Each of these interventions is likely to increase Dinsho's population and with it the number of livestock, which will further increase pressure on the surrounding forest and other wildlife areas. An additional risk is that the community's interests are not given an equitable expression. The much-respected elders who are responsible for community affairs are normally the most well-to do men within the community. As such they may be inclined to forget about the needs of women and disadvantaged groups. This apparently occurred when, in the early 1990s, WWF was approached by the Woreda Committee to support Dinsho's development through electricity connection. A survey conducted at the same time clearly indicated a strong desire among the women of Dinsho to have community firewood plantations. In this instance the WWF funded the community firewood plantations. However, the support of the elders is seen as essential for the success of the project, so concessions might be necessary in the future.

A fine balancing act is needed, no other option available. The fact that several main stakeholders have expressed their willingness to proceed with the Project is promising. Others have not yet had the opportunity to express themselves. If the Project is to succeed, building bridges between all stakeholders appears to be a necessity. ▲

Acknowledgements

All texts written by Hans van de Veen,
Bureau M&O - Journalistic productions on environment and development

Published by the DGIS-WWF Tropical Forest Portfolio based at WWF International.
For further copies contact Astrid Bjorvik, Finance/Communications Co-ordinator,
DGIS-WWF Tropical Forest Portfolio
WWF International, Avenue de Mont Blanc 27, 1196 Gland, Switzerland
Tel: +41 22 364 90 16, Fax +41 22 364 06 40, E-mail: bjorvik@wwfint.org

All pictures by Abbay Taddesse, except on pages 10, 14 and 15
Layout and design: MMS Grafisch Werk, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Production: Bureau M&O, Amsterdam, The Netherlands