

# Community management of Afroalpine highlands in Ethiopia

**Zeleelem Tefera**

Environmental conservation has often been characterized by a top-down approach that includes the establishment of protected areas, enforcement of legislation and the assumption of ownership of biodiversity by the State. This approach reflects the suspicion of governments that local communities are incapable of managing their own resources. Thus, while these approaches have ensured the survival of a few populations of certain species and ecosystems and contributed to foreign exchange earnings, they have been slow to integrate local people into resource management and decision-making activities. Local communities who live near protected areas and whose populations have invariably grown, are instead faced with a rapidly diminishing natural resource base, often resulting in conflicts between local communities and environmental conservation authorities.

There are exceptions, however – including ancient examples of local communities establishing natural resource management systems that are essential to the people's livelihoods and also to the persistence of biodiversity. These examples not only need to be closely examined to reveal how they work, but they also deserve our full support in a changing and threatened natural world. Following is an experience from Ethiopia, a country which has suffered untold environmental disasters and biodiversity loss.

## Community-based natural resource management

In the Central Highlands of Ethiopia, there is a small (111 km<sup>2</sup>) patch of land which has persisted in its current, relatively pristine state for the past four hundred years. The area, called Guassa by the local Menzi people, ranges from 3200 to 3700 metres above sea level. It is part of the Amhara Regional State of North Shoa, 265 km northeast of the national capital Addis Ababa.

The natural resource management system of the Guassa area dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Given that it still persists, this makes it one of the oldest conservation areas in sub-Saharan Africa. The area was set aside as a resource for the community, who use it for harvesting the "Guassa" grass (*Festuca* sp.) for thatch, for grazing livestock, and for harvesting shrubs for fuelwood. In essence, the use of these resources was restricted to a limited number of users during a limited period of time. The right to use the resources of the Guassa area depended on the prevailing land rights and tenure system, which was based on ancestry and controlled by the Ethiopian Coptic Church.

As with any restricted system, it required regulation and enforcement. The local people developed an indigenous institution, known as "Qero". This entailed each of the two user communities in the area democratically electing an elder as a headman, called the Abba Qera. The Abba Qera was then responsible for protecting and regulating the use of the Guassa area.

The Qero system could entail the closure of the Guassa area from any type of use by the community for as long as three to five consecutive years. The length of closure depended largely upon the growth of the Guassa grass. When both of the Abba Qeras felt that the grass was ready for harvest, they would announce the date of the opening to the community. This usually took place at public gatherings such as church ceremonies, market places, or burial ceremonies.

The area was usually only open for use at the height of the dry season – around February or March each year. There was also a sequence to its use: only once the grass cutting was over were livestock allowed to graze the Guassa area. When the wet season started the use of the area was once again prohibited, giving the resources time to regenerate. The traditional date of closing each year was the 12<sup>th</sup> of July, the date for breaking the second most important fasting season of the Coptic Church.

While the area was closed, the prohibition of its use was strictly enforced by the users themselves. Under the leadership of the Abba Qera, household heads regularly patrolled the area. Every able male household head was obliged to take part. Failure to participate would result in severe punishment – in some instances, punishment could even result in the burning of the absentee's house.

## Drastic changes

In 1974 a popular uprising, a revolution, swept the country. On March 4<sup>th</sup> 1975, the new revolutionary government proclaimed the nationalization of all rural land. Over large parts of Ethiopia, the relationship between tenant and landlord was dissolved. The proclamation abolished private and community ownership of land and gave all farmers the same right to cultivate land within the framework of state ownership. It also established peasant associations to distribute and regulate the use of land. As a result, the Qero system was abolished, together with its mechanisms of natural resource management. The changes also gave people who had earlier been excluded from resource use, uncontrolled access to the Guassa area.

**An Ethiopian wolf seeking rats among giant lobelias in the Afroalpine ecosystem of Guassa-Menz.**



One of the strengths of community-based institutions is their resilience – their capacity to cope with change. When the Qero system was abolished, the community adapted to the condition set by the new regime. They brought their case to the new local administration, and a new “Guassa Committee” was formed through the eight peasant associations. To some extent this replaced the former Abba Qeras, with the aim of overseeing the activities of the peasant associations for the protection of the Guassa area. The main function of the Guassa Committee was to enforce agreed by-laws, particularly to control illegal uses of the Guassa area during the closed season. The system was enforced by local militia from the peasant associations. Illegal users were prosecuted in the local courts, while repeated offenders were taken to the *woreda* (district) court.

Despite the apparent adaptability and resilience of the system to the new regime, it was less efficient than before and the area started to show signs of overuse and degradation. Indeed, by the mid-1990s, the system was collapsing under the strain. However, the Guassa area was not brought under crop cultivation despite the general craving for land. Its saving feature was the altitude: the Guassa area is above the tree line, which makes cultivation very difficult, and there is therefore no permanent human settlement in the area. The area continues to play an important role in the livelihoods of the Guassa communities and it is therefore not surprising that they have a vested interest in safeguarding the area.

The *Ethiopian Wolf Conservation Programme* (EWCP) had been concerned with the conservation of the area because of the important population of Ethiopian wolves that lives there. Thus, in November 2003, the EWCP facilitated a discussion among community leaders, elders and concerned individuals in all the eight peasant associations about the future of the area. This resulted in the formation of a new committee and new by-laws. Today the Guassa area is managed by a committee comprising of five elected elders from each of the eight peasant associations. They form the Guassa committee, which oversees the use of the area, guards it and prosecutes illegal users.

The first meeting of the Guassa committee, in view of the decline of the area in recent years, resulted in the closure of the area for three years starting from June 2003. It will be open again for a few months (March - June) in 2006. The EWCP continues to be involved by monitoring the effectiveness of the community management and assisting in bringing together all stakeholders for workshops and conferences.

On top of this, the people decided there was a need for a management plan which would be recognized by the regional government. In effect, this would mean the classification of the area as a community-based and managed protected area – the first of its kind in Ethiopia. Such a classification would secure the traditional form of land-use and the livelihoods of the local community. Recently, a draft management plan was reviewed by all stakeholders. It is anticipated that the management plan will be approved by the regional Environmental Protection and Land Use Authority, thereby giving an ownership certificate of the Guassa area to the communities.

### **Biodiversity benefits**

By regulating the exploitation of the area, the ancient system has also protected the unique and diverse fauna and flora of the area. The Guassa area harbours many of the endemic species of fauna and flora associated with the Afroalpine ecosystem. For example, there are 22 mammal species found in the area, 27% of which are endemic to Ethiopia.

These include the most endangered canid in the world, the Ethiopian wolf (*Canis simensis*), also known as the Simien fox. With an estimated 530 individuals in the world, Guassa - Menz protects one of the major populations. The Afroalpine ecosystem also harbours astonishing densities of rodents, on which the wolf preys. The other important species of the area is the endemic gelada baboon (*Theropithecus gelada*). It is the only surviving member of a once widespread genus *Theropithecus*. These magnificent animals with their lion-like manes are the only grazing primates in the world. They aggregate into huge herds of up to 400 animals. They too deserve the protection afforded to them by the Guassa area. Bird species have also benefited from the Qero system and 111 species have been recorded in the area. One striking feature of the birdlife in the Guassa area is the abundance of birds of prey that feast, with the wolves, on abundant rats.

Rain that falls in the Guassa area starts a long journey to the Mediterranean through the Nile river. Indeed, 26 rivers, springs and streams have their origin in the area. The ecological service provided by the protection of the vegetation by the local community is invaluable to all the downstream users all the way to Cairo! Finally, among the local communities, the area is renowned for medicinal plants for human and livestock uses.

Now, through the partnership with the *Ethiopian Wolf Conservation Programme*, the communities are seeking to broaden the benefits accrued from the protection of the area and its unique fauna and flora. Tourists are welcome to enjoy the area, and the people wish to accrue benefits from the visitors.

### **Conclusion**

The contribution made by the Qero system to the conservation of highland biodiversity in Ethiopia is comparable with areas protected under the more formal conservation system of the country. However, unlike other protected areas, the Guassa area community-based natural resource management system also provides the community with valuable resources in times of stress.

In general, indigenous communities have developed ways of life remarkably tuned to their local environment. Their long association with their territories has resulted in developing strong ties to their lands, expressed in customary laws, complex religious ceremonies, symbolic activities and extremely detailed knowledge of their resources. Such knowledge may be deeply coded within traditional lore, handed down and refined from generation to generation.

The long association with their environment and commitment to remaining there in the future equips indigenous communities for prudent management of natural resources – even by present day standards. Indigenous communities have held resource management systems under complex, often overlapping tenure rights, which share benefits across their community and exclude non community members. Traditional systems are in effect a partnership between individuals and their community, where rules and regulations enshrined within the traditions of the society ensure the smooth functioning of the system. Indigenous systems of communal land use may therefore offer greater promise for sustainable conservation than Western systems. However, indigenous resource management systems are undergoing rapid change and it is not clear to what extent they can be maintained during changing circumstances.

**Zealelem Tefera**, EWCP, P.O. Box 101426, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.  
Email: kykebero@telecom.net.et