

WHAT CAN BE DONE FOR THE SIMIEN MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK?

By C.W.Nicol

Forward:

Words cannot express the pleasure and gratitude I felt at being invited back to the Simien Mountain National Park after a gap of forty-five years. It was with great sadness that I left Ethiopia in late October of 1969. The park had been officially gazetted, but the lack of support from the government, the judiciary and the police to cease the destruction of forest, especially on the steep lower slopes of the Simien escarpment, plus the lack of funding and many other problems made it too frustrating and depressing to carry on.

When our Ethiopian visitors came from Ethiopia to the C.W.Nicol Afan Woodland Trust in Nagano, Japan, and after showing them many old photographs and describing how things had been in the early years of the park, I confessed to a long feeling that I had failed. When Ato Ewnetu Bilata Debela, at the time the Director General of the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority replied to my little speech he said that what I had done was not a failure, but was in fact the groundwork for progress made in the park since those years. Those few words, followed by the great welcome I received this January (2014) both in Addis Ababa, Debarq and the Simien, lifted a long, dark, brooding depression

from my heart. I was really happy and ready to return. I thank State Minister Ewnetu, Ato Berhanu Gebre, Ato Kassie Berihun, Ato Abebaw Azanaw and Ato Azanaw Kefyalew for their friendship and hospitality, and for coming to our woodland. I also thank Director General Dawed Mume for his hospitality and co-operation and for the strong liaison with the Minister of Culture and Tourism, H.E. Amin Abdulkadir, State Minister Tadelech Dalacho Dando, and Mulugeta Seid. We had positive and fruitful discussions with all these people.

We also had lunch and discussions with H.E. Ambassador Kazuhiro Suzuki of the Embassy of Japan, and with Minister/Councillors Takehiro Okubo and Kazuhiko Sasaki.

The trip was sponsored and co-ordinated by Hokkaido University Centre for Advanced tourism Studies and JICA, with the expert direction of Ass. Prof. Dr. Kiho Yaoita.

Personally it was a great pleasure to have the constant company and advice of Ato Berhanu Gebre, who had also been a Game Warden of the Simien Mountains National Park. We were able to talk like brothers, having shared many of the same trials and tribulations.

I thank everybody, so many of whom are not mentioned in this report.

The opinions expressed are my own, as are any mistakes or misunderstandings.

PERSONAL IMPRESSIONS AFTER A GAP OF FORTY-FIVE YEARS

First of all there is a road into the park now, which has made and is making a huge difference. From perhaps a few hundred visitors, this year there is estimated to be twenty-four thousand visitors. There is also a fine lodge at the entrance to the park, and various facilities within. The security within the park appears to be excellent. These are all good.

WHAT CAN BE DONE? FIRST THINGS FIRST!

LOSS OF FOREST AND WATER

I was horrified by the loss of native woodland, by the erosion, and by the loss of springs and streams. In the high alpine forest overgrazing by domestic animals has wrought terrible damage, and where once there was rich grassland, mixed with wild herbs, ferns, flowers and other plants, now there is drastically grazed land, devoid of any young trees or saplings. I fear that many invaluable plants have been lost. I was also horrified that the cutting of wood in these sensitive areas of the park continues. The park is left with old, often isolated trees that have been abused and which cannot much longer survive.

The cutting of native trees and trimming of branches must be strictly prohibited.

For the survival of the park and its biodiversity and water, it is absolutely essential that all grazing of domestic animals in the park, especially in the highland areas, be totally prohibited.

I would recommend also that horses, mules and donkeys used for travel and tourism in the park be paddocked at night, with hay and other food brought in, and that not even these animals be allowed to freely gaze as they do so now. Solar powered electric fences are effective for this, but stronger fences of eucalyptus poles would be better to look at and to photograph. Modern city folk love to see horses, donkeys and mules.

(I will have more to say about riding and pack animals later)

If the government and the park authorities and rangers will enforce these rules, then within three to five years we should see some improvement. Hopefully the old trees may begin to leave new trees.

I realize that this is a huge and courageous decision to make and that it will get a lot of opposition from local farmers and probably in local politics. I realize that the farmers are poor and that at present, they can only survive by grazing their animals in the park. However, if this continues, the park will die, World Heritage Status will be lost, national reputation and pride will suffer, and tourism will begin to fail. National Parks all over the world have faced and sometimes still face similar problems. Over grazing in a national park is not unique to Ethiopia.

I will put down some ideas that might help the local people, but in the meantime, some money brought in by tourism should be used to help. It has been suggested that tourists be asked to pay some kind of

'conservation fee'. That is a good idea, as long as the money is seen to be used directly for the benefit of the park.

The next major step will be reforestation with native trees. This will require fenced off plantations, tended by local people. I saw that many small watershed areas, especially near the entrance of the park and in the Geech area have been denuded of vegetation and have lost their former springs and streams of pure fresh water that used to run throughout the dry season. These areas would be the best for reforestation projects, for which lots of tree saplings will be needed, as well as work to create detainment walls and fences in order to conserve soil and water until the forest grows. Obviously, these areas must be strictly protected from grazing until they mature.

I would also recommend some projects to stabilize upland stream banks. This could be done with stone, but I also recommend experimenting with willows that are endemic to the Khabar valley and to some stream bed areas. Foresters and botanists who have studied the area should be consulted on this.

WATER

Water is already a problem for the local people and for wildlife in general, so in some areas adjacent to the park I would recommend to consider construction of small dammed water conservation pools, ringed with rushes, willows and native trees. Banks can be initially protected

from trampling animals coming for the water by rocks, or by wire, wicker or bamboo gabions filled with small rocks, earth and the rhizomes of rushes and other suitable water plants which will grow through the rocks, stabilize and strengthen them, and make attractive water edge borders for wildlife.. Experts can be brought in to make this feasible. This practice is common in other countries that experience long periods of drought, such as Australia for example. In many parts of the world, particularly in Asia, such ponds are also used to raise edible fish. Ponds ringed with rushes and rocks will encourage native dragonflies and help keep down mosquitoes.

Rushes would be invaluable to harvest for the mulching and protection of ground used for tree planting. Pollarded or coppiced willows can supply material for fences, baskets and so on.

Local people will find an increasing need for fresh, potable water, so in some key areas, once the aquifers have been properly studied, wells could be drilled.

EUCALYPTUS

Eucalyptus trees should be excluded from the park. I realize that the eucalyptus is an important cash crop for the local people, but it should not be grown along streams nor in watershed areas. This tree sucks up too much water and subdues the growth of other native plants, and is

not at all conducive to native wildlife. Let the eucalyptus plantations be grown below watershed and sensitive areas.

TRAILS

It is obvious that the park roads need maintenance, but I was also dismayed by the state of the trails. The trail leading down to the Djinn Barr River and then on up to Geech is a dangerous disgrace. It used to be bordered by trees, but even 47 years ago Geech villagers had begun to destroy these protecting forests and even to plough up trails. The trails should be improved, protected and maintained. At the moment, due to poor use and lack of control and management, they are a cause of erosion.

(The Djinn Barr valley should be a major project for reforestation, with a total ban on agriculture. The damage done to the steep slopes of this important water source valley is appalling. When I was the warden I did not permit it, and constantly had to battle with the Geech people, who had no understanding of water conservation, let alone of wildlife concerns, whatsoever.)

PARK SCOUTS

These men and women need more training and more support. They should not be used just to 'guard' tourists. They should be able to

enforce regulations, and to give instruction and teaching both to visitors and to local people.

In my opinion the Kalashnikov submachine gun or assault rifle is not a suitable tool for a conservation officer. It is a cheap, ugly, inaccurate piece of machinery designed for urban battle, not for mountain protection or wildlife control.

I would recommend nine millimetre sidearms for normal daily use, and with accurate, 'scoped rifles for use in any animal control.

Probably the best and easiest to obtain would be NATO 5.56 mm. calibre, which is lightweight and accurate, and certainly powerful enough for any emergency or troublesome creature in the Simien or surrounding area. (I have seen this cartridge bring down a bull caribou with a kill shot at four hundred metres)

Park scouts or rangers should also be equipped with lightweight binoculars.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE LIFE FOR THE LOCAL PEOPLE?

The more involvement in providing services, guiding, interpretation and food for tourists is obviously the number one preference for villagers immediately bordering the national park.

I understand the government's decision to relocate the Geech people. Their needs for grazing, fuel and agricultural land was a major problem for the park forty-seven years ago. On the other hand Geech has a long

history, and I think it would be wise to create a small Geech enclave to maintain their traditional roots and history, with a visitor centre and with young Geech people being selected for park activities and training.

SOLAR ENERGY

The effectiveness, reliability and cost of solar energy is improving worldwide and is one obvious solution for the Simien. I heard that in some areas theft of solar energy equipment was a problem, but is that really so in the Simien? If it is, then one solution would be for communal mega-solar plants, tended and protected by employed personnel. They are such plants that can also be used for farming, as the panels will allow enough light to pass to enable green growth beneath. Such plants, fenced off, could also provide village vegetables, as well as energy.

GREENHOUSES

Sturdy greenhouses made with reinforced glass could withstand extreme conditions such as heavy hail or winds. Tomatoes and many other plants could be grown in these greenhouses with relatively low-tech adjustments. Water stored in black-coated tanks would heat up in the day and release warmth at night. With vents closed at night condensation would form on the inside glass, enabling water to be reused. Initial cost would be high but I think that various aid organizations might be persuaded to help, and I am sure that Simien

tomatoes, cucumbers, strawberries and other products would gain a lot of popularity.

Here in Kurohime we had a farmer called Mr. Sato who for years (until he died) produced the finest organic tomatoes in Nagano prefecture. His secret was that he also kept thirty sheep and used the sheep manure for the tomatoes. That would seem a natural combination for the Simien!

HONEY

The Simien highlands were famous for the finest honey. By bringing back native flowering trees, and by some simple modern techniques for harvesting, cleaning and bottling honey, a unique Simien brand could be developed. We have many experts in Japan who could help with that. (Our own forester, now retired, has harvested honey, both domesticated and wild for sixty years, and here in Kurohime we have serious problems such as bears and predator giant hornets.)

Bees are dying off all over the world and true, unadulterated honey is becoming a very precious commodity. If the originally rich and unique flora of the Simien can be restored, and responsible beekeepers licensed by the park, a new industry based on ancient tradition and quality could be developed.

When I was in the Simien I heard reports of but never actually saw a honey badger. This predator might be a problem but it is not a problem that cannot be solved.

The harvesting of honey, and aromatic beeswax could be linked to some basic improvements in local agriculture.

ROTATION CROPS THAT IMPROVE SOIL, PROVIDE FOOD, AND ARE EXCELLENT FOR HONEY.

Traditional agriculture is the mainstay of Simien life. With the increase in human population, greater demands on the land, and the high cost of imported chemical fertilizers, farmers need to consider worldwide traditional methods of protecting their land and improving its fertility. I would recommend that with an emphasis on improving the honey industry for Simien, that farmers work with (or also become) beekeepers and rotate their fields with nitrogen-fixing crops such as clover, alfalfa, lupines, rooibos (traditional South African tea) and various legumes. This would increase and aid honey yield, improve the soil, provide animal fodder, and in some cases improve human diet as well.

Other oil producing plants such as rapeseed and borage also provide honey, oil and food.

Experts can certainly help with the wise choice of rotating crops, which will also improve the land for barley, wheat and teff.

HERBS

When I lived in the Simien I regularly used wild herbs, easily gathered for flavouring cooking and for making tea. There are many herbs which will come back in profusion if they are protected from grazing, herbs already known for foreigners such as sage and thyme, and many unique highland Ethiopian herbs. Gathering, drying and packaging these herbs could be a pleasant cottage industry. With attractive packets or bottles this could be another way of advertising the Simien.

WEAVING

Weaving and making garments of soft, organic cotton is traditional to the Simien. This could be further encouraged and developed, with a wider market. I brought back to Japan a dozen simple cotton scarves with colourful borders for the ladies in my family and in our trust. The Japanese ladies were all delighted with them. We should get experts in design and marketing to work with the Simien women and expand their home industry.

TOILETS

Clean, airy, healthy toilets are an absolute essential for modern tourists. There are excellent bio-toilets that do not have to be connected to a sewage system yet still can be flushed. The effluent from these

toilets can be safely used as a fertilizer. We use such toilets in our woodland trust. Obviously they must be maintained and kept clean. Simple, clean toilets can greatly improve the health of local people too. There are many systems worldwide. Of course, great care and planning should always be taken so as not to contaminate the aquifers or local springs and streams.

STOVES AND CHIMNEYS

Eye infections caused by smoky houses is an old problem in the Simien. Simple but energy efficient stoves with chimneys have been developed and are easily available. (Such as the stove developed by associates of the Simien Lodge.) Stoves with chimneys can help prevent eye infections and also increase fuel efficiency.

HORSES, DONKEYS, MULES.

These animals are an essential part of Simien life. They are also a tourist attraction. When I was park warden I imported saddles and pack saddles from America which greatly reduced the incidence of saddle sores and were much more efficient. I strongly recommend that trekking with horses, donkeys and mules be better developed and controlled in the park, with better pack saddles and all other equipment. The Ethiopian highland horse is a small but wonderful creature, and it would enhance the park's image and efficiency if the breed and its health were

better improved and taken care off. Tours with guests riding, or even better, tours with the baggage being carried for them while they walk carrying very light loads such as water bottles and camera bags, could be extended. If roads and trails were improved then even shorter tours on selected routes with improved gharries would be very attractive.

ROAD AND TRAIL NETWORKS

These badly need to be improved and could and should be extended. You don't need wide roads all the way, some trails could be just two and a half metres wide, big enough for a horse and carriage, or for a horse-drawn timber forwarder that could be adapted in season with seats, or, indeed for our very efficient small scale Japanese K class four-wheeled drive trucks, would be relatively easy and cheaper to construct and maintain.

Villages could be linked, with tree shaded areas for rest or camping, with local 'coffee houses', perhaps serving barley, wheat or teff injera with local honey or spicy red pepper. Foreign tourists would love this.

ANIMAL PRODUCTS

Butter, yoghurt and buttermilk are traditional in the Simien. With simple but improved local systems these products could be made also for tourists.

A non-polluting tannery in Debark handling domestic animal skins, attached to world famous designers, could produce a unique Simien 'brand' of clothing, bags, even furniture. If this was environmentally sound and transparent, many famous designers and companies would help.

CHICKENS AND TREE PLANTATIONS

If a real reforestation program is to be initiated for the Simien, then quite large tree nurseries will be needed, and they will have to be fenced off. The chicken is originally a bird of the forest, and there have been very successful experiments (for instance, with Oxford University) to raise chickens among these young trees. The trees give shelter from hawks and crows, and the chickens peck and scratch at insects and other pests. With rat and other predator-free chicken sheds that the birds go into at night, eggs and chicken meat can give the tree plantation a secondary source of income.

TOOLS

There are many simple traditional tools, especially in Japan, that can make life easier for farmers and their families. There are hand operated threshing machines, very efficient, that could alleviate the ancient method of making domestic animals circle and tread wheat, barley and

so on. Such machines could be reproduced in Ethiopia and will separate grain from straw far more efficiently.

Also, Japan's forester's handsaws are superb for small branches. Japanese 'kumade' or 'bear paw' rakes are really efficient for gathering twigs, straw and dry leaves and would be easily reproduced in Ethiopia. Whatever, the Simien should not be wooed by large scale farming that will ruin both the environment and the culture.

A SIMIEN SOFT DRINK

Coca Cola, Fanta and others have carved out huge market for themselves in Africa often to the detriment of the dental health of children.

My favourite beverage in the Simien was always 'korafe'. Refreshing, nutritious and tasty!

Why not produce a unique Simien, non-alcoholic beverage with a malted barley base, (such as in European traditional barley water) perhaps flavoured with a little local honey (not sugar!) and Simien herbs? It could be a safe, healthy Simien drink, rich in vitamin B, pasteurized and carbonated.

Could this not be developed together with a local beer company such as Deshen (excellent beer)? Produced and bottled with pure spring water in Debark? Personally I only ever drink Coca cola with dark rum,

and never, ever drink Fanta. I would love some non-alcoholic 'korafe' and would recommend it for my grandchildren.

ORCHARDS

On January 29th, Ato Berhanu took our party to the small village of Mastawte, recently renamed Ferie Mender 'fruit village'. (forgive me if the spell is wrong). We went to see the model farm run by Aba Kassa and his family. This farm is visible from the Simien Lodge.

Aba Kassa was not present, as there was a festival in the area, but we were warmly greeted by his wife, daughters and small children. There was a well built stone wall fence topped with woven eucalyptus fencing. Inside was a barn for cattle feed. We saw five fine fat sheep in the compound and a few horses and mules, all looking strong and healthy.

We were told that previously they had many animals which they grazed in the park, but they got rid of nearly all of them and kept just a few for their own use. Seven years they began to grow apples and plums, which were fruiting when we visited. There were also beehives, and the bees very active collecting nectar from low, yellow-flowering bushes called Tena ada. This poplar her is used in making wat.

Within the compound, apart from the fruit trees, there were poplars and small plantations of juniper, Hagenia, Erica and other native trees, grown for the park.

They were also growing Jerere grass, as all year round fodder for their animals.

Also grown are cabbage and other green vegetables, and the family have their own fields for barley and other essentials.

The orchard itself was protected by a three and a half metre high, two metre thick, very dense juniper hedge that no domestic animal could penetrate.

The house was large, bright and clean, and the wife and grownup daughter insisted that we accept their hospitality, so we were treated to cool, delicious 'korafe', injera with a tasty split pea wat and a kind of cabbage sauerkraut.

There were chickens, puppies and cats in the compound. It was an ideal environment for bringing up children.

The family has a toilet.

The main cash crop so far has been a well-tended eucalyptus plantation, which has financed the purchase of a Toyota jeep and an Isuzu truck. The daughter is a teacher and the other children attend school.

It was heartening for all of us that the family were happy, and proud of their life, and that they told us so.

Visiting these kind folk was both a joy and an inspiration, and it showed that if one family could make so many improvements, then why not ten families? Why not a hundred? Why not a thousand?

FINAL COMMENT

If wise, sustainable, and eco-friendly tourism is enhanced, along with the life of the local people, then collecting some kind of conservation fee from each visitor should not be too big a problem. The Simien is the most spectacular national park in Africa and the possibilities are almost without limit.

I thank the government and people of Ethiopia for their kind hospitality, and for the experts of the C.A.T.S. department of the University of Hokkaido and J.I.C.A. for having me along.

The opinions I expressed are my own, but I have discussed several of them with knowledgeable Ethiopians. If there is anything I can do to help I would be happy and honoured to do so. It was a great joy to be back in Ethiopia after all this time.

C.W.Nicol MBE

Chairman, The C.W.Nicol Afan Woodland Trust

Nagano Japan.

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