



**Community Education to Conserve Wildlife in the Didessa River Valley, Western Ethiopia –
through the use of Local Resource Persons (LRPs): *Experience from Nepal***

Habte Jebessa Debella (PhD)
e-mail: habte.jebessa@gmail.com
tel. 251911664081

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Abstract

The objective of this project was to pilot application of Local Resource Person (LRPs) which was exercised by Asia Network for Sustainable Agriculture and Bioresources (ANSAB) in Nepal. The LRPs are individuals drawn from the local community from amongst those with interest and commitment to local development. They are then trained for the delivery of specific development services to the communities to which they belong to. Being local, the LRPs can better understand the community characteristics and deliver the services accordingly. Further, as the project cannot continue forever, such local resource persons will maintain sustainability of the required services in the village. The project site is the Didessa River Valley, shared by Oromia and Benishangul Gumuz regional states. The method has a toolkit that has clear picture of application in 4 steps: (1) Prepare to implement conservation program through local resource persons (LRPs) (2) Select LRPs (3) Build capacity of LRPs to mobilize them (4) Monitor, organize and exit. The method has been found to be very effective to conserve wildlife in Ethiopia but the will of the regional wildlife conservation authorities is required.

Key words: LRPs, Didessa River Valley, Ethiopia, Wildlife Management, Nepal

Introduction

The history of conservation goes back to the 19th century in Ethiopia (Paulos Gnogno, 1984: 354 E. C.). This can be witnessed by the fact that Emperor Menelik II (1889-1913) was signatory to the Convention on the Preservation of Wild Animals, Birds, and Fish in Africa signed in London on 19 May 1900 (the “London Convention of 1900”), which was, in fact, proposed by the colonial powers and had never been ratified. However, this convention evolved into “Revised African Convention on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources” which was adopted, on 11 July 2003 in Maputo (IUCN, 2004). Emperor Menelik has set out several rules against poachers and illegal hunters. In his letter of Nehase 11, 1900 (E. C.) (ca. August 17, 1907) to his authorities, the Emperor wrote that all hunters should get hunting permit from the Emperor and live in one place at a place called Boku, and that anyone with no hunting permit should be brought to him. Particularly, the Emperor forbade killing elephants with no tasks or short tasks referring to the fact that age goes with task size in elephants.

The history of deforestation also goes back to the Era of Emperor **Menelik**. It is good to put the following from Paulos Ngongo (1984 Eth. Cal.: P. 294): “ሉዊስ ላንዲ ኢ. ኤ. ኢ. በ1870 ሪፖርት ላይ ... በሸዋ የነበረው ታላላቅ የወይራ ዛፍ አለቀ። 10 ኪሎ ግራም ከሰል ለማከሰል 1000 ኪሎ ግራም እንጨት ይነዳል...በሏል”:: This can be translated into English in brief: “*Olea* in Shewa Province has been destroyed. To produce 10 kg charcoal, it requires 1000 kg wood”, wrote Luis Land in his 1870 report concerning the extent of deforestation in Ethiopia.

Deforestation which is wildlife habitat destruction is one of the main problems for wildlife throughout the world. It has been an issue for centuries, leading to massive loss of species and biodiversity (Urquhart *et al.*, 2001). The cause of deforestation, which involves the cutting down, burning, and damaging of forests are very complex. It varies from country to country based on the level of development. Deforestation can be for subsistence agriculture; large scale agriculture, for domestic fuel; biofuel, logging etc. Biodiversity loss in Ethiopia is usually caused by deforestation, expansion of investment activities, overgrazing, expansion of agricultural activities, poverty and lack of appropriate policies that



encourage conservation and management of biodiversity (Medhin Zewdu, 2002). Different countries are tackling this anthropogenic problem by different methods. One of those countries tackling deforestation in a very successful way is Nepal. Nepal used what it called Local Resource Persons (LRPs). According to ANSAB (2010), the LRPs are individuals drawn from the local community from amongst those with interest and commitment to local development. They are then trained for the delivery of specific development services to the communities to which they belong to. Being local, the LRPs can better understand the community characteristics and deliver the services accordingly. Further, as the project cannot continue forever, such local resource persons will maintain sustainability of the required services in the villages. LRPs can become an important part of a development program for sustainable and effective delivery of services required at the local level. Working through LRPs can enhance local ownership of the program; allow the program to be culturally more sensitive; and avoid difficulties faced by program staff while working under conflict conditions. Most importantly, the LRPs can be graduated into locally available service providers after the termination of the program itself and can become a valuable resource for the community. The objective of this project was to pilot the already successful method in Nepal at the Didessa River Valley in Western Ethiopia.

Study site

The study site of this project is the Didessa River valley (Fig. 1). The Didessa River, which originates from the mountains of Gumma in Illubabor Zone, Western Oromia, drains the highlands of Oromia through its major tributaries such as Dabena, Dabus, Anger and Wama, traversing the lowland plains of Sudan-Guinea biomes crossing Wollega Zone and Benishangul Gumuz Regional State in which it confluences with the famous Abay (Blue Nile) River. The Didessa River basin is a vast area covering 25 800 km² (Shahin, 1985). Much of the Didessa basin is green, particularly, at its origin until it reaches Dabohanna District (Woreda) on the west and Jimma-Arjo in the East, where its basins are highly



degraded by farms. The Anger and Belo plains were completely degraded during the Derg regime due to large scale agricultural activities. Much of the Anger and Didessa Plains were under large scale agriculture which was later abandoned. In comparison to other parts of Ethiopia, the Didessa River basin still remained relatively afforested holding about 25% of the forest cover. However, current population pressure has changed the scenario and an annual rate of deforestation has increased to 2.6% (Sima, 2011). The most intact part of the Didessa River with rich biodiversity is still left on both sides of Dabena River, one of the biggest tributaries of the Didessa River. However, due to lack of biodiversity data, the biodiversity potential of this area is unknown. Recent reconnaissance studies have shown that there are new species of mega-fauna in this area.

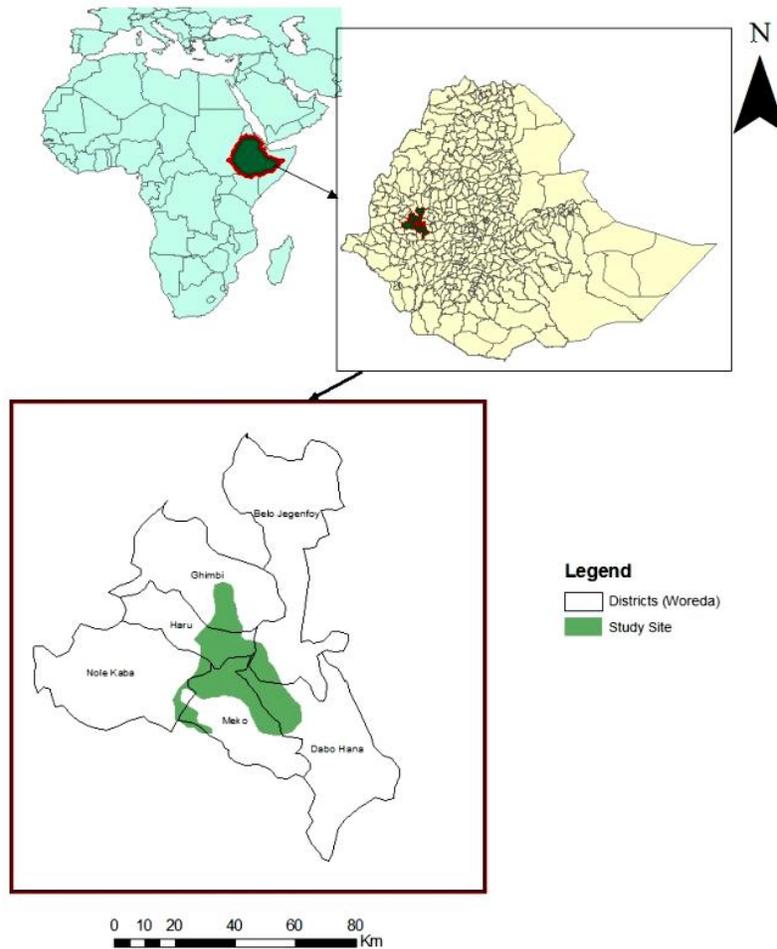


Figure 1 The Study site. Note that the study area covers at least 6 Woredas (districts).

General Objective

The general objective of this project is to increase public awareness on the benefits of wildlife and conservation to the community through effective and efficient methods and designate the Didessa River Valley as a national park.

Specific objectives

1. to Recruit LRPs
2. to train LRPs
3. to build capacity of LRPs
4. to mobilize LRPs and exit
5. and to propose the Didessa River Valley for National Park.

Materials and methods

This project involves step-by-step application and implementation of methods and applications of experiences from Nepal (Fig. 2). Considering the administration structure of Ethiopia, starting from the federal government, it goes to regional governments and then Zonal, Wereda (District), and the “Kebele” which is the smallest administrative unit at the community level. Several Kebeles surround the Didessa River Valley uninhabited forest. Since it is difficult to consider all the kebeles surrounding the Didessa Valley in the two regional states, Oromia and Benishangul Gumuz (Fig. 1), this project considers four Kebeles from Oromia Regional State as a pilot study. They are Qodii Gassi, Jorgo-Watto, Busano Nyano, and Babalii Saritti. The Kebele is administered by democratically elected chairpersons. The chairperson of each Kebele was contacted to offer a person with capability to shoulder responsibilities as an LRP. Each elder was asked if he wants to be an LRP after explaining to him what an LRP mean. From one Kebele, 4 or more people were selected. At least two LRPs had cell phones from each Kebele. The telephones were later used for several communication purposes to follow up their activities. Some LRPs used their friends’ cell phones to communicate with the facilitator of the project which is the researcher. The method roughly followed the following steps and is now preparing for final steps (Fig. 2).

The main activities the LRPs involved in were increasing public awareness through informal education. Such informal education takes place during socialization at work, funeral ceremonies, wedding ceremonies and coffee ceremonies. The main topics are: the use of forest to stop climate change; as a habitat of wildlife; ecosystem-services such as honey production; coffee production; water conservation and other uses the community perceives culturally. The other main topic is on how to reduce poaching, bush meat and deforestation. Some of the LRPs are former poachers who realized that their work is wrong after the training.

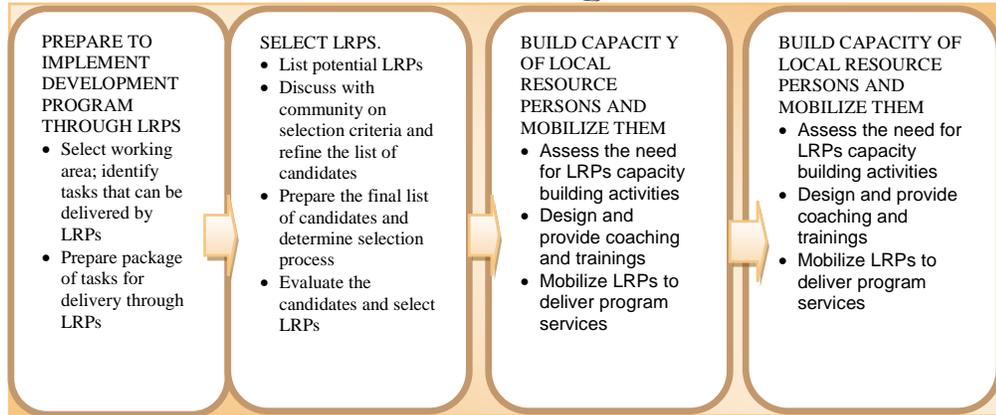


Figure 2 Step-by-step application of pilot LRP implementation in the Didessa Valley (Source ANSAB, 2010)

Contextualization of the LRPs to the local cultural set up

The application of LRPs in Nepal may not be directly implemented in Ethiopia due to different cultures. Therefore, to get the maximum out of this method, it is important to contextualize to the local cultural set up the country (Fig. 3). Ethiopia has a rich culture of working together and sharing happiness and grief. The local community also has a tradition of coffee ceremony every morning during which they discuss matters of their life. This makes LRPs very important role players in disseminating conservation issues.

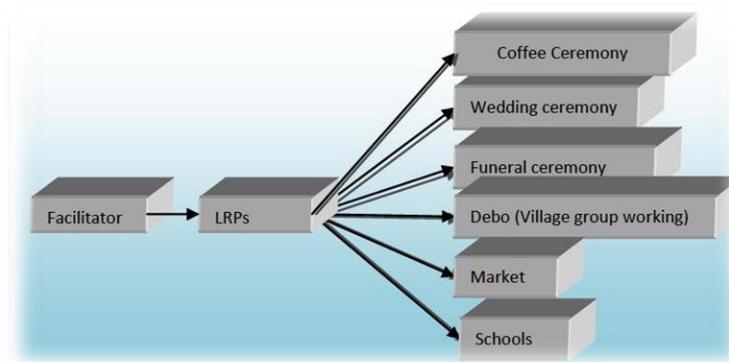


Figure 3 Flow of information from facilitator (the researcher, trainer) to the community based on the Ethiopian cultural context.

Results and findings

The results of this application can be viewed by considering events before and after the application of the method.

Before the application of the LRPs

During the last years, gunshots were rampant and dead buffaloes' remains were observed in the forests (Figs. 1, 2, 3).



Figure 4 This buffalo migrated from the savannah to the mountain forest due to habitat loss. It was shot and escaped from poachers and witnessed by the community in Jorgo Watto Participatory Forest Management concession.



Figure 5 Freshly killed buffalo by poachers, probably new species.



Figure 6 Butchered buffalo meat to be collected later by poachers (Didessa River Valley).



Figure 7 Buffalo to be butchered by poachers after Figure 4. This buffalo was the second shot on the same day at the same place in the Didessa Valley. The researcher heard two gun shots and witnessed two bull buffaloes after the militia's scared the poachers away.

After the Application of the LRPs

During and after the application of the method, gunshots were reduced dramatically. However, forest burning continued. The valley has been burnt down by unknown entities during late March, 2015. The first three steps have been completed while the fourth step is still in progress. After the training was offered, the LRPs were highly motivated, disseminating information in the community. After 6 months

of starting, the information has reached 90% of the residents according to the questionnaires collected from the four Kebeles' LRPs. Since the application of this method, trends in wildlife kill from indicators such as weekly gunshot (Fig. 7), rumors of bush meat sells, etc., dramatically decreased. The LRPs of two Kebeles are shown in Figs. 8 & 9.



Figure 8 LRPs in the Didessa River Valley. Two of these LRPs were former poachers. Note that the age groups from the oldest to the youngest. One of the LRPs on the right (the youngest one) died recently from malaria



Figure 9 LRPs from Jorgo-Wato Forest

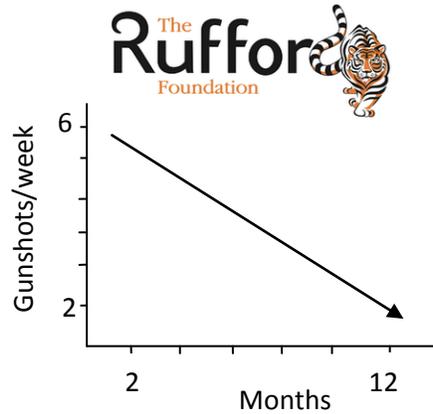


Figure 9 Trends in gunshots per week in the last one year which is proportional to wildlife kill.

Challenges and opportunities

Challenges

Reluctance to cooperate by the zonal and regional forest and wildlife authorities for unknown reasons was observed. After the socio-economic analysis of the area and posting of report on the website (Debella, 2014), particularly mentioning the death of wildlife and about poachers, the zonal wildlife bureau was not happy.

Opportunities

The smooth acceptance of informal education by LRPs and sharp decline in poaching after the application of this method shows that it is possible to stop poaching quickly with the participation of the community.

Discussion

Much of the discussions on the structure, functions, and administration of forests in Ethiopia have been covered by Stellmacher (2007). Most forest affairs are linked to land ownership. During the imperial time, all land belonged to the feudal lords and their families'; forests alike. During the Derg Regime, land belonged to the people. During the current government land belonged to the Government and the people as stated in FDRE Constitution, Article 4: 3: *"The right to ownership of rural and urban land, as well as of all natural resources, is exclusively vested in the State and in the peoples of Ethiopia. Land is a common property of the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia and shall not be subject to sale or to other means of exchange"*.

In events that the land is forested and not inhabited by people, people consider it like no-man's land despite its belongingness to the government. Such notions pose threat to unprotected forests. The



remaining Didessa Valley forests are prone to such notions and threats. The Didessa Valley is important for its biodiversity, which is hitherto unknown. One writer claims the upper Blue Nile valley to be "... the great unknown of the world." (Waterbury, 1988: 77).

Due to the current development schemes on the Blue Nile River including the Great Renaissance Dam of Ethiopia, the basin is currently getting more attention. However, little is being done or currently underway concerning conservation of the upper Blue Nile valley. The Blue Nile cannot stand for itself if it is not for its majestic tributaries like the Didessa River. Emphasizing the importance of the Didessa River for the survival of the Blue Nile, Okbazghi Yohannes (2008: 80), states: "Covering an area of 2,500 sq km and containing some thirty small islands, Lake Tana is the largest lake in the country. Since Lake Tana accounts for only 7 percent of its total discharge, the Blue Nile depends on contributions from a dozen important tributaries, among which the Beles, the Didessa, and the Dabus are critical. The latter two are particularly significant for the Blue Nile flow, not only for the water resources they contribute but also for the ethnographic symbols they represent. Both the Didessa and the Dabus rise in the country of the Oromo and other ethnic minorities. Sourced in the region of Illubabor, the Didessa River drains an area of almost 250,000 sq km and donates 13 billion cubic meters (bcm) of water annually to the Blue Nile, or 25 percent of the Nile flow. The Dabus also originates in Wellega with a similarly large watershed. Unlike the Didessa, however, the Dabus donates only 4 bcm of water to the overall flow of the Blue Nile since it surrenders much of its waters to vast swamps where it is consumed by aquatic plants or claimed by evaporation". On the other hand, Didessa is nourished by such tributaries like the Dabena which are critical for its discharge. Without conservation of the catchment of the tributaries of important catchments, the biodiversity and important ecosystem services will be in danger. Sustainable development in the Didessa River basin or the lower riparian nations of the Blue Nile can only be confirmed if the upper catchments are properly conserved.

So much has been done in Ethiopia for the conservation of nature since the Imperial period (Fig. 3). Emperor Haile Sillasie expressed the importance of the establishment of the Ethiopian Wildlife Society

and the Journal “Walia” in 1969 (Fig. 9). However, policies that prevent deforestation or illegal hunting are lacking or ineffective.



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Figure 8 A letter confirming support for the establishment of Walia and the Ethiopian Natural History Society by Emperor Haile Silassie I in January, 1969 G.C (1961 Eth. Cal.). (Source: Solomon Yirga, 2000 Eth. Cal.).

During the Derg Regime, protected area establishments were based on force and by displacement of people with no compensation. Such forces brewed grudges and ended up with revenge when the Derg Regime was deposed in few days of power vacuum (Phillips and Carillet, 2006). Ethiopia pledged a target to restore 15 million hectares (one-sixth of the country’s total land area) of degraded and deforested



land into productivity by 2025 (UN, 2014). Accordingly, this project proposes about 1000 km² of unprotected, forested area with Sudan-Guinea biome. This goes well with Ethiopia's current conservation program.

The use of LRPs is much like Participatory Forest Management (PFM) except that LRPs can be used for any natural resource management purpose. PFM strategies lack wild animals from its content. LRPs focus on wildlife. Gobeze *et al.* (2009) states: "PFM promoted awareness about forest; capacitated locals to form new institutional arrangement that increased their participation in forest management helped to reduce open access and assisted a regulated forest use; and contributed towards social equity in terms of gender and minority ethnic groups. When accompanied with complementary non-forest based livelihood activities, PFM helped to diversify income sources, increase household income level, and build household assets. This reduced dependence of communities on forests for livelihoods. A challenge threatening the sustainability of the PFM program in Ethiopia is the weak government support for the scheme". This may be restated as the weak forest and wildlife bureaus support. This is the case with the application of LRPs in the Didessa River Valley. If PFM creates such tremendous advantages to the local people, the scheme can be very applicable.

Conclusion

Objectives 1-4 were completed but exit strategy and proposal of the park to appropriate bodies remains. This paper was used to propose the Didessa Valley for national park at the society level. Since the use of LRPs is new in Ethiopia, its application cannot be judged from a single pilot project. However, initial socio-economic impact assessment (Debella, 2014) and trends in wildlife kill showed the interest of the community to establish a national park. Wildlife killing decreased dramatically, thanks to the LRPs and cooperation of district (Woreda) administrations. The same document shows that little attention is given to wildlife conservation to this area by the regional and zonal wildlife authorities. To finalize the designation of the area for a national park, further follow up is necessary.



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