



Biodiversity Monthly Newsletter

Ethiopian Institute of
Biodiversity



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The Botanist's Trip to Axum where the "Made in Ethiopia Obelisk stands with Grace"

Abiyot Berhanu (Source: Ethiopian Flora Network – www.etflora.net)

April 2nd, 2013 A professor told me a nice tale while we were discussing about our lost forests, "... forests are like the moon; we do not notice the beauty of the moon unless we are travelling during the night and we do not notice forests unless we miss their services". The past droughts of Wolo and Tigray, the floods of Dire Dawa, the blackouts of our Electricity supply, the shortage of food due to erratic rainfalls are all directly or indirectly associated with the lost services of our forests. The services we get from forest ecosystems are enormous, such as clean air, water for drinking and hydroelectric power, fertile soils, timber and non-timber products, and much more. Researchers, policy makers, and others are well aware of these facts. However, our forests are disappearing at an alarming rate and the ecosystem services are being disrupted leaving us nowhere. Climate change is also impacting every sector including agriculture, industry and tourism. The challenge is a mystery – we know the methods of conservation but fail to accomplish conservation objectives.

The problems of forest clearing in northern Ethiopia before 3 or 4 decades or so were basically similar to the current problems: cutting trees for firewood and construction. Most of the forests of these areas were badly destroyed leaving traces in churches and sacred areas. This had resulted in serious consequences, better coined as worst punishments. Millions of people died due to famine and livestock lost as a result of the drought. And we were not able to learn from these outcomes and therefore, we still continued to destroy remaining forests elsewhere without a trace. Our fathers used to say, "The wise learns from someone's mistakes, the foolish from his own mistakes".

Most of the time, when a Botanist/Forester thinks of northern Ethiopia, the image that comes to his mind could be degraded land without forests, dry river banks and poor households. Unfortunately, that has been true for the last four to five decades. The author of this article, Botanist by profession and born in the "lost forests" part of

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Ethiopia, travelled to Axum through the Addis Ababa-Dessie-Mekelle-Axum road and witnessed the state of the “lost” and remaining forests of northern Ethiopia.

The story goes as follows...

When we left Addis Ababa (the capital of Ethiopia) early in the morning, I felt as a botanist, ‘I am travelling to the lands without forests, where once upon a time civilization flourished on costs of forests’. That is probably normal feeling. It could have been worse if I were travelling to southwest Ethiopia, where the remaining biodiversity rich forests are under threat. I kept my eyes wide-open to catch all the images, bad or good, in my mind and my small camera so that I could tell the story.

And the scenes started to come...



Secondary-forest-regeneration – Tigray (Photo: Abiyot B.)

It was not late when I realized that my feelings were wrongly set. Everything is changing. The lost forests are coming back in many areas. The hills are covered with secondary forests composed of graceful *Olea*, *Juniperus*, *Acacia*, *Hagenia*, *Podocarpus* trees. The scenes at Alamata (Tigray) were breeze-taking! I could not believe my eyes, the forests are coming back. Any one crossing the ragged mountains can easily recognize the recovering forests.

That professor also once told me, “... forests recover through time once proper management systems are introduced on sustainable manner; particularly *Acacia*

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woodlands could easily recover”. He was right; the lost forests were not really lost. The degraded hills of Tigrai have been left aside for recovery and they are now covered with indigenous trees, shrubs and herbs. The road from Mekelle to Axum passes through some of the best reclaimed lands in the country, covered with beautiful plants.

All the way to Axum is a trip through the “lost and found” forests, the ‘moon’, which we usually do not give value unless we are travelling during the night! The church forests are still there with graceful appearance as eye-witnesses, telling us the story that once those degraded and recovered areas were with the same status to virgin forests. The package which has been successfully utilized in Tigrai and Amhara deserves dissemination to other regions of Ethiopian.



Axum Obelisk (Photo: Abiyot B.)

The Axum obelisk which is a symbol of the lonely civilized planet – Aksumite Kingdom around two thousand years ago is still young, standing firm and tall. It is incredible to watch the obelisk closely. However, though exceptionally happy to be there, the Botanist’s feeling is still a little different: what was the role of trees in bringing and erecting the Axum obelisk there? There were no modern cranes at that time, my heroes did it by pulling the obelisk using elephants and the ‘railway’ was the trunks of big trees underneath as historians tell us, right? Stones cannot be safely pulled over stones, rather on trunks of trees. And what was the reason for its

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tallness? Historians say it is tall to show respect as the underneath holds burials of great people.

The Botanist's dream is as follows;

“Aksumite ‘Engineers’ before two thousand years ago or so thought that the ‘fine art’ Axum obelisk could not be easily viewed by their king and the people due to obstruction by tall trees. What was their decision? No need to clear the heavenly forest, rather they engineered tall obelisks.” This is my dream, it is not re-writing history. This could have been the best ever Environmental Impact Assessment conducted in Ethiopia if at all the Botanist's dream were true.

International Day of Forests celebrated in Bale Goba, Ethiopia

29 March 2013: The International Day of Forests (IDF) was celebrated in Oromiya Regional State, Bale Goba with different events such as songs, cultural dances, paper presentations, documentary film, and tree planting. Paper presentations focused on the Forest Ecosystem Services, State of Ethiopia's Forest Genetic Resources, Forestry Research in Ethiopia and Medicinal Plants Conservation and utilization; while the documentary film summarized the objective of the IDF, Ethiopia's forests, conservation status, threats and conservation measures. Various messages about conservation and sustainable use of forests were included in the Documentary Film.

Dr. Gemedo Dalle, Director General of the Institute of Biodiversity Conservation, welcomed participants and stated that “Ethiopia, being signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity, is honored to celebrate the first International Day of Forests in one of the richest forest biodiversity regions, Bale Goba. The Day is commemorated with the objective of raising awareness on conservation and sustainable utilization of our forests.”

The Forests of Ethiopia have diminished from 40% in the 1940's to below 3% in the 1980's. The country has prioritized soil and water conservation as well as tree planting with the overall objective of increasing land productivity and conserving the country's natural resources. Water shade management is being implemented in

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order to save our hydroelectric dams and conserving soil and water. This has increased the vegetation cover to 11% according to reports by the Ministry of Agriculture.

Forests have been utilized extensively for firewood, construction, non-timber forest products (spices, honey, root crops, etc.), timber, production of agricultural utensils, etc. in Ethiopia. This has resulted in over-utilization of natural resources and the forest biodiversity has been diminishing alarmingly. To reverse the situation, mass awareness campaigns have been carried out by different concerned governmental and non-governmental institutions.

The International Day of Forests is key event in order to create awareness among the society and institutions. To facilitate easy communication of the day, electronic and print media journalists from four media institutions were invited and gave full coverage of the event in different local languages.

Tree planting was one of the most entertaining events. Members of the House of Peoples Representatives started the event by planting two of the threatened indigenous trees, *Juniperus procera* and *Olea europae subsp. cuspidata*, and all participants planted a tree on the Medicinal Plants Field Genebank, Bale Goba.

Participants from different institutions, zonal administrators, indigenous peoples, elementary school students, Parliament members, NGOs and Universities were present on the event. Source: **IBC**