ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Exploring the Past and the Present: Examining Preservation, Management and Resistance practices in the Simien Mountains National Park, Ethiopia

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Abstract

This study was conducted to explore the dynamic relationship between society and biodiversity in the Simien Mountains National Park (SMNP). As the local communities who inhabited the environs of the SMNP struggle for survival, they have altered the environment, and they caused for biodiversity revival as well. SMNP was exempted from the UNESCO "red list" in 2017 as a result of significant conservation efforts, but intensive grazing and farmland expansions are still affecting the sustainability of the natural environment. In order to alleviate this problem, qualitative research approach with in-depth interview was employed. Similarly, both diachronic and synchronic perspectives were implemented in analyzing changes in continuities as a result of biodiversity-society interaction. Archival documents were also meticulously consulted to corroborate data which were collected in interview. In the SMNP, thus, it is found that the connectedness has persisted for a long time while the nature of relationship has changed as human society evolves in terms of organization, structure and technological innovation. The early years in the origin of the SMNP were characterized by resistance from the local communities due to the attempt to impose unfriendly conservation ethos by the international conservation experts. The nature of biodiversity and society interaction in the SMNP is characterized by reciprocity relationship in which there is mutual affection between the two for many years. The life of the local community is largely dependent on the environment's ability to provide welfare demands (food, shelter, and clothing). The judicious use of the physical environment's plentiful resources by people on the other hand is correlated with the sustainability of biodiversity, and it assures community's' fundamental source of ongoing existence.

Keywords: Biodiversity, Society, Conservation, Simien Mountains National Park, Welfare demands, Sustainability

Background

Located in the North Western Ethiopia, the Simien Mountains National Park (SMNP) is internationally recognized as an area of rich biodiversity (Hurni 2005). With its scenic

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landscape, it is also a hotspot for a variety of rare wild native species of both flora and wildlife (Hurni 1982; Puff & Nemomissa 2001). One of Ethiopia's UNESCO (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization)-designated heritage sites is the SMNP. The National Park is also one of the nation's top conservation areas for biodiversity (Asrat et al. 2012). On the other hand, the area is considered as one of the greatest population densities in the country (Teshome et al. 2021).
Naturally, the SMNP exhibits an amazing terrain with a high plateau, steep escarpments, deep gorges and sharp precipices (Puff & Nemomissa 2001). It is a chain of mountains, yet they are frequently divided from one another by wide valleys (Mauerhofer et al. 2018). The Simien spans a large altitudinal ranges with deep valleys which are the lowest parts 200 meters below sea level while the highest points are over 4550 m altitude according to a DGPS survey which was done in 2007 by a French-Italian team) (Puff & Nemomissa 2001; Eweg et al. 2010). A staggering number of ecological zones were created as a result of the wide altitudinal and latitudinal ranges which in turn support numerous unique at risk species as well as significant levels of endemism. Therefore, its biodiversity richness is due to the mountains geographical position, and due to the presence of different altitudinal belts which are coupled with the topographic and ecosystem variations.

However, recent frequent reports of biodiversity loss are worrying issues despite the long history of harmonious cohabitation of society and biodiversity in the SMNP. Recent population pressure and related development demands have put great pressure on the SMNP endangering its biodiversity (Debebe et al. 2023). A complex and dynamic relationship among people, plants, animals and other insect species with their environment has historically existed in the SMNP (Yihune et al. 2009). Currently, on the other hand, environmental pressures which are resulted from excessive grazing and poor livestock production have caused severe soil degradation, and they disturbed the harmonious wildlife habitat (Teshome et al. 2021) for which researchers in some areas which are with high biodiversity proposed a plan of grazing in order to preserve the natural habitats (Perrino et al. 2021).

Traditionally, the environs of SMNP have been using for farming, grazing, and settlement. When the Park was proposed to territorial enlargement based on UNESCO's suggestion in 1996, several communities and their agricultural land and livestock grazing spaces were included under the park. As seen in the field observation, the settlements in the SMNP are concentrated in small volcanic plateaus mountain villages. The inhabitants are mostly traditional agriculturalists with a high concentration in the production for subsistence. The uncontrolled grazing was disastrous to the grass resource and grass species diversity in the park. It damaged not only the grazing field, but also the redevelopment capacity of forest and woodland zones. The cumulative results exacerbated survival and conservation of biodiversity. The challenges which biodiversity of SMNP faced are multifaceted. Therefore, this research is aimed to meet the following specific objectives:

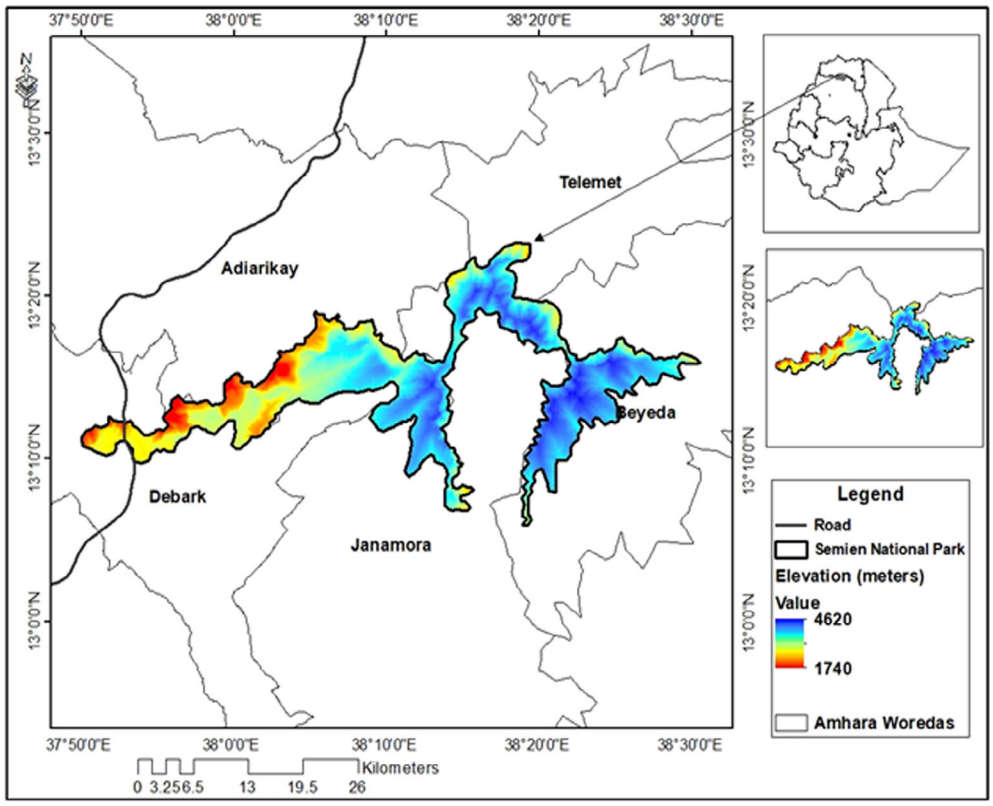
- Analyzing the role of different actors in the development of the SMNP
- Examining Preservation, Management, and Resistance practices in the SMNP

Description of the study area

The study was conducted in the SMNP which is located in the northern highlands of Ethiopia. The park lies between 13006'44.09 " N to 13023'07.85" N latitude and 37051'26.36"E to 38029'27.59"E longitude with about 120 km north-east from Gondar city, the seat of Central Gondar Zone, Amhara Region, Ethiopia. The area has often been referred to as "the playgrounds of the gods" or the "roof of Africa", undoubtedly a gem to

its visitors. The plateau is part of the Simien Massif which includes the highest peak in Ethiopia, *Ras* Dejen Mountain (4550m altitude according to a DGPS survey done in 2007 by a French-Italian team) (Eweg et al. 2010).

Fig. 1: Map of the SMNP, Ethiopia



Source: Ethiopian Central Statics Agency (ECSA), 2011; developed by the department of Geography and Environmental Science, University of Gondar, 2023

A magnificent ragged escarpment with vertical cliffs, pinnacles and rock spires surround the Park (Craig et al., 2019). Despite being close to the equator, the highest points have snow and ice as a result of which the nights are frequently below freezing. The impressive rocky massif of the SMNP is carved by streams and canyons which flow down to grasslands. Final approval of the SMNP's expansion to include the *Silki*, *Mesarerya*, *Limalimo*, *Kidus* Yared and *Ras* Dejen Mountains within the interconnecting pathways was decided in 2007 which has increased the park's area coverage from 136 to 412 km^2(EWCA 2014).
Concerning the geomorphology of the Simien landscapes, the present landscapes of the Simien Mountains were formed in the former shield volcano between the period of Oligocene and Mycenae with subsequent erosion over millions of years (Mauerhofer et al. 2018). The Simien Mountains were made by plateau basalt. During this period, very steep elevation gradients caused massive erosion. The Simien Mountains were developed into such a region of elevated plateaus from the mountain ranges which

created one of the most impressive land scape on the earth. *Qedus* Yared Mountain is thought to have been the focal point of the volcanic eruption (Hurni 2005). *Ras* Dejen, *Silki*, *Qedus* Yared, and *Bwahit* are just a few of the high mountains peaks that have emerged in the Simien Mountain systems as a result of the lava's eruption (Hurni 1982; Asrat et al., 2012).

The Simien Mountains have a wet and dry seasons which is one of the factors for biodiversity richness with approximately 75 percent annual rainfall between June and September (Simegn 2014; Ejigu 2017). The SMNP lies within the isohyets of 1,350 - 1,600 mm annual rainfall with an annual average rainfall of around 1,500 mm at 3,600 m.a.s.l (Ejigu et al. 2017). Temperatures are relatively constant throughout the year; however there is huge diurnal variation which is ranging from a minimum of -2°C to -4 °C at night to a maximum of 11°C to 18°C during the day (African Wildlife Foundation 2015). Generally, the climate of the Simien Mountains could be classified into four altitude based climatic zones: *Wurch* zone (above 3,700 m a.s.l.) alpine climate; High *Dega* zone (3,400 - 3,700 m.a.s.l.) cool climate; *Dega* zone (2,400 - 3,400 m.a.s.l.) temperate climate; and *Woina Dega* zone (1,500 – 2,400 m.a.s.l.) sub-tropical climate (Eweg et al. 2010). This high climatic variation is obviously a contributing factor for the existence of wide range of biodiversity in the SMNP.

The Simien Mountains are part of the Afro-alpine center of plant diversity (Hurni, 1998; Hurni, 2005). The alpine sections (up to 3,600 m) are forested while the lower slopes have been farmed and used for grazing. Afro-alpine woods, heath forests and high montane vegetation all coexist in the area. At higher elevations, fescue grasses and heathers can be found in montane savannah grasslands, and tree heath, giant lobelia, yellow primrose, lady's mantle and mosses can be found in montane moorlands. The trees in the tall forest are covered in lichen. Most importantly, the Simien Mountains are also part of the Eastern Afromontane hotspot of plant diversity (African Wildlife Foundation 2015). Traditional mixed farming which combines crop production and animal rearing, provides the means of subsistence for the communities in the SMNP. Livestock plays an important and multi-faceted role in their economy as indispensable for food supply, provision of draught power, and income generation (Menesha and Legesse 2016). Cattle, sheep, goats, donkeys and horses are herded throughout the SMNP which caused for many areas to be overgrazed.

Methodology

The researchers employed qualitative research methodology. This is because of the reason that qualitative research techniques are essential in exploring peoples' values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors (Quinn 2002). Thus, primarily, field surveys were made so as to identify the nature of land forms and vegetation that form the SMNP landscape. The number of households who are settled in protected forests, and in other conservation areas of the park were recorded during field surveys. Data on local rules and means of enforcement were collected for each protected area. The diversity of agricultural land use and management techniques was investigated using systematic field observation technique. The three *woredas* namely: Debark, Janamora and Beyeda were purposively selected based on the level of encroachment, their primary function as a corridor for wildlife, administrative staff knowledge of the practice of traditional knowledge for biodiversity conservation and suggestions from the relevant bodies. The research team accompanied households in the purposively selected six villages from the above mentioned *woredas,*

visited their daily activities and recorded it using observation checklists. Two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) which constituted six discussants each one from park office experts and the other from the community members were also conducted. In addition, in-depth interview to some members of the community were also employed as an important sources of information gathering tool to understand the reciprocal interaction between biodiversity and society.

Information which were collected from each interviewee were crosschecked during FGD from discussants who have better knowledge from each household, and from the community because focus groups are critical for cross-checking and/or enriching data which are collected from individual interviewees (Bryman and Cramer 2005). In addition to this, changes in land tenure, and in land use were also collected in interviews conducted to the oldest residents of the SMNP, and by reviewing documents which were found in archives which is located in the Central Gondar Archival Center and from the Park office at Debark. Archival documents were also used to historicize the origin, and the development of the park, and to document biodiversity conservation practices in Ethiopia and in SMNP. This data is important to corroborate the data which were collected by using other tools. The interview was conducted face-to-face in around participants' home. About 20 semi-structured in-depth interview questions were prepared using interview guides. The data which were collected by using in-depth interview, FGD and systematic observation were organized thematically for analysis after coding was completed. Qualitative data was managed and analyzed using ATLAS.ti 9. Finally, the findings which were found from the document analysis were integrated as corroborative information for interview results. The findings from the discussion were organized into the following themes: experiences of preservation management and resistance; changes in continuities across regimes; the "dark age"; revival, violence and conclusion.

A History of the SMNP: experiences of preservation, management, and resistance

Local elders perceived that the land was passed down from their predecessors who for a very long time protected the area and its ecosystem. The land is used for all cultural and spiritual activities because it is regarded as "sacred[2]". The local inhabitants hold the land in high regard, and they considered their culture to be inextricably linked to it. One of the elder informants indicated it in the following way:

> *"According to our tradition, it is a place where the ancient kings and rulers of the region kept their wealth especially precious minerals (even gold and pearls). Therefore, we see the place as sacrosanct, and we hold it in the highest regard. This explains why we despite being asked to be relocated by successive governments particularly during drought spells have refused to do so. There are monasteries and churches that are recognized for their ancientness and rich history yet have not gotten much attention such as Saint Yared Monastery and Deresge Maryam"* (COMI6, *Lori,* Janamora, 2023: 67-75).

The initiatives and movements to protect endangered species in Ethiopia and in the Simien Mountains were launched in the 1960s. Foreigners who were living in the area were drawn from the Simien Mountains because of the breathtaking natural beauty and

2 The land may be a sacred for the indigenous people who have formed deep emotional ties to it. For this reason, the locals hold the SMNP in high regard; it serves as a conduit "that communicates and entrenches traditional, cultural, and spiritual values espoused by the community," as Kotze and Van Rensburg (2003) have put it. Depending on the context, this could mean that certain locations or even entire landscapes are revered as sacred no matter how natural or historic they are (Endeshaw 2016).

the presence of Walia ibex (Blanc 2018; Teshome et al. 2021). A massive influx of tourists and immigrants entered into the country in great numbers. The country's wildlife received widespread acclaim. In 1962, the Ethiopian government requested UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) to dispatch scientific missions with the expertise to carry out a comprehensive study of Ethiopia's wildlife resources (Henze 2005; Amare 2015). UNESCO subsequently hired a team of wildlife experts to conduct in-depth research on Simien Mountain's breathtaking landscape. In 1963, a UNESCO expedition led by Sir Julian Huxley explored Ethiopia's natural attractions. According to Huxley, Ethiopia's government was primarily responsible for halting the rapid extinction of the country's distinctive flora and fauna in order to preserve their survival for future generations (Blower 1969).

Leslie Brown who is a British naturalist arrived to Simien Mountains in 1963 to undergone an extensive scientific study of the local fauna. The Walia ibex, which was his most significant discovery, is unique to the Simien Mountains. The expert was so moved by the spectacular natural habitat of the highlands that he made some recommendations to the Ethiopian government regarding wildlife protection and the construction of national parks. As a result, in 1964, the Ethiopian government employed guards to ensure the safety of Walia ibex. Three years later, in 1967, Leworens Richard Guez was also appointed as chief guard for Walia ibex conservation by the World Heritage Committee (Tayachew 2021). L.H. Brown and I.R. Grimwood, two UNESCO agents, were dispatched to Ethiopia in 1964 and 1965 to conduct additional research on the country's rich biodiversity. They carried out a thorough assessment of the country's wildlife resources, and they used the results to produce a three-year development plan for the establishment of parks across the country (Blower 1968).

The research team who worked individually and collectively on studies suggested to the then government of Ethiopia that the establishment of a national park that is off-limits to humans should be a key priority as human pressure had negatively impacted the biodiversity of the region. In his letter to the governor of the Simien-Begemedir Province, Brown commented that "Ethiopians are without exception the most destructive human beings I have seen-utterly feckless and without any regard for the future" (Brown1969).

Despite the various setbacks, the Simien Mountains wildlife area was turned into a national park in 1969 (Endalkachew et al. 2018; Flach 2000). This time around, the park's main priority was to ensure the survival of the Walia ibex population. Many experts and visitors from all over the world have flocked to the Simien Mountains since the park was formally established so that they might see the Walia ibex (Puff and Nemomissa 2001; Tessema et al. 2012).

British-born Blower who had previously earned experience in game reserves in Tanzanian and Kenyan moved swiftly to establish the park, and to hire its first group of wardens in 1966. The expatriate experts were adamant that the local people must be relocated. According to Leslie Brown "cultivators should be ejected without compensation" (Blower 1969). He criticized that they are doing terrible farming practices that are ruining the environment and leading to severe erosion. In a chat with General Mebratu Fisseha, the head of EWCO at the time, in July 1969, Blower said that the park's "backwards and primitive" people had to be removed before the park could have a future (Blower 1969). Since then, all discussions have revolved around the Gich community's relocation.

Although the Ethiopian authorities were the ones who had turned to the very people who held this degradation narrative inherited from the colonial era (Westerners), their attitude

was at the same time openly confrontational (Brockington and Igoe 2006). Blower was clearly unsatisfied from the start. In a letter to the government of Ethiopia, he expressed his disappointment with the delayed hiring of expatriate wardens by writing, "Only experienced men are able to lead the tasks recommended by UNESCO" (Blower 1969). He was far more vocal in his complaints, and he wrote a bundle of letters to EWCO about the inability of the office to reimburse his expenses, to meet the mutual goal they set and the inefficient functions of the office in charge to develop the park (Blanc 2018). According to Tessema (2019) Blower's strong comments received its equivalent from the EWCO Director. The EWCO's response is typical of Ethiopia's efforts to show diplomatic hospitality while reassuring the world community that the country will not cede its sovereignty. That is why it was decided to just let the foreign staff get on with it once they arrived at the site. Nicol's disappointment was instructive. From *Sankaber-Camp* in February 1969, he noted, "It is rather obvious that the Imperial Ethiopian Government does not find the Simien project of prime importance" (Nicol 1969). Nicol and Blower exchanged messages and expressed their dissatisfaction for the Ethiopian Imperial government's stance not to support *faranjes* against anybody. Nicol, when he resigned only months to go for inauguration in 1969, blamed the government and the local guards as they both are not willing to support his endeavor and the development of the park (Nicol 1969).

As a result of this, "national-global dialectic", the park's residents have been labeled as those who abused the site. In the past, they used to hunt Walia ibex for its meat, and they used the horns to create cooking utensils. It was during the Italian occupation period that people learnt to eat the Walia ibex flesh from the foreigners as the thinking so far was different. The arrival of the Italians prompted the patriots to start hunting Walia ibex to provide for their daily food needs. The Italians' use of a metal trap was instrumental in the widespread poaching of Walia ibex. Even after the park was established and the Italians driven out of Ethiopia in 1941, Walia ibex continued to be hunted. To make matters worse, the local population was given access to the newly introduced resources. Conservation experts in the FGD witness that birds which were medium-sized, wild animals (such as leopards, walia ibex, hyena, and jackals), and huge animals (such as lions) were all captured using different sized traps (COMD2, Debark, 2023: 61). The local communities were heavily involved in the poaching of Walia ibex and other wild animals within and around the park using the new materials as the tradition recognized it as an act of bravery (Woldemeskel 1950).

However, after practicing this hunting for long times, local communities started to believe that Walia ibex is a sacred animal, and they believe that only hermits are entitled to their milk. So, the Walia ibex's cave is where one can find the hermit's stick (COMI3, *Lori,* Janamora, 2023: 76; See also Tayachew, 2021). According to local tradition, Walia ibex arrived from Jerusalem with Saint Yared's Song. Thus, it was named as "Yared's goat". Elders have forbidden their children and the public from killing and eating Walia ibex because it brings divine punishment no matter what happened in the past. They would become sick too. A priest informant witnessed his father cursed him, and as a result they threw out the Walia ibex flesh he brought home. "Whoever kills Walia ibex against the elders will perish soon," says the local proverb.

In contrast to this, even though it was practice for short time, some local evidences testify that there was also a bad tradition that encouraged people to keep Walia ibex alive home in the hope that it would bring them prosperity (COMI2, Debark, 2023: 89). However, this tendency was taken away from them in 1963 when public awareness was created through the community elders. To everyone's annoyance, Emperor Haile Selassie I (r. 1941-74) learned about the likely genetic introgression between Walia ibex and the local

goat and issued an order prohibiting the practice as it was believed that it will eliminate Walia ibex at all (Tayachew 2021). Ethiopia's government also criminalized agro-pastoral practices in 1970 five years after it had outlawed slash-and-burn agriculture and tree felling. Those who disobey the rules faced fines and even jail time at the hands of park guards (NegaritGazeta 2007).

The local inhabitants, however, indicated that they put up resistance by keeping the area in use and even directly opposed the authorities. They also dispatched a delegate set up from all *woredas* that belong to the park to the federal government to address the policies enforced to abandon the land of their forefathers. They vowed to the government that while this may seem like exploitation, their efforts to preserve the area's biodiversity by turning it into a "national park" were actually guided by their traditional knowledge. As a result, they asked to lift the resource use restriction laws. However, actions were taken by the government to ensure compliance with the legislation forcing residents to leave. Security troops were dispatched to rural areas to cope with community resistance. The security force pounced on anyone who opposed the government's choice. Later on, government authorities attempted to pacify the local people by compensating them for property damage (COMD1, Debark, 2023: 77). The park was supposed to cover 220 square kilometers, but after a backlash from residents, it was reduced to 136 square kilometers (Hurni et al. 2008).

Blower (1969) also complained that a few of the park's boundary markings had been vandalized by 1966 indicating that the people continued their pressure on the park and its biodiversity. In his report to the local government, he also capitalized the unwise act of the local communities that caused quarrel with him and his staff (Browns 1969). Similarly, Nicol in his letter to the Minister of Agriculture also said that, "Populations are obstructive [...] they are showing an anger more and more superior" (Nicol 1969). Moreover, EWCO also messaged to the local government to urgently stop park boundaries encroachment as the national park would soon be inaugurated. EWCO's ultimatum looks as the following, "It is urgent to put a final end to the disorders that prevent the demarcation of Simien boundaries" (Gizaw 1969) The utmost concern also came from the emperor in 1969 stressing that the site is on the way to develop to the national park understanding its natural and cultural beauty and biological diversity as the suggestions from the foreign experts was promising. Thus, all act of abusing the site should be stopped quickly (Emperor Haileselassie 1969).

The official establishment of the Park in1969 was followed by the deployment of foreign staff that had racist Western ecological ethos in the administration position. The foreign experts' unfriendly ecological ethos to the people, and the limited awareness of the people resulted unending conflict between the local people and the Park warden. One day, the home of the first Park warden, Nicol was robbed and his weapon was stolen by unidentified individuals (Nicol 1969; See also, Tayachew 2021).

The foreign environmental experts and independent researchers attempted to induce new policies that did not fit to the values of the local communities. These conservation strategies were put in place with nature and wildlife in mind. Yet, these initiatives could have far reaching consequences for the local people often undermining their access to resources and their livelihoods. The people, however, were not silent receivers of the imposition. That led some of the expatriates to get dissatisfied and quit their job after continuous reports to the government. The resignation of Nicol after an immense contribution for the establishment of the park could be a case in point (Nicol 1969). The local communities' resistance to the foreign domination of the management of the park and resource use

restriction was both violent and non-violent in different times. It was ranging from sending delegates to Addis to violently attacked expatriates. Due to the considerable role of foreign experts in the Park, they also circulated rumors as the park was sold to the foreigners so that it would no longer be the property of the local population. Thus, opinion leaders mobilized all to fight against the move of the government at its nascent stage.

The struggle from the local communities was to catch the attention of the local government, and the international agencies to understand their rationale for the age-old practices and to recognize their achievements through their traditional knowledge. Scholars argue that those ecocentric and Western oriented environmental experts hardly understand why did the locals make terraces, practicing slash-and-burn agriculture, and alternating perennial and annual crops (Brockington and Igoe 2006; Martin et al. 2013; Adams and Hutton 2007). They have also adapted their living quarters using dried cow-pats and straw (from wheat and barley) (Blanc 2018). This ecological resilience, therefore, exemplifies the adaptability of human societies in their mastery of particular production methods to accommodate particular environmental constraints.

Once the park had been set up, new logics began to supplement the local communities' initial rationale. However, all representatives of international conservation bodies recommended that all residents in the park area should be expelled to protect the Walia ibex (Tessema et al. 2012; Blanc 2018). The federal government accepted this recommendation, and it urged the local government to act accordingly, but they answered as it is an impossible task. They explained the reason in association with the land tenure system of the region, *rist,* as it does not allow the project of relocation of people from one *rist* land to others' *rist* land (Tamrat, nd.).

Changes in continuities across regimes

Since 1969, the national and international bodies in the park have been working to protect the Walia ibex, the Gelada and the Lobelia and high altitude grasslands (Ejigu et al. 2017; Teshome et al. 2021). To achieve this, they have attempted to limit human activity that might harm these (Hassen 2018). However, the accounts of these nature specialists' activities suggest that their work is mostly influenced by the ideals of Africa made up of fauna-flora panorama, with its accompanying vicious spiral of deforestation, resource overexploitation, and overgrazing. Since 1969, an alarming increase of both human and non-human population was recorded in the Park (Hurni 2005).

It was in 1978 the SMNP became a UNESCO registered world heritage (Hurni 2005; Flach 2000). The tension between the Ethiopian government and the Western experts was coming to down as the latter accepted the development of the park without population relocation (Blanc 2018). New foreign staff was deployed including Hans Hurni who arrived in 1975 (Hurni et al. 2008). This shift indicated that they have quit the classical paradigm of biodiversity conservation that give priority for wildlife (Belay 2014; Jack 2017; Jaureguiberry et al. 2022). Proponents of limited access conservation strategies incorrectly attributed the species loss to the patchy "non-pristine" landscape. This approach does not recognize the integral nature between human community and their ecosystems (Vallejo-Ramos et al., 2016).

Expatriates in the situation regarding the development of the SMNP were a bit arrogant to the Ethiopian government because their arrival was due to the Ethiopian government invitation. However, the Ethiopian government on its part also made clear the situation as national sovereignty is something that all should respect (Hurni 2005; Yihune et a. 2009;

Yihune and Bekele 2012). Many international agencies have suggested to the emperor to increase the number of foreign experts including park warden (Hurni 1982), but it was rejected by the local people (COMI1, Debark, 2023: 26). This has a little bit changed the attention of the local communities to feel the park as their belonging. The Derg period was different because the government completely abandoned the role of foreign warden.

"The Dark Age"

The Derg period for the SMNP brought unspeakable atrocities in spite of its designation as a national park. EWCO stopped appointing foreign wardens attempted to fill in by the local people (COMI9, *Selwa,* Beyeda, 2023: 109). In the study area, however, most species which are listed as depleted including flagship species are victims of the war between the northern insurgents and the Derg regime in the 1980/90s (Endeshaw 2016; Tayachew 2016). According to Yihune et al. (2009), Blanc (2018), Getinet (2019) and (Tayachew 2021), in the late 1970s different rebel groups such as EDU (Ethiopian Democratic Union), EPRP (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Part), TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) and other student-based political oppositions used the site as a safe-haven to fight the Derg regime. Local inhabitants regrettably expressed that notable park scouts were executed because they were thought to be EPRP members namely Ambaw Meteku, Ambaw Atnaf, Abuhay Tessema, and Nega Menelik (COMI8, *Dilyibeza,* Beyeda, 2023: 132). As a result, the park and Walia ibex were left unguarded. TPLF fighters first arrived in the site in 1984 (Alebachew 2008).

TPLF fighters were unpopular in their abuse of the park resources. As archival sources confirmed, 49 Walia horns were found in the insurgents' camp proving Walia ibex feeding behavior of the TPLF troops. They have also caused further environmental degradation. When they camped inside the Park, the need for food and traditional cooking fuels such as firewood and charcoal contributed for deforestation and resource depletion. The SMNP refers to this period as "the dark age" since the Park was frequently abused by both warriors and local residents. Yet, nine *kebeles* relocated by the Derg were returned to their former locations when the Park fell under the control of northern insurgents as they knew no one else would halt them. To consolidate this, the FGD discussion among park office experts indicated that:

> *The fighters destroyed it and the society destroyed it as well. In particular, the TPLF army had given permission to the society to do whatever they want inside the Park thinking that they had avenged the Derg. As the Derg had started protection and development of the Park, they came and pretend to the local communities as they are their saviors from being denied to use their own resources. In fact, what they used to say was that 'Derg and monkeys eat what they do not sow' and encouraged some villages who had been relocated from the park by the Derg at that time returned and settled in their places. You would be surprised that only one camp was left undestroyed in the Park during that time* (COMD2, Debark, 2023: 12).

Pic. 1. A photo of the horn of poached Walia ibex in the Debark park office store

Source: researchers, 2023

Park facilities constructed by Nicol during the imperial regime were also extensively devastated during the civil war. Many of the park's valuable documents and houses and the park fence were also destroyed (Tessema 2017). Camps in the mountains at *Sanqaber*, Gich and *Chenek* were also destroyed. Only one camp was survived thanks to *shiek* Mustofa who protected the camp and other resources by teaching the local people as it is the property of all not belongs to the government. Leslie Brown also noted that acts of protest were seen as early as 1971 saying, "Arms are used, not only against the wildlife, but against the staff of the Wildlife Conservation Department" (Brown to the EWCO Director, 1971). Three years later, the park's administrators mentioned "lack of respect for the law and its representatives" and, just before the Park was designated as World Heritage, "the repeated destruction of its signage" (Hundessa 1995: 69). The park's employees evacuated to Amba Giorgis in October 1989 as the situation deteriorated. Until 1990, the war continued to wreak havoc on the park. As the level of violence rose, in 1991, and the park's outposts were looted, the park staff promptly evacuated these areas moving their operations center from *Sanqa-Ber* to Debarq town. As a result, with the support of EWCO, the SMNP scouts and officials had transferred to other National Parks as the situation in the SMNP was uncertain (DPO 1982; See also EWCA 2014).

Pic. 2. The destroyed Sanqa-Ber Camp site

Source: from SMNP office photo Gallery, 2023

Obviously, armed conflicts cause immense immediate harm to the people affected by different natural and human made challenges. Therefore, by the international organizations, it seems only to focus exclusively on the human consequences downplaying the environmental harm (Munive and Stepputat 2022). However, conflicts can and do cause long term damage to the environment whether directly or incidentally harming people's health, livelihoods, and biodiversity in general (Townsend 2009; Baumflek et al. 2012). Attacks and explosive remnants caused water and soil contamination, and they disturbed wildlife habitat and wellbeing in the SMNP. Even during the recent 2021-2023 TPLF and the federal government conflict, the park is again a battle zone that resulted similar suffering for the park and its biodiversity. It was in 1994 that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) submitted a guideline to the UN General Assembly for the protection of the Natural Environment during the armed conflict (Kemppinen et al. 2020; Bunker 2004). The more updated version of the guideline also submitted in 2020 (Munive and Stepputat 2022), but they are toothless as far as the enforcement of the law to protect the environment and its biodiversity is concerned.

As a result, some expatriate staff and development agencies that keep doing their task until the intensification of the civil war in the SMNP forced to leave the site. Due to their absence in the actual situation and the popularity of the new conservation paradigm, "community conservation", expatriates have left a plan that encourage the local communities to give due respect the biodiversity of the region and keep the UNESCO status of the Park (EWCA 2014; Iori 2012; Yihune et al. 2009; Blanc 2018; Getinet 2019). It was Hans Hurni in 1986 with the UNESCO fund first produced the development plan (Hurni et al. 2008). The dramatic shift in the newly developed plan by the foreign expert was the priority given to the local communities and other things will follow, "in the Simien the most critical element is man" (Flach 2000: 43; EWCA 2014). With regard to the governance system, the former paradigm granted the responsibility to the central government with little regard to local

opinions while the latter one has made an attempt to run protected areas by multiple partners to meet the needs of the local people (Belay 2014; Abebe 2018). The perception is also quite different in between different paradigms; the former viewed the site as a national asset with national concern, but it is a community asset with an international concern for the latter paradigm (Jack 2017; Ludwig and Poliseli 2018; Meguro 2009). This was the result of the emerging international movement on bottom-up and decentralization approaches for biodiversity conservation.

The Derg, on the other hand, pretend to UNESCO as improvements are recorded in the park ecology after relocation of some 1200 inhabitants made (Puff and Nemomissa 2001), but it complained again as they returned in a year time (EWCA 2014). To further underscore its dedication to protecting wildlife, the government issued the Proclamation for Wildlife Conservation in 1978 which is the first of its kind, and established the Forest and Wildlife Conservation and Development Authority (Flach 2000). The proclamation declared that "Wildlife have the right to exist, and our wildlife resources are a national legacy to be protected and exploited for the benefit of future generations" (Ministry of Agriculture, Forest and Wildlife Conservation and Development Authority 1987, p. 278). The Derg government has made the decision to put a stop to the widespread abuse of the country's wildlife. The Authority spread out to regional offices to facilitate the efficient execution of conservation initiatives. The responsibility for developing and managing the country's national parks and game reserves as well as educating the public about the importance of doing so was also given to this group. Its mandate included preventing deforestation, enforcing laws against illicit logging and coordinating with other government agencies to improve national parks, wildlife refuges and game preserves (Negarti Gazeta, 1980).

It is interesting to note that, in the SMNP the Derg was so aggressive to show its commitment keeping the Park in the World Heritage List. A person who refused to relocate was thrown away in the escarpment, for instance. Inhabitants were also forcefully displaced from *Agedamiya kebele* to the nearest *kebeles* of *Lori*, *Abeqa*, Adi Arqay town. Since then, tensions have grown between the local residents and the park administration because of the causes discussed already. The then governor of Semien *Awrajja*, *Meto-Aleqa* Gebrehiwot Gebreegziabher, ruthlessly murdered the protestors and dumped their bodies in *Qorbet Metaya*, next to *Chenek* Camp. Informants who witness the incident recited the poem coined by the local traditional singer of the time as follows:

በቁርበት መጣያ እንዴት ሰዉ ይጣላል፤

ሰዉን ጥሎ አይቀሩም በአየር ይቃጠላል።።

How a person is thrown in *Qorbet Metaya*;

It can never be forgotten and will be burnt down by plane.

The government forceful system of nationalizing all types of lands, mass execution of local noblemen, forceful relocation of the lowland villagers and other polices aggravated the local people in the SMNP to stand against the resources of the national park (COMI6, *Lori,* Janmora, 2023: 77; COMI7, *Ambaras,* Debark, 2023: 67). It was a root cause for the destruction of wildlife during the conflict between the government and rebels.

Revival vs Violence

The change of government in 1991 reopened the door for the SMNP that connect to the outside world. When the 'dust settled' the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government quickly show of its commitment for the revival of the park through various ways including in provision of unlimited support to the international development agencies (Nyssen et al. 2004). However, the intensity of ravage over the park during the "dark age" was seen when UNESCO decided to label the SMNP as "an endangered world heritage" in 1996 (Flach 2000; Tiru 2011). The UNESCO mission reckoned that almost 80 percent of the park's territory was farmed by its inhabitants. The local communities still considered as number one threats to the quality of the park. In 1997, the park's administration was decentralized to facilitate faster restoration efforts. So, the Amhara Parks Development and Protection Authority (PaDPA) replaced the Bureau of Agriculture as SMNP's administrative body once ANRS came into effect (Hurni 2005; Melese and Ayalew 2022). The park may now engage with local communities like the *woredas* and *kebeles* that surround it thanks to the new structure. In doing so, it allowed permission for the local people to have a say in matters of park management.

After the National Park was labeled as an endangered site in 1996, one of the benchmarks set for the local government was to expand the territory of the Park to create sufficient space for the endemic animals including the *Walia* ibex (Ejigu et al. 2017). Other than the multiple strategies and tools suggested by the management plan subsequently developed, the relocation of people is a radical measure and thus highly controversial (Menesha and Legesse 2016). In the year 2000, a fact-finding mission led by national and international experts proposed a realignment of Park boundaries and the relocation of four villages (*Gich*, *Islam-Debir*, *Adarmaz*, and *Muchila*) from within the SMNP (Debonnet 2006).

The relocation of *Arkwazye* residents in the SMNP in 2009 was successfully done, and it was rated good by UNESCO (Tessema et al. 2012; Tessema 2019). However, because Ethiopia became a republic, and international conservation groups adopted the theory of "parks for people," therefore the concept of forcible expulsion was replaced by that of "voluntary resettlement." With this goal in mind, the federal government established the Integrated Development Project (IDP) in collaboration with the Austrian government (EWCA 2014). UNESCCO and IUCN also introduced a mission to rehabilitate the Simien Mountains in the early 2000, but it was in vain due to the rejection of the local people for the relocation proposal (Tessema 2012; Iori 2012). The FGD discussion among the community showed that, "we were wise enough to the IDP's ploy, and we know that they sought us to weaken through their new project so that we are so poor that we have no other solution but to leave our villages" (COMD1, Debark, 2023: 55). However, both the local and federal officials saw the relocation as inevitable with the maximum cost.

The recent relocation of the Gich community in 2016 was a result of a long and tiresome process through which so many individuals in the village paid a huge deal of scarification. In return, the Park restored its place in UNESCO in 2017 that resulted satisfaction and relief to the regional government. Multiple discourses in this regard indicated diversified opinion. In the field observation, researchers observed relocated people in Debark are suffering so much and their life is ruining. Park officials in the interview, on the other hand, blamed their tough behavior to manage and determined their wish to regain the already abandoned village is unthinkable (POI, Debark, 2023: 44).

Conclusion

The study set out to explore society and biodiversity interaction over the years. And then, based on the findings from the study, it is concluded that the SMNP has passed through several ups and downs in which the local communities did their best to conserve biodiversity. At the international level, leaders and experts from conservation bodies seem despite themselves to uphold the idea of Africa as previously a land of fauna and flora, and today as threatened by its inhabitants. The philosophy of expanding an ideally human-free nature from the Western conservationists resulted unfriendly acceptance from the local people in Simien during the process of the development of the site towards a national park and even in the aftermath as coercive methods used by the local authorities. This was worsened when the national government reflects foreign ideologies in biodiversity conservation. Foreign development agencies did not give attention in cultivating the native potential and embedding into their conservation approach instead of persisting in the relocation proposal that caused endless resistance. Both change and continuity can be seen in the SMNP's history of biodiversity-society interaction. The tradition of resource use is something that uninterruptedly but with multiple modifications continued across generations in the SMNP. The diversity of resource use systems and other cultural practices as well as the capacity of the people to adapt to natural and social changes are local realities still seen in the SMNP, and that the researchers recommend to conservation scientists to blend it in the conservation and development schemes.

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Archives

SMNP Office, Dabark, A letter from *Abba* Finoteselam Kelemework to Mr. Nicol, Re-written
by Azanaw, SMNP Park Office Expert

Gondar Archive:

File No. m/41, monthly report from Blower to the Begemedir-Simien Province, 1960 E. C

File No. m/41, a letter from Blower to Abebe Reta, Minister of Agriculture, 1961 E. C

File No. m/41, monthly report from Nicol to Col. Tamirat Yigezu, Director of EWCO, 1960 E. C

File No. m/41, Nicol's letter to Tamrat Yigezu, 1961 E.C

File No. m/41, a letter from Nicol to the Begemedir-Simien Province, 1961 E. C

File No. q/1, Ref. No. 4w59/5/49, a letter from the Tamrat Yigezu to Mengistu Tiruneh

File No.m/41, Ref. No., Emperor Hayle Selasie I to the People of Begemdir, 02/05/ 1934 E.C.