

Title	DIFFERING LOCAL ATTITUDES TOWARD CONSERVATION POLICY: A CASE STUDY OF MAGO NATIONAL PARK, ETHIOPIA
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Citation	African study monographs. Supplementary issue (2005), 29: 31-40
Issue Date	2005-03
URL	<a href="https://doi.org/10.14989/68447">https://doi.org/10.14989/68447</a>
Right	
Type	Departmental Bulletin Paper
Textversion	publisher

## DIFFERING LOCAL ATTITUDES TOWARD CONSERVATION POLICY: A CASE STUDY OF MAGO NATIONAL PARK, ETHIOPIA

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**ABSTRACT** Communities are now the focal point of conservationist thinking. In this paper I present a recent cooperative attitude of a community toward wildlife conservation in southwestern Ethiopia. Moreover, attempts are made to analyze the historical relationships between the community and the park authority. No severe conflicts arose between the park authority and the villagers until the 1990s. The relationships could have worsened considerably when hunting in the Mago National Park intensified after the regime change in 1991. However, it was also at this point that the villagers began to reduce their direct use of the natural resources in the park. Then, relationships of both sides have taken a new turn. New form of leadership in the community is now able to deal effectively with the conservation issues.

**Key Words:** Wildlife conservation; Local attitudes; Hunting; Southwestern Ethiopia.

### INTRODUCTION

Conservation of diverse ecosystems with abundant fauna and flora has been a crucial policy goal of colonial and post-colonial African governments since the early 20th century. However, enforced conservation policies have often resulted in serious conflicts between government authorities and the local people who use the natural resources within the conservation areas. Despite the fact that since the 1980s, community-based conservation has become one of the popular conservation strategies (Western & Wright, 1994; Hulme & Murphree, 1999), most of the community were not consulted with regard to the decision-making process about land and natural resources.

Recently, conservation agencies in Ethiopia have begun to recognize the important role of local people in wildlife conservation. However, in most conservation areas, very little effort has been made to involve local people in wildlife management. The concept of “protectionism” still informs conservation methods. In this paper I present a recent cooperative attitude by a community toward wildlife conservation in southwestern Ethiopia. When the characteristics of this community are examined, several implications for practical methods of community-based conservation in Ethiopia might emerge. I focused on the historical relations between the community and conservation agency and on individuals within the community differentiated by political power and intentions.

## STUDY SITE AND METHODS

### I. Mago National Park

Mago National Park is located in southwestern Ethiopia about 750 km from Addis Ababa. It covers 2,162 km<sup>2</sup> of gently undulating valley floor at about 450 m above sea level. Savannah bush and woodlands with small patches of grassland mostly cover the area, which is home to African elephants, buffalo, waterbuck, bushbuck, greater kudu, lesser kudu and a variety of small antelopes (Hillman, 1993). The park was planned and set up based only on ecological survey (Stephenson & Mizuno, 1978). Turton (2002) has criticized the manner of the park's establishment, contending that by ignoring local people it constituted an extreme statement of "preservationist" concepts rooted in the Western conservation ethic.

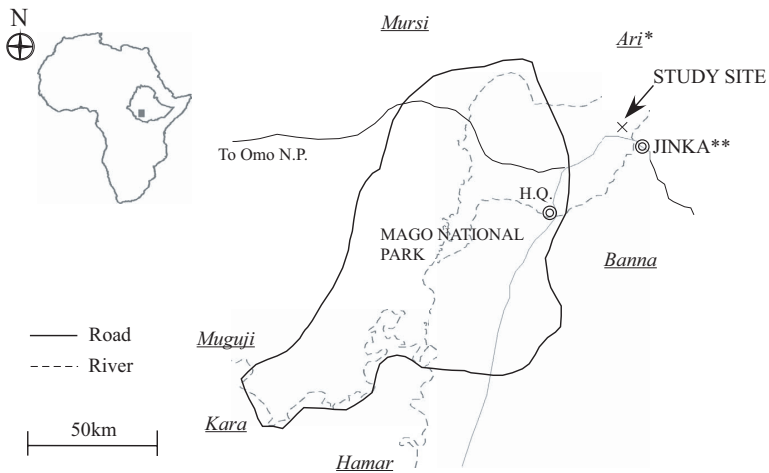
Six ethnic groups—the Ari, Banna, Hamar, Kara, Muguji and Mursi—rely on natural resources in the park for their fodder, firewood, and food. Most user settlements are located on the margins of the conservation area, and have limited infrastructures and access to social services. Severe disputes over hunting erupted when a large number of automatic rifles became available after the regime change in 1991. Wild animal populations have since decreased dramatically (Graham *et al.*, 1996).

The relationship between the park staff and the local people became increasingly violent. In February 2003, the local people from Banna killed a warden of Mago National Park. After that incident, the conservation policy in Mago National Park has temporarily tended towards protectionism once again.

### II. Study Site

The village where the field study was conducted is located on the northeastern side of the park (Fig. 1). The number of households was estimated at about 350 in 1994 (Central Statistical Authority, 1996). The Ari people speaking the Omotic language (*Ari aaf*) live in the village. The economy of the Ari people is essentially based on agriculture and animal husbandry. They are also beekeepers who own hives in the park.<sup>(1)</sup> The village people have a relatively good relationship with the park staff. A large number of tourists pass through the village on the way to visit the Mago National Park. Villagers have been in direct contact with the park staff since the park was established. No other villages around the park have had such a strong relationship with the park staff.

In this study, I will focus on the historical relationships between the village and the park authority to clarify how these 'good' relationships have been created. In order to do this, I conducted field surveys in the village over a period of five months in 2002 and one month in 2003. Most of the descriptions in this paper are based on these field interviews with the villagers and the park staff.



**Fig. 1.** Location of Mago National Park and the Research Site  
 \*Underlining indicates the name of ethnic groups.  
 \*\*Jinka is zonal center of South Omo.

## HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE VILLAGE AND THE PARK AUTHORITY

### I. Before the Establishment of the Park

Many people were unwilling to talk about their hunting activities, even if they had hunted in the past and no longer now. The villagers, generally, are very afraid of such information being revealed to the park staff, and they distrust even fellow village members on hunting information. They do, however, speak freely about northern hunters, especially the hunting carried out by the Amhara people. According to oral histories, the northern hunters had already visited the Mago area by the early 1900s. Most of the wildlife had disappeared from northern Ethiopia by that time and people started hunting game to the south (Pankhurst, 1964, 1990) for prestige and status.

The northern hunters came to the Mago area on horseback, and the first thing they did was visit the chief of the village. Ari society was traditionally organized as a chiefdom, which was headed by ritual kings known as *baabi*. The *baabi* was the supreme authority performing judicial, military, administrative, economic, and ritual functions for the well-being of his subjects (Gebre, 1995). The northern hunters would ask the chief for permission to hunt in Mago in exchange for a small amount of money. The chief would provide some guides to assist their hunting and to protect them from attacks by wild animals or a neighboring ethnic group. The chief would sometimes lend the hunters his rifles.

The northern hunters would always try to take over the leadership of the hunting parties. However, the Ari guides were more experienced hunters and would often make the 'mistake' of successfully shooting the targeted animal before the northern hunters had a chance to shoot at it themselves. This would often cause the northern hunters to get angry and they would therefore be unwilling to eat the meat. Successful hunters, returning from Mago, would offer the chief the tongue and liver of their kill as tribute. Then, they would distribute the meat among the guides and other villagers. They went back to their homelands with only the tails and skins of the animals as proof of their success, to gain prestigious titles from their sovereign. It is noteworthy that the chief not only gave the northern hunters permission to hunt, and the use of his guides and his rifles, but he also limited the numbers and species of animals they could hunt. In what follows, the current chief recalls how his father treated the northern hunters.

The hunters targeted only buffalos, elephants and lions. Our chief did not permit Gojjam<sup>(2)</sup> hunters to hunt female buffalos. A hunter was allowed to hunt only one buffalo at a time. The chief requested that they pay 5 birr for a buffalo and 25 birr for an elephant. The chief ordered them to leave the ivory. The hunters were allowed to take back only the tails of the hunted elephant to Gojjam. They did not bring their rifles. The chief lent them his rifles. However, he did not give them bullets. They bought those from traders. When they arrived back from Mago, some of the villagers fired blanks and the Gojjam hunters started to dance. (Interview: 23/June/2002)

The Ari people traveled across rugged mountain terrain to reach the Mago area, by a route that was extremely dangerous. It should be noted that very few villagers except for skilled hunters had rifles at that time, and most people could not engage in hunting.

## II. After the Establishment of the Park

The Ethiopian revolution of 1974 replaced the imperial regime by the socialist regime known as the 'Derg', and since then northern hunters have seldom visited the village. Moreover, since 1978 when the park was established, northern hunters did not appear in the village at all because the park staff was permanently stationed in the park. Hunting by the villagers was also restricted. However, villagers did not show their opposition, even though some villagers had used the natural resources of the park in the past. Most of them noted that the Mago had been a place where wild animals could be found. However, they did bitterly recall how they had been forced to construct a road by the park authority. One of the reasons why the villagers did not object to the restrictions may have been because the border between the park and the village was decided by agreement. Secondly, people expected that park staff would pre-

vent attacks from their neighbors, principally the Mursi people.<sup>(3)</sup> Thirdly, scouts patrolled the park only infrequently; despite this fact, most villagers still had no means of hunting except for spears and snares.

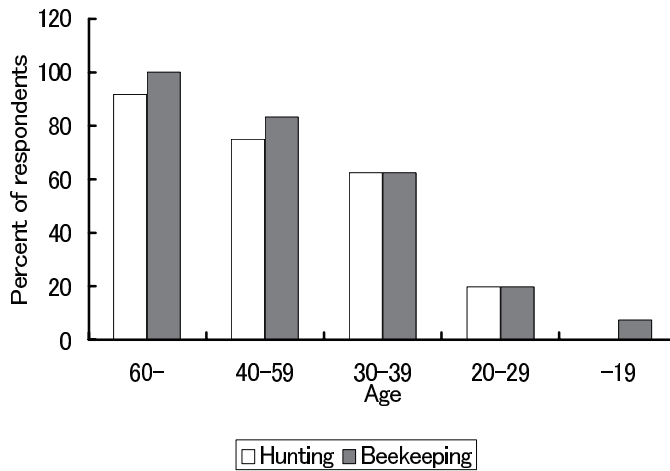
In contrast, there were other policies on the part of the Derg regime that did greatly impact on the villagers, especially the chief and the ritual specialists (*godomi*).<sup>(4)</sup> The power of the chief had already been reduced during Haile Selassie's rule. However, chiefs continued to operate in nominal leadership positions. After 1974, however, chiefs and ritual specialists could not exercise their economic, political, and legal powers as before. They had to obey national government rules. In the study village, the chief quit his work and left the village in the 1980s. Only some ritual specialists presently continue to practice in a nominal fashion. A current *afti godomi* (bird ritual specialist) recalls how he functioned in the village at that time. He claimed that he had authority over the villagers in the Derg period.

After the Derg, Amhara people left the village. Then, our people started to believe in our power once again. Elders also came to ask me to do ritual ceremonies again. The government imprisoned the *godomi* of other localities, and they stopped practicing their ritual ceremonies. As a result, crops were damaged by heavy rain, and flocks of birds came to their villages, and the people starved. (Interview: 15/July/2002)

### III. After the Regime Change in 1991

After the regime change in 1991, hunters' "skills" radically improved when a large number of automatic weapons were brought into the area, causing a hunting boom. The new weapons (mainly AK-47 automatic rifles) made hunting easier. The entire village, including even young and inexperienced new hunters, visited Mago for hunting.

Increased local hunting brought more severe conservation regulations, for example, frequent patrol by the park scout. As a result, local people conducted their hunting activity in secret. Others stopped hunting at the end of the 1990s. The younger generation, in particular, has had little experience in hunting and beekeeping (Fig. 2). Younger people have strengthened their agricultural activities under the influence of the market economy. There have been substantial changes in terms of the types of crops which the villagers cultivated. Over the years, sorghum, millet and maize were the primary crops cultivated. The village people however started to intensify the cultivation of maize, coffee and chat<sup>(5)</sup> as cash crops from the 1980s. The village is close to the zonal center of South Omo (Jinka) and would become one of the main suppliers of these crops. Fig. 3 shows the changes in land use for cultivated fields of crops in the village in 1960, 1990 and 1999. The area of cultivated fields expanded greatly from 1990 to 1999. Fig. 4 shows the produce percentage of annual cash income. According to the graph, honey makes up only two percent of their annual cash income. On the other hand, agricultural produce made up ninety percent. Honey

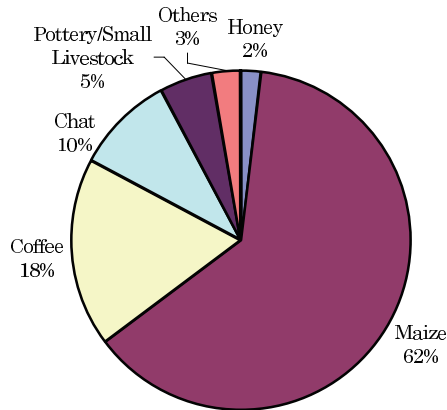


**Fig. 2.** Percentage Comparison of Experience of Hunting and Beekeeping in the Park. Data was compiled from interviews in 2002.



**Fig. 3.** Changes in Land Use for Cultivation of Crops between 1960, 1990 and 1999. Data was based on aerial photographs taken in 1960, 1990 and 1999.

might have had much more importance for its economic and cultural value in the past.<sup>(6)</sup> This trend indicates that the villagers have reduced, in a relatively smooth way, their dependency on the natural resources in the park.<sup>(7)</sup>



**Fig. 4.** Produce Percentage of Annual Cash Income.  
Data was estimated from interviews with 38 households in 2002.

#### NEW RELATIONSHIPS IN 2002

Recently, relationships between the villagers and the park authority have taken a new turn. One of the events leading to this change took place at the beginning of October, when a chairman (*likemember*) of *qebele* (peasant Association) sent a letter to the officer of the park. He wrote that the villagers were planning to organize a safari tour, and asked for the park staff's assistance. This was the first time the park staff had received such an offer from the villagers on their own initiative, and the park warden willingly gave his support. The chairman had called for participants a few weeks earlier in the village. Anybody could join the tour as long as they paid 15 birr for food.<sup>(8)</sup>

The safari took place from October 30 to November 1, 2002. Seventeen people participated in the tour, including the village chairman. All the participants had formal education and most were young people under the age of thirty who had never visited the park. The park warden offered two vehicles and tents for their stay. From the first day, the participants enjoyed the safari. The young people in particular enjoyed themselves very much when they discovered the wildlife of the area. They behaved like foreign tourists, even if what they saw was just a common antelope. This was because they had no prior experience of observing such wild animals. At night, the warden taught them about the importance of preserving wildlife through a three-hour video presentation on this subject. Then, the warden and the head of the scouts each gave speeches. They explained that they had, "...severe conflicts over poaching" and went on to say that the relationship between the villagers and the park staff was better than in other villagers and expressed his desire for this to continue. He asked the villagers for their help in this regard.

On the last day, the village chairman repeatedly asked the park warden to send a report of their safari tour to district, zonal and regional administra-



tions. Under the socialist regime, chairmen were assigned to each *qebele*. In the beginning, most chairmen were selected from elders who had ample knowledge of the village. After 1991, however, the study village chose a young man who could speak Amharic, a necessity for communication at the zonal level.

The current chairman acts as a go-between between the village and the district office or park officers. Outside officials frequently question the chairman on his ability to enforce government policies. In addition, the chairman has to explain government policy to the villagers. Park officials look for a chairman who has been accepted by village elders, as the village elders are sometimes against government policies such as hunting prohibitions. Indeed, park officials did wonder whether the safari tour was an attempt to divert the park staff's attention away from their strong suspicions of poaching. However, the chairman has tried to gain power in village matters, and the safari tour did indicate strong leadership on the part of the chairman and a new attitude of the villagers towards wildlife conservation.

## CONCLUSION

I have described in this paper a brief history of the study village's response to conservation policy in order to outline how a positive attitude toward conservation has emerged. In the past, the village chief had the authority to decide political issues for the village, including matters concerning the natural resources around the village. The chief monitored hunting by outsiders and made the hunting rules.<sup>(9)</sup> The establishment of the park did not have a great impact on the people's attitude to the park authority, because both sides (the park authorities and the villagers) had been involved in the agreement on the park's borders. No severe conflicts arose between the park and the villagers until the 1990s.

In the 1990s, the park authorities started to suspect the villagers of poaching; relationships could have worsened considerably from this point. However, it was also at this point that the villagers began to reduce their direct use of the natural resources in the Mago National Park, under the growing influence of a market economy. Furthermore, macro-political changes in Ethiopia led to changes in the nature of village leadership. This new form of leadership (the chairman) is now able to deal effectively with political issues.<sup>(10)</sup> For example, in this study, during negotiations with outsiders such as park officials, the chairman willingly appealed to them for their cooperation.

At present, the park staff has given a high priority to relations with this village, because the people of this village obey conservation policy and willingly show a cooperative attitude toward wildlife conservation. The park authority especially hopes that the young generation will undertake the task of conservation in the future and that people living in other areas will develop similar attitudes. However, the situation in other villages is markedly different from that noted in the study village. Most villages are still remote, both geographically

and politically. Moreover, people in other villages are more eager to have the park authority permit natural resource use within the park. Furthermore, meaningful relationships between most local people and the park authority only began in the 1990s, after the end of the hunting boom. It is important that the park staff continue to patiently communicate with local people understanding the varying preferences for resource use, even in the face of temporary setbacks.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT** The research was financially supported by Research Fellowships of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science for Young Scientists. My sincere appreciation goes to two academic supervisors, Associate Prof. M. Shigeta and Dr. G. Yamakoshi, Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University, who gave me valuable advice. I am grateful to all of the villagers who supported me during my stay. Since I first visited Mago National Park in 2002, I have been given the warmest kindness and help by the park staff, especially the park warden Mr. Shanife Dulla. I sincerely mourn his loss.

#### NOTES

- (1) Local beekeeping in the Mago National Park has been permitted since the park was established. Beekeepers have been allowed to enter the park to care for their beehives several times a year in addition to the harvesting seasons if they submit a letter of permission authorized by the chairman to the office in the park.
- (2) See Abdussamad (1988). Gojjam is northwestern provinces of Ethiopia.
- (3) The Mursi have frequently attacked the Ari. It would be in the 1960s that the Mursi people started to forcibly attack the Ari people. In many cases, they plundered goats, crops and honey from the village.
- (4) Ritual specialists assisted the chief, especially in ritual matters. They also acted as a council of advisors in non-ritual matters (Gebre, 1995). At the time of study, an *ihir godomi* (crop ritual specialist) and an *afiti godomi* (bird ritual specialist) were working in the village. Each *godomi* has a special role in ritual ceremonies.
- (5) Chat (*Catha Edulis*) is a natural stimulant with a stimulant leaf chewed in Eastern Africa, the Horn and Yemen.
- (6) Honey was considered one of the most important things as bride wealth. A lot of honey wine (*tej*) was consumed at wedding and funeral ceremonies. It was also common to welcome guests with honey.
- (7) Some villagers were engaged in commercial hunting in the past. They targeted on elephant ivory and rhinoceros horn. On the other hand, bush meats were consumed in the village.
- (8) US1\$ is approximating 8.49birr (24/August/2001)
- (9) The chief did not monitor hunting by the villagers, but he and ritual specialists (*godomi*) conducted ritual ceremonies for the villagers' hunting.
- (10) Some elders and ritual specialists still exercise strong leadership, especially when they deal with village issues. The village chairman and elders sometimes settle issues such as land disputes together. At that time, elders counsel the chairman.

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