

Community Attitudes towards Wildlife Conservation in Ethiopia

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Introduction

Mutually supportive relationships between communities and nearby protected areas are critical to the long-term success of conservation efforts. In sub-Saharan Africa, many protected areas were first created during colonial times as hunting grounds or parks for European elites, with little or no regard for the needs or desires of local communities (Anderson and Grove 1987; Neumann 1998; Adams 2003). Today, many of these areas harbor long-standing conflicts over land tenure and resource use (IIED 1994). These conflicts may create tensions between local communities, protected area staff, and conservation goals (Newmark et al. 1994; Lillieholm and Romney 2000; Whitesell et al. 2002).

In Ethiopia, 40 protected areas cover roughly 16.4% of the country's land area (186,000 km²). These areas face many challenges due to growing populations, border conflicts, and recurring drought. A chronic and growing issue for Ethiopia's largely pastoral rural people is local access to grazing lands (Tedla 1995; Ashenafi and Leader-Williams 2005). As in other parts of the developing world, increased concern over the burden that conservation often places on local communities has led to efforts to incorporate development goals into conservation practices (Hulme and Murphree 2001). In 1991, community-based conservation programs were established in several Ethiopian national parks in an effort to gain local support for conservation. Participatory management and benefit-sharing were also adopted, along with the granting to local communities of limited ownership rights for some resources.

Given the recurring nature of conflict between conservation and local communities, it is critical that conservationists better understand local views with respect to wildlife and protected areas. Toward that end, we sought to better understand local community attitudes towards wildlife, protected areas, and protected area staff in and around four Ethiopian protected areas.

Methodology

We examined community perceptions in and around four Ethiopian protected areas: (1) Abijata-Shalla Lakes National Park; (2) Awash National Park; (3) Bale Mountains National Park; (4) and Senkelle Swayne's Hartebeest Sanctuary. These protected areas represent a

wide range of ecological, social, economic, and policy conditions. Key informants from randomly selected Peasant Associations located inside and surrounding each of the four areas were invited to participate in focus group discussions. These discussions solicited information about local community perceptions of wildlife and protected areas. Two focus group sessions were conducted per site, with group sizes ranging from 8 to 15 people. The information gathered was subsequently used to develop an interview questionnaire to gauge broader community perceptions of wildlife and wildlife conservation in and around the four protected areas.

Heads-of-households were randomly selected for interview on a first-come, first-served basis. In total, 384 household heads from 25 Peasant Associations were interviewed—85 to 101 households from each of the four sites. The survey included both closed and open-ended questions across three broad categories: (1) views towards wildlife and wildlife conservation; (2) views towards protected area management and staff; and (3) a series of household demographic questions, including information about each household's source of income.

Information collected from the focus group discussions was collated and summarized using text analysis (Bernard 2002) to discover the regularity with which discussants told their story. Questionnaire data were analyzed using both Chi-square tests and logistic regression to determine relationships between socioeconomic variables and factors affecting attitudes. Open-ended questions were grouped into different categories based on similarity.

Results and discussion

Community characteristics. Residents in communities located in and around each of the four protected areas depended almost exclusively on subsistence agriculture and the rearing of livestock. Residents living in the highlands in and around Bale Mountains National Park raised horses, sheep, donkeys, and cattle. In contrast, lowland residents in and around Abijata-Shalla Lakes National Park, Awash National Park, and Senkelle Swayne's Hartebeest Sanctuary raised goats, sheep, donkeys, camels, and cattle. Subsistence agriculture was largely dependent upon the availability of arable land. While the Ethiopian government owns these lands, rural communities enjoy free usufruct rights. Roughly half of questionnaire respondents worked land holdings of less than 1 hectare, though many (42.2%) held 1 to 3 hectares. Most respondents depended on agriculture for subsistence, while one-quarter depended on livestock and the balance engaged in both activities. Roughly half of all respondents cited a shortage of pasture as their main challenge in raising livestock, while nearly one-quarter cited disease and predation as major constraints. Less than 10% of respondents relied on other income sources like small-scale business.

Local views toward wildlife. Focus group discussions revealed that local residents generally held positive attitudes towards wildlife and nearby protected areas. Reasons given for the importance of wildlife across the four protected areas included its attraction to tourists, hunting opportunities during drought, enjoyment derived from viewing wildlife, and its value for future generations. Indeed, residents near Abijata-Shalla Lakes National Park saw wildlife as a source of national income and pride. Others valued wildlife for aesthetic reasons, and because of historic links between wildlife and traditional tribal culture. One excep-

tion was residents around Senkelle Swayne's Hartebeest Sanctuary. There, views of Swayne's hartebeest turned negative after the sanctuary was created in 1976, largely due to loss of access to grazing lands and harsh enforcement actions by Sanctuary staff.

Across all four sites, 94% of respondents supported policies designed to protect wildlife. However, levels of support differed across the four study sites, with the lowest level of support (60%) expressed by respondents from Abijata-Shalla Lakes National Park. Logistic regression showed that the probability that a community wished to protect wildlife was related to whether they had previously received benefits from the protected area, the numbers of livestock they owned, the frequency of wild animal predation, and whether they had visited the protected area.

Overall, three-quarters of respondents felt that wildlife and people could co-exist. Local views on co-existence varied across the four study sites, however, with the least support (16%) expressed by respondents from Bale Mountains National Park. Logistic regression indicated that the probability of a community expressing the belief that wildlife and people can co-exist was related to income source and whether or not the respondent had received benefits from the nearby protected area.

Local views toward protected area management and staff. Across all four sites, three-quarters of respondents expressed the view that protected areas have both economic and ecological value. Many respondents valued these areas for their potential for tourism revenues and resource use in times of need (e.g., dry-season pasture and sources of water in drought). Residents that expressed value for protected areas tended to be older, better educated, have large families, and to have previously received some tangible benefit from the reserve.

Residents from some protected areas were less supportive of their nearby reserves. For example, the relationship between Abijata-Shalla Lakes National Park staff and local communities was generally poor. Indeed, only individuals employed or receiving other benefits from the park expressed positive attitudes. Other residents expressing negative views had experienced poor relations with protected area staff, and felt that staff were antagonistic to or disliked local residents. Oftentimes these conflicts stemmed from controversy over resource use and access—particularly in times of drought or special need.

Residents in and around Abijata-Shalla Lakes National Park cited community-park mistrust stemming from limited dialogue and a lack of transparency over the last 30 years. In fact, most discussants were unsure of the park's boundary—a sure recipe for conflict over resource use and access. At Senkelle Swayne's Hartebeest Sanctuary, many discussants expressed the belief that the sanctuary was too large, and felt that some lands could be returned to the community. Part of the rationale for a smaller sanctuary was the historic coexistence between humans, livestock, and Swayne's hartebeest. Indeed, discussants expressed their desire to look after Swayne's hartebeest like their own livestock, and to continue to protect the species if the government supported local communities and included them in conservation activities. And while many residents acknowledged that community relations had improved in recent years, some admitted to illegally gathering firewood, thatching grasses, and using pasture within the sanctuary because they felt that these resources still belonged to them.

At Awash National Park, residents expressed disappointment over the number of employees that were non-locals. Many felt that the park should favor local residents for Park jobs over non-locals. In support, residents noted that many conflicts between park staff and communities arose from misunderstandings, often due in part because most staff originate from other parts of Ethiopia. A similar concern was expressed at Senkelle Swayne's Hartebeest Sanctuary, where local residents complained that sanctuary staff tended to comprise people from outside the area who viewed wildlife as more important than local people.

Improving community relations. Across the four protected areas, two-thirds of respondents believed that they derived tangible benefits from their nearby reserve. In contrast, one-third expressed the view that they had received no benefits. Benefits most often cited included opportunities for jobs and social services such as health clinics and schools, along with opportunities for resource use during the peak of the drought season.

While most residents wished to see both wildlife and habitat protected, they also expressed frustration over the limited level of benefits they received from protected areas and wildlife. Indeed, the strong correlation between protected area benefits and local community support is critical to sustaining conservation efforts. For example, most discussants in and around Awash National Park clearly believed that the park's future depended upon good relationships between park staff and local communities. Toward this end, many locals felt that community relations could be improved by allowing access to traditional resources like pasture, firewood, and key water points.

At Abijata-Shalla Lakes National Park, some residents indicated that they had benefited from the park through job opportunities, social services such as transport during emergencies, and the construction of a local school. All discussants, however, believed that assistance in improving their household economies through the sharing of tourism revenues would increase their willingness to support conservation activities.

Discussants compared past and present management at Bale Mountains National Park and noted that staff were showing increased interest in providing benefits and involving local people in park management. Examples of benefits included the construction of a health clinic, expansion of electrical services, and the creation of various job opportunities. Residents felt that park staff could foster better community relations through continued dialogue and transparency. Residents also expressed support for increased park development and infrastructure, believing it would attract more tourists which would in turn enhance local opportunities to earn more benefits.

While most discussion centered on protected area management and staff, some respondents expressed disappointment toward non-governmental organizations working in and around Awash and Bale Mountains national parks. Locals felt that these organizations promised community benefits from wildlife conservation, but seldom delivered. Part of the problem may be that these projects work only in a few selected pilot villages and are thus unable to satisfy the interests of all communities. Nonetheless, the poor public perception of these projects is consistent with other critiques of integrated conservation and development projects in Africa (see, for example, Hannah 1992, Western et al. 1994, and Alpert 1996).

Most discussants around Awash National Park felt that human population growth threatened the long-term coexistence of both humans and wildlife. Indeed, many older com-

munity members witnessed first-hand the impacts of overpopulation, and were able to explain in stark contrast the difference between resource conditions now and when they were young.

Across all four sites, three-quarters of respondents opposed degazetting their adjacent protected area. Among respondents, those that had not received benefits and those who had suffered from problem wildlife were most supportive of abolishment—findings similar to Newmark et al.'s (1993) research in nearby Tanzania. Hence, while few residents support the degazetting of nearby protected areas, the support for such action could increase if residents fail to realize benefits in the future. Ensuring continued local support for wildlife conservation over the long term suggests the need for proactive programs of benefit-sharing and local awareness of conservation values. In this regard, residents in and around Abijata-Shalla Lakes and Bale Mountains national parks supported public awareness programs and conservation education as ways to improve the attitudes of young people.

Conclusions and recommendations

Ethiopian protected areas face significant challenges in meeting human and wildlife needs. Indeed, while most communities viewed protected areas and wildlife favorably, the lack of benefits limited local willingness to aid conservation work. In this study, we found that protected area benefits, household income, education, age, and relationships with protected area staff were key factors in explaining community views towards protected areas and wildlife. Improving cooperation between communities and protected areas requires that villagers gain benefits from conservation, including some level of land rights and resource control. While policy changes since 1991 have led to improvements, existing laws fall short of empowering communities and stimulating participation.

A number of policy options could enhance local attitudes toward wildlife and protected areas. These include: (1) clarify the respective conservation roles of regional and federal governments, as well as the private sector; (2) ensure that community development efforts consider the high levels of illiteracy in communities surrounding protected areas; (3) enhance employment opportunities in and around protected areas; (4) encourage conservation and development projects to expand their planning horizons to more realistically assess their impact on poverty alleviation and conservation; (5) ensure that future management plans for protected areas include active participation from local communities; and (6) explore strategies to share and transfer land rights and security of tenure to give communities near protected areas negotiating power, security, control, and access to lands.

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