



Protected Area Governance: Lessons Learned from NGO Endeavours in Nech Sar National Park, Southern Ethiopia

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Introduction

Nech Sar National Park (NP) is located between two Ethiopian regional states, Oromia and Southern Region. Since its establishment in 1974 the park was managed by governmental park authorities. In 2005, the management of the park was handed over to the international NGO, African Parks Foundation, through a 25 years agreement between the Ethiopian Federal State, Southern Region and African Parks. However, the project failed and ended after only 3 years. Ever since, the degradation of natural resources in Nech Sar NP continues. Based on empirical local level research, we present reasons for the failure of the NGO endeavour and lessons learned for protected area governance in Ethiopia and beyond.



Fig. 1: Different ecosystems at Nech Sar, a favourable condition for biological diversity



Fig. 2: A herd of Burchell's zebra in the Grassland Plains for which Nech Sar is famous



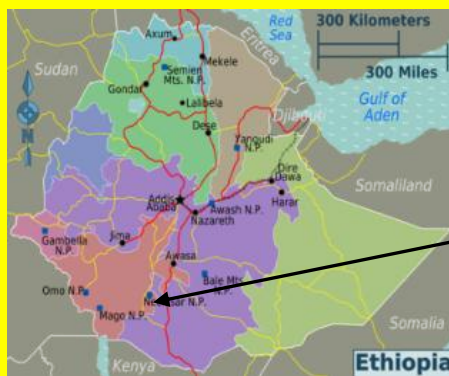
Fig. 3: Cattle from agro-pastoralist households grazing in the Nech Sar Grassland Plains



Fig. 4: Wood collection from Nech Sar for income generation



Fig 5: Fishermen at Lake Chamo, Nech Sar National Park



Nech Sar National Park

Problem Statement

Smallholder farmers and pastoralists use the natural resources of Nech Sar NP for their livelihoods, mainly grazing land, firewood and fish (Fig. 3-5). This promotes a continuous degradation of the park's ecosystems and its biodiversity. For example, the population of the endemic Swayne's hartebeest was reduced from the estimated 100 in 1970s to 13 in 2010; invasive woody species are overrunning the Nech Sar Grassland Plains on which the grazing wild animals depend. The government attempted repeatedly to address the problem by resettling people out of the park and to deter "illegal" resource utilization through law enforcement. Consequently, the last 30 years are characterized by State-settlers conflict. The loss of wildlife and their habitats in the park have continued unabated despite the conservation efforts by the Ethiopian government.

Methodology

Empirical field research was conducted in and around Nech Sar NP between May 2010 and March 2011. A total of 50 expert interviews were conducted with state representatives, park employees and settlers who currently live within the park boundaries. Furthermore, participatory observations, group discussions (10 in different villages), transect walks and resource mapping with park settlers was undertaken.

Results

The technical and financial capacities of Nech Sar NP improved tremendously during the engagement of African Parks. However, the overuse of grazing land, firewood and fish continued and conflicts between the park settlers, park authorities and governmental bodies remained unresolved. The initial agreement between African Parks, the Federal State and Southern Region envisaged resettlement of the settlers from the park by the government. After more than two years without the intended resettlement fulfilled, African Parks started direct negotiations with the settlers to re-demarcate the park boundaries. However, since the park is located between two regional states, political and administrative disagreements overweighed questions of the parks' management and conservation needs. The Southern Region, which was not fully included in park boundary re-demarcation process, finally withdrew from the negotiations. Thereupon African Parks gave up all its activities in Nech Sar NP and withdrew from Ethiopia at all.

Lessons learned

Technical and financial resources are necessary but not sufficient conditions to sustainably govern protected areas. In addition, success highly depends on balancing between conservation efforts, local livelihoods, and diverse – often conflicting – higher level political interests. Therefore, involving all parties in the negotiations from the beginning should be obligatory when dealing with complexities inherent in protected area governance.