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## Bridging the Researcher-People Knowledge Gap in Biodiversity Conservation: The Case of Nech Sar National Park, Ethiopia

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### Abstract

This study aims to analyse knowledge perceptions and gaps between researchers and local communities in Nech Sar National Park, Ethiopia, and to suggest ways of integrating knowledge systems into practices. The study is based on findings generated by key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and interviews with 60 sample households in Nech Sar National Park between May 2010 and March 2011 and interviews of key informants among wildlife conservation experts and officers. Many studies concerned with biodiversity in Africa show a rapid degradation of the diversity of genes, species or ecosystems. Extensive systems of protected areas (PAs) aim to maintain biodiversity by using different conservation concepts. However, PAs also created manifold conflicts with local people who use species and ecosystems for their livelihoods. Local people describe changes of biodiversity by using trends of flagship species, such as grasses, trees and larger animals. For grasses, they pinpoint to those preferred for cattle grazing in the priority list. For tree species, they focus on those providing shade for meetings, those which can be used as a source of traditional medicines to treat animal and human diseases, or invasive species that take-up grassland plains used for cattle grazing. For larger animals, they use either those that attack their cattle or those that graze and browse together with cattle as indicators of the population trends. Researchers often identify local people's non-sustainable resource utilization as a cause for degradation of natural resources. The local people living inside Nech Sar National Park, however, associate the degradation with the prohibition of traditional land management practices, such as burning for renewing grass growth for their cattle and transhumance, by the park administration. These diverse perceptions call for action to bridge the knowledge and communication gap between researchers, park managers and local people. Improved knowledge exchange can be generated through more participatory and transdisciplinary research. This serves as an important step towards the development of innovative management approaches for Nech Sar National Park that effectively integrate local peoples' livelihood needs and the conservation of biodiversity and natural resources.

**Keywords:** Biodiversity, Ethiopia, indigenous knowledge, protected areas