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## Urban Needs and Protected Areas: Interfaces between Arba Minch Town and Nech Sar National Park in Southern Ethiopia

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### Abstract

In 1974, Nech Sar National Park was established in close vicinity of Arba Minch town, a then-regional capital in Southern Ethiopia. To understand the multi-dimensional interfaces and dependencies between the park and the town, empirical data was collected in 2010 through interviews, focus group discussions and participatory observation. Data was analysed by using the Social-Ecological Systems (SES) framework. Arba Minch inhabitants directly depend on the park in multiple ways. The ground water springs in the park are the major sources of water for Arba Minch. The park is also the most important tourist attraction in the area. Arba Minch inhabitants depend on the park to fulfil their demands for wood, construction material and fish. The park is the main source of wood supply in the area. Poor urban households gather wood from the forests in the park primarily for income generation. Farmers from the surrounding areas also collect wood in the park to sell it to town dwellers. The two large lakes in the park are used by fishermen who sell their catch in Arba Minch town. All these activities in the park are illegal and contribute to its ecological depletion and destruction. Consequently, ever since the park's establishment, there are severe conflicts between the park authorities who strive to maintain the park as a biodiversity hotspot and town dwellers who directly or indirectly depend on its resources. In more than three decades, however, the stakeholders were unable to develop and implement sustainable resource use concepts for the park. The situation calls for working beyond the limits of defending "conservation boundaries". The livelihood needs of the urban and rural people need to be integrated into biodiversity conservation activities. National conservation policies need to recognise local realities and develop and incorporate sustainable use strategies on the scale of integrated landscapes rather than dealing with protected areas as isolated units.

**Keywords:** Biodiversity governance, Ethiopia, national parks, protected areas