

“NEOLIBERAL CONSERVATION” IN ETHIOPIA: AN ANALYSIS OF CURRENT CONFLICTS IN AND AROUND PROTECTED AREAS AND THEIR RESOLUTION

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ABSTRACT Neoliberal conservation approaches have led to a rapid increase in African environmental protection practices since the 1990s. This paper aims to investigate the current management of protected areas (PAs), which is based on the neoliberal conservation approach adopted in Ethiopia in the 2000s, and to examine the cause and resolution of conflicts within the PA system. The results indicate that the state-private partnership established in the case of Nechisar National Park echoed the fortress conservation approach taken by the previous government and made conflicts with local communities more complicated and possibly unresolvable. Conversely, another case suggests that increased security with respect to the land and property rights of local communities reduces the incidence of land-use conflicts with park authorities. The new wildlife policy issued in 2007 may improve the overall community-based conservation dynamic and has great potential for providing improved solutions for conflicts due to increased understanding, appreciation, and valuing of local livelihoods by the government.

Key Words: Neoliberal conservation; Protected area; Ethiopia; Conflict; Natural resources.

INTRODUCTION

Many protected areas (PAs) in Africa have been the cause of conflict, particularly because the establishment of many PAs during the colonial era required forcible eviction of local communities. Colonial rulers and certain local elites had initially earmarked such areas for their own personal game hunting and excluded the local communities who had previously inhabited and depended upon the land for their livelihoods. As the importance of wildlife protection for environmental conservation is increasingly recognized, many have come to see the exclusion of local people in this context as justified. This approach, called “fortress conservation,” dominates the conceptualization and implementation of current conservation interventions. As a result, two situations of conflict have emerged. First, the practice of creating and maintaining PAs has caused severe clashes between park authorities and local communities. Second, the expansion of farmland into wilderness areas has resulted in competition for space and resources between humans and wildlife. These conflicts not only affect the disputing parties at the micro level but also have repercussions for a variety of external factors that drive changes in national conservation policies, organizational structures, and international environmental demands, and they can lead to further conflict and issues with resource allocation.

The fortress conservation approach, which excluded rural communities from a role in conserving their natural resources, is gradually making way for a new conservation approach known as community-based conservation (CBC) (Western & Wright, 1994). CBC places local communities at the center of conservation initiatives by empowering them to manage their natural resources and derive direct benefits from them. However, even though the concept of CBC was introduced at the end of the 1980s, local people in Africa are still not fully involved in land management and planning. This may be because the primary goal of most CBC projects is to generate and distribute proceeds from tourism and game hunting to local communities, rather than to facilitate the ownership of local property and natural resources by the community. In this context, the use of development as a conservation tool, sometimes labeled “neoliberal conservation,” considers economic growth and environmental protection to be mutually compatible. The neoliberal conservation approach takes into account the fact that “ecological services” can have true economic value, an aspect frequently neglected by previous approaches. As stated by Costanza et al. (1997: 253), “because ecosystem services are not fully ‘captured’ in commercial markets or adequately qualified in terms comparable with economic services and manufactured capital, they are often given too little weight in policy decisions.” Neoliberal conservation approaches, seeking to promote more profitable commodification of natural resources, tend to involve enclosing land as a means of protecting the natural environment.

In Africa, this approach has led to a rapid increase in conservation practices. For example, in Eastern and Southern Africa, privately owned lands play a particularly important role in conserving critical biodiversity. The establishment of trans-boundary PAs in these regions, in accordance with agreements with neighboring countries, represents an important development in PA governance in Africa (Munthali, 2007), with PAs now occupying 15.9% of the total land area in eastern and southern Africa (Newmark, 2008). In accordance with neoliberal principles, this expansion of the geographic area of PAs is expected to increase the size of the potential tourism market. Büscher et al. (2012: 4) commented, “neoliberal conservation shifts the focus from how nature is used in and through the expansion of capitalism, to how nature is conserved in and through the expansion of capitalism.” New types of management, including some involving the private sector, and co-management initiatives such as NGO/private sector, state/private sector, and state/NGO initiatives, emerged through the 1980s and 1990s and have formed networks that promote programs focused on development-oriented conservation.

Neoliberal approaches can influence positive conservation outcomes because PAs are less economically exploitable, although limited concerns related to tourism do exist. Only highly market-oriented interventions have caused problems, such as animal abuse, as used to be seen “canned hunting” (hunting wild animals in a confined area, from which they cannot escape) in South Africa. Conversely, neoliberal conservation is sometimes criticized in terms of local participation. This approach is, in theory, expected to promote increased democracy and

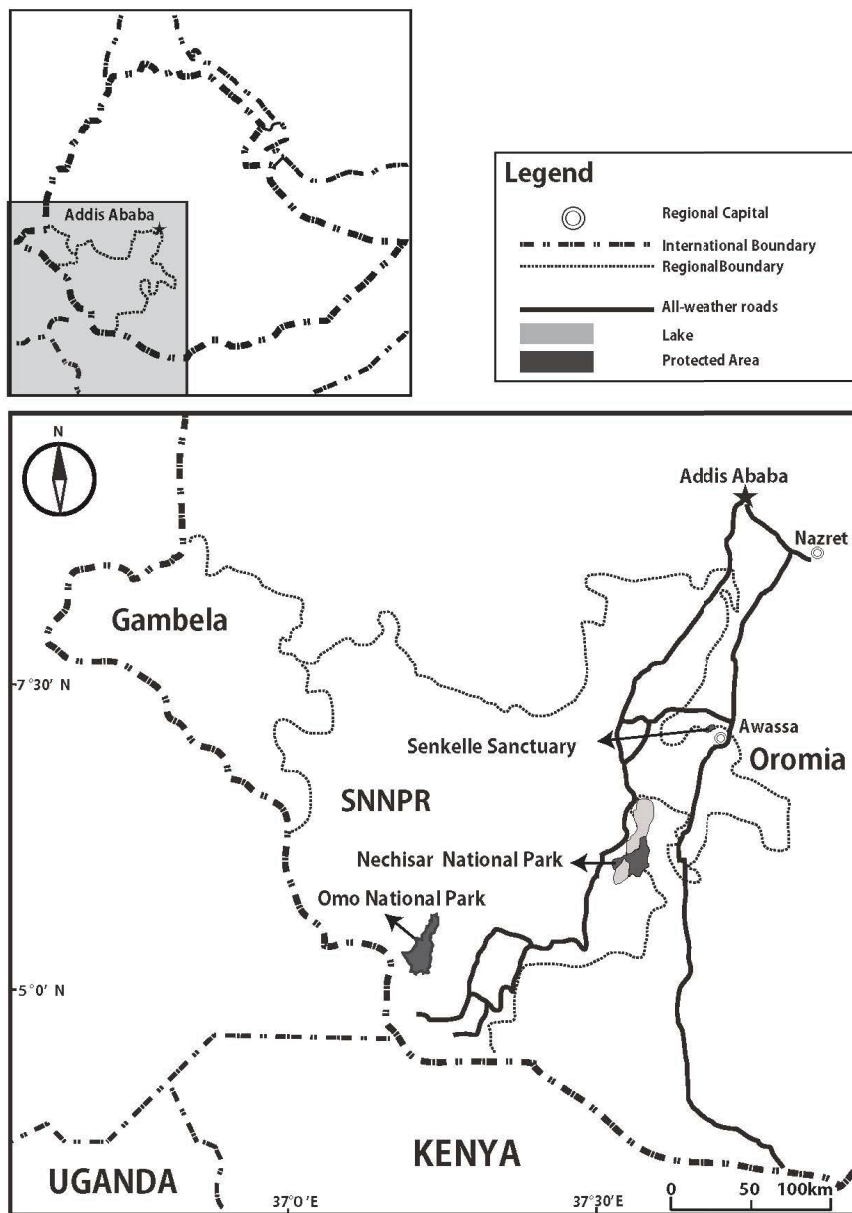


Fig. 1. Ethiopia and the location of the protected areas

participation and to protect rural communities and business practices. However, whether current conservation interventions actually deliver on these points remains open to question.⁽¹⁾

In this paper, I investigate the effects of neoliberal conservation in Ethiopia using data collected at Senkelle Swayne's Hartebeest Sanctuary between 2008 and 2014 and Nechisar National Park in August 2008 (Fig. 1). I describe the introduction and infiltration of neoliberal conservation in Ethiopia, examining some of the country's relevant wildlife laws that directly govern the PA system, and analyze the background of institutional change in the area using a case study of a 'privatized' PA. I also briefly reconsider conflict resolution in the context of another PA case.

THE INTRODUCTION OF NEOLIBERAL CONSERVATION

I. Protected Areas and Wildlife Policy in Ethiopia

Wildlife regulation in Ethiopia was introduced in 1908, during the reign of Emperor Menelik II, in the form of a nine-article law strictly forbidding the hunting of young elephants (EWCA, 2012). Ethiopian ivory exports, which were at their highest between 1900 and 1909, consequently decreased sharply in 1910 (Donham & James, 2002). In 1944, three years after Ethiopia's brief period under colonial rule (1936–1941), the first Preservation of Game Proclamation was issued, which defined wildlife as a finite natural resource. Similar proclamations and regulations were also endorsed following the establishment of the Department of Forestry, Game, and Fishery by the Ministry of Agriculture in 1945. The Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Organization (EWCO) was established in 1965 and formally recognized as an autonomous body five years later under Order No. 65/1970. Subsequently, Awash and Semien National Parks were established in 1969 as the first Ethiopian PAs.

In 1974, Marxist revolutionaries overthrew the Ethiopian monarchy and declared the country a socialist state. During the socialist regime (1974–1991), only three PAs were established (Fig. 2). However, the new government maintained previously established wildlife management policies, taking a fortress conservation approach. During this time, local people were not given the means to maintain access to conservation areas and manage the natural resources therein, placing the local population in conflict with conservation objectives. In 1980, the Forest and Wildlife Authority was established, and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild fauna and Flora (CITES) was ratified in 1989.

At the time of the overthrow of the socialist regime in 1991 and in response to the previous regime's approach, local people attempted to resist the government's control of natural resources, even going so far as to attack park officers in an attempt to regain lost access to resources. The new government, led by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), started

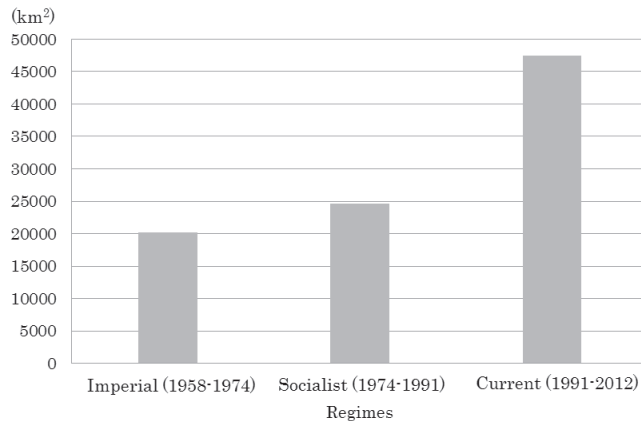


Fig. 2. Total area of protected areas in Ethiopia
Source: Based on data from EWCA (2012).

to rehabilitate the facilities.

In 1993, the responsibilities of the Forest and Wildlife Authority were transferred to the Ministry of Natural Resources Development and Environmental Protection, and then to the Ministry of Agriculture, when the Constitution of Ethiopia was adopted in 1995. The constitution promoted ethnic states and regions, consolidating and extending government decentralization (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995), including with regard to the management of wildlife and PAs. As a result, PA management, with the exception of two federally administered areas, was transferred to regional governments. This reflects a shift to a more community-oriented approach, perhaps influenced by global CBC trends.

In 1998, the duties and responsibilities of the Wildlife Conservation Authority were transferred to the Biodiversity Conservation and Research Institute, and then, in 2003, to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. During the period from 1997 to 2008, 10 more PAs were created. Thus, the total area of PAs increased with each regime. In 2007, the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority (EWCA) was established, with the mission of facilitating active participation in and unification of parks and other PAs in the name of wildlife conservation. Currently, 20 national parks and three sanctuaries are distributed across Ethiopia’s nine ethnically based administrative regions and two self-governing administrations. PAs range in area from 19.4 km² to 6,987 km², encompassing a total area of 52,478 km² and occupying 4.7% of the total land area of Ethiopia.

II. Privatization of PA Management

Immediately following decentralization in 1995, the federal government struggled with chronic budget shortages and PA management problems. However,

between 2004 and 2010, Ethiopia's GDP grew by an average of 11% per year. This high economic growth may have influenced the transition from the government's sluggish wildlife management to a neoliberal conservation approach. Accordingly, in 2004, the federal government placed Ethiopia's national parks under the management of African Parks, an NGO devoted to international conservation that was established in 2003. African Parks has started to negotiate with each government to manage the national parks in Zambia, Malawi and Ethiopia (African Parks, 2003). Currently, the organization manages seven parks (covering 4.1 million hectares) in six countries: Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, the Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Zambia. By 2020, African Parks aims to increase the number of parks it manages to 15. According to The African Parks web site explains the incentive to manage the state-owned PAs as follows: "[I]n Africa, properly managed protected areas are not just important for preserving biological diversity, they are also some of the continent's greatest economic assets ... although there are over 1,200 formally registered national parks in Africa, many exist on paper alone." This is a typical neoliberal view, wherein natural resources are regarded as economic assets, and re-orientation of the poor management of African PAs is encouraged. The involvement of African Parks and the introduction of tourism-oriented management strategies were triggered by issues of underfunding and limited management expertise among Ethiopian authorities at the time.

In 2004, Nechisar National Park in Ethiopia's southern region was the country's first park to be managed by African Parks. The park, whose 514 square kilometers of territory include the Nechisar ("white grass") Plains, was officially established in 1974 to protect Swayne's hartebeest and other wildlife.

III. Recurrence of Conflicts with Local Communities

The African Parks approach combines conservation practices with business expertise, placing importance on the economic benefit of promoting ecotourism. The federal government has similarly prioritized tourism development to encourage the influx of foreign expenditure. For example, since 2005, several development schemes have been promoted under the Ministry of Tourism and Development (formerly the Tourism Commission) to attract and maintain tourism and to encourage investment by the private sector.

Under the management of African Parks, visitors to Nechisar National Park steadily increased from 2004 to 2007 (African Parks, 2007). Subsequently, the organization proposed the reintroduction of big game (such as elephants and buffalo) to restore biodiversity, as well as the erection of extensive game fencing. This proposal was justified as a way to reduce human-wildlife conflict; however, enclosing much of the park would also cause conflicts between governments and local communities.

Nechisar National Park had been the site of frequent conflicts with surrounding communities since its inception, and the contract agreement between African Parks and the federal and regional governments called for the eviction of over

10,000 Kore and Guji people who inhabited or utilized the park illegally. It was agreed that implementation of the agreement would commence once park authorities had completed the resettlement of people illegally occupying the park.

In this way, the regional government took a classical fortress conservation approach by enforcing the eviction of local people between 2004 and 2005. According to one international human rights NGO, the federal and regional governments relocated 1,020 Kore families, promising to provide land, a clinic, schools, and wells along with food and approximately 17 USD⁽²⁾ per person in moving compensation. These promises were not, however, fully fulfilled, and in 2004, 463 houses belonging to Guji people were burned down by police and park authorities (Refugees International, 2004; 2005). These actions sparked considerable criticism from international human rights organizations.

Subsequently, African Parks attempted to directly negotiate with the Guji people. While agreements were reached with some Guji communities, they were ultimately not formally recognized. In December 2007, African Parks ceded management of the park prior to the end date stipulated in its contract, citing the Oromia regional government’s uncooperative negotiations with the Guji people as a major factor in its withdrawal (African Parks, 2012).

In 2005, African Parks started another conservation project in Omo National Park (4,068 km²), which had been established in 1966. However, in 2008, African Parks withdrew from this park as well, again citing conflicts over unsustainable use of the parks by local people. African Parks further criticized a human rights organization for their campaign (African Parks, 2012).

The neoliberal conservation approach taken by African Parks echoed the fortress conservation approach taken by the government in previous years, particularly in terms of the distrust of local people. For example, the Guji were forcibly evicted from the park in 1982 (Getachew, 2007; Abiyot, 2009), decades before their subsequent re-eviction under Africa Parks’ management in 2004. Later, at the end of the socialist regime and immediately afterwards, Nechisar National Park suffered considerable human-inflicted damage, and as a result, the Guji returned to their traditional grazing areas in the park.

Although Africa Parks predicates its actions on the promise of “future benefit,” it is evident from the aforementioned examples that forced resettlement conclusively deepened the split between park authorities and local communities. Local people strongly resisted African Parks’ commodification of conservation. This may be because, as one SNNPR (Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People’s Region, one of Ethiopia’s nine ethnic divisions) government official involved in local community negotiations explained, the conservation of PAs is a single issue among many other region-specific ones that either transcend or conflict with conservation concerns.⁽³⁾

IV. The 2007 Proclamation to Provide for the Development, Conservation, and Utilization of Wildlife

The federal government issued a new wildlife law in 2007, in the midst of

struggles among the park authority, African Parks, and the local communities. Concurrent with the establishment of the EWCA, the new federal wildlife policy, issued under proclamation No. 541/2007, encouraged the development of wildlife resources—specifically, their sustainable, yet increasingly market-oriented, utilization. Accordingly, the administration of all PAs shifted from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. One purpose of this policy was that it promoted wildlife-based tourism and encouraged private investment. For example, Article 6 indicated that private investors can be authorized to administer wildlife conservation areas via concession agreements with the federal government.

However, the law also regarded local communities as important stakeholders in PA administration. For example, the Wildlife Development, Conservation and Utilization Council of Ministers Regulations No. 163/2008 ensured that “Community Wildlife Development and Utilization Areas,” located outside the PAs and administered by the government or private concessionaires, were managed and utilized by the local community. Thus, local communities, which had long been prevented from accessing natural resources within PAs, are now allowed to partake in their economic utilization (such as in ecotourism and sport hunting), providing that the income is used for community development and conservation activities.

Also of note is that people inhabiting the regions surrounding PAs are permitted to engage in the seasonal utilization of natural resources, such as beekeeping, honey harvesting, cutting, taking, or foraging of vegetation, under controlled conditions. Game hunting is allowed for people over 18 years old who possess a resident hunter license (available for a yearly fee of 2,000 birr). People are also permitted to hunt, under controlled conditions, wildlife that endanger human life or damage property.

Recent wildlife policies and regulations emphasize development-oriented conservation, the practical use of tourism, and the local people’s participation in natural resource management and utilization. However, there is a tendency for the federal government to regain control of conservation area management from the regional government. The three types of wildlife conservation areas (national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and reserves, and controlled hunting areas) are administered by both federal and regional governments. Consequently, the federal government now has much greater sovereignty over PAs than it has had in previous years, because the private sector must have concession agreements with both the federal and regional governments to take part in PA management. In this sense, the administrative sphere of the federal administration has been expanding since the government embarked on decentralization in the mid-1990s following the 1992 constitution of the transitional government of Ethiopia.

SANCTUARIES AS *DE FACTO* “COMMUNITY WILDLIFE DEVELOPMENT AND UTILIZATION AREAS”

Senkelle Swayne’s Hartebeest Sanctuary (36.4 km²) is located on the west side of the Great Rift Valley, 300 km south of Addis Ababa. The Arsi Oromo ethnic group grazed livestock and cultivated the land in the region before the sanctuary was established, and has a deep psychological attachment to the area (Nishizaki, 2004). When the sanctuary was established in 1976 to protect the Swayne’s hartebeest, an endangered and endemic species, the park authority regarded the area as a no-man’s land, and ignored the concerns of the local people.

In 1991, at the very end of the socialist regime, local people started to destroy the sanctuary’s office buildings, steal office equipment, and poach hartebeests. They justified these actions as retaliation for misdeeds of the sanctuary’s officers. Taking advantage of the unsettled political situation, the Arsi Oromo escalated their resistance against the park authority and its conservation policies (Nishizaki, 2004). For example, they openly grazed livestock and collected firewood within the sanctuary and began to reclaim and reoccupy land there.

Tourism in the Senkelle sanctuary remained underdeveloped because relatively small animals such as hartebeest, oribi, and bushbuck did not satisfy tourists seeking big game. In response, the foreign conservation organization Al Wabra Wildlife Preservation (AWWP) provided financial support to the park authority between 2002 and 2005. This support, which included the employment of additional scouts from local communities and strengthened patrols, was deemed a success in terms of increased hartebeest numbers and decreased poaching (AWWP, 2005). In this sense, the typical fortress conservation approach at the time of the socialist regime was replaced by an incoherent approach that still depended on bringing local communities under control.

However, in recent years, the park authority has also begun to understand the needs of the local community, allowing them to utilize the land adjoining the sanctuary and the natural resources within the sanctuary. For example, since 2005, local people from six villages (*kebeles*) have been allowed to access the grassland in the sanctuary for a month in the dry season for the purpose of cutting and collecting grass (*Pennisetum sphacelatum*) for roof thatching and fuel (Fig. 3).

Additionally, following the onset of the Arsi Oromo occupation of the state farm and sanctuary from 1995 onward, formal distribution of land was conducted in 2006, because land shortages were presumed to be a major factor influencing reoccupation.⁽⁴⁾ When I surveyed the area in 1999, about 1,400 huts surrounded the sanctuary in a tight row extending 20 km along its border, and farmland extended out from these huts toward the original village (Nishizaki, 2004). Current formal land distribution follows the same strategies as previous efforts: land is reorganized among the six villages (*kebeles*) bordering the sanctuary, then distributed using the traditional clan (*gosa*) system, the people’s own cultural method.



Fig. 3. Left: Local people cut, collect, and carry grass in the sanctuary, Right: House of the Oromo people, prepared for roof thatching (February 2014)



Fig. 4. Left: A reservoir, called *haro*, that had been utilized by local communities and whose use is now prohibited (February 1999), Right: A well was constructed by the government (February 2014)

In addition to land distribution, social development programs in the 2000s provided local communities with highly desired clinics, schools, and wells. Of particular importance was drinking water, which had not been available in this area for a long time. Thus, local communities specifically negotiated with the park authority, using the water situation as a strategy to delay negotiation with the park authority regarding their use of the sanctuary as pasture land because they knew that the government could not construct a well quickly. However, the government finally constructed the well (Fig. 4) and began to negotiate land issues with the local people. These cases indicate that the current relationship between the park authority and the local communities contributes to the avoidance of land-use conflict resolution.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, I analyzed the current neoliberal conservation approach adopted in Ethiopia in the 2000s, examining how conflicts embedded in the current PA

system were caused and solved, and focusing on recent dynamics in the relationship between park authorities and local communities.

The case of Nechisar National Park is an example of advanced neoliberal conservation policy. In this case, the federal government combined its development-oriented policy with the market-oriented approach favored by international conservation bodies. This necessitated controlling the conservation areas with an iron fist, leading to the contradictory approach of forcible resettlement, combined with occasional emphasis on “community participation.” This contrasts with the conventional conservation approach taken by powerful international outsiders who support PA management—not only in financial terms, but also in terms of providing local communities with a central role in land and resource management. Iwai (2009: 73) called this approach “community-friendly fortress conservation.” This kind of governance of PAs makes conflicts with local communities more complicated, and possibly even unresolvable, because they necessitate negotiation with an essentially invisible external party.

Another complication of neoliberal conservation is that once a program seems to have failed, external agents can easily withdraw from the landscape. African Parks insisted on modern, results-focused PA-management techniques rather than more traditional, governmentally favored procedures. However, because the biologically diverse ecosystems in question are extremely complex, conservation interventions in such areas require long-term management. In this case, an adaptive management approach based on learning and observation and reliance on clearly established scientific and social processes may be required.

Based on these findings, we can conclude that successful co-management involving integration of the government, local communities, and the private sector is seldom successful. While governments have expected the private sector to make strong conservation interventions, they have also partially retained the classical approach by extending centralized government control over wildlife, land, and other natural resources. Consequently, the displacement of populations continues, ignoring the land rights and human rights of the local people. Such actions have drawn criticism, not only from local communities but also from international human rights organizations. As a result, co-management is regarded as a failure in this context.

The case of the Senkelle Sanctuary further illustrates the local, sometimes violent, conflicts that accompany the clarification of PA borders by conservation agencies. If enlarging the PA area had been the only measure taken by the park authority in 2006, conflict may have intensified, as it did in the case of Nechisar National Park. Instead, the government conducted formal land distribution to local communities in order to reduce illegal land occupation, and allowed limited use of the sanctuary’s grassland. Some antipathy remains in this relationship, especially when grass shortages result in livestock feed shortfalls, but this strategy has allowed for the temporary avoidance of more severe conflict. However, while certain local people are currently permitted to use grassland in selected areas, the anticipated rapid market expansion is expected to lead to significant ecosystem disturbance. Thus, ecological surveys and some form of control over foraging

and collection will inevitably be necessary. Furthermore, the ability of the local people to provide environmental governance by managing land and natural resources is not recognized.

The government's wildlife policy, issued in 2007, authorized the private sector and local communities to jointly administer PAs, emphasizing development-oriented conservation. The prevalence of neoliberal forms of governance is still clearly observable; for example, EWCA aims to make Ethiopia one of Africa's top five countries in wildlife tourism by 2020 (EWCA, 2012). Additionally, following widespread decentralization in 1995, the federal government aims to promote the triad of state, market, and community as a superior structure for PA management. These efforts are partially supported by the aforementioned 2008 regulations, which allowed for PA management and resource utilization by local communities, as had been customarily allowed in previous years. However, the federal government also increased the number of PAs over which they have management authority. Therefore, in a sense, Ethiopia's current wildlife policy aggressively promotes development-oriented conservation, which echoes neoliberal conservation, but still contains inherent contradictions: decentralization vs. centralization, CBC vs. fortress conservation.

This study also examined some cases of local conflict resolution. While local people have mainly used aggressive measures, such as poaching, illegal collection of firewood, and land enclosure, some have been receptive to conservation efforts, as seen in the anti-poaching effort conducted in Mago National Park (Nishizaki, 2009). Using various styles of resistance, including the "weapons of the weak" (Scott, 1985), local people are negotiating with park authorities to regain control over land and natural resources and thereby to improve their daily livelihoods. Sometimes, it is possible to find potential for co-management of natural resources that involves both the authorities and the local residents. The Senkelle is also a very rare case in which such results were achieved through tough negotiations. However, the greatest challenge for co-management is that the park authority still regards the local community as a threat that contributes to environmental degradation.

The first step in solving conflicts is to understand, appreciate, and properly evaluate local praxis before criticizing communities for their lack of education, limited project capacity, and weak local institutions. Local people have experienced a long history of conservation, from which they have learned and developed coping strategies. In this context, there is sometimes very little room for conflict resolution. Currently, the greatest challenge in this regard is to correct the imbalance of power among multiple stakeholders. For example, local praxis is generally only recognized at the most local level, such as within a conservation area. While some individual park staff members place high importance on maintaining a good relationship with the local community, others are indifferent to or completely ignore local residents. Additionally, there is a huge divide between local praxis and wildlife policymakers or project representatives at higher levels.

In some respects, the new wildlife policy may improve the overall community—

conservation dynamic. For example, the Community Wildlife Development and Utilization Areas, a new PA category defined in 2007, have great potential to provide better solutions to conflicts between the park authority and local communities. If properly managed by local communities, such areas can generate local profit while preserving customary rights to natural resources.

However, in the past few years, massive amounts of land in Ethiopia have been bought by foreign organizations (Robertson & Pinstруп-Andersen, 2010), depriving communities of their land-use rights, destroying traditional farming methods and knowledge, and sometimes displacing communities from their ancestral lands and natural environment. In light of this recent land-grabbing trend, it is likely that the additional zoning required to establish Community Wildlife Development and Utilization Areas will generate new conflicts, and it is essential that national and global wildlife management policies take this into consideration. Ultimately, conflict resolution cannot be applied as a single, generalizable argument; instead, it must be experimental and context-specific, whether local, national, or global.

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NOTES

- (1) See, for example, Sullivan & Igoe (2010).
- (2) One USD was equivalent in value to about 8.6 ETB in 2004.
- (3) Informant: K/S, age approximately 50 years, who had worked for the regional government (SNNPR) in Jinka and Awasa for about 30 years. Interview was conducted in Jinka on December 30, 2012.
- (4) Officially, all land in Ethiopia is owned by the government, but individuals have customary rights.

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