ETHIOPIA’S CHURCH FORESTS
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HOW CHURCHES ARE THE GATEKEEPERS OF ETHIOPIA’S FORESTS

by

Lori Robinson

24 April 2015
“The best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago. The next best time is now.”
*Chinese proverb.*

In the highlands of Ethiopia, American scientist Meg Lowman is working with local forest ecologist Alemayehu Wassie to protect ancient church forests.

As in many developing countries, much of Ethiopia’s original forests have been cleared for subsistence agriculture and for harvesting timber and firewood, diminishing northern Ethiopia’s forest cover from 45% of its territory in the early 20th century to less than 5 percent today.

A large portion of the remaining forests is concentrated in the northern part of the country, especially in the Lake Tana area. There, bright-green patches of trees surround 3,500 Orthodox Tewahido Churches – a consequence of the Church’s belief in maintaining a woodland home for all God’s creatures around the place of worship.
Worshippers make their way through a church forest. ©Meg Lowman.
Worshippers wait under old growth trees at the church in Aunara, Bahir Dar region. ©Raïsa Mirza.
A white cheeked-turaco is just one of many extraordinary birds depending on the forests. ©Christian Boix.
Debresna church forest from above. Image by Google Earth.
The forests are said to be necklaces around the church, and the tree canopy is believed to prevent prayers from being lost to the sky. According to the Alliance of Religions and Conservation, an estimated five to ten percent of wild lands across the globe are currently held by religious organisations.

Ranging in size from five acres to more than 1,000, some of Ethiopia’s church forests are more than 1,500 years old. All are remnants of the country’s Afromontane forests, are cooler and more humid than the surrounding lowlands, and many have fresh water springs. These church forests have become the centerpiece in the struggle to conserve what remains of northern Ethiopia’s biodiversity.

“They are native seed banks for the future of that landscape,” says Dr. Wassie.
Spiritually designated woods sequester carbon, conserve water, reduce soil erosion, and provide shade and medicine.

Besides being rich in biodiversity, these spiritually designated woods sequester carbon, conserve water, reduce soil erosion, and provide shade and natural medicine. They also harbour pollinator species, including native bees and other insects that add value to outlying crops.

But threats to Ethiopia’s church forests are many. Villagers harvest the timber, cattle trample and eat seedlings, and farmers cultivate the wooded edges. Pressure from a rapidly...
growing population, 80% of whom live in rural areas and rely on subsistence agriculture, as well as warming temperatures that have forced farmers to shift their plantations to higher elevations, have taken their toll.
Pressure from a rapidly growing population has taken its toll

Lacking alternatives, the priests sometimes use the wood to repair their church, to make charcoal for church activities, and to carve sacred utensils. Plants from the forest are eaten or used to make dyes. Deadfall is sold to congregants for cash.

“The biggest solutions to these forests comes from inside: the church members and clergy who believe they are the stewards of all of God’s creatures, a similar mission to us as conservation biologists. We all understand that the sad thing about vanishing forest islands is once they are gone, we will never know what used to live there or what might be missing or extinct.”
“Forest patches are like families of trees, and trees are the building blocks of life on Earth. One of the most successful ‘machines’ for storing carbon, trees transform sunlight into energy and food. Forests around the world provide homes for up to half of the species on our planet. They also provide spiritual sanctuary. Humans could not live if trees and forests were not part of our environment,” Lowman says.
A parent of two grown boys, Meg Lowman compares trees to mothers: “We have a great deal in common.”

Trees are the heart of productivity of many ecosystems. Just as mothers function as the biological center of birth and life, trees provide sustenance for their entire community. They quietly drive important functions that make all life possible in the surrounding ecosystem.

“If only I, as a mother, could have achieved as much as a tree,” Meg says with a smile.
A grivet monkey makes its way across a branch in the church forest canopy. ©Raïsa Mirza.

Churches aren’t the only establishments to protect forests. Trees have long been part of the foundations of these baths in the town of Gondar. ©Christian Boix.

Cows graze in a field in front of Bete Maryam near Addis Ababa. Local legend has it that Jesus’ mother, Maryam, ascended to heaven from this hill. A church in her honor is located at the very top, overlooking the valley. ©Raïsa Mirza
Sacred places are being recognized for their value as conservation sites

“If we can better understand the complexities of biodiversity, then the chance of survival for all Earth’s life forms will certainly grow,” says Wassie. On the twenty-eight Church sites he identified as containing high biodiversity, the team is helping the local people build protective rock walls around the forests.

“The locals consider the forests as jewellery to the church, and the walls are the clothing. We have invoked a cultural shift for conservation because now all the churches want walls built around their ‘naked’ forests,” says Meg.
When viewed from above, it’s apparent that unsustainable deforestation has rendered these church woodlands as green island sanctuaries scattered among bare land, fields, pastures and human settlements.

Thanks to researchers like Lowman and Wassie these sacred places are beginning to be recognised for their value as conservation sites worth studying and protecting. “The Church and scientists like Dr. Wassie and I have the same mission. They call it God’s creatures and we call it biodiversity, but we’re all trying to conserve it,” says Lowman.

For more about this project visit the Tree Foundation.
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The Suri people of South Western Ethiopia and South Sudan form part of the Surma ethnic group which includes the Mursi and Me’en people. Collectively they number over 180,000. They are sedentary pastoralists with villages located in remote, often desolate regions where they survive chiefly on the milk and blood of their cattle. Having lived in Ethiopia for four years, photographer Trevor Cole has come to love the diversity of culture and people in the country. “It is a land which lends itself to photography as the people still have an inextricable bond with their environment,” he says.

“The country is so diverse in terms of landscapes and it is this which has shaped the people who live there.

There is a quote from Paul Caponegro which comes to mind when photographing the Ethiopian people - ‘It’s one thing to make a picture of what a person looks like, it’s another thing to make a portrait of who they are.’”

See more of Trevor Cole’s work at Alternative Visions
At a young age, to beautify themselves for marriage, some Suri women pierce their bottom lip, increasingly inserting large discs made of clay or wood. This is usually combined with the excision of the two lower front teeth. The lip plate is also a sign of social or economical importance in this and other tribes.
The Suri people of Ethiopia

A young Suri woman shucks seeds from their pods.
The Suri people of Ethiopia

Suri children are often painted with clay. Here a young boy looks into a mirror as he decorates his face in a traditional pattern.
The Suri people of Ethiopia

One of the newest members of the tribe looks up at the photographer.
The Suri people of Ethiopia

Young Suri boys covered in dirt and remnants of decorative body paint.
The Suri people of Ethiopia
The Suri people of Ethiopia

Suri girls take to the water.
The Suri people of Ethiopia

Suri boys waiting for the ‘Donga’, a traditional stick fighting ceremony.
Using cloth and woven grass for protection on his wrists and elbows, a Suri man takes part in the 'Donga' stick fighting ceremony. This is a fierce tradition and there are often injuries. It is a way for men to impress girls by demonstrating their bravery and their willingness to protect the tribe and their cattle.
The Suri people of Ethiopia

A young Suri boy.
The Suri people of Ethiopia

An elderly Suri woman smokes a traditional pipe.
Africa Geographic Photographer of the Year 2015

A selection from this weeks entries
24 April 2015

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Kenya’s Mara River teems with life during the annual migration.

Early morning in Kenya’s Maasai Mara.

Africa Geographic Photographer of the Year 2015

Leopards find a good vantage point to survey the Timbavati Game Reserve in South Africa. Image by Christof Schoeman. Wildlife/Scenic category.

Canon EF 200-400mm f/4L IS USM
A Himba child runs to catch up with a family member in the arid Kunene Region of Namibia. Image by Devon Macrae. People/Culture category.
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A tribesman in the Omo Valley of Ethiopia.
Image by Randy Hanna. People/Culture category.
Like water off a rhino’s back.

Image by George Diam Balan. **Wildlife/Scenic category.**
A bend in the Luangwa River, South Luangwa, Zambia.

A lechwe leaves a trail of water in the Okavango Delta, Botswana.

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Maasai initiates near Ngorongoro Crater, Tanzania.

Image by Shirli Carswell. People/Culture category.
A leopard looks back in Sabi Sands Private Game Reserve, South Africa.

Image by Mike Sutherland. *Wildlife/Scenic category.*
A chameleon caught in mid stride in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa.

Image by Mike Sutherland. Wildlife/Scenic category.
A young Himba woman in Northern Namibia.
Image by Tertius Jordaan. People/Culture category.
Something has caught the attention of these two young lions in Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, between South African and Botswana.

A dirt road leading to Nxai pan in Botswana.


Canon EF 200-400mm f/4L IS USM
Visiting elephants of Samburu National Reserve, Kenya.

Image by Devon Macrae. Travel category.
Elephants on the run in Kruger National Park, South Africa.

Image by Mike Sutherland. Wildlife/Scenic category.
Contributors

FORESTS OF EDEN

&

SURI

Issue 43, 24 April 2015

LORI ROBINSON sold her California home and most of her
belongings in 2009 for a simpler more nomadic life. As a lover of the wild, Lori strives to live more connected to the rhythms of nature. She rotates between California, New Mexico, Wyoming and Africa writing about wildlife and wild places and working on her memoir. She designs and leads safaris to Africa and is a contributor to Africa Geographic, Travelers Tales and Conscious Lifestyle Magazine, and the founder of SavingWild.com where you can find interviews with the world’s top conservationists, book reviews, and stories about Lori’s lifelong friendship with Dr. Jane Goodall. In FORESTS OF EDEN Lori expounds on the importance of forests and how some churches in Ethiopia have become islands for trees and the creatures that depend on them.

RAISA MIRZA grew up between Bangladesh and Montreal, Canada, spending most of her time reading National Geographic magazines and dreaming of wild, open spaces. She works in the intersection of community development, food security and behavior change communications. Through her photography, she aims to portray the diversity of the world’s people and wild spaces, while changing people’s perceptions
of the developing world. Currently living and working in Ethiopia, Raïsa brings us images of the churches and forests that are protected by them in FORESTS OF EDEN You can find more of her work on her Facebook page.

Born in the City of Derry, TREVOR COLE is a native of Ireland yet he has lived most of my life outside the bounds of Ireland – in England, Singapore, Togo, Italy, Ethiopia and Brazil. Photography, together with travel, have become two of his life’s passions. Trevor’s imagery focuses on culture, landscapes and wildlife; images which reflect a spatial and temporal journey through life and which try to convey a need to live in a more sustainable world. He seeks the moment and the light in whatever context he finds himself and endeavours to use his photographic acumen to turn the ordinary into the extraordinary. Published in multiple magazines, Trevor has also presented to The Royal Geographical Society and to tertiary institutions in Ireland. He has also exhibited in Ethiopia and Ireland. Having lived in Ethiopia for four years, Trevor has come to love the diversity of culture and people in the country. He gives us a glimpse of that in his gallery SURI.