

A DAY IN NECH-SAR NATIONAL PARK

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I was recently in Arba Minch town some 500km south of Addis, for two weeks fieldwork at the Arba Minch Hospital. You may wonder how the flood is going on up there, as the media is propagating about the heavy rain basically in the south. This is a dry season in and around Arba-Minch, hot and very comfortable compared to the heavy rain and cold in Addis. The summer will begin some where in mid September, we saw few days of rain. However we have encountered two or three damaged bridges on the way to Arba Minch as a result of heavy rain somewhere in the highlands. I would like to pass my heart-felt sympathy and condolences for the huge number of innocent life we have scarified for the heavy rain this summer.



As to our plan to visit the Nech-Sar National park we finalized payment and procedures before one day and on early Sunday morning (August, 27/06) we reach at the park get. The park is located right at the eastern edge of Arba-Minch some five minutes drive from the downtown, Sikala. Unfortunately there was an expected heavy rain on that particular night and the officials advised us to cancel our visit as the rain may have damaged especially the near by roads. This was our last chance to visit the park, we will be back to Addis in few days time,

plus our guide convinced us to try and came back otherwise. It was true the road was really slippery and water from the nearby Kulfo River has covered part of the road. After few kilometers drive came the worst, a very big Ficus (Sholla) tree fallen in the night because of the heavy rain blocked the road. We get time to come out the car and look around, with the birds song and the morning sun through the thick forest it is amazingly beautiful, similar to my perception to heaven in my child hood. When we try to pass by the side of the fallen tree our car get stacked in the mud. After few straggle, help from the scouts and the strong car (hard top Toyota Land Cruiser) we get out of the mud and cross the Kulfo River. Here, every thing starts changing. The road becomes to be dry and relatively comfortable, as we drive up the mountains we left behind the beautiful forest and followed by Acacia woodland. All of a sudden our car was filled with a seriously biting Tse-Tse fly (vector of Trypanosomiasis). Stragglng with the flies and the heavy road on the sharp mountains we all were frustrated for not seeing a single animal except the plenty baboons and the many promises of the guide.



After a hard drive we reach on the middle of the mountain were one can see the two lakes side by side. The magnificent site and the kind of natural beauty God has granted to this area amazed us. The land we are now is called the bridge of God (Ye'egzr dildeye) that divides the two lakes Abaya and Chamo by few kilometers.

Abaya is the biggest lake of the Ethiopian rift system brownish in color. Chamo is light green and biologically productive full of algae thus fishes, crocodile and even hippos. From here beautiful



Small Island covered by trees are seen from a distance. No one was ready to leave this area but since we have a long way a head we were forced to drive up the bushy mountain by our guide. When we are done with the mountain every thing has changed again. There happened to be a flat Plato (typical of Ethiopian highlands) surrounded by mountains and the plain covered by a whitish dry grass (*Chrysopogon aucheri*). The name of the park itself emanated from this area; Nech-Sar literally means white grass. In this area one fined the Zebras (berchelle zebra) in plenty.

They form groups of three to ten, they are not afraid of humans when we try to approach them they just run a little and keep on enjoying the grass. The Zebras are really Donkeys except that they are beautiful, very big and extremely comfortable. This is another amazing site in the park, we have also saw Gazelles (Yemeda feyel), Koreke, dik dik (Midakoa),bush buck, warthoges and a number of birds. But these once were from a distance and run away when approached by humans. Then we drive up to the eastern foots of mount Amaro, Mome hills. To see small hot spring mainly used by the local people as holly water (Medhanealem Tsebel).



Now we remain with two sites one is the crocodile market where one can see plenty of crocodiles enjoying the sun at a particular shore of lake Chamo and the other is the forty springs from which the name of the town Arba Minch derived. We were unable to access the first, as the road is very difficult and damaged. We drive back to the forest to see the springs, by this time the mud has dried and the road is very safe. The springs are not actually forty they are so many may be more than hundred flow from small holes at bottom of a very big mountain. The guide showed us the cleanness of the water using



Godere leaf. The water from the springs is collected and pumped up the mountain for the town consumption, and thus the region water authority protects the area. The remaining water flow to a small pond, the clean ness of the water in the pond is amazing to extent shows you small fishes swimming. Kids from the near by enjoy the pond together with the fishes.

Something funny, still today mothers send kids to the forest just to collect fire woods and fetch few fishes for lunch or dinner. In this area I am more absorbed by the moist underground water forest than the springs. It is not a very thick forest dominated by very big



indigenous trees such as Ficus (*Ficus sycamorous*), Dokima(*syzigium guineese*), Tikur Enchet (*Prunus africana*) and different large lianas. The canopy is totally covered and when you go deeper and deeper in to the forest you will once again be amazed with the beauty of nature. The extreme silence except the melodious sounds of the beautiful birds and monkeys which jumping branch to branch enjoying fruits of the trees, feels your soul with a different joy beyond words to express. Different kinds of monkeys like the black and white colobus (Gureza), grevet and vervet monkey and different apes and baboons are very common.



This extremely beautiful area no doubt will deserve protection and thus established as a national park since 1967. The management was assumed by different governmental bodies such as the Ethiopia Wild Life conservation organization and the local government. However since 2005 the park management is transferred to African Parks Plc with the context of public-private partnership based on build, operate and transfer contractual agreement for 25 years, entered by and between the government and African Parks. The problem is the

community around wouldn't yet accept the partnership; they rather felt that the park is sold to a foreigner. Basically, the community in the town complains about the lack of fish and firewood, as fishing and accessing the park for firewood is prohibited by the new management. It is actually true and surprising that the expensive food item in Arba Minch today is fish even compared to Addis. Other people around the park will also complaining as their piece of farmland is being claimed by the park management and fishermen loss their substantial income. All this made the community to feel against the park management. On the other hand, since last year, the park condition is improving. The park scouts increased from fifteen to sixty and they are well equipped with communication instruments, vehicles, boats etc and their earning has increased up to 1000 birr a month. As a result, the park vegetation is improving, fish which were about to disappear from Chamo lake has restored the number of animals has increased and the park management is promising to



reintroduce back lost animals such as buffaloes from the near by parks. The roads are improving and the number of visitors has also increased. I have also noted that interference by the community is minimum compared to other parks that I have visited such as Awash, Abjata-Shalla and Bale national parks. The park management is trying to apply participatory approach, we have been told. There is community education and the park scouts are collected

from different communities that border the park. This is to participate the community in the park management and minimize conflict. Some of the scouts complain of their poor guns and very few bullets they have compared with particularly the Kereyu Oromo that live near the border of



the park and who are equipped with automatic weapons. Still however some of the scouts want their payment to be from the government pocket fearing the foreign men (Dutch and South Africans) may leave one day for unforeseen reason.



The other thing I have noted is however poaching for fishes, fire wood and grasses is still there .In my free times I have developed a new hobby, fishing (common this is not an easy task, it requires time, patience and concentration). This time, I have noted that poachers with traditional boats come up with plenty of fishes just in a few minutes. I use to buy fish my self from the poachers, on the days that I fell to fetch good fishes, for one thing the big fishes will not come to the shores and the other I am afraid of the crocodile to get in to the water they are always there staring towards me. I have

been told the crocodiles at Chamo don't attack people as that of Abaya. Reason Chamo is fertile and full of fish. It sounds good reason But me NO! I have asked one of the poachers why not they get employed as a park scout or tourist guide and he replied payment is not attractive. He told me that he earns two hundred to three hundred birr a day by selling a single fish (Koroso) by five birr in the towns. So, the conflict between the community and the park management is still there, on the time we where about to live from Arba Minch we have heard from the park office that the Dutch Millionaire who funded the park management (Mr. Tom) has died of cancer but the effort to fence the park and protect it will continue. Gauss what is going to happen in the new Ethiopian millennium! Who is going to win the park management? The community or they may agree to work together for the protection of the park and the well being of the community? We will pray for the last. And if it worked, it may be exemplary for the other parks in the country currently being threatened. What do you think???



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