

AWASH NATIONAL PARK ETHIOPIA

Newsletter No 3 - October 2010

Welcome to the third of Awash National Park's (ANP) half yearly newsletters. In this issue we feature some of the highs and lows of the last six months.

One low was the death of 44 anubis baboons that were raiding the nearby sugar plantation. Ato Gebreselassie and I write about the human-wildlife conflict issue at Awash and the actions that ANP and *Save Awash National Park (SANP)* have taken to alleviate the problem.

The other, and biggest, low in the last six months was the death of long time park scout Gesh Ahmed while on patrol. Gesh Ahmed was a kind and gentle soul who will be sorely missed by all who knew him.

It hasn't all been bad news. In July, Dr Stephane Boissinot brought his students from the City University of New York (CUNY), USA, to Awash for several days to teach them about conservation. While there, the students met with ANP and SANP staff for in-depth discussions on the park's conservation issues.



Dr Stephane (right) teaching his students from CUNY about conservation in Awash
(Photo M. Pines)

SANP and *Hilfe fuer Afrika e.V. (Help for Africa)* have made progress in

strengthening infrastructure and resources at the local schools around ANP. An update is provided on how it is all going.

Also featuring in this issue is Dr Yirmed Demeke's piece on the many tourist attractions in and around Awash. Once you have read about it, come experience it for yourself.

I hope to see you there.

By Dr Mat Pines,
Founder and Director of Save Awash National
Park
www.save-awash-national-park.com

Nice Shot

This photo was taken by Helga Peters during her stay in Awash. Pictured is a male hamadryas baboon guarding his female. The male had just fought an epic 40 minute battle with a rival who was trying to steal the female.



Taken any interesting photos at Awash? If you have and would like it share it, email the image along with your details to: info@save-awash-national-park.com.



Why Awash National Park is an ideal tourist destination

Ethiopia's first national park, Awash, has something for everyone. From its extraordinary biodiversity, rugged landscapes and fascinating Kereyu, Itu and Afar indigenous communities, few other places in Ethiopia hold such a variety of tourist attractions. These are summarized as follows:

1. *Wildlife and game drives* - Home to more than 453 bird, 80 mammal and over 40 reptile species, Awash NP contains an unrivalled variety of animal and plant species. A range of game drives through an array of habitats provides great opportunities to see such delights as grazing oryx, and lumbering leopard tortoise.



Beisa oryx- the flag species of Awash
(Photo Y. Demeke)

2. *Riverine trekking* - Departing from Awash Falls Lodge, this 2.7 km (loop) hike follows the Awash River as it flows downstream. Crocodiles are frequently spotted sunning themselves on the boulders mid river. Aquatic birds such as Goliath herons, African fish eagles and Hamerkops can be seen along the river edge, while rock hyraxes may be seen darting along the cliff.



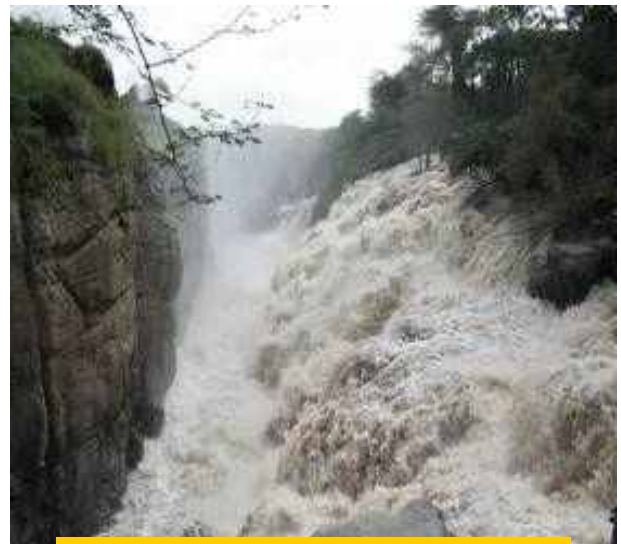
Nile crocodiles sunning themselves on the rocks of the Awash River
(Photo Y. Demeke)

3. *The Filwuha Hot Springs* - Located in the park's north are the fascinating Filwuha (Filoha) Hot Springs. It is one of the wonders of the area which tourists like to swim in 45°C water. Aside from the hot springs, picturesque pools with Doum Palms all around attract a wide range of aquatic birds and fish-eating Nile Crocodiles.



Filwuha Hot Springs A green oasis in the semi-arid desert (Photo Y. Demeke)

4. *Awash River Falls* - The 1,200 km long Awash River leaves a stunning impression in the park as it flows over the wide falls into the deep Awash Gorge. Above the falls is a narrow band of dense riverine forest sustaining Black-and-White colobus, vervet Monkeys, hoopoes and barbets, all attracted by Ficus and Tamarindus trees that line the upstream river.



A must see for all visitors: the spectacular Awash River Falls
(Photo Y. Demeke)

5. *Boat rides* - The Awash Falls Lodge has two boats with the capacity of three and five persons, which guests can use to cool themselves under the falls or head for a paddle upstream.

6. *Watching hyenas* - Trips can be arranged for tourists to visit the three recently discovered caves at the base of Mt Fentale to watch the many hyenas coming out of the caves each evening.

7. *Fentale Mountain* - Situated at the north-western edge of Awash NP, Mt. Fentale towers majestically over the surrounding low land. Fentale has an array of fascinating volcanic features, including the crater with its clouds of volcanic steam rising here and there. With the assistance of a local guide, tourists can do the 3 hr hike to the crater edge.

8. *Community cultural dance* - Among others, the Kereyu and Afar ethnic groups dwell nearby the park. They have very interesting and attractive lifestyles with their own culture, languages and historical backgrounds. We recommend tourists visit the unique colorful pastoral communities or come to the Awash Falls Lodge to see cultural songs and dancing of the Kereyu community.



The Kereyu community perform cultural songs and dances at the Awash Falls Lodge (Photo Y. Demeke)

9. *Lake Beseka* - Located near Metehara, is the growing Lake Beseka and surrounding black lava rock that spilled out from Mt Fentale 200 years ago. This barren, hostile basalt is the haunt of the drab, but endangered and localized, Somber Rock Chat and various aquatic animals.

10. *Camping* - There are great camping sites under the shade of Doum Palm at Filwuha and the riverine trees beside the Awash River. The facilities are simple, but the peace and solitude are ample.

11. *The Awash Falls Lodge* - This privately owned enterprise by an elephant researcher (Dr. Yirmed Demeke) was opened recently

inside the touristic zone of the ANP and provides great meals, accommodation and views of Awash falls.

12. *The Kereyu Lodge* - A Government owned lodge with basic caravan accommodation. The meals are tasty and the view of the Awash Gorge is impressive.

Hence, to properly and efficiently utilize the above mentioned tourism potentials, the concerned stakeholders should organize themselves with clear strategy.

By Dr Yirmed Demeke,
Director of Wildlife for Sustainable Development,
E-mail: wsd-ethiopia@ethionet.et

To mourn the death

We are still grieving for our staff member, our friend and our father Guesh AHMED. We lost a very hard worker and kindly person among us. He sacrificed his life for the conservation of Ethiopia's natural resources. Even though we lost him suddenly, none of us will ever forget his work and sterling effort. As conservationists, we will continue our effort to conserve Ethiopia's natural resources for ever.

Guesh Ahmed passed away on 20 July 2010. The staff of Awash National Park (ANP) and Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority (EWCA) mourn the untimely death of Guesh Ahmed.



Park scout Guesh Ahmed, pictured at Filoha Hot Springs, passed away in July (Photo M. Pines)



Challenging Awash: Wildlife crop raiding

In June 2010, 44 anubis baboons were burnt to death while raiding the sugar plantation that adjoins Awash National Park's southern border. Park officials investigating the tragedy were told by Merti Sugarcane Factory (MSF) that they weren't aware of the baboons' presence when burning the crop. However, one eyewitness claimed the fire was intentionally lit to stop the baboons crop raiding; thereby reducing the need for guards to protect the plantation. The burning of sugarcane is a standard practice that is done before harvest to remove dead leaf material.



44 anubis baboons killed by fire while raiding a sugar plantation (Photo M. Pines)

ANP and Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority (EWCA) officials later met with MSF management and Wereda officials to discuss the issue. The meeting resulted in the MSF agreeing to: (1) conduct all further burning at night time; when the baboons have returned to the park to sleep. (2) Daytime burning is permissible only when the weather is not suitable for night-time burning and only after the plantation has been cleared of wildlife. And (3), park officials talking to MSF workers about the importance of the park and its animals.

This is not the first time that human-wildlife conflict has occurred in the sugar plantation. In 2008, a lioness attacked four MSF workers, each on separate occasions, killing one. Professional hunters, recruited by EWCA, later shot the lioness, which had taken up refuge in the plantation.

Warthog, baboons, vervet monkeys and various antelope species frequently raid the plantation to feed on the sweet sugarcane juice. Their consumption and trampling of the crop reduces its yield and, hence, economical value.

For some warthog and antelope, such as lesser kudu, the easy food has come at a cost.

Those drinking from or attempting to cross the plantation water channels find that they cannot escape the steep, plastic sheet-lined channel banks once their hooves are wet. Many end up drowning in the channels.

Wildlife reliance on sugar may also have deleterious effects on their health. A preliminary investigation by SANP of the hamadryas baboons in the park's north, suggest that some baboon groups are spending up to 4 hours per day foraging on sugar cane that falls from the back of tractors during transportation to the mill. What impact sugar has on wildlife teeth, social behaviour and their nutritional status is not known.



Hamadryas baboons foraging on fallen sugarcane inside ANP (Photo M. Pines)

To help address the crop raiding problem around Awash NP, SANP and EWCA, with the kind financial support from the not-for-profit foundation *Primates Conservation Inc*, have produced a brochure to be distributed to the local farmers and MSF workers. Written in Amharic, the brochure outlines what crop raiding is, why it happens and practical ways in which it can be reduced. The brochure also makes clear that it is illegal to kill wildlife in Ethiopia without the necessary permits.



The English version of the new crop raiding brochure to be distributed to local farmers and sugarcane workers

By Ato Gebreslassie Gebregzabiher, ANP Biologist, and Dr Mat Pines, SANP Director

Supporting Local Schools

The life of young pastoralists is not always conducive to achieving a school education. From an early age, the children spend many a day accompanying the family livestock in the field, leaving little time to attend school. Given that the pastoralist lifestyle is fast becoming unsustainable around ANP, there is a real need for the people there to be better educated to embrace and create alternate livelihoods.

To help address this problem, the German NGO *Hilfe fuer Afrika e.V.* (Help for Africa) and SANP have teamed up to strengthen four local schools around Awash. Based on the requests of the schools' directors, two schools were provided with solar powered lighting to provide night classes for those unable to attend school during the day. A third school was supplied with cement to clad three mud-walled classrooms that the community raised money to build. The fourth school was given book resources for the teachers and students to use. Beyond helping the schools and students, the voluntary participation of ANP scouts in installing the solar lighting has helped strengthen the park-community relationship.



SANP and ANP staff installing solar lighting at a local school (Photo V. Van Doren)

Pleased with the initial results, *Hilfe fuer Afrika e.V.* and SANP have extended the program to include three more schools; two of which have requested solar powered lighting and the third, building materials to construct another classroom.

If you would like any more information about the school support program, please write to info@save-awash-national-park.com.

By Dr Mat Pines,
Director of Save Awash National Park

Animals of Awash

LONG TAILED CORMORANT

(*Microcarba africanus*)

Description:

Size: 50-55 cm. A medium sized bird with a hook-tipped bill and a tail longer than other cormorant species. Mainly black, with black edged silvery-white back feathers. The face and bill are yellow-orange and the eye red. The small head crescent is obvious during breeding. Sexes are similar, but, the juveniles have a dark-brown back and a white neck, belly and lower half of the bill.



Long tailed cormorant at Filoha
(Photo M. Pines)

Behaviour, habitat and ecology:

Found perched in trees or on rocks along the Awash River and around the hot spring pools, where it hunts for slow moving fish, frogs and aquatic invertebrates. Typically dives in shallow water but capable of diving deeply. Prey are usually consumed at the surface. A silent bird, except when in large numbers.

Best time and place to see the long tailed cormorant:

Long tailed cormorants are most active during the early morning and late afternoon. They are often seen in the Awash River or cooler pools at Filoha or perching in nearby trees or rocks.

Conservation status in ANP:

Least threatened.

By Dr Mat Pines,
Director of Save Awash National Park