

The Simen Mountains National Park World Heritage Site

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An Interview with Leykun Abune, Program Coordinator, Simen Mountains Integrated Development Program



FIGURE 1 Leykun Abune, Program Coordinator, Simen Mountains Integrated Development Program, faces the dual challenge of depleted animal and vegetal genetic resources and increasing rural poverty in the Simen Mountains National Park. (Photo courtesy of the interviewee)

Hans Hurni (MRD): Why was the Simen Mountains National Park chosen as one of the first World Heritage Sites in 1978?

Leykun Abune: Conservation in the Simen Mountains assumed national and international significance after 1965, when IUCN and UNESCO fielded a scientific mission to the area. Soon after the Mission's recommendation and subsequent scientific studies, the Simen Mountains National Park (SMNP) was created and gazetted in 1969 by the Ethiopian Government. Its unique landscape and canyon-like gorges, rich biodiversity, high number of endemic species, and the position of the Park as the only area in the world where the highly endangered and endemic Walya ibex (*Capra ibex walie*) is found make the Park worthy of protection.

What changes have occurred since 1978?

Civil war between 1981 and 1991 and a change of government policy to promote a command economy with no incentives to investment and tourism were among the critical shortcomings that hindered protection of biological resources in the Park. Resentment against the policies of the previous government after 1991 also led to widespread destruction of wildlife habitat, reoccupation of wildlife habitats, and destruction of residential and tourist facilities in the Park. At the initiative of the government and with a view to developing an integrated conservation and development program, a Swiss–Ethiopian Simen Mountains baseline study (SMBS) was conducted in 1994. The survey provided basic information on nature and human use and contributed much to development of a conservation plan, including projects to promote sustainable development.

How is conservation threatened in the Park?

Recent decades have seen severe environmental threats from unregulated use of living space associated with alarming population growth. The imbalance of increased population, land shortage, and economic need is threatening the unique environment, leading to severe degrada-

tion of natural resources in the Park. The threats include intensive farming, overgrazing, deforestation, and intrusion into special habitats leading to excessive soil erosion, habitat degradation, and loss of genetic resources.

What recent steps has the regional government taken?

The regional government has taken corrective measures to integrate sustainable management of park resources in an overall structural reform focusing on decentralization and poverty alleviation. The local government has already taken steps to integrate the sustainable park management in an overall regional conservation strategy. The decentralization policy is a clear indication that the government wants to involve local communities in planning for environmental protection, development, and sustainable use of natural resources.

What impacts have been achieved so far?

Steering committees have been established and organized at regional, zonal, and *wereda* levels to assist and coordinate park development activities and to resolve development conflicts. There is good financial support for enhancing park management capacity and for reversing deteriorating social and environmental conditions within and outside the Park. The Austrian-supported SMNP integrated development project features target-oriented components, such as tourism, park management, afforestation, soil and water conservation, agriculture, and community capacity strengthening. UNDP and UNCDF projects are also active adjacent to the Park in buffer areas.

How do you assess the potential for tourism?

If package tourism is organized, infrastructure facilities are improved, and tourism is well marketed and promoted, it will have a substantial multiplier impact. A bad international press and poor-standard facilities are the major constraints currently impeding the potential of ecotourism

and investment in the Park. The public road that passes through the Park from Debarq to Janamora is another hindrance to efficient tourism management. A well-designed trekking map is required to easily guide tourists to satellite camping grounds or lodges that are appropriately located to maximize benefits to tourists and to the Park. Local communities must benefit evenly from tourism, with direct revenue from park development activities.

What are the most important challenges in the coming years?

The main challenge is how to establish a sustainable and efficient level of operations for the maintenance of natural resources and to ensure food security in the area. However, the challenges the Park faces for sustainable development are absence of clear policy with legal, institutional, and planning frameworks and lack of accepted international administrative procedures. Wildlife development is a specialized field and requires skilled manpower to effectively implement the integrated development program. There are substantial problems of integration, overlaps, and duplication of efforts among development agencies, with no common vision and objectives. This problem is compounded by lack of administrative procedures and a development plan. The Development Plan that has been worked out to reflect the needs of immediate and long-term solutions is not yet reviewed and endorsed for implementation by the government. According to the Development Plan and in my view, the most challenging job would be the resettlement issue.

What are the main challenges and constraints you face in your job?

The idea of creating the Simen Mountains integrated program coordination unit at Gondar was to bring all development activities and donor initiative projects in the area into one forum and facilitate their work in a synergetic manner. Another purpose is to solicit funds for the development of the Simen Mountains



FIGURE 2 The Simen Mountains feature astounding topography and many endemic species. (Photo by Gudrun Schwilch)

National Park and the surrounding rural areas. The unit is thus expected to serve as a liaison office between government and donor-funded projects to enhance development coordination and future integrated planning for effective program implementation. It was designed as a single planning and coordination unit that would help guide and control all activities of the development program and as a means of effectively achieving targeted goals on the ground.

The problems and solutions associated with environmental degradation and park maintenance are complex and finding effective ways of addressing them may take years. What I now perceive as a short-term solution in the area is to follow and develop the concept of a park with people and to allow for medium-term, limited, human use within defined areas. Economic incentives for off-farm activities should be encouraged, with long-term strategies and adequate funding. In this connection, the call for technical and financial assistance from international conservation agencies such as UNESCO, IUCN, WWF, and GEF among others is of paramount importance at this point in time.

Leykun Abune is Program Coordinator, Simen Mountains Integrated Development Program, Gondar, Amhara National Regional State, Ethiopia. He has had many years of experience in the development, sustainable use, and management of wildlife in different administrative positions with the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Organization (EWCO), and in wildlife management, park planning and policy issues, and integrated resource management. He was interviewed by MRD Editor-in-Chief Hans Hurni on 1 April 2003.