

The Forestry Example of the Ethiopian Church

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ANY VISITOR TO RURAL ETHIOPIA CANNOT FAIL TO notice the patches of trees atop many of the hills. Close inspection will usually reveal a church or some other holy site such as a shrine or cemetery. These wooded hilltops, often in an otherwise treeless landscape, are mostly in Ethiopia's northern highlands, home of the Ethiopian Orthodox, called Tewahido, the Amharic term meaning "United Church."

The northern highlands are also the home of settled agriculture. Here high human densities have led to increased pressure on its forests and widespread degradation of the environment, making the sight particularly uncommon.



Drought conditions in this arid climate have been recently magnified by extensive deforestation due to fuel-wood gathering and land cleared for human settlement over much of the highlands. Realizing the need for more active conservation measures, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) through its Development and Inter-Church Aid Department, has embarked on extensive reforestation in an effort to reverse the current trend. So far, 21 nursery centers have been established where more than 2.6 million seedlings have been raised. These seedlings are distributed free of charge to rural communities, farming cooperatives and peasant farmer associations.

The local church provides local communities with species appropriate to their location and choice. Several indigenous trees including scented thorn, apple-ring, thorn tree, wild olive and cordia, are raised in the nurseries. The Ethiopian Church has also established over 300 small plantations, most of which are near church grounds. These are tended by the clergy. Many priests are also being trained in development activities and act as teachers, farmers and agricultural laborers as well as local spiritual leaders.

In addition to these new afforestation efforts, the Church continues its centuries-old tradition of planting and maintaining trees around church yards and cemeteries. Trees within the grounds of these churches are considered sacred by members of the Ethiopian Church. This is particularly obvious in the Merto Lemariam district of Gojam Province, which has the third oldest church in Ethiopia. There is a chronic shortage of trees for fuelwood and construction in this arid region. Despite this pressure for wood, existing tree stands on church grounds remain untouched. Consequently many of the trees associated with churches are very old, and include juniper, wild olive, and other indigenous species as

well as older imported trees such as cypress and gum.

The trees provide an important focal point for local gatherings as well as shade where members of the community can meditate and pray. An added and vital benefit, which was perhaps not understood in earlier times, is that this vegetation promotes soil and water conservation by trapping rainfall and preventing water run-off and soil erosion. The vegetation also provides food, shelter and cover for several species of wildlife such as monkeys, small antelope and rodents, as well as roosting and nesting sites for bird species. All wildlife are given the same status as trees on church grounds, and are therefore protected on religious grounds.

An example of this protection can be seen on Lake Tana in the northwest of the country. It is Ethiopia's largest lake and the source of the Blue Nile. Its 37 islands shelter more than 20 monasteries and churches (where several emperors are buried), and are important aquatic, wooded and forest habitats for subsequent colonies of birds, including spoonbills, herons, ospreys, hornbills, hoopoes and weavers. It is claimed that the birds on one island, Dega Stefanos (Saint Stephen), are so tame that they can be fed by hand.

Such passive forms of conservation have probably been practiced since Ethiopia became the first Christian country in Africa with the establishment of the EOC at the ancient city of Axum around 327 AD. Today, the EOC, sometimes called the Coptic Church, which implies an association with the Egyptian Church, has over 20,000 parish churches spread throughout much of the country, with more than 25,000 clergy and a membership in excess of 25 million, approximately 57% of Ethiopia's estimated population of 44 million. (In other words more than six times as many people call themselves Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia as exist in the United States.)

The country's other major religions are Islam with 9 million members, Evangelical Protestant with 900,000 members, Roman Catholic with 220,000 members and Judaism with 34,000 members. Trees and other vegetation surrounding mosques, churches and other hallowed sites is generally preserved, but may only be a token single tree in a cultivated field marking the burial site of a prominent Muslim and no active form of worshipping is continued there. Similarly certain tree species or individual trees are held in high esteem by between 5% and 15% of the population that follow animist rites and ceremonies.

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The church's primary objective in providing and planting trees, both in nurseries and in sacred grounds, is to promote the conservation of soil and water resources in the northern highlands and to complement the efforts of the nation in environmental rehabilitation.

A second and more long-term objective is to provide fuel and timber from imported eucalyptus species, which are not considered a sacred species in church grounds, on a sustained yield basis, where any tree that is cut down is immediately replaced. This form of harvesting, over time, will provide a source of revenue which can be directly paid back into the afforestation program (a condition that is not always met in other wildlife utilization programs).

Finally, the afforestation program motivates people by increasing awareness of the value of trees and by providing training so that church members may participate more fully in the life of their communities and take an active part in their own development and ecological restoration. This is vital if the reforestation is to succeed and will clearly elevate this program above many other afforestation

schemes in the country. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church's activities will undoubtedly strengthen the alliance of religion and conservation which has existed in Ethiopia for many centuries.

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