

Co-existence between a World Natural Heritage Site and the Local Community

– Community Tourism in an Ethiopian National Park

Located in the Amhara Region in the northern part of Ethiopia, Simien Mountains National Park (SMNP) was one of the first sites to be inscribed on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) World Heritage list in 1978. Because of its soaring mountain ranges, the park is known as the "Roof of Africa," and abounds with exotic fauna and alpine flora. As a result of the growing local population and the subsequent expansion of sheep grazing and agricultural activities, however, the environmentally damaged SMNP was added to the List of World Heritage in Danger in 1996.

The Government of the Amhara Region provided local residents, who relied on grazing and subsistence farming within the park for their food supply and livelihoods, with alternative opportunities to support themselves outside SMNP, such as the cultivation of orchards and beekeeping. The Government also tried to encourage residents to voluntarily relocate to areas outside the park. Many residents, however, continued to live inside SMNP. Freely-grazing sheep fed on the fresh shoots of trees in the park, and the environmental destruction continued unchecked.

It became necessary to provide local residents living in the park with livelihoods that would enable them to co-exist with nature in SMNP. One possible solution is tourism.

As an industry, tourism is expected to invigorate regional economies, improve the life of local residents, and help reduce poverty. In response to a request from the Government of Ethiopia, the Government of Japan launched the Project for Community Tourism Development through Public-Private Partnership in Simien Mountains National Park and Surrounding Areas (SIMCOT) in 2011. The project supports proactive efforts initiated by local residents to achieve co-existence with nature in SMNP, thereby turning the site into a tourism resource.

Dr. Kiho Yaoita, who is engaged in research on tourism creation as Assistant Professor at the Center for Advanced Tourism Studies at Hokkaido University, was selected as project manager to supervise all local activities of this project. Dr. Yaoita was previously engaged in a project in which she developed the old port town of Levuka in Fiji as a "historical port town" to become a



Village residents entertain tourists. (Photo: Kiho Yaoita)



Ms. Kiho Yaoita (front center) conducts training with Mr. C.W. Nicol (third from the right in the back row), the first director of the Semien Mountains National Park (1965-1969), at the Afan Woodland in Kurohime, Nagano Prefecture. (Photo: Kiho Yaoita)

tourist destination, and carried out surveys and other activities for its inscription on the World Heritage List.

According to Dr. Yaoita, the process of building a mechanism of integrating tourism is the same as realizing the preservation of heritage and improvement of the livelihoods of local residents for both cultural heritage and natural heritage.

Upon visiting villages in Simien in November 2011, Dr. Yaoita strongly felt that the very nature of Simien and lifestyle of the residents who co-exist with it would become a tourism resource. Local people living in the natural habitat of this World Heritage site have maintained their ancient lifestyle and hardly ever use any industrial goods. Their villages lack electricity supply and waterworks. Local residents cook and do laundry using water drawn from the village wells. Traditional foods and crafts, such as weaving, have been preserved over the ages.

Dr. Yaoita frequently visited the villages inside the park, and discussed with local residents which aspects of the nature in SMNP and of their lifestyle would appeal to tourists, and what practical steps residents could take. Based on these discussions, after a year and a half of work, Dr. Yaoita and the other members of the project team finalized the tourism program.

The program incorporated a wide range of tourist attractions. As part of the program, visitors are invited to try the local staple food injera (sourdough-risen flatbread made out of teff flour), savor the aromatic Ethiopian coffee and micro-brew beer, enjoy the ancient crafts of weaving and traditional hairdressing, and purchase beautiful local folk art items as souvenirs.

Dr. Yaoita and the project team members gave a presentation on the tourism program, inviting travel agencies from the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa. The agencies enthusiastically welcomed the program, praising how great a product it would be and saying with conviction that the program should be presented to overseas travel agencies as it would surely attract countless tourists from all over the world.

While the project attracted overseas tourists to the villages in Simien and boosted tourism revenue, in fact, the positive effects reached even further. The local residents underwent a significant change in mindset, as they began to realize the enormous value of their co-existence with nature.

Under the supervision of the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority (EWCA), local residents began to voluntarily limit sheep grazing areas in order to preserve the natural environment of SMNP. These efforts slowed down the pace of environmental destruction and the nature of Simien took a course to recovery.

The assistance project implemented by the Japanese government will end in February 2016, but the initiatives of Dr. Yaoita and her team to enrich the nature of SMNP and people's livelihoods through tourism will be maintained by the local people. These efforts will primarily be led by a non-governmental organization whose Director General is Berhanu Gebre, former Deputy Director of the Amhara National Regional State Bureau of Culture, Tourism and Parks Development.