

The takeover of Ethiopia's Omo National Park by African Parks Foundation (APF) of the Netherlands

African Parks Foundation (APF) a Netherlands-based organization with strong South African links, is about to sign a public-private partnership deal whereby it will take over management of the Omo National Park, in the Southern Regional State of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. It was originally intended that this agreement would include the nearby Mago National Park. APF has now decided to exclude the Mago Park from the agreement, although it has not ruled out the possibility that it may offer to extend its management to the Mago at a later date. APF has been managing another Ethiopian national park, Nech Sar (also in the Southern Regional State), since February 2005, having signed an agreement with the Ethiopian government in February 2004.

Among the groups who live in and around the Omo Park are the Mursi (pop. 6-10,000) and Surma (20-25,000) and the Nyangatom or Bume (15-20,000). All three groups combine cattle herding with both flood-retreat and rain-fed cultivation. Because of the spatial distribution of agricultural and grazing land, and because of the unreliability of rainfall in this semi-arid environment, the successful utilisation of these resources requires regular seasonal movements, over relatively short distances, by most members of the population. The Mursi live in both the Omo and Mago Parks, which enclose, between them, around 75 per cent of their subsistence base.

Most East African protected areas and national parks have been created in areas used by pastoralists. One of the main justifications for this has been the now-discredited belief that pastoralists do not know how to manage the environment in a sustainable way. The greatest threat to the efficient management of natural resources by African pastoralists has come not from contradictions internal to the ecology of subsistence herding, as the 'Tragedy of the Commons' argument would have us believe, but from external pressures—not the least important being well-intentioned but misguided livestock development projects. The loss of key dry-season pastures, whether to agriculturalists or wildlife conservation schemes, has had a particularly disastrous impact on pastoralists.

The Omo Park (4,068 km²) was established in 1966 and the Mago Park (2162 km²) in 1978. It was not until a few months ago, however, following African Parks Foundation's expression of interest in taking over the management of these parks, that urgent steps were taken by the Southern Regional Government to have them gazetted.

- A 'demarcation ceremony' was held at the Omo National Park Head Quarters in March 2005, at which a number of local people, including both Mursi and Nyangatom, were asked to show their 'agreement' by putting their thumbprints on documents describing the park boundaries.
- Government officials who took part in the demarcation told Mursi living in the Mago Park that they would have to move, in due course, to an area lying between the Mago and Omo Park boundaries. They could not possibly survive there without becoming permanently dependent on food aid.
- According to a Mursi eye-witness, 'police' from the Mago National Park visited a Mursi village, known as 'Maganto', in July this year and persuaded three randomly

chosen men to put their thumbprints on a document defining the Mago Park boundaries.

It is not known whether gazettment has yet taken place, but when it does, those now living in the Omo and Mago Parks will become - apparently by their own 'prior consent' - illegal squatters on their own land.

Concern about what these events may mean for the Mursi and their neighbours is heightened by the history of APF's takeover of the much smaller (514 km²) Nech Sar National Park, near Arba Minch. When the Nech Sar agreement was signed, in February 2004, it was understood by APF that the people then living in and utilizing the park, Kore peasant farmers and Guji cattle herders, would be resettled before APF took over its management. In an interview in the *New Scientist* magazine (13 August 2005), Paul van Vlissingen, founder and Chairman of APF, said:

We said [to the government] that we could work with people in the park, as we do in Zambia, but they said no. We didn't want to be involved in the resettlement, so I put a clause in the contract that said we wouldn't take over the park until the resettlement was completed.

In February 2004 around 1000 Kore families were resettled to an area about 15 km. south of the park. Resettling the Guji, however, proved a more difficult proposition. According to a report posted on the website of Refugees International in April 2005 (<http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/article/detail/5639>),

On November 25, 2004, 463 houses of the Guji-Oromo people in Nechasar National Park...were burned down by police and park authorities.

The report described this as,

...the latest move in the effort to remove the Guji and Kore people from within the boundaries of the National park so that it can be developed and managed by the Netherlands-based African Parks Foundation as a wildlife viewing park for well-heeled tourists.

It went on:

The Guji-Oromo were previously expelled by the government [of Mengistu Haile Mariam] in the 1980s but came back and re-established themselves in five villages. Facing expulsion again..[they]..filed six appeals to the Federal and Regional governments to allow them to remain in the park. However, the regional government then ordered the Guji-Oromo to visit and choose one of two resettlement sites.

It was during the visit of their leaders to the second site when their houses were burned without warning on November 25, 2004. Some of the houses were occupied at the time; others were temporarily abandoned as the Guji-Oromo typically migrate with their herds and return to their houses during the rainy season.....no compensation has been paid for the property destroyed during the house burning.

Latest reports say that around 5000 Guji have been pushed into one corner of the park, where they are living in two villages, and that their access to grazing land in the park has been restricted.

APF's responded to the RI report with a statement, also posted on the RI website, and signed by Paul van Vlissingen, in which he wrote:

African Parks has never been and will never be involved in questions of a political nature, such as the resettlement of people.....resettlement is not a matter for our organization as Governments are sovereign in these matters in every country.

Mr van Vlissingen adopted essentially the same position when he met Mursi and Nyangatom elders in Jinka, the capital of the South Omo Zone of the Southern Regional State, at the end of September. The main concern expressed by the elders at this meeting was about the implications of the government's 'park demarcation' process for their continued access to agricultural and grazing land within the Omo Park. In response to this concern, Mr van Vlissingen said that APF had no plans to remove people from the Omo Park, but he was also at pains to point out that 'we are not the government'. He thereby appeared to be washing his hands in advance of any responsibility for actions the government might take to remove people physically from the park and/or to deny them access to agricultural and grazing land within it.

Not surprisingly, this did not calm the anxieties of the local people present at the meeting, one of whom later wrote:

Mr. Paul was telling us everything and told us he would not move any Mursi, but he would let the Mursi live in the park, but doesn't want people to kill animals. He said this but maybe later he will trick us. I think he is a very nice man, very friendly...but we see only the outside not the inside. He said not to worry since no one will move you. He said I want your help and we will help each other. He said he doesn't know about government plans. He said he wants to train local people to be scouts. He said APF are not allowed to move people, but I don't believe it. I read about the Guji and Kore people, and he said the government did that, and not APF, but now he took over that place.

Following this meeting, Mr van Vlissingen summed up APF's position very clearly in a letter dated 31 October 2005, in which he wrote "As we manage State Assets we can not be seen by any government as interfering."

This argument is both unethical and untenable. It is precisely because APF is managing 'state assets' that it has a moral obligation to ensure that the way these assets are employed and utilized is consistent with international guidelines concerning the fundamental rights of local people. The widely accepted ILO Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries (1985), for example, states categorically (Article 14) that:

The rights of ownership and possession of the peoples concerned over the lands which they traditionally occupy shall be recognised. In addition, measures shall be taken in appropriate cases to safeguard the right of the peoples concerned to use lands not exclusively occupied by them, but to which they have traditionally had access for their subsistence and traditional activities. Particular attention shall be paid to the situation of nomadic peoples and shifting cultivators in this respect.

The fact that Ethiopia has refused to ratify this convention does not invalidate its ethical basis and moral authority. On the contrary, it makes it even more incumbent on any foreign

enterprise entering into a business partnership with the Ethiopian government to ensure that the fundamental rights of local people likely to be affected by this partnership are not violated.

The IUCN has consistently affirmed the rights of indigenous peoples to the lands they traditionally occupy, in numerous resolutions and statements of policy. It is also a fundamental principle of the organization that the establishment of protected areas should not exacerbate the poverty of local people by, for example, depriving them of vital subsistence resources and making them dependent on food aid. It should also be noted that the World Bank revised its Operational Policy on resettlement (OP 4.12) in 2002 to include the loss of access resulting in adverse impacts on livelihoods as a form of displacement. Similarly, the African Development Bank has included in its 2003 policy on resettlement the statement that the policy covers

loss of assets or involuntary restriction of access to assets including national parks, protected areas or of natural resources; or loss of income sources or means of livelihood as a result of projects, whether or not the affected persons are required to move.

If the APF is to be accepted internationally as a responsible conservation agency it must ensure that the principles and policies articulated by the relevant international conventions and widely understood best practice are adhered to in the projects it manages. The responsibilities incumbent on the APF in this respect are neither diminished nor abrogated by the fact that it may be the Government with which it collaborates that actually carries out the evictions or lesser forms of loss of access that violate the rights of local communities in and around the Omo and Mago National Parks.