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## THE MURSI AND THE ELEPHANT QUESTION

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The call for 'community participation' in conservation projects has grown to such an extent over the past few years that it has virtually become current orthodoxy, along with similar calls for participation and 'bottom-up' planning and management in rural development projects (IIED, 1994; Pimbert and Pretty, 1995; and numerous references therein). The reasons for this turning away from a 'preservationist' approach, which sees local people as an obstacle to effective natural resource management, are as much biological and economic as they are moral and political. Firstly, since virtually all existing eco-systems are a function of human use and disturbance, artificially to exclude such disturbance runs the risk of reducing biodiversity rather than preserving it (Hobbs and Huenneke, 1992, p. 324, cited by Pimbert and Pretty, 1995, p. 21). Secondly, not only are the technical and logistical costs of attempting to exclude human activity from protected areas very high but such efforts are almost certain to fail. They will alienate the local population from conservation objectives and thus require an ever-increasing and, in the long-run, unsustainable level of investment in policing activities.

I shall take the correctness of these arguments for granted, partly because, being neither a biologist nor an economist, I am not qualified to subject them to close analysis and partly because I imagine few would wish to disagree with them. But there is, of course, a huge potential here for well-intentioned rhetoric to take the place of action, or to provide a 'donor-friendly' screen behind which the same old 'preservationist' and ultimately unsuccessful policies are put into practice. The latest plan for the development of the Omo, Mago and Nechisar National Parks, in Southern Ethiopia, is a case in point. The feasibility study for this project, which is now known as the 'Southern National Parks Rehabilitation Project' pays frequent lip service to the need to involve the local people and 'increase the tangible economic benefits' they gain from conservation (Agriconsulting, 1993, p. 61) but, six years later, there has still been no serious effort to achieve either of these objectives.

The issue I shall address in this paper, therefore, is not whether local participation in conservation is in principle 'a good thing', but whether it is feasible and how it might be achieved in the case of the Mursi. This will mean, firstly, giving some baseline information about Mursi natural resource management, without which it is impossible to know to what extent, if at all, present human activity in the area is detrimental to the sustainable use of its renewable resources. Secondly, I shall discuss a number of documents in which foreign advisers and consultants have presented 'top down', or 'preservationist' proposals for conservation in the lower Omo Valley. Thirdly, I shall make some recommendations for a radically different approach, based on the now conventional wisdom of 'conservation with a human face' (Bell, 1987).

## MURSI NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

The Mursi live in an oblong territory of about 2000 km, bounded to the west and south by the River Omo, to the east by the River Mago and to the north by the River Mara, a seasonal tributary of the Omo (Figure 1: [Mursiland: topography and drainage](#)). They depend on three main subsistence activities, each of which is insufficient and/or precarious in itself but, when taken together with the other two, makes a vital contribution to the economy: flood-retreat cultivation at the Omo, rain-fed cultivation in the bushbelt and cattle herding in the wooded grasslands above the 500m contour line. Cultivation is primarily the responsibility of women and cattle herding of men. The main crop is sorghum, though some maize is also grown, together with cow peas, beans and squash. In spanning their three main natural resources (floodland, bushland and grassland), the Mursi have developed a form of transhumance which, although it takes place over a relatively small area, does not permit fixed residence, in a single locality, for any section of the population. Rights to subsistence resources are allocated in a way that reflects the physical and ecological character of the resource and maximises the contribution it makes to the overall viability of the economy.

Floodland is a scarce resource which makes a critical contribution to the economic viability of households but the extent of which varies unpredictably from one year to the next. It must therefore be allocated in such a way that short term adjustments can be made between the amount of land available for cultivation in any one year and the number of potential cultivators. Each Omo cultivation site is associated with a particular clan but it would be very misleading to speak of clans 'owning' land. For a clan is not an organised group but a patrilineal category of the population. Clan names are merely labels, recording the fact that particular stretches of riverbank were first occupied by members of particular clans whose descendants now have prior rights to its use. The effective owners of riverbank land are small groups of close patrilineal kin - descendants of the same grandfather or great grandfather - who allocate land to more distant kin and affines, normally for one or two years at a time. Riverbank land, then, is collectively owned by small groups of kin, but many others may have potential or 'diffused' rights in it. The advantage of this system, which clearly depends on obligations to kin being seen as inescapable, is that it maintains a balance between supply and demand where great flexibility is needed to ensure that the maximum benefit is gained from flood cultivation in any one year by the maximum number of individuals. It is not just that flood levels vary from one year to the next but also that the effect of a poor flood will not be uniformly felt at all cultivation sites. Security for individuals and families in these circumstances means having 'dormant' rights in riverbank land at various points along the Omo which can be activated at short notice, and this is what the moral imperatives of kinship and affinity make possible.

Rights to grazing land, on the other hand, are vested in local groups, not kin groups. Here it is necessary to explain that the Mursi are divided into five territorially based groups, or *buranyoga* (sing. *buran*), which are named, from north to south, Baruba (formerly known as Mara), Mugjo (formerly known as Mako), Biogolokare, Ariholi and Gongulobibi (Figure 2: [Distribution of local groups in relation to the River Omo](#)). Each of these divisions spans the full range of natural resources, from flood land in the east to dry season grazing land in the west. The fact that they make ecological sense presumably

accounts for their size and boundedness and for the strong sense of moral obligation which their members feel towards each other (cf. Spencer, 1990, pp. 215-6). They are, in short, miniature replicas and potential equivalents of the Mursi *buran* as a whole.

Each *buran* is associated with a particular territory within which its members have 'primary user rights' (Potkanski, 1994, p. 17), but members of other *buranyoga* are granted temporary rights in the same territory at times of hardship, crisis or emergency. Collective ownership of a resource implies, by definition, that there are rules and conventions determining who shall have access to it, for how long and under what circumstances. As far as grazing land is concerned, these rules apply at the level of the *buran*. There is a sense in which all Mursi have a right to graze their animals anywhere in Mursiland, but the sense is this: they have a right to be granted access to areas outside their own *buran* in times of crisis and on a temporary basis. This applies particularly to access to dry season grazing areas in the Elma Valley, the key constraint here, of course, being the availability of permanent water points in the Elma Valley. Since rainfall is highly variable, herders have to be alert to changing conditions on a daily basis and be ready to move their animals at fairly short notice in order to match the available water and grazing to animal numbers in a particular place.

It is often said that pastoralists own grazing land 'collectively' and livestock 'individually' but this distinction, which lies behind Hardin's vastly influential 'Tragedy of the Commons' argument (1968, 1988), is a gross over-simplification. We have just seen that the collective ownership of grazing land amongst the Mursi is compatible with controlled access at the level of the *buran*. As far as cattle are concerned, it is certainly always possible to identify an individual owner for any particular animal, but so many other people are likely to have actual and potential rights in the same animal that to describe this as individual ownership would be highly misleading because it would imply that the 'owner' could use and dispose of the animal entirely as he or she saw fit. It would be more accurate to describe cattle as owned collectively, small groups of patrilineally related men - essentially groups of brothers - having primary 'user rights' in them. This does not mean that brothers always live together and herd their cattle as a single unit. On the contrary, a man is more likely to be found sharing a settlement with his affines than with his patrilineal kin. It does mean that brothers have potential or 'dormant' rights in each other's cattle which they can activate at any time, but especially in extreme circumstances. The diffusion of rights in livestock to a wide variety of kin, affines, and 'stock associates' is a feature of pastoral resource management which has been fully described in the anthropological literature and which is, of course, an effective means of spreading risk and hedging against environmental and other uncertainties. (A particularly notable means of achieving this objective amongst the Mursi is their method of collecting and distributing bridewealth cattle (Turton, 1980)). It is worth pointing out that the system for allocating rights in riverbank land, another scarce, critical and highly variable resource, has more in common with that for allocating rights in cattle than it has with that for allocating rights in grazing land.

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 'institutional fact' (Thompson et al. 1986, cited by Warren and Agnew 1988) that pastoralists do not know how

to manage the environment in a sustainable way. In particular, their combination of communal ownership of land and individual ownership of cattle locks them into a relentless drive to build up their herds until they exceed the carrying capacity of the range, thus bringing about irreversible environmental degradation - the so-called 'Tragedy of the Commons'. Being based on the abstract assumptions of games theory and the concept of the economically rational individual, the argument is elegant and convincing - until one looks at the real world.

Firstly, and as I have already demonstrated briefly for the Mursi, communal access to grazing land does not necessarily equal 'open access'. Or, to put it otherwise, a communal system can control, restrict and coordinate the behaviour of individuals through rules and conventions which they recognise it is in their own best interests to observe (Runge, 1984 and 1986). Secondly, the Tragedy of the Commons argument is based on an 'economic' definition of carrying capacity (the optimal stocking density for commercial ranching) which is considerably lower than the 'ecological' carrying capacity of subsistence herding (Behnke and Scoones, 1993, pp. 3-8). Thirdly, in the arid and semi-arid grazing areas of East Africa, a stable equilibrium between animal and plant populations may never be reached because rainfall and temperature fluctuate so widely that 'it is likely that these non-biological variables will have a greater impact on plant growth than marginal changes in grazing pressure caused by different stocking densities' (Behnke and Scoones, 1993, p.8). And finally, the one certain conclusion to emerge, over the past few years, from the so-called 'overgrazing controversy' (Homewood and Rodgers, 1987) is that the subject is so beset with conceptual confusion and so much in need of more objective methods of assessment and evaluation that great care should be taken before making any assertions about individual cases in advance of a careful study of the evidence (e.g. Warren and Agnew, 1988; Abel and Blaikie, 1990; Tapson, 1993; Homewood and Rodgers, 1987 and 1991).

I am not qualified to make such a study of the Mursi case. I can only report that there is no obvious evidence that their pastoral activities are, in the words of one recent definition of range degradation, bringing about 'an effectively permanent decline in the rate at which land yields livestock products' (Abel and Blaikie, 1989, p. 113). The same can also be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of flood retreat cultivation, although the case of rain-fed cultivation, because it depends on clearing new areas of bush every few years, is more problematic. Even if it is accepted, however, that the natural resource management system of the Mursi has the capacity to 'maintain those features of the natural environment which are essential to its continued wellbeing' (Behnke and Scoones, 1993, p. 20), there is always the danger that the co-operative norms upon which its smooth and efficient running depends will break down under pressures brought about by economic change and state incorporation.

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 of these have resulted from well-intentioned but misguided livestock development projects (Horowitz, 1986; Galaty and Bonte, 1991; Dyson-Hudson, 1991). The loss of key dry-season pastures, whether to agriculturalists or wildlife conservation schemes, has had a particularly disastrous impact on pastoralists.

For the Mursi, the threat to these 'key pastures in wetter areas' comes from the potential development of the Omo and Mago National Parks.

## SAVING THE ELEPHANTS

The boundaries of the Omo and Mago Parks, as they have been described since at least 1970 (they have not yet been gazetted) enclose between them the most valuable agricultural and pastoral resources of the Mursi - flood retreat land on both banks of the Omo and dry season grazing land in the Elma Valley (Figure 3: [The Omo and Mago National Parks](#)). It follows that, if and when these boundaries are legally established, the Mursi will be transformed overnight into illegal 'squatters' in their own territory. The area between the Elma and Omo, the only part of Mursiland not included in the parks, has been designated the 'Tama Wildlife Reserve', where 'controlled settlement and other human activity may be allowed subject to the special consent of the minister and may be phased out as required' (EWCO, 1989, quoted by Sutcliffe, 1992, p. 83). It is obvious that those who demarcated these boundaries had virtually no understanding of the human ecology of the area (Turton, 1987).

In a report submitted to the Wildlife Conservation Department (as it was then called) in 1978, J. Stephenson and A. Mizuno recommended the merging of the two parks (the Mago Park literally still only existed on paper at that point) into a 'Greater' Omo/Mago National Park on the grounds that 'The Omo and Mago will lose their value as national parks if vested human interests are permitted to exist between them. For one thing, some of the wild animals, chiefly elephant, lion and zebra will interfere to an increasing extent with the rights of the people of the Tama wedge and conversely the people will interfere to an increasing degree with the wildlife of the Tama and the two neighbouring parks' (1978, p.41).

Stephenson's and Mizuno's novel suggestion for protecting the 'rights' of the inhabitants of the 'Tama wedge' (whom they estimate to number no more than 1750 individuals) is to forcibly resettle them outside the proposed park boundaries, an exercise the 'onus' of which 'falls fairly and squarely on the Administration and not on the Wildlife Conservation Department' (1978, p. 49). Since they do not indicate what kind of human 'interference' would be avoided by resettling the Mursi, it is worth asking in what ways their continued presence could be detrimental to the welfare of wild animals. There are, presumably, two main possibilities: they might kill them directly or be in competition with them for the same natural resources.

The Mursi certainly have the pragmatic, unromantic, view of nature which is characteristic of those who directly gain their livelihood from it and live in daily contact with it. They would share the view that Wordsworth sadly attributed to the majority of his contemporaries, namely that 'a rich meadow, with fat cattle grazing upon it, or the sight of...a heavy crop of corn, is worth all...the Alps and Pyrenees in their utmost grandeur' (1835, p. 151, quoted by Thomas, 1984, p. 257). But the corollary of this is that the Mursi do not share the urban, modernist assumption that to explore, exploit, understand, paint, photograph, document or in other ways control and dominate nature is to fulfill our potential as human beings. The result is that they do not kill animals - any more than they climb mountains -

merely 'because they are there'. The main use they make of them is as a source of food at times of severe hunger, the species they most frequently hunt being the buffalo. Buffalo hides are also exchanged at such times with highland agriculturalists (who, among other things, bury their dead in them) for money and grain. They also kill elephants for their ivory, which can be used,

as it has been for the last 100 years in this area to buy rifles and cattle from highland traders. In short, the Mursi kill animals to obtain economically useful products and, when necessary, to protect their cattle (this applies mainly to hyenas), but otherwise their disposition towards wild animals is, as Evans-Pritchard wrote of the Nuer, 'to live and let live' (1956, p. 267).

Since livestock use resources upon which wild animals also depend, there is obvious potential for competition between them. On the other hand, there seems to be more scope for coexistence between wild and domestic animals under a subsistence herding regime than under either commercial ranching or sedentary agriculture: subsistence herders are mobile, do not monopolise water points and are relatively sparsely settled (Homewood and Rodgers, 1991, pp. 191-92; Hillman, 1993, pp. 11-12). Although they depend heavily on cultivation, the Mursi have no permanent settlements and, apart from the Omo itself where cattle cannot be kept because of the high tsetse challenge and lack of grazing, there are no permanent water sources in their territory. It is true that the presence of relatively large numbers of people at flood cultivation sites on the Omo during the dry season must have some impact on the behaviour of wild animals. This can hardly prevent them, however, from using countless watering points along uninhabited stretches of the river, while for half the year (March to September), there is virtually no human settlement at all along the Omo. As for settlements in the grazing areas, these are always situated well away from water points, with the result that the use of these points by cattle does not exclude their use by wild animals at other times of the day and night.

Stephenson's and Mizuno's main concern is with the *protection* of wild animals - especially those of most interest to tourists - in an environment they describe as having 'retained its primeval character from ages past' (1978, p. 2). Thus, virtually all their recommendations have to do with the need for technical, administrative and security improvements - more roads, buildings, vehicles, game guards and guard posts. Although they describe the area as 'the country's last unspoilt wilderness' (p.1) they consider it to be in such imminent danger from human activity that all the local people (Mursi, Bodi and '300' Chai living in the Omo Park) must be resettled as a matter of urgency, after which 'the integrity of the boundaries must be rigidly preserved' (p. 49). It would be difficult to find a set of recommendations more unrealistic in their expectations nor more calculated to stir up the bitter opposition of local people. This is an extreme statement of the 'preservationist' approach to conservation, an approach which owes more to European myths - about 'wild' Africa and about the essentially apolitical objectives of conservation (Anderson and Grove, 1987) - than it does to African realities.

A more realistic and enlightened proposal for the development of the Omo and Mago parks is presented by Sutcliffe (1992), who criticises the conservation categories used by the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Organisation (EWCO) (as it is now known), such as 'national park' and 'wildlife reserve', on the grounds that they fail to give proper consideration

to the 'basic needs of the local population' (p.86). His proposal would divide the area inhabited by the Mursi into three 'categories of conservation management' (pp. 87-91): the Omo and Mago National Parks, with reduced areas; the 'Mago Resource Reserve', where 'relatively low intensity human land use would be allowed to continue'; and the 'Omo River Anthropological Reserve' where 'the subsistence economy of the indigenous population' would be maintained. He also recommends that 'planning and demarcation of the new land use zones should...be negotiated with the peoples' and that 'sharing of revenue from visitors to the area should also be catered for' (p. 92).

These proposals are a notable advance on Stephenson's and Mizuno's, for three reasons. Firstly they show a greater understanding of local subsistence systems (though it must be said this would not have been difficult); secondly they include a number of measures specifically designed to protect the interests of the local population, even to the extent of altering the park boundaries; and thirdly, they recognise the need to ensure that local people gain tangible benefits from conservation development. Unfortunately, however, enthusiasm for the proposals must be tempered with some scepticism because of two fundamental assumptions they share with earlier approaches: that it is only the needs - and the 'basic needs' at that, meaning basic subsistence needs - of the local population that have to be taken into account and that natural resource management is, by definition, an activity that can only be managed effectively 'from above'. These assumptions are, of course, connected since, if all that matters is the identification of a people's 'basic needs' (and not, for example, their knowledge, capacities, attitudes and aspirations) then it should be possible in theory (it hardly ever is in practice) for these to be identified and catered for by outside experts on flying visits from the national capital.

It is presumably because he does not question these assumptions that Sutcliffe is led, from the highest of motives, to suggest that an 'Anthropological Reserve' is established along both banks of the Omo. There are a number of objections to this proposal, some practical and some ethical. Firstly, and as is clear from what I have written above, such an area could not possibly support the 'subsistence economy of the indigenous population'. Secondly, the proposal ignores the rights and aspirations of those who would, in effect, be confined to this corridor of land along the Omo to improved living conditions, quality of life and economic security. Thirdly, it would therefore create exactly the kind of local opposition to the conservation plans of the EWCO that would ensure their ultimate failure. And fourthly, it would be a short step from here to regard the Mursi as little better than another form of wildlife: not an endangered species, to be sure, but no more than an aesthetic enhancement of the 'national park experience' for the tourist.

By far the most ambitious and costly plans to date for developing the Omo and Mago Parks are set out in the report of a feasibility study for the 'Southern Ethiopia Wildlife Conservation Project', which has since been re-named the Southern National Parks Rehabilitation Project' (SNPRP). This is a five-year project, focusing on the Nechiser (Arba Minch), Mago and Omo National Parks, to be financed by the European Development Fund to the tune of approximately ECU 16 million. A consultancy team, consisting of a wildlife biologist, civil engineer and economist, made helicopter and ground visits to the Mago and Omo between 17 and 23 March 1993. In their final report they note that 'It is almost

certainly in the socio-cultural area that the greatest long term threats to project sustainability lie' (Agriconsulting, 1993, p. 60). What they mean by this is that, without the 'goodwill and cooperation' (loc. cit.) of the local people, the project will not succeed. They therefore propose to 'increase the tangible economic benefits that rural people get from land used for wildlife conservation' by, among other means, 'introducing revenue sharing with rural communities and 'giving priority to local people in opportunities for employment' (Agriconsulting, 1993, p. 61).

It is envisaged that revenue sharing will operate through the financing of 'priority rural development projects', identified with the help of 'socio-anthropologists' and ultimately decided upon by the EWCO 'since this should relate to wildlife conservation' (62). Denial or loss of such benefits would be used as a sanction to induce 'respect for the laws and rules relating to wildlife conservation and park management' (62). For it is realised that it would be a hopeless task to attempt to force such respect on 'well armed, unruly tribesmen at home in a vast wilderness' (62). In line with this realisation it is proposed to appoint at least one assistant warden in each park to have responsibility for 'extension work' and to keep the number of game guards and outposts relatively small. This recognition that the key to the success of the project lies in the attitude towards it of the local people rather than in its infrastructural and policing capacity, is greatly to be welcomed. Unfortunately, however, it is clear from the general tone and content of the report that, like the documents discussed earlier, it is firmly based on 'top-down' and 'preservationist' assumptions.

Despite its emphasis on the importance of 'socio-cultural' factors, the report goes into detail only about the technical and infrastructural arrangements required by the project and has nothing to say about the knowledge, attitudes, customs and beliefs of the local people. The specification of relevant 'socio cultural' factors, one must conclude, is considered irrelevant to the feasibility stage of the project (unlike the specification of roads, bridges and buildings) and can therefore be taken care of after it has begun. In particular, there is no mention of the resource management skills of the people which must, by the report's own evidence, be considerable, for the Mago and Omo parks are each described as an 'impressive wilderness' (pp. 125 and 137). This of course is the language of the tourist brochure, not of ecological science, and it is aimed, presumably, at political decision makers. The political usefulness of the wilderness myth is that it implies (a) that there are very few people currently living in or using the area - to use the report's own words, that there is little or no 'encroachment' (pp. 125 and 137) - and (b) that those who are living in and using it are a threat to its 'wilderness' character.

Revenue sharing is therefore intended to buy the 'goodwill' of local residents while denying them a decision-making role in the management of their own resources. Quite apart from the questionable morality of this strategy, it will almost certainly fail because the 'community developments' to be financed under the scheme will be allocated, on the stick and carrot principle, at the behest of the conservation authorities. The local people will thus become 'passive beneficiaries' (IIED, 1994, p. 21), with no final say in how the benefits are distributed - a reliable recipe for failure in any development project.



There is a further serious problem here which is mentioned in the report but the implications of which are ignored: since there will be no 'excess revenue' generated by the parks in the near future and since it will be important to make some investment in 'community development' at an early stage in order to gain the 'goodwill' of the people, this investment will have to come out of project funds. Even when 'excess revenue' (presumably from tourism) does become available, it will be 'inadequate to finance capital intensive inputs...(schools etc.) and will more likely be adequate for the relatively modest running costs of such facilities' (p. 62). Once donor funds are no longer available, in other words, the revenue sharing scheme will probably collapse.

The most significant weaknesses of the report, which force one to conclude that its emphasis on the 'socio-cultural area' is largely rhetorical, are that it contains no information about the natural resource management strategies of the local people and no evidence that any of them were informed, let alone consulted, about the project during the 6 day field visit that the study team made to the Omo and Mago Parks. The willingness this shows to spend huge amounts of money on such a complex and far reaching environmental project, apparently in full recognition of the crucial importance of the 'socio-cultural area' to 'project sustainability' and yet without taking virtually any notice of the human ecology, environmental knowledge, capacities and rights of the local population is staggering.

Following the feasibility study it was decided to initiate a two year 'preliminary phase' of the project, the aims and objectives of which are set out in a document dated April 1994. This describes a number of urgent objectives for the preliminary phase 'in view of the speed of degradation and the need for certain pre-conditions to be met'. These objectives include 'the early gazetment of the priority protected areas' and various steps to strengthen the legal, institutional and infrastructural capacities of the EWCO. What is most striking about this document, however, is its uncompromisingly negative attitude to human activity in and around protected areas, its totally unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved by military-style protection of such areas and its use of 'institutional' rather than objective facts to justify far-reaching policy proposals. The author(s) would have us believe that there is no time to lose in gazetting the Parks because degradation is proceeding apace within them. It is proposed to prepare 'a comprehensive and coherent land and resource use plan' for the Omo-Mago area ...to address the very serious environmental degradation currently taking place as a result of the indiscriminate build-up of livestock herds.....combined with uncontrolled exploitation of the natural resources of the national parks'.

Since no evidence is presented in support of the statement that 'degradation' is taking place, the author(s) clearly believe(s) this is a self-evident truth - despite the notorious complexity of the issues involved in identifying and measuring rangeland degradation, and despite the fact that the report of the feasibility study contains no evidence of environmental degradation in the Omo and Mago parks. There could be no better illustration of the way policy decisions, having momentous long term implications for the well-being of people and the environment, can be based on assessments and assumptions which bear hardly any relation to the world as it really is. While the report of the feasibility study avoids the question of resettling people living within the park boundaries simply by pretending they do not exist, this document takes the bull by the horns, stating that 'One of the first tasks of

the project will be to arrange the resettlement of families living in the parks (480 in Nechisar and some 1200 in Omo) with the collaboration of the local administration. The project will assist with the timely supply of materials (for building new houses), hand tools and where necessary food aid for six months to allow families to re-establish themselves. There will also be social infrastructure by way of boreholes, schools and clinics provided'(p. 10). There is some ambiguity about the number of people it is planned to move. If the figure 1200 really does refer to 'families', then it is being proposed to remove about seven or eight thousand people from the Omo Park - a figure that would make sense, since it would more than account for the entire Mursi population. A page earlier, however, it is said that 1200 'squatters' will be moved 'in an orderly fashion'. In which case it would be interesting to know on what basis this particular figure was arrived at. Those who are not to be resettled (presumably because they live in areas adjoining the two parks) will be 'sensibilised...in order to minimise conflictual or unsustainable resource use'. At this point one begins to wonder whether these proposals are intended to have any connection with the 'real world' at all.

The terms of reference for the preliminary phase make no mention of the need to arrive at workable proposals to ensure that local people gain tangible and realistic benefits from wildlife conservation and tourism, despite the insistence of the feasibility study team that unless this can be achieved the project will fail in the long run. The terms of reference do, however, include the requirement for a 'sociologist or socio economist', whose task will be to undertake a 'socio-economic survey....concerning families to be resettled, and local populations living in or near the national parks'. One can only conclude that those responsible for designing and implementing the project are not only prepared to see local people bear the main burden of its cost, even to the extent of being forced off their land with six months' food aid 'where necessary', but that they simply do not appreciate the need for local involvement, purely on grounds of efficiency.

## INVOLVING THE PEOPLE

But what kind of 'involvement'? The word is open to as much rhetorical abuse as that other development buzz-word, 'participation' which can include getting people to provide labour for a project or merely asking them what they would like a project to do for them ('needs assessment'). I assume that the only kind of 'participation' that is likely to lead to long term success in any development project is 'interactive participation' (Pimbert and Pretty, 1995, p. 26), the essential feature of which is that local people are involved, from the start in design and implementation. It must surely be accepted by now that, unless people have real power to influence the way a project is designed and managed, they will not feel that it is 'theirs', whatever (often temporary) benefits they derive from it.

Espousing as I do this notion of 'interactive' participation, it would clearly be contradictory if I were to recommend a management structure and set of objectives that would allow effective local participation in the SNPRP, for these must themselves be worked out with local involvement. But I can make some general observations and recommendations, based on my knowledge of the Mursi over the past 25 years, which I hope might prove helpful to the EWCO if, as I hope, it decides to revise its present approach

to this project. First, there is no rush. Talk of 'serious environmental degradation' in the Omo and Mago parks has more to do with getting donors to release funds than with the actual situation in those areas. I recognise the pressures there must be on government departments concerned with conservation, and their advisers, to emphasise the image of 'Africa in crisis' in their competition for scarce development funds. The same pressures have been felt by development NGOs, who have only recently recognised that to use heart-rending images of starving Africans in their fund-raising literature is counter-productive. By spreading a false image of the passivity and helplessness of rural Africans, such advertising promotes inappropriate aid which prolongs or increases the levels of poverty. Similarly, projects which are designed to appeal to (and therefore which confirm) the European image of Africa on the brink of ecological disaster are more likely to help bring that disaster about than prevent or mitigate it.

Second, a new feasibility study should be undertaken with the sole aim of assessing the prospects for effective local participation in the development of the Omo and Mago Valleys as a conservation area. The first objective of the study would be to analyse the natural resource management strategies of the Mursi as well as their northern neighbours, the Bodi, and to assess the environmental impact of these strategies, both positive and negative, over the past few decades. This would require a lengthy period of fieldwork by a team that should include a range ecologist and an anthropologist with specialist knowledge of pastoralist ecology in East Africa. The second objective would be to initiate a process of debate and discussion within local communities, aimed at formulating an effective management structure for the project in which these communities would have a decisive decision-making role. The third objective would be to make a thorough study of other community participation conservation schemes in Africa, especially among pastoralists. (The study team should visit some of these, especially perhaps the Ngorongoro Conservation Area in Tanzania.)

Third, the EWCO should take steps ensure that it's staff are well informed both of the need for a community-centred approach to wildlife conservation and of the history of such projects in other African countries. As the Agriconsulting report suggests, at least some national park staff should be given specific responsibility for 'extension work' and it would be enormously helpful if such staff received training in so-called 'Rapid' or 'Participatory' methods of 'Rural Appraisal'.

Fourth, it should not be assumed that it would be necessary, in order to involve the Mursi in the project at a decision making level, to create new organisational structures. A key difficulty in the management of community conservation projects - and indeed of other kinds of 'participatory' development projects (Hogg, 1992) - has been how to define the 'community' as an empirical entity. The five-fold territorial division of the Mursi population into *buranyoga* would provide decision-making units of the required nature. The relative economic homogeneity of the Mursi, their egalitarian ethos and their strong tradition of public debate and oratory make one confident that they would have no difficulty in adapting their existing methods of public decision making to the demands of a *genuinely* participatory conservation project.

Fifth, conservation development should not be seen as incompatible with pastoral development - that is with helping the Mursi to improve their food security through such means as the extension of veterinary services and the construction of water points in dry season grazing areas. Pastoral development of this kind - aimed, that is, at improving the productivity of subsistence herding rather than at commercial offtake - is, as Homewood and Rodgers forcefully argue for the Maasai of the Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA), 'entirely compatible with conservation' (1991, p. 248).

Sixth, and in view of the last point, a decision should be taken now to alter the boundary of the Mago Park. This would be to take account, not only of flood-retreat cultivation along the banks of the Omo as suggested by Sutcliffe, but also of the vital importance of the Elma Valley to the pastoral activities of the Mursi and therefore to the viability of their entire economy. This would mean re-tracing the western boundary of the park so that it follows the top of the Omo-Mago watershed, thereby enclosing the whole of the Mago Valley but excluding the whole of the Elma valley.

Finally, and as part of a radical re-assessment of the negative role of local people in conservation development which is implicit in the documents discussed earlier, a decision should be made to drop all plans for the resettlement of families living within park boundaries. This is not to say that resettlement of local people can never be justified, under any circumstances. My argument here is that there are no grounds for believing that the long term objectives of wildlife conservation would be served by excluding local people from the area and strong grounds for believing that such action would have the opposite effect.

## CONCLUSION

The SNPRP, with money provided by the European tax-payer, has the potential to create a humanitarian outrage if the re-assessment recommended here is not made. Such outrages have been perpetrated many times in the past, and almost always on people who, like the Mursi, have no power to fight for their own rights and interests. It therefore falls to outsiders to attempt to fill this political vacuum, speaking up on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves and gaining in the process a reputation for being 'trouble makers' amongst those whose income and career prospects are linked to the completion of such scandalously ill-conceived projects as the one I have outlined in this paper.

In this case, however, we can base our appeal on grounds of efficiency as well as equity. Failure to put the interests and well being of the local human population at the centre of the project - to approach the 'elephant question', in other words, from the point of view of the Mursi - will almost certainly ensure that it does not achieve its conservation objectives. There have been some imaginative attempts made in other African countries, some of which we shall no doubt be hearing about at this conference, to involve local people, to varying degrees and with varying degrees of success, in conservation projects (e.g., Lindsay, 1983; Skinner, 1985; McCabe et al., 1992; Newby, 1990; and Murphree, 1992). It is disappointing, therefore, that a more concerted effort has not been made to benefit from this experience in the planning of the SNPRP. Given the substantial funding available, the size and significance of the areas to be 'rehabilitated' and the advantage that comes from being able to learn from

other people's mistakes rather than one's own, there is an opportunity here for Ethiopia to create one of the most exciting and influential wildlife conservation projects in Africa. For the sake of us all, and especially for the sake of the Mursi and the elephants, let us hope that it is not too late for this challenge to be accepted.

## POSTSCRIPT

This chapter originated in a paper for a workshop on participatory wildlife management, which was organised by Farm Africa and the Save the Children Fund (US) and held in Addis Ababa in 1995. The purpose of the workshop was to enable Ethiopia to benefit from the experience of other African countries in promoting community-centred approaches to conservation and wildlife management. The purpose of the paper was to urge the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Organisation and the European Union's Addis Ababa office to give more serious and systematic attention to the need to make community participation an integral part of the Southern National Parks Rehabilitation Project (SNPRP), which was then about to get underway. I made no bones about the fact that my main concern was for the welfare of the affected human populations, specifically the Mursi. (This was implied by my title, which was based upon a joke about a man whose passion was elephants and who, when asked to write an essay about the Polish Question, chose as his title 'The Elephant and the Polish Question'.) But I based my hope of persuading the responsible authorities to make changes to the project on an appeal to pragmatism and efficiency rather than to ethics: this was a case, I thought, where what was good for the Mursi would also be good for the elephants.

My appeal fell on deaf ears. The project went ahead without major revision and those responsible for funding and implementing it appear to have seen my intervention as an attempt to undermine their conservation objectives, for the sake of the narrow self-interest of a few thousand Mursi, rather than to make them more realisable. In this postscript I shall fill in what details I can concerning the subsequent history of the project. My account will be sketchy, because of the paucity of information available to me. This comes from two project documents, an 'Inception Report' for May-July 1995 (DHV Consultants BV, 1995) and a 'Final Report' covering the period May 1995 to April 1998 (DHV Consultants BV, 1998) and from a meeting I had with various officials of the EWCO during a visit to Addis Ababa in April 1999.

The 'preliminary phase' of the project (henceforth referred to simply as 'the project') began in May 1995, when the Project Manager (from DHV Consultants, The Netherlands) took up his post. It was expected to run until May 1997 but was later extended to 30 April 1998. A budget of 2 million ecu was allocated to the project, with a further 740,000 ecu to be provided by the Ethiopian Government from 'existing counterpart funds'. Over half of this latter amount was to cover resettlement costs, although the inception report devotes only four lines to this topic, stating that 'This objective will not be further discussed at this stage and actions to achieve it are unlikely to begin before year two' (p. 11). Three 'issues' are identified in the inception report as constituting 'project objectives', the first and most important being the establishment of a 'legal framework' for conservation. This is to

include the formal adoption by the government of a Wildlife Conservation Policy, the legal gazettelement of the three parks and the achievement of financial and managerial autonomy for the EWCO.

A wildlife policy and wildlife law were duly drafted and forwarded to the government in April 1997 but no official response had been received by the time the project ended in April 1998. As for gazettelement, the final report states that this cannot sensibly proceed until the wildlife law has been adopted and promulgated, since >under existing law gazettelement would. lead to immediate problems relating to the presence of people in the parks. The new law provides for zoning which would avoid 'conflictual situations' (p. 9). Nor had financial autonomy for the EWCO been achieved by the end of the project, although this goal is described in the report as 'potentially achievable'. The significance of such a step, however, has been diminished by the formal transfer of responsibility for Ethiopia's national parks from the EWCO to the respective regional authorities, which occurred soon after the project began.

The second issue identified as a project objective was 'the strengthening of conservation efforts. in the three parks. This was to include improving the capacity and morale of park staff, rehabilitating park infrastructure and planning the resettlement of local people living in the parks. Efforts to achieve the first of these objectives appear to have been relatively successful in Nechisar, where regular patrols were instituted and where 'Hostile clashes between park staff and intruders is fortunately not a feature' (p. 11). In the Mago and Omo Parks, however, such clashes continued to occur, leading to the death of a game scout in January 1998. 'The net result is that the promising start to the institution of surveillance by regular patrols has effectively come to nothing and Mago and Omo are once again freely accessible to anyone wishing to hunt' (p. 11). The rehabilitation of park infrastructure has included repairs to roads and tracks, the repair of the Omo ferry, the digging of wells and the rehabilitation of existing park buildings and the construction of new ones. Plans to resettle people living in the Omo and Mago parks were shelved, no doubt because it was soon realised that this was an impossible task, given the lack of a detailed resettlement plan, the potential opposition of the well-armed local population and the totally unrealistic budget available for this purpose B 471,000 ecu for the project as a whole. The final report states that 'No resettlement is foreseen in Omo and Mago' (p. 14). The resettlement of families from the Nechisar Park (estimated in the project documents to number 480, which is the equivalent of at least 3,000 individuals) remained an integral part of the project, though it had not been achieved by the time the final report was written. The report states that 'There is now a high degree of probability that this vital action can be successfully concluded, although not during the life of this phase'.

The third 'issue' to be addressed by the project was the 'sustainable exploitation' of the three parks. This was seen to involve the preparation of 'development strategies' for each park, the encouragement of tourism, a review of the existing ban on safari hunting, censuses of wildlife and, in a revealing turn of phrase, an effort 'to inform the local communities about the project and their role within it'. Development strategies for the parks have been included in their management plans, wildlife censuses have been carried out in the three parks and the ban on safari hunting was lifted in 1996. Apart from the production of a

‘promotional booklet’ and park brochures, there appear to have been no other practical steps taken to encourage tourism. As for the involvement of local people in the project, this was left to the park wardens to organise, since no project funds were available for this purpose. The final report merely states that,

A vigorous and very productive dialogue with the communities around the parks had already been initiated by the wardens before the project began. Active and frequent discussions continue to be held. However, there is limited progress in this area because there is still nothing specific to discuss. (p. 15)

The report concludes with a recommendation to extend the first, or preliminary, phase of the project for a further year by means of a 20 per cent increase in the original grant from the European Development Fund. The purpose of the extension would be to help the Government create ‘workable institutional arrangements for conservation’ and

to fund the resettlement of the people in Nechisar National Park. The recent efforts of the Southern and Oromia Regions to achieve this *absolutely vital goal* must be given every assistance. To stop now is to lose the initiative for ever. (p. 19, emphasis added)

On a visit to Addis Ababa in April 1999 I was able to meet several officials of the EWCO, including the General Manager, the Director of National Parks and the member of staff who had taken over as Project Leader of the SNPRP, after the departure the ex-patriot Project Manager in May 1998. They told me that the preliminary phase of the project had indeed been extended for a fourth year, up to June 1999. It was still intended to go ahead with the resettlement of people living in the Nechisar Park, but this had been held up because of ‘administrative problems’. The people had been consulted, through a workshop at which their representatives were present, and they were ready to move. Some of the building materials needed for the resettlement B including corrugated sheeting B had already been purchased. The resettlement would therefore go ahead as soon as the ‘administrative problems’ had been solved. It was not explained what these problems were, but I gathered from other sources that they had to do with an argument between the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region, within which the Park falls, and the neighbouring Oromia Region, about a resettlement site for the main population living in the Park, the Guji, who are Oromo speakers. I also learned that, while there had been no forced removals, the Southern Region authorities were putting strong pressure on the Guji to leave the Park ‘voluntarily’, by denying them veterinary, health and educational services.

This brief account of the subsequent history of the SNPRP illustrates at least two general issues. First, there is the contrast between good policy and poor implementation. The feasibility study for the SNPRP was full of wise words and noble aspirations on the subject of community participation, but it provided none of the detailed information about local resource management and decision-making systems that would have been necessary in order to plan the project in such a way that it could have lived up to these aspirations. The failure systematically to consult local people, either before or during the course of the project, to involve them in decision-making and to ensure that they gained long-term benefits from the project was at variance with the Ethiopian Government’s own policies on environmental protection, which state that policies in this area should ‘promote the involvement of local

communities' and 'ensure that park, forest and wildlife conservation and management programmes....allow for a major part of any economic benefits deriving therefrom to be channelled to local communities affected by such programmes.' (Environmental Protection Authority, 1997, pp. 9-10). Second, there is the failure of donor institutions to ensure that the projects they fund, particularly those involving resettlement, are carried out in accordance with internationally agreed guidelines, designed to protect the rights and well-being of affected populations. In this case, the relevant guidelines were those of the OECD on Involuntary Displacement and Resettlement. These require, amongst other things, that, when resettlement is unavoidable, a detailed resettlement plan, with timetable and budget, be drawn up, aimed at improving or at least restoring the economic base of the resettlers. There is no evidence that such a plan was drawn up in this case, nor that the European Commission made any effort to ensure that the project complied with the OECD guidelines.

Who, then, have been the 'beneficiaries' of this project? I shall leave that for the reader to decide but, whoever they are, they have not included the Mursi and, still less, the elephants.

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