

Sustainable ecotourism potentials and its challenges in Ethiopia: The Awash National Park in Focus

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Abstract

The main objective of this study was to assess the existing ecotourism development potentials in the Awash National Park and major challenges for its sustainability. To this end, data was gathered from primary and secondary sources by qualitative and quantitative approaches. First hand information was obtained through intensive reading of local archives and institutions and through field observation as well as through interview with purposively selected knowledgeable informants. As to secondary sources, the works of various scholars with different academic and life experiences were consulted. Moreover, statistical data released by local, national and international institutions that have stake in tourism industry was used for this study. The collected data were analyzed and interpreted through tabulation, chart and percentage. The findings showed that Awash National Park and the surrounding community, if its tourism shareholders including the local community act cooperatively and strategically to deal with challenges, have viable potential to be developed as important ecotourism destination.

Keywords: Tourism resource, Ecotourism, wildlife conservation, National Park and Protected areas

1. Introduction

Since the 1980's tourism has increasingly been center of attention as an alternative strategy of economic development in less developed countries. Like many other least developed countries, Ethiopia has also taken tourism as an effective instrument for poverty alleviation and to its integration into the world economy (A. Kauffmann, 2008:14-15). In terms of job creation, tourism is a labor intensive service industry that serves as a significant source of employment. It invites large number of people with a wide range of jobs from the unskilled to the highly specialized personnel to be tied up to the sector (Ajala O.A, 2008:75; Kumar Dube, 201:96). In the Ethiopian context where most of its rural people are still engaged in subsistence agriculture and living below poverty level, establishing links between tourism activity and poverty reduction and targeting tourism as a strategic driver of per capital GDP growth is critically reasonable and legitimate strategy (World Bank, 2006:14)

However, given the country's high tourism resources which include eleven of its well known heritages registered by UNESCO, the country is still benefited the least out of the sector and in terms of attracting international tourists and getting foreign earning, Ethiopia is less competitive. (Yabibal Mulualem, 2010:3 [27]; A. Kauffmann, 2008:28). For example, according to the World Economic Forum report 2013, the country's all over performance in Travel & tourism was 120th in rank from 140 world countries. When compared with neighboring and nearby countries with less tourism resources, Ethiopia's tourism performance is low. In this case while having less diversified tourism resource when compared with Ethiopia, such countries like Egypt, Kenya and even Uganda, which respectively stood at 85th, 96th and 116th in their rank, were and still are in a better position than Ethiopia (WEF, 2013:xvi). Again when compared with its close competitors

such as Kenya and Tanzania, which claimed 4 percent and 2 percent of tourism market share respectively, Ethiopia's share at continent level is very small (i.e. 1 percent,) in 2008/2009. In 2011 while Kenya earned an amount of US\$ 466 million, which accounts for 7.6% of total government revenue, the contribution tourism to government revenue in Ethiopia was only 2.4% (US\$76 million). The Kenyan government earns a significantly higher (MCT, 2012:28; UNECA SRO-EA; 2011:20) [19, 29].

On the other hand, there is a general agreement among UN member countries for "*Promotion of ecotourism for poverty eradication and environment protection*". Moreover, member countries are advised to devise policies that enable them to use ecotourism as a means of income generation, job creation and education (UNEP, 2013:275) [25]. Like many other members, Ethiopia accepted the UN resolution and the country has now making a good effort to boost community based sustainable tourism as a strategy to poverty reduction. (MCT, 2012 :9). However, in terms of job creation and foreign income generation, the sector's contribution is still very low. According to World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) report in 2013, Travel and Tourism generated 985,500 jobs directly (i.e. 3.8% of total employment), and in 2014 it created 979,000 jobs (3.6% of total employment) in the country. The total contribution of Travel and Tourism to employment in 2013 and 2014 respectively was 2,491,500 (9.5%) and 2,291,500 jobs (8.5%) of total employment. In 2014 the total contribution of Travel and Tourism to the GDP was ETB 91, 898.4mn (9.3% of GDP), (WTTC, 2014&2015). The UN resolution also highlights the importance of ecotourism for the conservation and protection of natural and cultural heritages through the involvement of the indigenous local community and tourists (UNEP, 2013:275). In this regard, by establishing more than 55 protected areas, out of

which 21 are parks, Ethiopia is making a good effort to protect and conserve its natural ecosystems and wildlife heritage. However, the country is not effectively using its rich and endemic wildlife species for ecotourism. Nature based sustainable ecotourism is confined only on few natural parks (Alemneh, 2015:408) ^[2]. To make this argument more valid, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania are among the world's top list countries well known for their endemic mammal species (*Melaku Tefera*, 2011:108) ^[17]. In terms of harnessing its natural resources such as wild life resources for tourism, Ethiopia is at a disadvantaged position. For example, Kenya's wildlife-based tourism accounts for about 70% of tourism earnings, 25% of gross domestic product and more than 10% of total formal sector employment (John S. Akama and *et al.*, 2011:2) ^[15]. Ethiopia has all attributes of tourism heritages like impressive array of fauna, flora, historical and cultural and hence possesses even more from what Kenya has (Abel Markos, 2012:5 ^[1]; Tekle Shanka, p.2376). However, the contribution of Ethiopian wildlife tourism as source of foreign earning and employment is insignificant (World Bank, 2006:37). On the other hand, there is scarcity of comprehensive investigation about the potentials, opportunities and challenges of developing sustainable ecotourism. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to investigate the potentials, opportunities and challenges of developing sustainable park based ecotourism by taking Awash National Park as a case.

2. Materials and Methods

Data was collected from different sources released by relevant institutions and from various works of scholars. Primary information was collected through interviewing informants, observation in the park and by consulting the archives of local institutions such as East Shewa Zone Culture, Tourism and Parks' Development and from Fentale Wereda Culture and Tourism Office. Then information was crosschecked for its validity and analyzed through the use of chart, table and percentage. In order to show the changes and continuities in a historical perspective historical descriptive method is applied.

3. Discussion and Interpretation

3.1 Historical Development of nature based tourism

Conservation oriented activity has long history in Ethiopia, and its beginning is traced back to the reign of King Zera Yaacob (r.1434-1468). However, until its resumption in the early 19th Century for protection of large and flagship animals, the practice did not continue. By the beginning of the 20th Century, Emperor Menilik II (r 1889-1913) revised the early 19th Century wildlife conservation regulation in 1908. In the 1960's, up on recommendation by the United Nations Scientific, Educational and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Organization (EWCO) was established in 1964 (Alemneh Amare, 2015:407-408). EWCO then under Ministry of Agriculture was in charge of, among many other related responsibilities, establishing and administering protected areas. Thus throughout the 1960s right up to the early 1980, EWCO as an agent of the Ethiopian government played a significant role in designating reserve parks focusing on those areas that inhabited exclusively either by large assemblage of mammals or in areas that harbored remnant populations of endemic and charismatic species. However, only two 'national parks:

Awash National Park and Simien Mountains National Park were legally established or 'gazetted' as National Park. Awash National Park was initially established in 1966 and got legal recognition in 1969 with an area of 756 kilometer Square (FDRE UNDP & GEF, 2007:5 ^[10]; Demeke and Kahsay G/Tensae, 2011).

Until the end of the early 1990s, the condition of protected areas in Ethiopia was not relatively good. During the period of the socialist government (1975-1991), recurrent drought and prolonged civil war endangered the protected areas. In the period between 1972 and 1986, for example, boundary demarcation and park resource management by neglecting the interest of the local community as well as the park's authorities permission to drought affected pastoralists to settle in the ANP caused irreversible devastation on Awash National Park (Solomon Belay and *et al.*, 2014) ^[21]. Moreover, the protected area system in Ethiopia was managed in a top-down approach and it excludes the local community, civil organizations and the private sector. Due to the neglect of the local community by the government in parks management, the local community failed to develop a sense of ownership. Consequently, the communities living around parks involved in an act of vengeance during and immediately after the 1991 change of government (FDRE UNDP & GEF, 2007:9).

In the post 1991, the new government transformed the system of administration from unitary to federal system; and from command economic system to decentralization and liberal free market system of administration. With the change in administration system, there was devolution or decentralization of power from the centre to the newly created regional states. New policies and strategies such as the National Conservation Strategy of 1994 was enacted and used as instrument to protect natural environment. Following the promulgation and implementation of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia/FDRE/ constitution in 1995, various proclamations were issued and enforced for the management and regulation of the country's natural resources including protected areas and associated activities such as tourism. From the perspective of conservation of natural resources in the post 1991 is the Ethiopian Environmental Policy of 1997 (Daan Vreugdenhil and *et al.*, 2012:14) ^[6]. The policy serves as comprehensive document for other specific laws and proclamations that deal with natural resource conservation.

On the other hand, the federal constitution provided regional states the mandate and powers to administer natural resources and the land to the regional state and the tourism activity in the park to culture and tourism (FDRE constitution, 1995 Article 52 sub article 2 (D)). Proclamations also provide the management of tourism and natural resources. As stated in Proclamation No. 691/2010, that serves legal basis to set up the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the whole task of identifying, developing and managing all tourism resources; natural, cultural and wildlife conservation areas as tourist attractions is given to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (Daan Vreugdenhil and *et al.*, 2012:16-20 ^[6]; Tourism Policy, 2009). For the administration of heritage resources, two important departments/authorities under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism i.e. the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority/EWCA/ and the Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage were established (ARCCH) (MCT, 2012:48) ^[19].

The Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority (EWCA) under the auspices of Ministry of Culture and Tourism was entrusted with activities related to the development, conservation, and sustainable utilization of the country's wildlife resource. The other proclamation, Development, Conservation and Utilization of Wildlife Proclamation 541 of 2007 (in its Article 4 sub article 1) states that parks that have global and national significance should be managed by the federal government. On the basis of this legal ground, the mandate of administering and regulating national parks is entrusted to EWCA. Therefore, protected areas including parks and animal sanctuaries are administered either by federal government through the agency of EWCA or regional states under the bureau of culture tourism and parks development (Melaku Tefera, 2011:108) [17]. On the basis of these principles at present, Awash National Park is administered by EWCA and by Oromiya and Afar Regional States.

3.2. Location and Brief Description of the Study Area, ANP

Awash National Park is one of the most important conservation areas of Ethiopia. The park is found in the Great Rift Valley Region of Ethiopia. It is situated between 8° 40'

and 9°9' North and 39°50' to 40°10' East at about 225 kilometers to the south east of Addis Ababa, the national capital. The national park is laid between the Afar and Oromia Regional states in an area of 593 square kilometers (Tezera Chernet, 2015:3). It is one of the national parks of Ethiopia best known for its rich biodiversity and rural landscape. Topographically, the altitude of the park ranges from about 712 meters at its lowest point at Sabure to its highest point at 2007 meters above sea level at the peak of Mount Fentale. Located in the east African rift valley, ANP receives very small amount of rain, and its average annual rainfall is 619 millimeters; and the park has relatively hot temperature which varies from 22 °C at nights to 42 °C during the day (Habtamu, 2014:7) [13].

Based on its vegetation characteristics, the ANP is classified into three micro-ecosystems; Acacia woodland with expanding bush into the grassland; a savannah grassland which serves as grazing field to many of the mammalian wildlife species and riverine and wetland ecosystem with diverse tree species (Habtamu, 2014:7-8) [13]. Chernet Tezera classified the ANP forest cover in a detail and descriptive way. In both cases it is possible to see that currently the park's ecosystem and wildlife habitat is predominantly grassland.

Table 1: Current Land covers classes in Awash National Park

Category	Description vegetation	Area it covered in hectare	Area it covered in %
Thicket	Composed of trees, shrub, and grass between 5-20%, 10-15% and 25-55%, respectively	13,479 hectare	22.8%
Bush land	Characterized by trees (<10%), shrubs (25-55 %) and grasses (20-70%)	8,409 hectare	14.3%
Grassland	Characterized by trees (0-1 %), shrubs (0-2%), grasses (80-90%) and bare lands (<15%)	5,685 hectare	9.6%
Grassland with scattered Trees	It is composed of herbs (65%), trees (< 2%), shrubs (< 15%) and bare land (< 20%),	13,957 hectare	23.67%
Grassland with scattered Shrubs	Characterized by trees (<5 %), shrubs (2-5%), grasses (70-90%) and bare lands (up to 10%).	16,168 hectare	27.42 %
Riverine forest	Located along the Awash river	894 hectares	1.54%
Palm trees	Found northern and north eastern part of the national park, around the hot springs	375 ha	0.64%
Total		58,967.00	100

Source: Tezera Chernet, 2015:12

3.3. Evolution of Nature based Tourism in ANP

Recently with a growing concern for the conservation of the natural environment, the government of Ethiopia has declared ecotourism as a priority growth sector. Moreover, with availability of easy and cheap road transport access to national parks, a large number of visitors, both domestic and

international, is recorded. In this regard, Ethiopian national parks; Awash, Shala Abijata and Nechisar National Parks, all accessible through good roads from Addis Abeba, are attracting a good number of tourists and took the highest share of domestic tourism (World Bank, 2006:45)

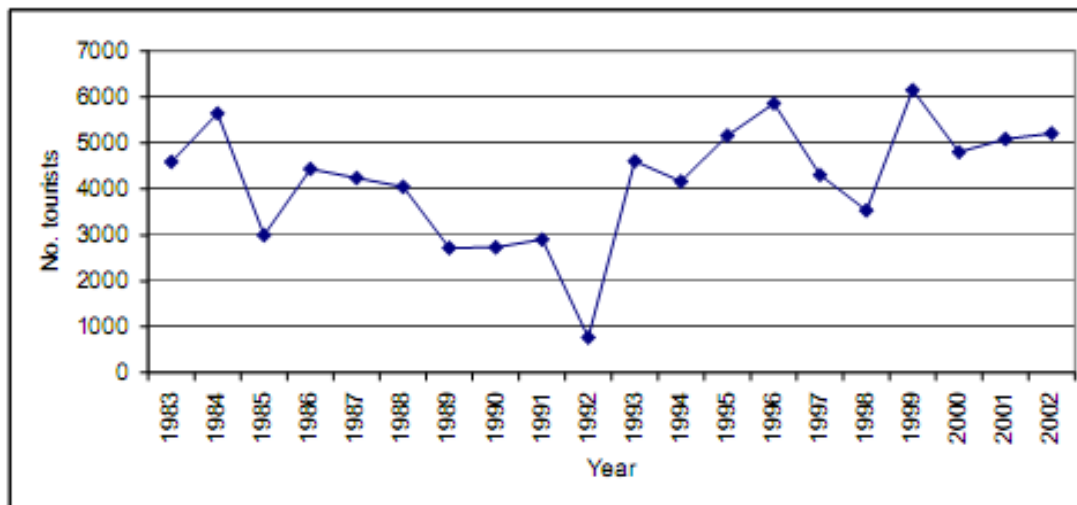
Table 2: Tourism arrivals and receipts in protected areas, 2001-2009

year	Tourist Arrivals	International Tourist	% International tourists	%Growth Total tourists	Tourist receipts(Birr)	Tourist Receipts (US \$)	Receipts Growth (%)
2001	21,045	6,346	30%		840,509	48,222	
2002	22,920	10,401	45%	9%	1,106,176	63,464	32%
2003	30,109	12,120	40%	31%	1,141,163	65,471	3%
2004	34,077	14,644	43%	13%	1,662,161	95,362	46%
2005	39,532	18,818	48%	16%	2,018,731	115,819	21%
2006	51,943	23,810	46%	31%	2,477,774	142,156	23%
2007	64,735	26,485	41%	25%	3,116,255	178,787	26%
2008	61,506	29,421	48%	-5%	3,469,436	199,050	11%
2009	6,973	35,959	54%	9%	5,844,158	335,293	68%
Average				16%			29%

Source: Ministry of Culture and Tourism Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, (2012) Ethiopia's Tourism Sector: Strategic Paths to Competitiveness and Job Creation, p.31

Ecotourism in Ethiopian protected areas is becoming favorite activity for foreign tourists. As indicated in table-2 above, there has been a 16% average growth of total tourists on protected areas. In terms of income generation, regardless of some fluctuations, there has been a 29% increase of revenue receipts. In this regard, Ethiopian parks are becoming good destinations for foreign tourists. When compared with tourist flows of the preceding years in 2004, for example the number of foreign tourists that visit national park had grown with more than 17%. The share of foreign tourists that visited 7 Ethiopian parks in 2004 constituted 40% of the total park visitors (World Bank, 2006:37). Awash National Park is also one of the popular tourist destinations in Ethiopia. It has rich tourism potential that ranges from wildlife resources and

natural scenic to cultural heritages. Even during the period of the military government,(1974-1991) when political turmoil, prolonged civil war and natural catastrophe such as drought and famine stained the image of the country, Awash National Park was attracting a good number of tourists(World Bank,2006). However, the park has not shown much progress to attract more tourists. For example, the number of tourists that visited the park in the year 1984 and 1985, when the country was at civil war and harsh famine, was almost the same as that of 1995 and 1996 (when the country was stable). As indicated in chart-1 below, there is high fluctuation as well. These indicate that the park’s resources are not properly managed and utilized for tourism (Daniel 2011) [7].



Source: Daniel, 2011 [7], p.24

Chart 1: Tourist flow Trends in ANP

However, when compared with other parks located in Rift Valley and nearby areas of Ethiopia, the ANP has been in a good position as a tourist destination. In the year 2004, Awash, Nechisar and Mango National Parks respectively attracted 1870, 1120, and 1101 foreign visitors. Awash National Park was by far the most visited tourist park in the rift valley region of Ethiopia (World Bank, 2006:37; A. Kauffmann, 2008:28)

3.4. The National Park’s Potentials and Opportunities for Sustainable Ecotourism

Given that they use diverse nature, landscapes and biodiversity as major tourist attractions, protected areas such as national parks are becoming major ecotourism sites. Regardless of their emphasis on conservation efforts, at present Ethiopian national parks are recognized as important places for sustainable ecotourism (Girma &Till, 2012:3-4; Adem Gobena, 2008: 12). Park based ecotourism creates enormous opportunities for conservation, protection and sustainable use of natural resources through the involvement of the local people. If ecotourism needs to be sustainable, it should make positive contribution to environmental conservation with an emphasis on economic benefit to the local community (IWG, 2013:11-15; UNEP, 2013:275)

Awash National Park (ANP) has a savannah ecosystem and contains varieties of endemic, rare and endangered wildlife resources. The national park was designated to protect these natural heritages that have national and international values.

As a tourist attraction site, its resources consisted of habitats, fauna, flora, scenic landscape and culture of the Kereyu, Ittu and Afar communities (Habtamu, 2014:22)

3.4.1. Amazing Physical Landscape and Various Natural Resources

Natural attractions can be categorized as landscape, wildlife and other natural resources (Abel, 2012:6). From the physiogeographical and geological point of view, Awash National Park is endowed with exceptional tourist attractions which include the point where the Afar triangle joins the Rift Valley and the looming Mount Fantalle, a dormant volcano with slopes that are thrown with the rubble of ancient lava flows. The national park also includes a unique array of striking landscapes that ranges from the Awash waterfalls and its gorge in the south to the palm oasis and hot springs at the park’s northern edge (Yirmed Demeke and Kahsay G/Tensae 2011:5; Tezera Chernet, 2015:4). The Awash National Park has spectacular scenic resources suitable for ecotourism product development. Among them five distinctive land and physical features used as tourist attractions are Mt. Fentalle, the Lala Sala plain, Kudu Valley, the Awash fall and reverie forests, and the hot springs(Danile 2011 :55)

3.4.2. Rich Bio-Diversity

The term biodiversity refers to the variety of life on Earth and includes plants, animals and other organisms. Ecotourism

focuses on experiencing wildlife in its natural environment (IWG, 2013:9-11). Ethiopia is one of the richest countries in the world in terms of biodiversity. In this regard, ANP with its lowland ecosystem hosts several species of wildlife and its rich wild life makes the park unique. In terms of number of wildlife the park contains, scholars put different findings. In this case, *Yirmed Demeke and Kahsay G/Tensae(2011:4) estimated that more than 450 species of birds and 72 species of mammals are dwelling in the park. However, Habtamu (2014:22) make the number of mammal species over 76 and*

that of bird species over 460. As a conservation area, Awash National Park has special place for the protection of diverse bird life. ANP is very important protection area for transnational migrant birds. It is through this park that such birds cross during breeding seasons. As a tourist destination Awash National Park is extremely important for bird watching. From the total number of migratory birds listed in Ethiopia, over 60% of them are found in the park. The national Park is also home of 43 species of reptiles (Habtamu, 2014:22).

Table 2: List of the most important mammals and birds that contribute to the uniqueness of ANP

A. Large Mammals in ANP			B. Bird species in ANP		
Name	Scientific name	status	Name	Scientific name	Status of birds
Beisa oryx	<i>Oryx beisa</i>	*Near threatened	Lappet-faced vulture	<i>Torgos tracheliotus</i>	near-threatened species
Defassa waterbuck	<i>Kobus ellipsyprimnus defassa</i>		Imperial eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>	near-threatened species
Salt's dik dik	<i>Madoqua saltiana</i>		Lesser kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	near-threatened species
Hamadryas baboon	<i>Papio hamadryas</i>		Basra reed warbler	<i>Acrocephalus griseldis</i>	near-threatened species
Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>		Yellow-throated seedeater	<i>Serinus flavigula</i>	near-threatened species
Ardwolf	<i>Proteles cristata</i>		Lesser flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus minor</i>	endemic species
Bat-eared fox	<i>Otocyon megalotis</i>		Pallid harrier	<i>Circus macrourus</i>	endemic species
Lesser kudu	<i>Tragelaphus imberbis</i>	*Near threatened	Sombre rock chat	<i>Cercomeladubia</i>	endemic species
Soemmerring's gazelle	<i>Gazella soemmerringi</i>		<p style="text-align: center;">* Wildlife status in ANP in 2010 Source, Tezera Chernet, 2015^[23]:14-16; Tezera, 2014:22 and Yirmed Demeke and Kahsay G/Tensae, 2011:4</p>		
Greater Kudu	<i>Tragelaphus strepsiceos</i>	Least *concern			
Abyssinian hare	<i>Lepus abyssinicus</i>				
Warthog	<i>Phacochoerus aethopicus</i>				
Anubis baboon	<i>Papio anubis</i>				
lion	<i>Panthera leo</i>				

It is pertinent to note that Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) serves as the most comprehensive information source on the status of wild species and their links to livelihoods. The IUCN Red List is used by government agencies; wildlife departments and others interested institutions to halt the decline in biodiversity (IWG, 2013:17)

3.4.3. Availability of Cultural and Archaeological Resources in and around ANP

Awash national park is also an ideal site for tourists who entertains with cultural and archeological evidences. The national park is not too far from the archeological site Hadar where Lucy, the fossil of one of the oldest hominid species in Ethiopia was discovered, is located in the Afar Triangle of Ethiopian Rift Valley. Another Late Stone Age anthropological site (11,000-15,000 years ago) is also found around the shores of Lake Basaka in the ANP. Moreover, just across the Awash River, on the eastern edge of the Park, there is an archeological site known by Paleontologists as the "Chorora Formation" which has yielded a small vertebrate fauna. On the other hand, ANP is surrounded by three ethnic groups; Karayu, Ittu and Afar having rich and attractive culture, local handicrafts, indigenous knowledge and accommodation facilities at nearby areas are potential resources for sustainable ecotourism in and around ANP (Daniel Alemayehu, 2011:56-57^[7]; Sintayehu W, and et al, 2014:795)

3.4.4. Infrastructure Development in and around ANP

In order to attract tourists to a destination, basic tourist infrastructures and services like accommodation, transportation, communication, healthcare and other services are very essential. The development of transportation and communication in and around a destination is very fundamental requirement for tourism sustainability (Yabibal Mulualem, 2010:20). In this regard, the Addis Ababa Dire Dawa high way passes between the mid-eastern and south-western part of the Awash National Park for approximately 26 Km. Now, the new Addis Adama Express way makes the journey to Awash National Park easier. Thus Awash National Park is one of the easily accessible national parks (World Bank, 2006:30; Tezera Chernet, 2015:19)^[23]. Moreover, its proximity to Addis Ababa, which is now growing as important hub of international conference tourism, enabled ANP to be one of the most widely visited national parks in Ethiopia. In 2013/2014, for example, the national park was visited by 11,843 tourists and the income generated in the same year was 1.2 million ETB (Tezera Chernet 2015:5)^[23]. From entrance fee alone nearly 60,000 Birr was collected each year from around 4,000 tourists who visited the Awash National Park (ANP) annually (Daniel, 2011:13)^[7].

4. Challenges Facing Awash National Park

Protected areas are increasingly facing numerous challenges (IWG, 2013:11-15; UNEP, 2013:275). The existence of communities engaged in agriculture and nomadic activities

that destroy natural resources in the parks is the root cause for intertwined problems. In the case of Awash National Park, at the beginning the park was established in the home villages of indigenous local communities such as the Kereyu and Afar, and by the time when the park was founded, a political decision was made not to forcefully displace the communities. In addition to ever increasing population growth, the local communities lost sizeable parts of their land to private state development projects and (Ayalew Gebre, 2009:284-288; World Bank, 2006). All these factors have made land and resource shortage to the communities living adjacent to the park more acute and this in turn have become a serious threat to the sustainability of the national park and its resources. Currently, not only Awash National Park but also many other national parks in the country are facing numerous challenges. Some of the major challenges are discussed below:

4.1. Incompatibility of Interest among Stakeholders

There is always incompatibility between the interest of the park and that of the local people who reside adjacent to it. While the parks strive for conservation to protect endangered resources like wildlife and its habitat, the local communities want to extract natural resources with little or no concern for sustainable use (Girma & Till, 2012:3-4) [11]. Since the date of its foundation in 1969, the government and local agents made a serious effort to make the Awash National Park and its natural heritages that have local, national and global value, a good tourist destination. To that goal, the park and its resources with all its biodiversity and landscape features should be conserved and sustainable community based ecotourism need to be promoted (Daniel, 2011) [7]. On the contrary, the semi agricultural and pastoral local communities such as the Kereyu, the Afar and Ittu communities have been highly dependent on the resources/wildlife, forest and water / where the park is established. Consequently, in the last four decades, the resources of ANP declined drastically. In one way or another, the root causes of the problems and the challenges the park encountered today are manmade (Ayalew Gebre, 2009:284). In the words of (Girma and Till, 2012) [11] under this conflict of interest between “conservators” and “extractors”, the natural resources of Awash National Park have under gone changes in area, size and distribution of vegetation unit. In other words, in the last four decades, the national park faced serious challenges to the extent of species extinction and habitat degradation (Tezera Chernet, 2015:18) [23].

4.2. Population Growth and Related Factors

Population growth is identified as the basic driving factor for resource degradation and deforestation in ANP in the pre-and post-decentralization (1991). In the past three decades, it was reported by different scholars that the rapid population growth exacerbated deforestation and wild life habitat loss in ANP. In this regard, while the population of the Afar people increased by 65%., the population on the Kereyu-Ittu side have grown by more alarming rate of 71% (solomon and *et al.*, 2014) [21]. With an increase in human population, demand for grazing and farm land increased. Moreover, high consumption for fire and construction wood as well as illegal charcoal production that focused on big trees, in addition to aggravating

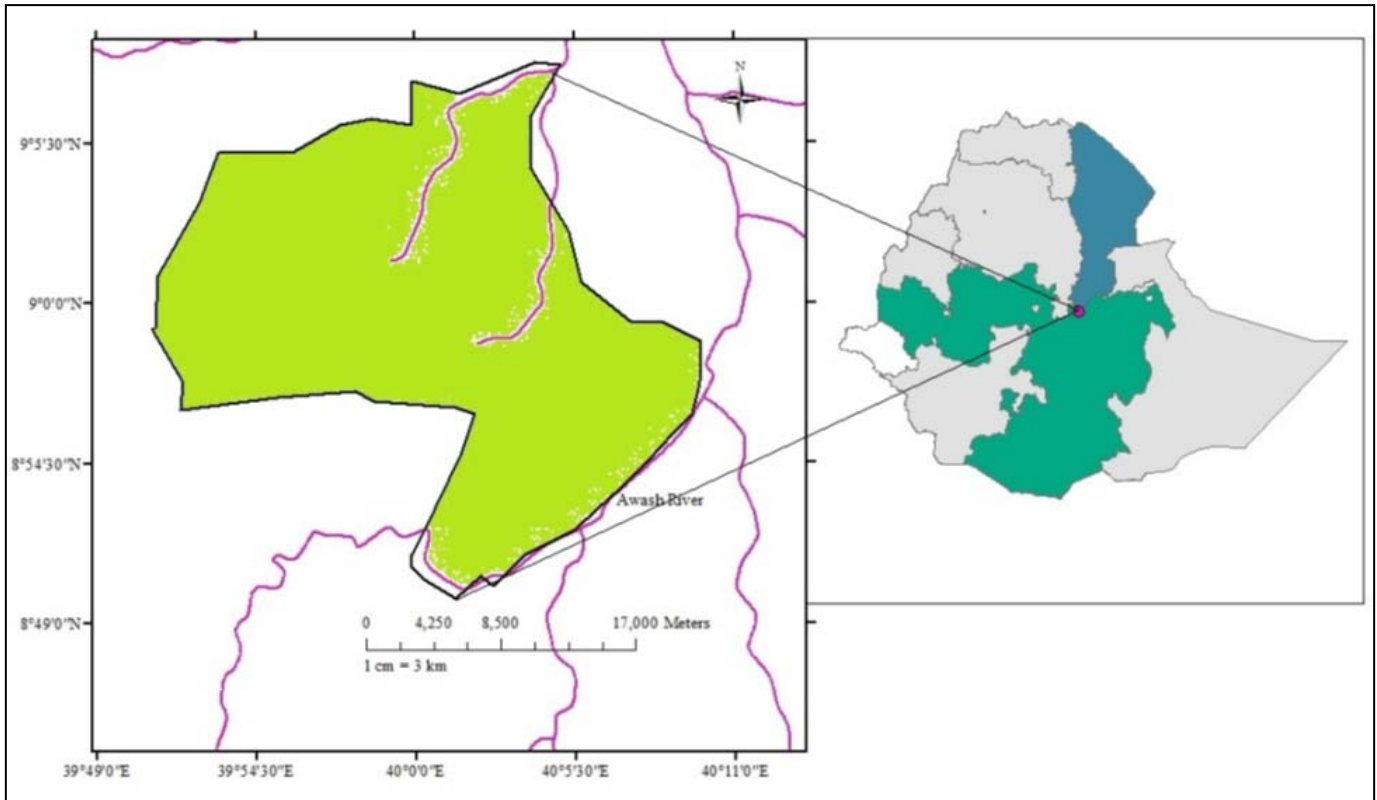
deforestation, endangered the survival of the varieties wild life in ANP. Big trees are very essential for shade provision to mammals during strong sun radiation and for bird species for nesting (Tezera, 2015:12) [23].

Due to these intertwined factors, in the last four decades, the habitat of wild life; the environmental landscape and pattern of vegetation in ANP has undergone changes. An investigation by Solomon and *et al.* (2014) [21] about the extent of land use and land cover change/ LULC/ in the ANP found that while scattered bush land was drastically reduced by 29.4% between 1972 and 2006, grass land expanded rapidly by 14.2% between 1972 and 1986 and by 10.5% between 1972 and 2006. Moreover, in addition to ever increase in demand for farm and grazing land in and around ANP, bare land expanded rapidly. For example, in some parts of the park like at Mt Fentale 4.9% of the area became barren land between 1972 and 2006 (Solomon and *et al.*, 2014) [21].

In ANP, land deforestation and degradation has been aggravated in an alarming rate. In this regard Habtamu estimated that the annual deforestation rate in ANP’s savanna wood land to be 677.7 hectare and if deforestation continued in the same rate, the remaining wood land in the park will be lost in 71.5 years (Habtamu, 2014:24-25). In support of this idea, Tezera Chernet indicates that in the early 1970s, even though deforestation and environmental degradation was regular, the loss was insignificant. He further explains that it was between the early 1970s and mid 1980s that ANP lost 2/3rd of its grass land. In theory, decentralization is taken to be appropriate for conservation and wise utilization of natural resources through proper management (Solomon and *et al.*, 2014) [21]. In ANP, however, even after the establishment of participatory administration in the post 1990s, land degradation and deforestation has continued in a worst rate. Accordingly, it was between 1990s and 2014 that 34.6% of the park’s wood land changed to grass land (Tezera Chernet, 2015:12).

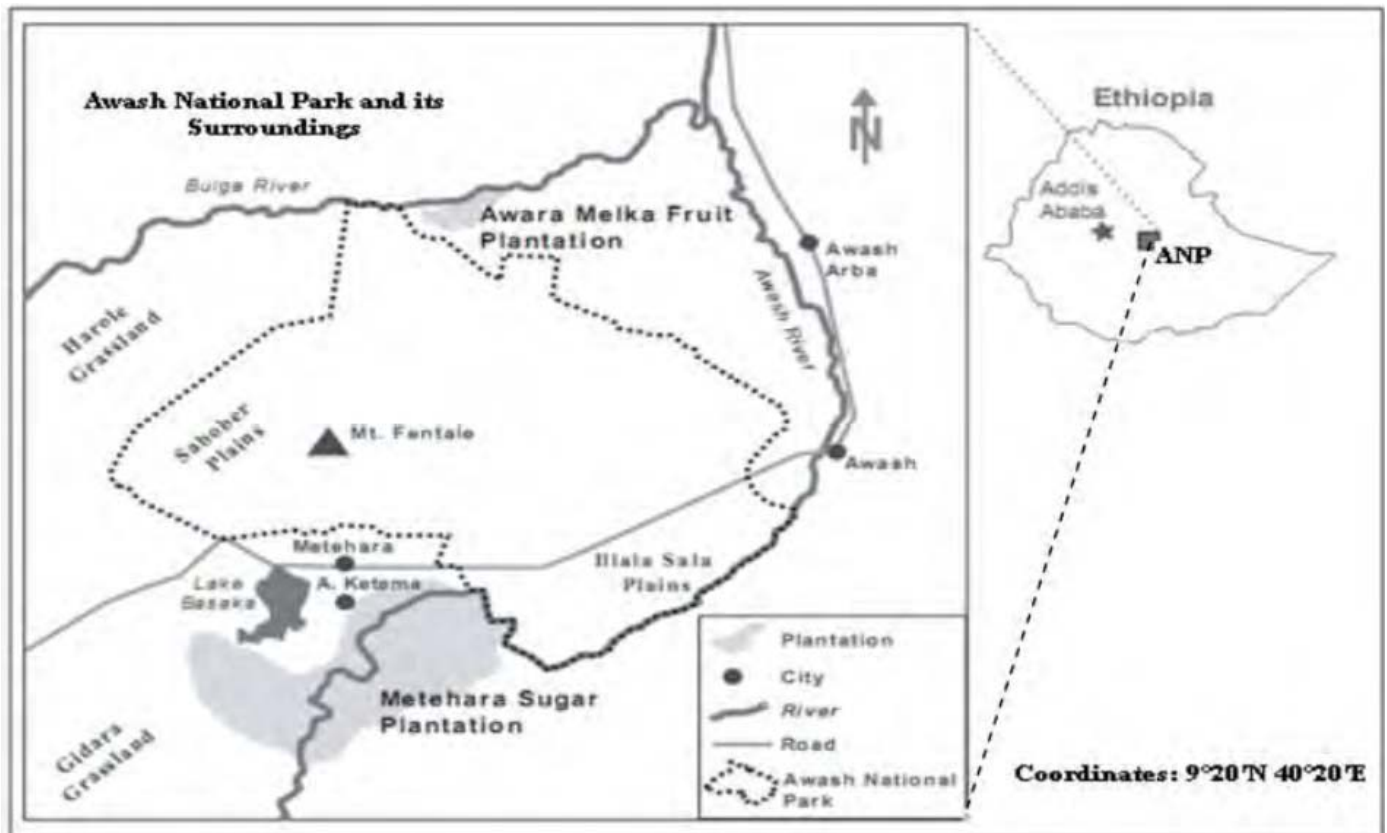
4.3. Loss of Biodiversity

Loss of biodiversity is another serious challenge for ANP. Expansion of private commercial farm and state supported settlement programs in the nearby areas of the park aggravated the scarcity of grazing land and forced the park adjacent pastoral and semi pastoral communities to use the grasslands of ANP natural resources for grazing. Competition from grazing for large flock of domestic animals like camel, cattle, goats and sheep forced wild mammalians either to migrate or to conflict with domestic animals. Moreover, over grazing in the park’s grass land brought scarcity of pasture and water which in turn become a major cause for loss of wildlife either in death or migration. Moreover, since the Addis Abeba Djibouti main road and rail way crosses the park, a large number of wild life and big birds are lost in a road kill (Habtamu, 2014:23-25; Tezera, 2015:21). In addition to ecological implications, the ever growing loss in wild life in ANP has been discouraging tourists. Sources and local authorities recounted that tourists persistently complain that they did not see large animals and varieties of wild life equivalent to the information they they have before their arrival on the spot (Yirmed Demeke and Kahsay G/Tensae, 2011:2-4).



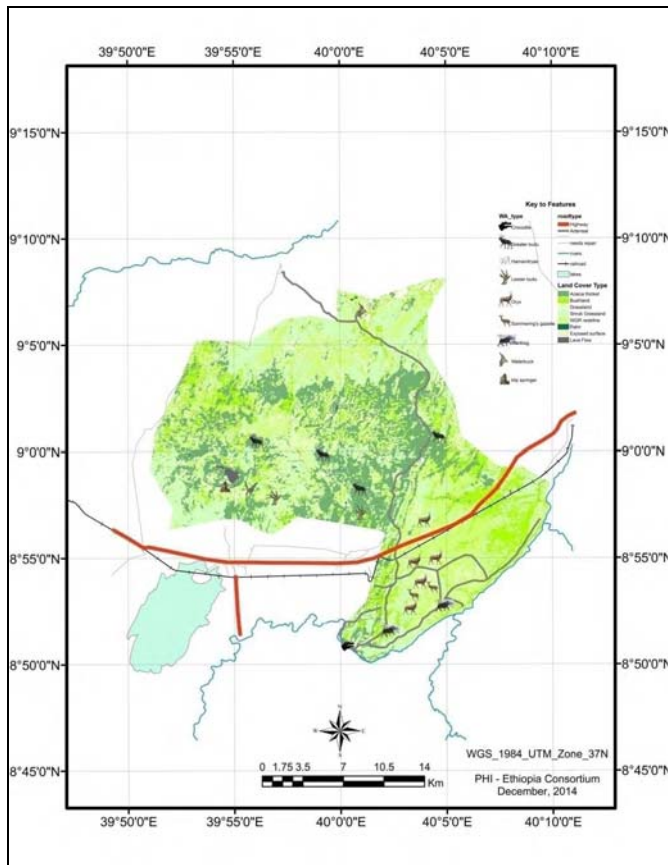
Source: Sintayehu W. (2014:793)

Fig: location of the study area, Awash National park ersit



Source: Daniel 2011

Fig 2: Location map of Awash National Park



Source: Tezera Chernet, 2015:17 [23]

Fig 2: Location map of Awash National Park (Source; Daniel 2011) [7]

5. Recommendation

Awash National Park is very essential not only for conservation of wild life and natural resources but also as a major destination for tourists. It has rich and diverse resources for sustainable ecotourism. However, it is one of the national parks of Ethiopia that encounters serious challenges most of which resulted from population pressure and lack of proper management through involvement of institutions and the local community that have stake in tourism and natural conservation. Therefore, creating a sense of ownership on the part of the local community should be the priority issue and searching viable means of income generation and benefit sharing from the park need to be emphasized. Moreover, all aspects of tourism and tourism resources need to be properly monitored and evaluated.

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