

Entoto Natural Park

– an environmental success story in the making

On the edge of Addis Ababa, a long-term conservation project is ongoing to restore indigenous vegetation in place of the imported eucalyptus that has dominated for over a century. *William Davison* went along to investigate the project for *Selamta*.

Environmental degradation in Ethiopia is well advanced. According to the United Nations Environment Programme, more than 70 per cent of Ethiopia falls into its classification of land that has suffered desertification – showing that even without wholesale industrialisation and urbanisation, humans can still have a significant deleterious effect on the natural environment.

Tourism revenue aside, historically there has been a trade-off between commercial activity and environmental protection. It is only recently that ‘green growth’ – investment in renewable sources of energy, for example – has become a mainstream idea. For a developing nation like Ethiopia, this trade-off has been, and is, even more pronounced: economic growth is very much the primary target of its policy.

However, with the contemporary focus on climate change issues and the wider concept of sustainability, environmental thinking has become ubiquitous. When these ideologies are combined with romantic, aesthetic notions about preservation of original habitats and species it becomes a powerful idea: not only is it nice to preserve unique, natural things, but also we need to be much more careful about how we utilise the earth’s resources.

It is in this context that the Ethiopian Heritage Trust is undertaking a long-term project to restore 1300 hectares of eucalyptus plantations in Entoto Hills above Addis Ababa to its original, indigenous habitat.

The project is called Entoto Natural Park, which is a bit of a misnomer, as people often mistake it for a fully-fledged national park.

Below: **In the park’s nursery**

Opposite: **Tesfaye Hailu, the park’s project manager, next to one of the eucalyptus stumps**





When these ideologies are combined with romantic, aesthetic notions about preservation of original habitats and species it becomes a powerful idea

This has led to some confusion about the site, with some guide books failing to recognise that it is a conservation project in progress, rather than a wildlife-filled, visitor-ready tourist attraction.

About the park on the periphery of Ethiopia's capital, some books boast everything from spotted hyenas to soaring lammergeyers, it has absolutely no infrastructure yet, meaning people spend most of their time looking for the park instead of looking for the animals! But if the researchers had got in touch with the Ethiopian Heritage Trust they would have discovered the full story

Entoto Hills, a few kilometres to the city's north, are frequently visited by tourists based in Ethiopia's capital, but they are normally there to view the panorama of the five million strong metropolis and for the various historical attractions: Emperor Menelik's palace; a museum dedicated to imperial memorabilia; Entoto Maryam Church; and the ancient, rock-hewn Kiddus Ragael Church.

They do not come for the flora and fauna. The reason for this is that it is dominated by the (originally Australian) *Eucalyptus globulus* trees, which suppress other vegetation, as explained by the park's project manager, 39-year-old Tesfaye Hailu: "Eucalyptus is voracious. No other vegetation consumes as much water. Under eucalyptus it is difficult to mitigate erosion."

The antipodean invasion arose because a fast-growing tree was needed to provide firewood for the capital when its construction was ordered by Emperor Menelik in the 1880s.

Its subsequent monopolisation, and the accompanying lack of bio-diversity, makes the importation seem like a mistake; but that's from the perspective of a 21st century environmentalist, not a 19th century emperor, a point succinctly encapsulated by Tesfaye: "I do not blame Menelik, because at the time we needed the fuel."

But despite his defence of past policy, Tesfaye is now leading the bold effort to restore Ethiopia's indigenous vegetation to its rightful, prominent position.

Tesfaye, a smartly dressed, single Addisian, speaks in serious, short, technical bursts, in keeping with his scientific background – he completed his first degree in forestry and then studied ecology and systematics for his Master's.

Despite lacking the over-stated 'passion' of some in the conservation industry, it is clear that he is an example of someone who can see the benefit of the project for its own sake, although his training and public position lead him to also refer to the more utilitarian benefits.

Over the previous decade, incremental efforts have been made to clear the gum trees and plant seedlings of, primarily, *Juniperus excelsa*, *Acacia abyssinica*, *Olea europaea cuspidata* and *Hagenia abyssinica*. The initiative is now beginning to show returns. The attractive, rugged hillside above Entoto Natural Park's nursery, complete with a wide variety of the indigenous vegetation, compares favourably with the lifeless, uniform swathes of eucalyptus. It gives the visitor an idea of what the pre-Addis landscape would have looked like; and the restoration has also led to the occasional return of dik diks, duikers, and jackals, as well as a variety of birds and shrubs such as *Rosa abyssinica*.

As Tesfaye says: "I think you can find a better diversity of organisms in the project area. Clearly there is a positive correlation between restoration of animals and vegetation. When you increase the vegetation, the animals return. With a further five years it will become a forest. The canopy will close and there will be animals."

One of the main current problems is erosion, a product of the eucalyptus's voracious appetite. Pointing to a patch of bare earth, Tesfaye bemoans the tree's effect, and also makes clear the practical utility of the project: "It was covered by soil for a long time, but now because of eucalyptus it is lost irreversibly. We have been constructing terraces and check dams to stop erosion. It would be bare if there were no such constructions.

"High gradients, heavy rainfall and the soil texture, which is clay, are all factors that contribute to soil erosion. If we don't have forest development that focuses on soil and water conservation, we can not mitigate soil erosion. We will have a wasteland. Therefore, protection forestry is indispensable. We are working not only to restore biodiversity but also to combat erosion and flooding. Developing this area has several purposes."

Some of the terracing – which already has an attractive, sturdy stone path running through it for several kilometres – will have been seen by almost all visitors to Entoto, as it is alongside the main road that winds up from the busy market area of Shiro Meda. One of its purposes was to control the water run-off and the success of this was demonstrated to me by a small spring, about which Tesfaye claimed: "Before it was drying up in November, but now it has water even at the peak of the dry season."

Another issue for the project is damage to the saplings by wild and domestic animals. To combat this, more than 60 guards are employed to ensure that new predators do not replace the vanquished eucalyptuses.

There is a penalty system in place for individuals that let their animals roam amongst the planted areas, and even a pen for the confiscated animals to be kept in while Entoto Natural Park awaits the fine of Birr five for a sheep and 10 for all other animals to be paid.

Debarking the eucalyptus stumps, which are typically about two feet tall, to prevent re-growth is another task. This is a laborious process and a costly one for the park and its parent body, the Ethiopian Heritage Trust, as Tesfaye makes clear: 

■ ENTOTO NATURAL PARK – AN ENVIRONMENTAL SUCCESS STORY IN THE MAKING

“Debarking stumps to prevent coppicing is time consuming and consumes huge amounts of money. But we have to do it, otherwise there will not be restoration.”

Based in Bole in the restored 116-year-old house of Ras Kebede Mengesha, the Ethiopian Heritage Trust is a non-governmental organisation with more than 1,500 members. The annual membership fee has been one of Ethiopian Heritage Trust’s main sources of income. However, these funds do not cover a project on the scale of Entoto Natural Park, which needs one Birr one million per year for the next five years to fund its plans.

Somewhat ironically, the shortfall is partly made up by the sale of the ram rod straight eucalyptus trunks to be used as telegraph and fence poles. A recent sale of a 150 hectare plot to merchants brought the project around Birr Three million. Despite these sales, which occur every couple of years, Tesfaye’s team is in need of donations from other sources: “It takes a lot of effort. You need to stop erosion, protect the soil, remove eucalyptus, plant the indigenous trees and you need guards. We need help from other organisations, not just the money from selling trees.” he says.

One day, possibly in a couple of decades time, the park will generate funds from large numbers of visitors, but for now Tesfaye explains the focus is on restoring the landscape and educating the local people about the project: “One day the park will have tourist infrastructure, but for now it’s about restoring bio-diversity.

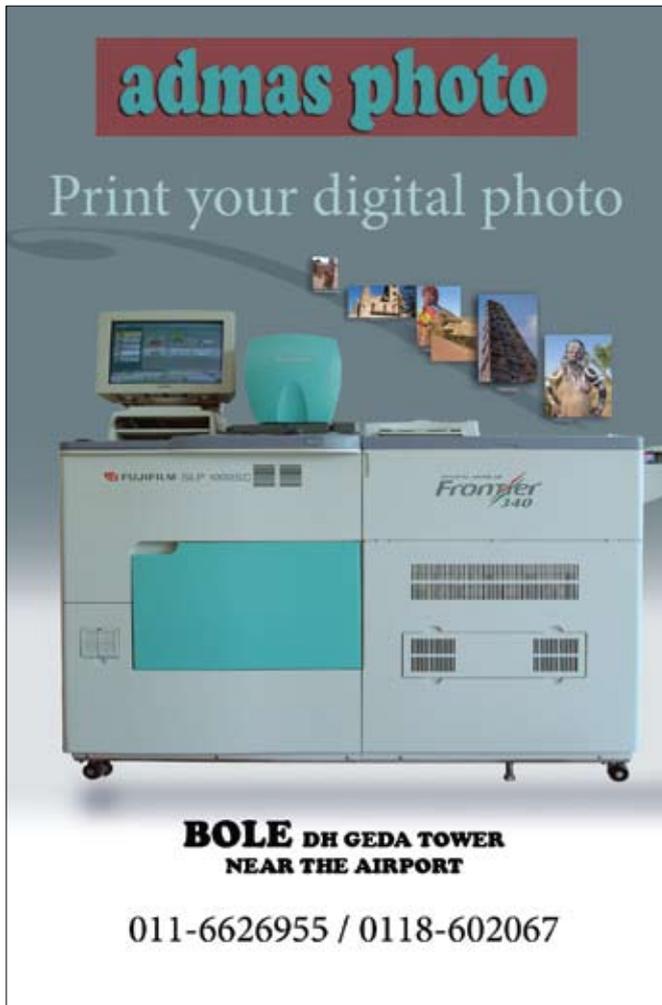
“At the same time we have to give education to the local people: environmental education through schools. We need to convince elders, like religious leaders, as they can play a critical role.”

Tesfaye also makes clear that he hopes the local authority, Addis Ababa City Administration, will take over responsibility for the park, once the restoration work is complete: “The politicians should take it as their duty. The city administration should be committed to safeguarding the park.”

The undertaking of such a conservation project on the edge of a teeming urban area is bold, but given its steady stewardship and solid, practical objectives, Entoto Natural Park has a decent chance of becoming an Ethiopian environmental success story – and hopefully a model for others to follow. 🌿

Location: The most accessible part of Entoto Natural Park, including a good footpath, is halfway up the hairpins from Shiro Meda, shortly after the tej shop. To reach Entoto Natural Park’s nursery follow the main road (asphalt road) from Shiro Meda past Entoto Maryam Church. As it bends left towards the rock hewn Kiddus Raguel church, take a right (gravel road). There will then be a sign post to the park. Take the right by the sign post and drive through the eucalyptus for 2.5 kilometres until you reach the nursery. You will require a 4WD vehicle to take you there.

Contact: For a tour or to make a donation to ENP, contact Feleseta at the Ethiopian Heritage Trust on 0115158302

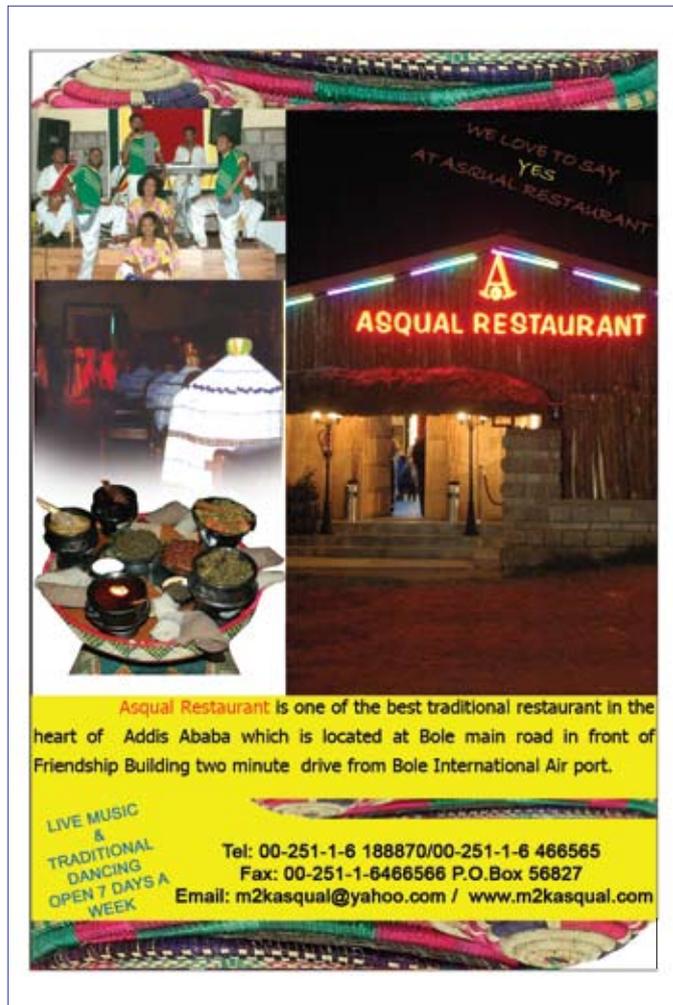


admas photo

Print your digital photo

**BOLE DH GEDA TOWER
NEAR THE AIRPORT**

011-6626955 / 0118-602067



ASQUAL RESTAURANT

WE LOVE TO SAY YES AT ASQUAL RESTAURANT

Asqual Restaurant is one of the best traditional restaurant in the heart of Addis Ababa which is located at Bole main road in front of Friendship Building two minute drive from Bole International Air port.

LIVE MUSIC & TRADITIONAL DANCING OPEN 7 DAYS A WEEK

Tel: 00-251-1-6 188870/00-251-1-6 466565
Fax: 00-251-1-6466566 P.O.Box 56827
Email: m2kasqual@yahoo.com / www.m2kasqual.com