

Conservation International shows concern on significant problems of Ethiopian highlands

By Melaku Demissie

The Washington-based Conservation International in its recent biodiversity hotspots communiqué disclosed that population pressure is a big problem in the Ethiopian highlands in order to properly protect land and wildlife from damages. The organization said that the population of Ethiopia has increased tenfold in the last 60 years. About 80 percent of the country's 70 million people live in the highlands, putting significant pressure on the land for agricultural development. According to Conservation International, Ethiopia also has the largest national herd of domestic livestock and cattle, particularly in Africa. This livestock increasingly uses the most extreme areas to graze, and overgrazing has led to erosion, an increasing abundance of unpalatable or poisonous species, and heightened competition between livestock and wildlife. It added that hunting is also a significant problem in the Ethiopian highlands.

Though in the Ethiopian Highlands, the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Organization (EWCO) was established in 1964 with the assistance of international conservation organizations, the EWCO is plagued by the lack of resources and legislations that have been impossible to enforce, it said.

The organization said that although a system of conservation areas were proposed to form the basis of wildlife conservation in the country, only two of the planned 14 national parks and sanctuaries have been legally constituted. These are the Awash National Park and Semien Mountains National Park. Even these two parks are not adequately secured, staffed or equipped. These difficulties have been exacerbated by famines, refugee problems, civil unrest, armed rebellions, and war which threaten the livelihood of people and make it unlikely that conservation measures will be implemented.

Conservation International indicated that the most important of the conservation areas in Ethiopia is yet to be officially gazetted. This key biodiversity area harbors the finest and most intact remnants of the highlands original vegetation. These mountains are also home to four threatened endemic species and to more than half of the global population of the Ethiopian wolf, it added. The Ethiopian Wolf Conservation Program has been working in the Bale Mountains for several decades to secure the conservations of areas of Afroalpine ecosystem, to assess, address and counteract threats to the wolf's survival and to enhance the focus and strength of the environmental sector in Ethiopia.

It is to be recalled that more than 30 of the 200 mammals found in the Ethiopian highlands are found nowhere else, including a remarkable six endemic genera, four of which are monotypic: three rodents and one primate, the gelada.