

Conservation management in the Guassa Plateau saves threatened biodiversity and helps disadvantaged groups

- By Obaka Torto



The Guassa Plateau is an extraordinary area of biodiversity in Ethiopia. Rare and globally unique species occur across all taxa, with exceptional levels of endemism. The afro-montane ecosystems of the Ethiopian highlands constitute over 80% of the entire continent's land over 3000 m asl. There are number of charismatic flagship species such as the mountain nyala, Ethiopian wolf, and the walia ibex– all of which are listed as endangered by IUCN, as well as a plethora of other endemic and endangered birds, amphibians, insects and plants. The Guassa Plateau has therefore been identified as a priority Key Biodiversity Area (KBA) in the [Eastern Afro-montane Hotspot](#).

Currently the Guassa Plateau is the only portion of the Afro-montane Hotspot in Ethiopia under community management after being formally gazetted as the Guassa Community Conservation Area (GCCA) in June 2012. A contemporary management institution with representatives from the 9 farmers associations (kebeles) that have natural



Guassa Plateau landscape (all images Grzimek's Help for Threatened Wildlife)

resource user rights, oversees management of the area. The Guassa Conservation Council, the highest management body, operates community guards and monitors and prosecutes illegal users.

Together with the Guassa Conservation Council, [Grzimek's Help for Threatened Wildlife](#) is implementing a project called *Improved Community and Ecological Resilience for the Guassa Community Conservation Area*. This project, funded by the [Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund](#), aims to develop conservation-compatible income generating activities that will protect the Guassa landscape and provide alternative livelihoods for disadvantaged groups.

Work will focus on landless, marginalised and other disadvantaged groups who have limited livelihood options and capacity to develop sustainable alternatives for survival, and who are thus most likely to break existing bye-laws on natural resource use. The increasing demand for honey and associated price increase presents an opportunity as a supplemental livelihood option, given its ease of storage and transport. In addition, wool spinning with rug, blanket, curtains and mattress production is a traditional activity in Guassa but is not well developed as a commercial enterprise. The project will support the development of a "Guassa brand" to ensure high quality, facilitate marketing, and increase sales of these environmentally-friendly products.

The impact of the project is expected to enhance the economic wellbeing of the community who are already engaged in the conservation of the Guassa Area. Community-based tourism in the area is also developing, creating an alternative source of income.

This project is funded by the [Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund](#) (CEPF) and will run from January 2014 to December 2015.



Community lodge



Ethiopian wolf in the Guassa Plateau

BirdLife International, together with IUCN and the Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society, form the Regional Implementation Team that supports CEPF with their investment in the Eastern Afromontane Hotspot.

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