GUASSA-MENZ COMMUNITY CONSERVATION AREA
Ethiopia

Equator Initiative Case Studies
Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities
Local and indigenous communities across the world are advancing innovative sustainable development solutions that work for people and for nature. Few publications or case studies tell the full story of how such initiatives evolve, the breadth of their impacts, or how they change over time. Fewer still have undertaken to tell these stories with community practitioners themselves guiding the narrative.

To mark its 10-year anniversary, the Equator Initiative aims to fill this gap. The following case study is one in a growing series that details the work of Equator Prize winners – vetted and peer-reviewed best practices in community-based environmental conservation and sustainable livelihoods. These cases are intended to inspire the policy dialogue needed to take local success to scale, to improve the global knowledge base on local environment and development solutions, and to serve as models for replication. Case studies are best viewed and understood with reference to 'The Power of Local Action: Lessons from 10 Years of the Equator Prize', a compendium of lessons learned and policy guidance that draws from the case material.

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PROJECT SUMMARY

For over 400 years, the grasslands in the Guassa area of Menz in Ethiopia’s central highlands were governed under a communal management system known as Qero. In this system, elected headmen determined when and for how long local people could harvest thatch grass and graze their livestock. Following the 1974 revolution and the collapse of the Qero system due to agrarian reform, the Guassa area suffered from year-round exploitation of the grasslands and subsequent degradation.

The Guassa-Menz initiative has worked since 2003 to revive the Qero system as a means of sustainably managing the area’s valuable festuca grasses. Control of the grasslands was transferred to the Guassa Conservation Council, and has been complemented by modern governance elements, while community scouts have been trained in local bylaw enforcement. These successes resulted in the legal recognition of the Guassa Community Conserved Area in 2008.

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KEY FACTS

EQUATOR PRIZE WINNER: 2004

FOUNDED: 2003

LOCATION: Guassa Area, Amhara National Regional State

BENEFICIARIES: Guassa communities

BIODIVERSITY: Guassa Community Conservation Area
The Guassa Area of Menz, located in the central highlands of Ethiopia in Amhara National Regional State, has seen the reintroduction of an indigenous land use system to safeguard its important biodiversity and secure the long-term livelihoods of its human population. This area, covering over 110 km² at an altitude of 3200-3700m above sea level, is an important component of the Afro-Alpine habitat of Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Highlands, the Eastern Arc Mountains and Southern Rift, and the Albertine Rift constitute the three main massifs of the Eastern Afromontane region, one of thirty-four global biodiversity hotspots. The highlands are home to high levels of species endemism and important populations of endangered and rare species such as the Ethiopian wolf, gelada baboon and Ankober Serin Seedeater. The region is also an important water catchment area for the Nile and other important rivers draining into the lowlands of Ethiopia.

An important local resource, sustainably conserved

The area’s ecosystem integrity is also vitally important for the livelihoods of local communities, who harvest “Guassa” grass, a subspecies of the *Festuca* genus of perennial tufted grasses, and graze their livestock in the Guassa area. The grass is important as a thatching material, being used for 98% of the houses in the area, and is also a cash crop for poorer members of the community. The area serves as a refuge for the entire Menz livestock herd during seasonal droughts. The Ethiopian Highlands region is home to over 80% of the country’s population, most of whom practice sedentary agrarian lifestyles. High levels of vegetation loss, soil degradation, and population growth have resulted in very low levels of agricultural productivity, however, and human development for the region’s population remains poor.

For over four hundred years, the Menz area’s grassland had been sustainably conserved by a well-defined indigenous common property resource management system known as Qero. This institution entailed each of the two user communities in the area – Asbo and Gera – democratically electing an elder as a headman, called the Abba Qera. The Abba Qera was then responsible for protecting and regulating the use of the Guassa area. This Qero system would entail the closure of the Guassa area from any use by the community for between three to five years. The length of closure largely depended upon the growth and recovery of the grass, community requirements for resources, success of the local crop harvest and on the frequency of drought in the Guassa Area. When the two Abba Qeras felt that the grass was ready for harvest, they would announce the date of the opening to the community. Closure periods were strictly enforced by the users themselves. This system also had substantial benefits for the biodiversity of the region, providing a healthy ecosystem that supported endemic and endangered species.

Following the 1974 revolution, however, all rural land was nationalized in a process of agrarian reform, leading to the end of the Qero indigenous resource management institution. Private and
Communal land ownership was transformed into state or public land tenure. The area was essentially treated as an open access resource as it became available to a wider number of communities, leading to unsustainable overexploitation through the 1990s: livestock grazing continued year-round, while grasses were cut until they became too short to be of use. Attempts to reintroduce community-based management of the area's natural resources in tandem with the new local government authorities were less successful, and the land area had been substantially degraded by the late 1990s.

**Reintroduction of the Qero system**

By 2003, support from the Ethiopian Wolf Conservation Programme, the UK-based Darwin Initiative, and the Frankfurt Zoological Society, had enabled the Guassa Committee, a body made up of representatives from local peasant organizations, to establish the Guassa Conservation Council, and reinstall the traditional resource management system. This began with a three-year moratorium on natural resource use within the Guassa area, from 2003 to 2006. In its modern form, closure periods banning harvesting within the conservation area are declared by the Guassa Conservation Council. Several workshops with local village associations were held during this initial process, during which the area was mapped, and bylaws were drawn up governing the use of its resources. The ecological health of the area is monitored by local villagers trained as community scouts and community ecological monitors, while all human incursions are punished by local courts.

The daily management of the area and supervision of community scouts is conducted by the Guassa Conservation Council, which now comprises five representatives from each of the nine local Kebele, or village administration units, as well as representatives from the Woreda (district-level) administration, judiciary, police, agricultural office, environmental protection agency, and militia and security offices. The nine Kebele that make up the Guassa Committee are home to approximately 9,000 households; the average size of their land holdings is 0.7 hectares.

In addition to securing the long term natural resource-based livelihoods of the local population, this community management system has created opportunities for ecotourism, currently being developed with support from international partners. A general management plan was drawn up for the period 2007-2012, outlining the aims of the community-managed Guassa Area of Menz, and the initiative has successfully sought official recognition as a Community Conserved Area (CCA). It has also hosted several international researchers who have studied its endemic and rare species, providing the scientific basis for conservation of Guassa grass, gelada baboons, and the endangered Ethiopian wolf.

"Guassa is found at the edge of the area that was deeply affected by the 1984 drought and famine. The existence of the Guassa area has helped the survival of livestock in the area by increasing the resilience of the community to droughts. In the last few decades the rainfall has been erratic and unpredictable in the mountain regions of Ethiopia, increasing the vulnerability of many rural communities. The Guassa area has supplied a reserve source of income and animal fodder during these difficult times."

*Dr. Zelealem Tefera, Ethiopia Country Representative, Frankfurt Zoological Society*
Much of Guassa’s success in establishing community-based conservation has been based on its use of the Qero system, and the adaptability and resilience of this system to modern challenges. Its strength as a tool for conservation and sustainable use is rooted in over four centuries of tradition, and is closely tied to the histories of the nine Guassa Kebele themselves. These villages trace the lineage of some of their members back as far as four hundred years; the Qero system is therefore an integral part of local cultural heritage. In its modern incarnation in Guassa, it has been based on the innovatory use of local ecological monitoring strategies, partnership with the district-level government authorities, and legal recognition as one of Ethiopia’s first community conservation areas.

**Monitoring and enforcement**

Drawing on the successful Namibian example of local-level monitoring as a decision-support tool, the Guassa Conservation Council oversees twenty community scouts who have been trained in bylaw enforcement and conflict resolution, as well as eight community ecological monitors. These community members are elected from the four Kebele nearest to the conserved area. Financial support and training for these scouts and monitors has come from the Darwin Initiative, a UK Government biodiversity financing initiative, and the Frankfurt Zoological Society. They monitor various indicators of the ecological health of the conservation area including vegetation cover and animal species population numbers, as well as illegal usage during the closed season. These community monitors have also been able to raise awareness of the importance of conserving the area’s Ethiopian wolf population.

Local courts are mandated to fine community members up to 1,500 Br (more than USD 100) for repeated illegal cutting of festuca grass, or grazing livestock during the closed season. This punishment is also accompanied by one month’s imprisonment. The area has been closed for festuca harvesting since 2007, although allowances have been made for short periods during droughts, when farmers are able to herd cattle in the grassland area.

Official legal recognition as a community-based organization in 2008, and acceptance by the Amhara National Regional State as Ethiopia’s first Community Conserved Area (CCA) in 2010 were crucial achievements for the initiative. It has made it a model for other community-based natural resource management projects in Ethiopia, and has brought the initiative substantial national attention. Importantly, it has also enabled the Guassa community members to resist various pressures on their land in the form of proposed investments. Prior to designation as a community conserved area, the initiative was able to successfully halt two attempts to establish commercial sheep-farming in the Guassa area. These applications to the regional investment office proposed creating a 150-hectare enclosure as a commercial sheep ranch; this was opposed on the basis that it would establish a legal precedent for private land enclosures. Now, as a legally-designated protected area, the Guassa communities have a certified right to their land.
Biodiversity Impacts

By regulating exploitation, the Qero system has protected the unique and diverse fauna and flora of around 9,800 hectares of grassland. Ecosystem monitoring, by providing information on the state of the exceptional resource values of the Guassa area, has been identified as a key part of the adaptive management of the area. Technical experts have identified six key ecosystem components that support the unique biodiversity of the Guassa Area; if all these components are conserved, then the long-term health of the ecosystem should remain intact. Festuca grass constitutes the largest of these six elements, and around 30% of the total area.

Guassa is home to many of the species commonly associated with Afro-Alpine ecosystems. These include 22 mammal species, 27% of which are endemic to Ethiopia. The area’s flagship mammal species is the most endangered canid in the world, the Ethiopian wolf (Canis simensis), also known as the Simien fox. With fewer than 500 individuals remaining in the world, the Ethiopian wolf is rated as ‘Critically Endangered’ by the IUCN Red List. The Guassa area protects one of the major groups, with a stable population of around 35 wolves. The conservation of grassland has provided a habitat for high numbers of rodents on which the Ethiopian wolf preys.

Other important species in the area include the gelada baboon. The gelada is the only surviving member of a once widespread genus Theropithecus. These baboons are the only grazing primates in the world. Although they have been assessed as a species of ‘Least Concern’ by IUCN, global species numbers have fallen from an estimated 440,000 in the 1970s to around 2,000 in 2008. The Guassa population of gelada has doubled, and is now the second highest population in Ethiopia behind the Simien Mountain National Park.

Bird species have also benefited from the Qero system, with 114 species recorded in the area. Among these, 14 species are endemic to Ethiopia, including the restricted-range Ankober seedeater and Spot-breasted Plover. The Guassa area also serves as a wintering ground for many palearctic migrant birds. A striking feature of the birdlife in the Guassa area is the abundance of birds of prey that feast, along with the wolves, on the area’s high rodent population.

Socioeconomic Impacts

The Guassa Area is a critical natural resource for the people of Menz, providing ecosystem services such as fodder for animals, fuel, building materials, farming, and household implements for subsistence purposes. The area also provides an element of livelihood stability through diversifying of income sources beyond subsistence agriculture and smallholder farming. The wide variety of local goods that are produced from Guassa grass ensure a degree of independence from markets and the government, allowing
self-reliance through the availability of many goods and services locally. These goods can also be bartered and sold in markets, supplying cash income for poorer households.

**Provisioning ecosystem services of the Guassa area**

The main uses of the Guassa Area are the collection of Guassa grass and firewood and grazing of livestock. Two varieties of the Guassa (*Festuca sp*) grass are classified locally: *Kuachera* is used to thatch 98% of houses in the area, while *Naso* is used for plaster in houses, after being mixed with mud. Grass is also used to make ropes, household equipment, baskets, painting brushes, mattresses and shepherds’ raincoats. *Festuca* grass is especially important in making mats for use in houses, as its miniscule thorns catch fleas, preventing them from spreading diseases.

Guassa also provides a prime grazing area for the Menz livestock population, a key economic activity, being the largest area of communal grazing locally. It has provided an important refuge during recent drought periods, when farmers have been permitted to graze their livestock within the conserved area. Fuelwood is another key resource with Cherenfi (*Europs sp*), Asta (*Erica arboria*), Gibera, (*Lobilia sp*) Ameja (*Hypericum rivolutum*), and Abelbila (*Kniphofia*) all being collected. Collection usually takes place in the dry season; a large volume is required due to its low calorific value. Cattle dung is frequently burned as an alternative source of fuel.

**Underpinning local wellbeing**

Medicinal plants are widely collected from the Guassa area to treat human and livestock diseases. Wild berries such as *Rubus abyssinicus* and *Rubus Stedneri* are also collected, while thyme is used in cooking and as a medicinal plant. Stinging nettles (*Urtica slimensis*) are used to prepare a stew during the fasting season.

In addition, the Guassa area is a key water catchment area both locally and regionally. A total of 26 rivers begin in the area, and drain into either the Blue Nile or Awash Rivers. The mountain block provides year-round water supplies for drought-prone settlements bordering the region. Downstream users in the low-lying areas of Yifat, Merhabeti and the Afar Region are dependent on this water, an ecosystem function that is well-recognized by the Guassa community groups.

**Diversifying incomes: ecotourism and micro-enterprises**

The Guassa communities’ main strategy for increasing household incomes is to develop tourism in the area, utilizing the wildlife-spotting potential of the area as an ecotourism attraction for visitors. An eco-lodge has been constructed, and work is ongoing to develop related activities such as guided walks, horse-riding, and handicrafts. A tourism board has been created comprising one representative from each Kebele. Community members have been selected and given training to serve as tour guides and produce artisanal...
handicrafts for sale to visiting tourists. Profits from the project will be used for community development projects.

One such project idea has been to begin a micro-finance scheme for local women. This is a model that has proved successful in the Amhara Region of Ethiopia: the Amhara Credit and Savings Institution is internationally recognized as a leading microfinance institution. Profits from ecotourism would go into a village lending scheme that allowed women to make products from grasses and establish forest nurseries, reducing the time spent collecting fuel.

**POLICY IMPACTS**

Guassa’s example has provided a model for community-based natural resource management in Ethiopia. It has successfully overcome land-tenure barriers to communal ownership of land, and in 2008 was recognized as a community-based organization and as the first community conserved area in Ethiopia. This official designation is now one of five types of protected area in Ethiopia, along with parks, sanctuaries, reserves, and controlled hunting areas. In large part this change in land policy is due to the work of the Guassa communities.

This aim was stated in a General Management Plan in 2007, outlining a five-year strategy for ensuring the sustained success of the Guassa initiative:

“The Guassa Area is under threat from a number of directions, including development and investment initiatives, agricultural expansion and uncontrolled grazing… To date, environmental impact assessment (EIA) and lobbying by the local community have stopped any development in the area. In addition, farming has expanded at the edge of the Guassa Area, from all directions, due to human population growth, drought frequency, rural development activities and changes in rural land use policies at a national level. The community therefore believes there should be a stronger legal framework for the conservation of the Guassa Area that will provide additional protection and security to the Area and their traditional natural resource management system from both external and internal pressure.” (Guassa Area General Management Plan, 2007)

This legal framework was established in 2008 and has been the primary policy achievement of the initiative to date. Cooperation with local government offices has been critical to the success of community management of the Guassa area, with their boundaries being legally demarcated and recognized in the regional parliament.
Sustainability and Replication

SUSTAINABILITY

In terms of its financial sustainability, the Guassa initiative is not reliant on external funding to continue its main areas of work. The conservation of the grassland area relies on community volunteers and the local court system, and therefore doesn’t require financial input, although initial training was given to the community monitors using Darwin Initiative funding.

The General Management Plan for 2007-2012 outlines three main areas of work that are fundamental to the sustained success of the Guassa Menz project. These are sustainable community natural resource management, based on the Qero system of closed periods for harvesting Festuca grass; the ecological monitoring program, using community volunteers as local monitors; and tourism, accompanied by an outreach programme with 21 primary and secondary schools adjacent to the Guassa area to raise awareness of the area’s biodiversity and the need to conserve it. The importance of this third component is to establish a solid social foundation for the continuation of the closure periods. Droughts, unpredictable rainfall patterns, continued population growth, and a lack of diversified income sources will continue to impose pressures on the Guassa grassland area; grassroots understanding of the needs for sustainable use of natural resources will safeguard against the reversal of the communities’ success.

The other main strategy to improve the socioeconomic wellbeing of Guassa communities is establishing ecotourism in the area. The construction of an eco-lodge was financed with a grant from the Frankfurt Zoological Society. It is hoped that this will become self-funding, providing a source of income for local people, and that the profits can be reinvested in community development projects.

REPLICATION

The Guassa Community Conservation Area has inspired replication efforts in two cases, in partnership with the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority and the Frankfurt Zoological Society and using funding from the European Union. Representatives were brought to Guassa from the Abune Yoseph Community Conservation Area and Denkoro National Forest Priority Area to observe the conservation model being implemented. Peer-to-peer learning was facilitated through these learning exchange site visits. The director of the Wildlife Conservation Authority in Ethiopia has also requested a handbook to be written by the Guassa Committee for use in replicating their model.

PARTNERS

- Frankfurt Zoological Society (including EU financing)
- Ethiopian Wolf Conservation Program - University of Oxford Wildlife Conservation Research Unit (WildCRU)
- Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority
- U.K. Darwin Initiative
- Regional and local government authorities
- Addis Ababa University
- Academics from Scandinavia, the UK, Addis Ababa and other countries have spent time at Guassa conducting research into local biodiversity and community conservation efforts.
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FURTHER REFERENCE

- Guassa-Menz Community Conservation Area Photo Story (Vimeo) http://vimeo.com/15749552
- Guassa-Menz Community Conservation Area website: http://www.guassaarea.org/