
Ethiopia: Dutch conservation organization involved in eviction of thousands of tribal people

The Omo National Park in Southern Ethiopia is being taken over by the Dutch conservation organization, African Parks Foundation (APF) and 50,000 tribal people are in danger of being displaced and/or of losing access to their vital subsistence resources.

The 1570 square mile Omo National Park is home to the Suri, Dizi, Mursi, Me'en and Nyangatom tribal peoples. These tribal peoples live in or use nearly the entire park for cultivation and cattle grazing. They have made this land their home for centuries.

The boundaries of the Omo National Park were recently legalized (gazetted) to pave the way for a management contract between African Parks Foundation and the Ethiopian Federal and Regional Governments. This gazettement was accomplished by Ethiopian Park officials persuading tribal people to sign away their land, without compensation, on documents they could not read.

One Mursi tribal member reported that he "saw the police grab three Mursi people and force them to sign the paper with their thumbprints."

The gazettement of the Omo Park will make the Omo peoples illegal squatters on their own land. African Parks Foundation was aware of the way the 'agreement' of local people to the park boundaries was obtained, and was asked repeatedly to include a 'no evictions' clause in its contract with the government. They went ahead, however, and signed a contract, which makes no mention of the tribal peoples, in November 2005.

Several Ethiopian government officials have said they plan to move the tribal people and African Parks Foundation says it cannot interfere with the plans of a 'sovereign government'.

People have been evicted from a park African Parks Foundation has taken over, before. In February 2004, APF signed an agreement to manage Nech Sar National Park, near Arba Minch. In November 2004, 463 houses of the Guji people were burned down by Ethiopian park officials and local police, to coerce the Guji to leave their land, inside Nech Sar.

"We usually hear news on the radio even when a single house is burned down by criminals. We hear all different kinds of crimes reported. In our case we lost 463 houses, but it was not reported at all," said one Guji tribal member.

In 2004, ten thousand people of the Guji and Kore tribes were resettled from within Nech Sar to fulfill a contractual agreement between the government and APF that all people would be removed before APF took over management.

"We didn't want to be involved in the resettlement, so I put a clause in the contract that said we wouldn't take over the park until the resettlement was completed," said Paul van Vlissingen.

African Parks Foundation was founded by Paul van Vlissingen, Chairman of the global retail giant Makro Retail and Calor Gas, a liquid petroleum gas distribution company. Rob Walton, Chairman of the board of Wal-Mart, is on the board of African Parks Foundation. The Walton Foundation has donated large sums of money to APF and is listed as one of two major funders to African Parks, along with the US Department of State.

African Parks Foundation manages parks in Zambia, Malawi, South Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, and Ethiopia and is reportedly looking at managing more. The revenue from these Parks accrues to their projects, and put towards opening more parks. "National Parks must become virtual companies," Paul van Vlissingen has said and this corporate philosophy for his conservation organization makes sense, with the business tycoon Rob Walton on board.

The environmental impact of this plan could be disastrous, if people, who have managed this land and its wildlife for centuries, are removed. Tribal people have formed this landscape over thousands of years of agriculture and grazing. The most radical change to the ecosystem would be the removal of humans, whom the wild animals have evolved behavior patterns with over millennia. Hungry, angry peoples surrounding the park would be detrimental to the success of the park and to the biodiversity.

If the tribal peoples of the area are removed, there is great risk of both violent conflict with the government and with any tribes whose land they are moved onto. There is no unused land in the area; fights would ensue over too little land for too many people.

"The Ethiopian government should be very worried about the prospects of even more violence if they go ahead with their apparent policy of removal in the Omo area" said David Turton, a British anthropologist with over 30 years experience working among the Mursi, one of the tribes living in the boundaries of the Omo National Park. "Any attempt to encroach on Mursi territory will ratchet up the existing pressure on resources in the lower Omo area."

If you wish to support the struggle against this happening, please visit
<http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Ethiopia/actionalert2006.html>

Article based on information provided by Native Solutions to Conservation Refugees, a fiscally sponsored project of Global Justice Ecology Project. For further information on Native Solutions to Conservation Refugees, contact Will Hurd hurd@hailmail.net. Sent by Global Justice Ecology Project, info@globalecology.org, <http://www.globaljusticeecology.org>.