
Ethiopia: Deforestation and monoculture plantations behind the fires

A mountainous tropical country with altitudes of over 4,000 metres, Ethiopia has many regions which were once rich in vegetation and are now rocky, desert areas. Desertification and erosion have further increased within the past decade.

Almost all the forests in Ethiopia have been destroyed in the last 40 years, according to a study by the United Nations. Less than 3% of the entire country is now covered with trees, compared to the 40% of a century ago and 16% in the early 1950s, prompting fears of an impending environmental disaster in this country which is home to coffee and one of the biodiversity hotspots of the world, now with large areas exposed to heavy soil erosion.

The primary cause of deforestation --with an estimated rate of 200,000 hectares/year-- has been extensive forest clearing for export driven agriculture and over-grazing, and also commercial exploitation of forests for fuelwood and construction materials. Development projects --including coffee and tea cash cropping, human resettlement, grazing and logging operations-- undertaken by government agencies upon assistance of many international and bilateral organisations have put pressure on high forest areas. The dissected terrain, the extensive areas with slopes above 16 percent, and the high intensity of rainfall lead to accelerated soil erosion once deforestation occurs.

The most threatened vegetation zones of the country are not found in the wildlife designated areas; these are the moist evergreen forests and the dry evergreen forests, the most extensive and most widely used forest resources. Except for the Bale National Park which contains only small patches of both types of forests, and the small Menagesha state forest near Addis Ababa, there are no protected forest areas in the country.

A four-month study carried out on behalf of the UN Emergency Unit for Ethiopia reported that there has been an obvious climatic change in the last 30 or 40 years. Geographer Eve Guinandi explained that the environment was changing from forests to bush to savannah and then becoming semi-arid. "If you talk to older farmers they tell you that their areas were covered in forests. They also tell you that the temperatures have gone up and now there are few rains if any", he said.

The increase of temperature due to lack of trees, severe soil erosion and commercial monoculture plantations with cash crops and trees like the eucalyptus have totally disrupted the environment. Thus, the traditional practice of communities to prepare the land through fires --which they have used for centuries-- has got wild and become a peril which is wreaking havoc throughout the country, hiding the real underlying causes of Ethiopia's environmental disaster.