1st International Day of Forests celebrated in Ethiopia: ?Forests: our Lives, our Future?

Title
While the International Year of Forests had been observed in 2011, there was no globally-recognised date to raise awareness about sustainable forest management. In response, the UN General Assembly proclaimed 21 March the annual International Day of Forests.

On the occasion of the 1st-ever celebration of the International Day of Forests (IDF), the Institute of Biodiversity Conservation in Ethiopia organised a workshop on 29 March 2013, in the highly biodiverse Bale region, Oromiya. The event, sponsored by UNEP and GEF, and to be held annually on 21 March, was attended by a wide range of Ethiopian civil society and governmental stakeholders: Members of Parliament, ministries (Water and Energy, Agriculture), research institutes (Forestry, Agriculture), regional administrators, indigenous groups, school environmental clubs, universities, the Ethiopian Wildlife and Conservation Authority, as well as local and international environmental NGOs.

The IDF was celebrated in various ways. As an introduction, cultural dances and songs were performed by local people, and in particular by young environmental club members to celebrate the diverse and important values of forests, their importance in providing food, shelter, livelihoods and protecting against the effects of climate change.

In his message to mark the Day, Dr. Gemedo Dalle, Director General of the Institute of Biodiversity Conservation, stated: *"Ethiopia, being signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity, is honoured to celebrate the first International Day of Forests in one of the richest forest biodiversity regions: Bale - Goba. The Day is commemorated with the objective of raising awareness on the conservation and sustainable utilisation of our forests."*

The country's high demand for fuel wood and land for farming and grazing has slashed its forest cover from about 35% of its territory in the 1940?s to just 3% by 2000. Ethiopia's forests have been utilised extensively for firewood, construction, non-timber forest products (honey, spices, root crops, etc.), timber, production of agricultural utensils and more, resulting in over-exploitation of natural resources and an alarming diminution of its biodiversity. To reverse this situation, mass awareness-raising and tree-planting campaigns have been launched all over the country over the last decade. The country has prioritised soil and watershed management with the overall objective of increasing land productivity and conserving the country's natural resources, whilst also preserving its hydro resources. This has resulted in an increase in vegetation cover, today representing 11% of the country, according to the Ministry of Agriculture.

The IDF celebration was marked by presentations focusing on forest ecosystem services, the state of Ethiopia's forest genetic resources, forestry research in Ethiopia, and medicinal plants conservation and use. Two documentary films punctuated the presentations and the discussions, summarizing in Amharic and English Ethiopia's forest conservation status and main threats, including messages about conservation measures and sustainable use of forests. As a good opportunity to highlight successful forest initiatives, the Institute of Biodiversity Conservation, entrusted with safeguarding Ethiopia's plant genetic resources and implementing her obligation to the Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD), showcased its Medicinal plants and ABS project. Kebu Balemi, an ethnobiologist with IBC, gave a lecture on the importance of forest genetic diversity, in particular about the role of genetic diversity in making trees resistant to pollution, supporting climate change adaptation, identifying patterns of illegal logging, and sustaining increased forest production.

The Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society (EWNHS) represented the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) Regional Implementation Team at the event. CEPF funds non-governmental efforts to conserve the world's most biodiverse and threatened ecosystems, and recently announced its five year $9.8 million investment plan in the Eastern Afromontane biodiversity hotspot. This IDF event was a good occasion for the Eastern Afromontane Regional Implementation Team (which consists of EWNHS, BirdLife International and IUCN) to meet civil society and stakeholders from the forestry sector in Ethiopia.

To conclude the celebration of IDF, all the participants were invited to participate in an entertaining tree-planting exercise on the medicinal plants field of Bale –Goba's gene bank. Members of the House of People's Representatives commenced the proceedings by planting two species of threatened indigenous tree, *Juniperus procera* and *Oleaeuropae subsp. cuspidata*, and were enthusiastically followed by all participants. Electronic and print media journalists from four media institutions gave a comprehensive coverage of the event, in different local languages as well as in English.