Title The Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society (BirdLife in Ethiopia) has established a new Site Support Group (SSG) at in the Central Rift Valley around the Abijata Shalla Lakes National Park (ASLNP) with funds obtained from NABU (BirdLife in Germany). The SSG is established by members of the community from 3 Peasant Associations (PAs), namely, 1) Daaka ?Dallu-Harangamaa, 2) Gaale fi Qeelloo, and 3) Shaalaa-Biilla. It is called '*Abijata ? Shalla Environmental Degradation Mitigating Group'.* The total number of founding members is 40, out of which 8 are female. New individuals have applied to join the group. Members meet ones at the end of each month to discuss conservations issue and to pay their monthly contribution of ETB (Ethiopian Birr) 5.00.

Activities

- The SSG?s Administrative Manual has been Prepared
- The conservation, and Alternative Income Generating Activities (AIGAs) have been identified. The AIGAs include cattle fattening, poultry farming, small businesses (mainly by women), production of hollow-blocks, etc. Each beneficiary will choose in which area from among those stated above or any other one he/she is interested. The AIGAs are beneficial to both the people and the local environment. First of all since there are no other employment opportunities, the community depends heavily on whatever the natural environment could offer. Hence, to make ends meet people cut trees to make charcoal and sell the rest for fire wood in Arsi Negele town. It is believed that by engaging people in AIGAs it is possible to reduce the devastation and pressure on the natural vegetation.
- A pilot conservation site has been secured. The site will serve as a demonstration site. Members of the community could learn that by taking appropriate measures such as area closure and enrichment planting, it is possible to rehabilitate the degraded areas. The whole idea can be replicated at community and/or household level. The Acacia woodland will be rehabilitated; and people will get more grass, wood, and other products from the rehabilitated land. The pilot conservation site that was secured earlier was close to Lake Shalla. It was found necessary to fence the pilot site to observe the impacts clearly, but the site was not convenient for close supervision, and there is a high risk of the fencing materials being vandalized. To avoid such a risk an alternative site was allocate by the community to minimize the risk. The new site is about four hectare and has been fenced with barbed wire. Soil conservation structures have been constructed inside the pilot site and pits have also been dug for enrichment plantation at the start of the rainy season.
- A Revolving Fund has been transferred to the new Bank Account of the SSG, opened at the Cooperative Bank of Oromiya, Arsi Negele Branch.
- All members of the SSG, have received loan to undertake different livelihoods improvement activities. The activities include goat and sheep rearing, cattle fattening, poultry, and petty trade.
- The 2010 World Environment Day was also celebrated in the presence of around 100 people, including community elders, representatives of local government offices, and SSG members, under the shade of a tree near the new SSG office. T-shirts and caps bearing EWNHS and NABU logos were produced. Student of Dole Junior High School Environment Club members entertained the guests with environmental song, poems, and a short drama.

Major challenges Many of the activities have been carried out. However, delays were encountered in delivering some of the activities due to natural causes and administrative bottle-necks.

- Nursery activities could not take place in 2008/2009 because of delay in the start up of the project. The Wondo Genet College of Forestry had agreed to supply seedlings for the planting months of July and August 2009. But because of insufficient rainfall, it was not possible to plant the seedlings. The next planting time is scheduled for June/July 2010. The Arsi Negele Woreda Agriculture Office has promised to supply enough seedlings for the enrichment plantation in the pilot conservation site.

- The Abijata SSG was supposed to open a Bank Account at Arsi Negele for its Revolving Fund scheme, the latest by April 2009. But due to Administrative and bureaucratic bottle-necks, opening the Bank Account was realized only in December 2009. Hence, timely distribution was not possible. But still a total of ETB 100,000 was sent to the SSG for its revolving fund scheme. Out of this fund ETB 80,000/eighty thousand/ has been distributed to all members of the SSG with each one of them receiveing a loan of ETB 1,000 - 2,500, against an interest of 8%, which is immediately deducted upon receipt of the loan. According to the agreement document each beneficiary is obliged to pay back the loan in one year.
- Due to shortage of funds the office has not been furnished, and the ceiling is not yet done. So, additional funding is required for furnishing and for fixing the ceiling.

Conclusion Although there were some challenges, the Abijata Shalla Site Support Group has started functioning. Delays were encountered in the opening up of Bank Accounts. Then there are other processes which among others include eligibility criteria, and selection of beneficiaries. The problems have been sorted out, and the distribution of loans have taken place. First and foremost only individuals who are hard working and disciplined are entitled for loan. Such individuals are selected by SSG and community representatives. Hence the risk of default or none payment of loan is minimised. As to full fledged impacts of the envisaged alternative livelihood improvement and environment friendly operations on the lives of the beneficiaries, it is still early days to predict at the moment. But one thing is certain. Most beneficiaries will economically be in a much better shape at the end of each loan period.