

The Omo National Park and African Parks Foundation (APF) of the Netherlands

In January 2006, African Parks Foundation took over the management of the Omo National Park in southern Ethiopia, under a public-private partnership agreement with the Ethiopian government. It was originally planned to include the nearby Mago National Park and APF has not ruled out the possibility that it may offer to extend its management to the Mago at a later date. It has been managing another park in southern Ethiopia, Nech Sar, near Arba Minch, since February 2005.

Members of at least five different ethnic groups live in and utilise the Omo Park for herding and/or cultivation: the Mursi (pop. 6000-10,000), Suri or Surma (about 25,000), Nyangatom or Bume (15,000-20,000), Dizi, (about 25,000) and Me'en (about 55,000). The Mursi live within and between both parks, which enclose the bulk of their most valuable agricultural and grazing land. (For a map showing the distribution of these groups in relation to the park boundaries, go to: <http://www.conservationrefugees.org/threatened.html>)

Although established in 1966 and 1978 respectively, it was not until 2005 that urgent steps were taken by the government to have the Omo and Mago parks gazetted. A 'demarcation ceremony' was held at the Omo National Park HQ in March 2005, at which members of various local groups were asked to sign (with their thumb prints) documents describing the park boundaries. The late Paul van Vlissingen, founder of APF, was present on this occasion. In July 2005, game guards from the Mago National Park visited the Mursi settlement of Maganto (known to the government as Hailu Wuha) and persuaded three men to put their thumb prints on a document defining the Mago Park boundaries. In the words of one of these men, 'We were afraid, so we just signed – they grabbed us'. It is not known whether gazettelement has yet taken place. When it does, those now living in the Omo and Mago Parks will become illegal squatters on their own land and these documents will be used as evidence of their 'prior informed consent'. APF's policy in relation to such 'people and parks' issues is that it is not their 'place' to interfere with the policies of a 'democratic government' (<http://www.africanparks-conservation.com/Peopleandparks.html>).

Concern about what these events may mean for the Mursi and their neighbours is heightened by the history of APF's takeover of the much smaller Nech Sar National Park, near Arba Minch. In November 2004, 463 houses of Guji-Oromo residents in the Park were burned down, three months before APF took over the management of the park, under an agreement with the government that stipulated that all those living in the park would have been resettled by the time it took over. Latest reports say that a few thousand Guji are still living in one corner of the Park, although their access to grazing has been restricted without compensation.

APF says that it has no plans to evict local people from the Omo Park or to restrict their access to it for cultivation and grazing. But their agreement with the government makes no mention of the rights of local people and they have so far refused to make separate written agreements with local groups about their land rights. The reason given is that they have yet to determine the extent and sustainability of current resource-use. The final decision, in other words, will be made by APF. One can only conclude that they see local people as, at most, 'beneficiaries', not rights holders.

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For more information see the following websites:

<http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/article/detail/5639>

<http://www.iucn.org/themes/ceesp/alert.htm>

<http://www.conservationrefugees.org/>