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Introduction

By Georg Sprecher*

The writing of this book has been rather unusual and not at all pre-planned. The aim of the authors was, together with the Foundation "Pro Semien" and World Wildlife Fund, to conserve the national park in Simen. In the very early stages the members of the Foundation discovered that conservation of the wildlife park could only be realized by looking at the problems of drought, lack of soil and old-fashioned cultivation methods. Who can blame these people, whose education is so limited, for hunting for their livelihood? Who can blame them, with no knowledge of modern agricultural techniques, for cutting trees to obtain more soil for farming and cattle-raising because soil is eroded?

Without very deep structural changes in farming and economic methods, which must be related to the attitudes of the population, a long-term change is not possible. Therefore, the Foundation "Pro Semien" came to the conclusion that aid must not go to just one facet of the society, but must be directed to farming, the markets, as well as to medical care and education. This decision was meant not to be hasty, shortlived aid, but the result of basic research to be used as a solid base later on.

That is how fruitful, interdisciplinary research work was begun. First of all, the place in question had to be surveyed and maps had to be drawn up, as all aid is based on this kind of work. Road construction, for example, is unthinkable without exact maps. Maps not only show the topographical situation, but also settlement politics. The maps are needed to indicate areas of heavy erosion, as well as settlement zones surrounding the national park. For us, as outsiders, it was interesting to follow the work of experts. Our enthusiasm is not only related to the results, which often involved risk of life, but also to the teamwork of different scientists who had one aim in mind: to work together to find an up-to-date means of help for a development project.

Because there were political changes, which shook the very foundation of Ethiopia, the field work had to be interrupted. It was a revolution which was more than just regionally-limited political differences, therefore this change requires more development time, as it is rooted in a more than 1000-year history and is based on unshakable religious themes. How and when these political changes will stabilize, no one can predict today, but this cannot change the existing importance of the already completed basic research. No matter what the political situation is, this basic research is a necessary prerequisite for any help in the Simen Highland. Today the Foundation can only maintain its financial support of the college in Debark, and through this aid Debark can keep its contact with us. How long the Foundation can do this, depends on the local situation and the time it takes to calm and stabilize the present problems. It will also depend on the members and contributors who continue to sustain this research project.

Whatever may happen in the future, it seems important that the already completed research does not get lost. It must be kept for the future. We are very grateful to the Department of Geography of the University of Berne for keeping all the important parts of the basic research in the present publication.

It is our deepest wish that this present work be not only a model for basic research in every aid program, but that it also may be realized soon in the Simen Highland. This wish includes our thanks to all those who cooperated in this work and who are friends of the Simen Highlands.

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