

**Landscape, People and Parks:
Environmental Change in the Lower
Omo valley, Southwestern Ethiopia**

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 Landscape &
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The lower valley of the River Omo, in southwestern Ethiopia, is one of the culturally and biologically most diverse regions of East Africa. Over the past 200 years it has undergone large-scale physical changes, due to falling rainfall over the Ethiopian highlands, which have affected, and been affected by, patterns of human movement, settlement and use. Since the 1960s, a state farm and two national parks have been established, while hydro-electric schemes currently under construction further up the valley are likely to have significant downstream impacts. The aims of this research, which will give the human dimension of landscape change a central explanatory role, are to gain a detailed understanding of:

- the sequence of environmental changes and vegetation history over the past 200 years, including an assessment of whether recent trends have been unprecedented or within the normal range of variability for this period;
- the way these changes have influenced, and been influenced by, the land-use practices, migratory and seasonal movements, social institutions and cultural values of the local population;
- the culturally specific ways in which landscape is described, imagined and 'constructed'; and
- the impact of incorporation into wider political and economic processes on local understandings of landscape, locality, territory and belonging.

The research will be conducted by a multi-disciplinary team trained in the methods of ecology, history and anthropology. A chronology of vegetational change over the past 200-500 years will be established and population movements over the past 200 years will be reconstructed using archival and oral historical materials. The interaction between environmental change, local techniques of land management and the institutional and cultural context of these techniques will be documented and analysed. The 'spatial practices' (settlement construction, field layout, ritual events and linguistic usages) by which landscape is made culturally meaningful and a sense of place and belonging established will be identified. The research results will be targeted, first, at historians, anthropologists and geographers working on African environmental history; second at conservation scientists, environmentalists and policy makers concerned with the role of human activity in environmental degradation and with the links between conservation, poverty reduction and development; and third, at academics from a range of disciplines interested in the social construction of landscape, locality and belonging.