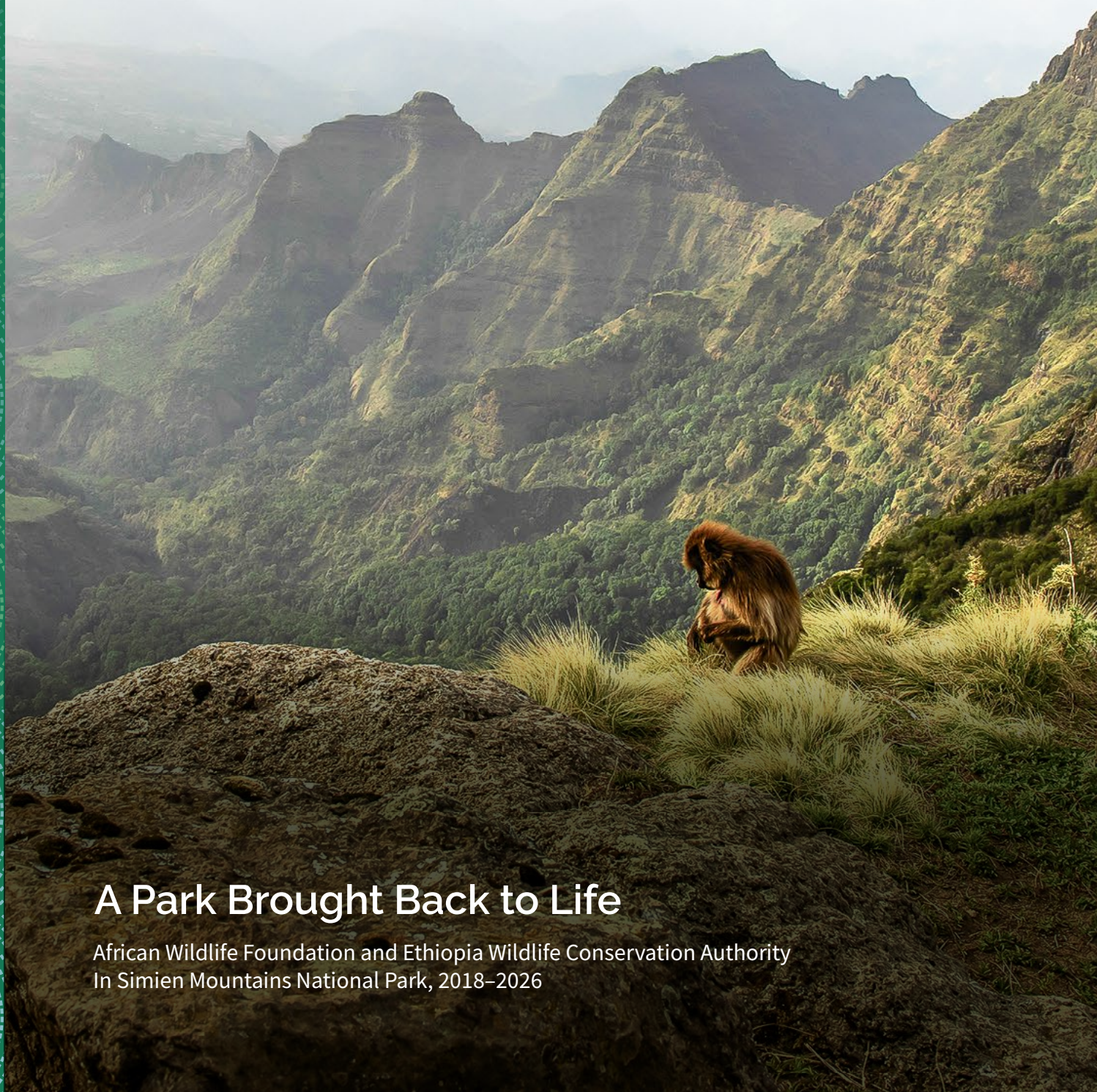
AFRICAN WILDLIFE FOUNDATION

# The Simien Mountains



## A Park Brought Back to Life

African Wildlife Foundation and Ethiopia Wildlife Conservation Authority
In Simien Mountains National Park, 2018–2026

# Foreword: A Park Brought Back to Life

**The Simien Mountains have always belonged to the people who live in their shadow. That is the first thing to understand about what has changed here. For AWF and our partners at the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority (EWCA), the work was never about fencing nature away from communities; it was about proving that a park in crisis could be brought back without leaving those communities behind.**

When our partnership with EWCA began in 2018, Simien Mountains National Park (SMNP) had been removed from UNESCO's List of World Heritage in Danger only the year before, and the gains behind that decision were still fragile. The threats were not abstract. They came from the pressures of daily life at the park's edge—livestock grazing, cultivation along the boundary, fire, and, more recently, the alarming decline of the Walia ibex, a species of wild goat found nowhere else on Earth. Holding on to the progress that had secured the park's removal was fundamental.

What followed was not a single intervention but a coordinated answer to each of those pressures. A grazing-reduction strategy that worked. Restoration on a degraded mountain that also returned something to the people farming below it. Livelihood support for the Gich community, in which the government provided land and compensation and AWF served as the catalyst—bridging relocation into opportunity. Long-term training that built the park's own capacity to manage itself. Together, these consolidated the gains behind the park's removal from the danger list.

This is the story of our partnership with EWCA and the communities around the park, built on AWF's earlier work at Adisge School with the Straus Family Foundation and culminated in 2026 with the park's transition to full local management as our programme closed. It does not pretend the work is finished. It argues, instead, that the most important things a conservation programme can leave behind are not buildings or equipment but functioning systems and local people who can run them: a community that earns its own income, a school that no longer loses its children, a mountain growing back its own habitat and a wildlife authority enforcement team led by someone who, eight years ago, could barely speak up in a meeting.

Conservation demands cooperation, and we are grateful to the Government of Germany, through KfW, for making this work possible. What this partnership has shown is that strong collaboration, sustained over years, produces milestones no single partner could reach alone.

The achievements must now be protected and carried forward by EWCA and the communities of the Simien Mountains so that they exist not simply as part of a story, but as milestones of a long-term, locally-led and sustainable strategy.

Charly Facheux
Senior Vice President, Programs
African Wildlife Foundation



# AWF & Simien Mountains National Park Timeline

**2016**

With funding from the Straus Family Foundation, AWF's Classroom Africa programme begins at Adisge School, strengthening classrooms, IT and solar infrastructure. This support predates the AWF–EWCA partnership.

**2018**

AWF–EWCA partnership begins in Simien Mountains National Park, a year after the park's removal from the List of World Heritage in Danger ; park management effectiveness baseline measured at 52.5 on the METT (Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool).

**2021**

The Adisge School meals programme launches, supporting students with meals, uniforms and stationery and driving dropouts toward zero.

**2022**

Headmaster Dagnew Mesele arrives at Adisge School; the school begins a three-year run of zero dropouts.

**2024**

The final management effectiveness assessment records a METT score of 60.9, up from the 52.5 baseline.

**2025**

Ethiopia's first national Walia Ibex Recovery and Conservation Strategy is produced; Walia Ambassador Programme launches across six monitoring clusters.

**2026**

The park transitions to full local management as AWF's programme closes; 513 students supported, 14 livelihood enterprises established, about 695 hectares restored, about 30,900 hectares (75%) made grazing-free, 17 of 18 planned census rounds completed and digital ranger monitoring systems embedded.



THE ZUMERA MILL IN DEBARK IS ONE OF 14 SMALL ENTERPRISES SUPPORTING FAMILIES RELOCATED FROM THE PARK TO THE TOWN.

THE GICH TRANSITION

# From the Mountain to the Mill

**Nigus Adam speaks of the mill in Debark as if it were a member of his family. It brought 15 households together, pays for school clothes and keeps sacks of coffee and sugar in the house. It is the reason he no longer watches his neighbours walk three kilometres every day to Seraba looking for work.**

"It is thanks to this mill that we created the association," he says. "Just over a year ago, there was no association at all." Now three milling machines grind dried chillies and grains each day — the work of the fifteen-household Zumera Milling Enterprise, which has changed not just his life but those of his neighbours too.

For most of his life, Nigus measured wealth in cattle. When he and his neighbours lived inside the Simien Mountains National Park, they farmed and kept animals and by those standards, he says simply, "We lived well." Relocation to the town changed the arithmetic of his world.

The Gich community once lived on the Gich Plateau, within the core area of Simien Mountains National Park. Their relocation to Debark was carried out through an understanding between government and local communities, with the aim of improving management of the World Heritage site and reducing human-driven pressure on the park's fragile highland ecosystem. For families who had endured the cold, isolation and limited productivity of the plateau, the move also opened access to schools, health services, markets and the possibility of a different kind of life. But it also required a farming community to rebuild its sense of income, identity and belonging in town. Nigus was among those who moved in 2016.

"Adapting to life in the city was complicated," he says.

The mill gave that adaptation a foundation. So far the association has divided its profits three times — modest sums of between USD 25 and USD 50 per member. His story carries a private weight that income figures cannot capture. He is the only son of an ageing mother, whom he represents at the association. What he earns there goes directly to her needs and to his four children.





NIGUS WITH HIS FAMILY. HIS SHARE OF THE MILL'S PROFITS HELPS HIM PROVIDE FOR THEM.

> "Currently, my children dress like other children. I don't like seeing them feel bad.
>
> **NIGUS ADAM**
> *Member, Zumera Milling Enterprise*

The mill is not yet the complete answer. With 15 members and at least five dependents each, it partly supports some 90 people. Nigus hopes for more — an extra machine that can run day and night, or a second income-generating activity. Yet the shape of change is already visible. A man who once had no income in the town now shares profits, supports his mother, and clothes his four children. He speaks without bitterness about the park that displaced him.

"The park is our life," he says, noting that his family was the first to respond when fire broke out on their old land. They left years ago, but they still call it theirs.

## ONE NODE IN A DELIBERATE PROGRAMME

Nigus's mill is part of the government's Gich Livelihood Restoration Programme (LRP). It is one of 14 small enterprises — milling, bakery, tailoring, livestock and more — built out with 26 serviced sheds, equipment and start-up inputs. This support is designed to underpin lasting behaviour change in the community.

Across seven business types, the 14 enterprises reached around 846 individuals in 141 households. When tourism collapsed during COVID-19 and conflict, the programme also converted restoration work into cash-for-work, paying a daily wage for labour that was needed in any case and putting money into households that had lost their income. It is early days, as Nigus knows — the programme itself notes that household incomes still need independent, long-term tracking — but the foundation he describes is real: enterprises registered, sheds built and skills that outlast the grant.

### GICH LIVELIHOODS AT A GLANCE

**141 Households**
of the 252 households relocated under the government's LRP

**14 Enterprises**
across 7 business types, with 26 serviced sheds (14 in use), equipment and inputs

**846 Individuals**
engaged in alternative livelihoods outside SMNP

*But income alone does not keep a child in school. The next test was Adisge.* →




THE ENTRANCE TO ADISGE SCHOOL IN ETHIOPIA.

# On the Edge of Change

**The football pitch at Adisge sits where the land runs out. Beyond its far edge, one of the great cliffs of the Simien range drops clean into the valley, so that a long pass or mishit toward the sideline seems, for a moment, to be heading off the roof of the world. Every break time, Yeshareg Asfaw is out there. She is 14, and she plays with her best friend, Belayiye Yideg — the same girl she studies with, does homework with and trades school supplies with when one of them runs short. Football and friendship and the cliff's edge-this is what school feels like to her now.**

It did not always feel this way. "There was an education problem in this area before," remembers Dagnew Mesele, the headmaster. Families struggled to provide a uniform, a notebook or even a pen; there was nowhere proper to sit and no equipment. Yeshareg's own family knew the limits well — her elder siblings were sent to the town to work because their father could not put all of them through school. "I feel privileged to have the chance to go to school," Yeshareg says. That privilege is what the African Wildlife Foundation's investment in Adisge has tried to make ordinary for everyone.

Dagnew arrived in 2022 to a school he remembers for its poor infrastructure, low enrolment and teachers who did not want to be posted to a place with empty classrooms. His proudest change is simple: zero dropouts in three years, with every student progressing to the final year. He credits the school meals program, launched in 2021, which supports 513 students with meals, uniforms and stationery from two kitchen facilities. Children eat before lessons begin at 9:00. EWCA Director General Kumara Wakjira calls it the first programme of its kind in Ethiopia. In his words, it has completely stopped school dropout.



THE SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAMME IS CREDITED WITH KEEPING CHILDREN IN SCHOOL. MEALS ARE SERVED BEFORE LESSONS, SETTING THE TONE FOR THE DAY.

> I am going to work for my country and for my community — to help them protect the park and make a profit, without being dependent on it.
>
> **YESHAREG ASFAW**
> *Student, Adisge*



## ADISGE: THE SCHOOL THE COMMUNITY KEEPS

AWF's Classroom Africa programme, funded by the Straus Family Foundation, delivered the infrastructure: 13, two IT and pedagogy rooms, 15 staff quarters, multipurpose buildings, a computer lab and uninterrupted solar electricity. 31 teachers were trained in conservation education and pedagogy, six of whom gained IT skills to staff the lab.

The school's greenhouse and garden — 87 apple trees and crops like tomatoes and peppers — are maintained by the community and earn income. A library holds nearly 500 reference books and hosts one of seven conservation clubs, which together have about 106 members. That is where Yeshareg is happiest.



THE SCHOOL'S GREENHOUSE PROJECT KEEPS BOTH THE SCHOOL AND THE COMMUNITY ENGAGED. SURPLUS IS SOLD AND INCOME GENERATED GOES BACK TO THE COMMUNITY.

**Zero Dropouts**
for three consecutive years

**513 Students**
supported with meals, uniforms and stationery since 2021

**13 Classrooms**
plus 2 IT rooms, 15 staff quarters, 2 kitchens, lab & 24/7 solar

**31 Teachers**
trained (6 in IT) · 7 conservation clubs (~106 members)

Malede Negash, who leads the elected Parent-Teacher Association, frames the deal plainly: the park provides the children with stationery, IT equipment and food; in return, the community keeps the park clean.

The hopes the school has unlocked are not modest. According to Malede, the children are beginning to dream further — setting their sights past the cliff at the edge of the pitch. Now they have somewhere to aim.

*A nourished, settled community changed what was possible on the land itself. →*



EPHREM WENDIE IN SIMIEN MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK. BEHIND HIM, NEW SEEDLINGS TAKE ROOT ON ONCE-BARE GROUND.

# The Roof of Africa Restored

**Every time Ephrem Wendie stands at Ras Dejen, the highest peak in Ethiopia, he gets a sense of fulfilment.**
**It is not the spectacular views from what the park calls Africa's roof that move him. It is the 695 hectares of restored land — work he and his colleagues have done over the past eight years. It is the kind of pride that does not photograph easily.**

Degraded, damaged ground is coaxed back toward what it used to be. Indigenous seedlings are planted based on research, then watered through the dry season, weeded and tended until they hold. The scale is real: more than 568,800 indigenous seedlings were produced and planted against a target of 150,000, and the programme planted 228 hectares of core habitat at an 87.2% survival rate. Biological rehabilitation covered 342 hectares and soil and water conservation a further 353 hectares; 637 hectares were cleared of invasive plants, and 30.5 hectares of severely eroded gullies in the core were brought back. "The area that was degraded returned to its natural state," Ephrem says. "This is a big milestone in the work done by the African Wildlife Foundation."

Restoration, as he tells it, is not gardening; it is conflict prevention. When land was overgrazed and degraded, people and animals were pushed into the same shrinking spaces, and that competition became a source of conflict. By returning the land to a natural state, the park restores habitat for wildlife and eases the pressure that sets people against the park. The single largest lever has been grazing. About 30,900 hectares — roughly 75% of the 41,200-hectare park, and ahead of the 70% target — are now grazing-free and recovering, up from around 37% at the start. As habitat returned, the pressure between people and wildlife began to ease.

## HONEST ABOUT THE HARDEST NUMBER

Not all outcomes have been positive, and Ephrem is candid about the Walia ibex, a rare mountain goat and national symbol of Ethiopia. Its monitored population rose from a 2018 baseline of 619 to a peak of 691 in 2020, then fell to a low of 306 in 2024; it stood at 321 at closure. He openly acknowledges that COVID-19 and conflict led to a lapse in law enforcement that directly contributed to the decline. But the response is where innovation lies. The park now conducts regular analyses using transects — 17 of 18 planned rounds completed over the programme, despite a suspension during the conflict — carefully analysing threats and reporting to officials who use the evidence to make management decisions.

> The recovery of a species is a multinational problem. It cannot be solved by one office on one mountain.
>
> **EPHREM WENDIE**
> *Ecologist, EWCA*



**~695 ha**
restored (342 ha biological · 353 ha water conservation) · 568,800 indigenous seedlings

**30,900 ha**
of the park (~75%) now grazing-free and recovering

**87.2%**
seedling survival rate · 637 ha invasive species cleared

**619 → 321**
Walia ibex: 2018 baseline to 2026 (low of 306 in 2024)

## WHAT THE MOUNTAIN LOOKS LIKE NOW

Restoration is easiest to understand as a picture of the same ground at two moments. The illustration alongside shows how the buffer-zone landscape has changed between the start of the programme and its close. Where bare earth and erosion gullies once dominated, native vegetation is returning across hundreds of rehabilitated hectares.

Supported by more than 568,800 indigenous seedlings and the removal of grazing across about 30,900 hectares — roughly 75% of the park.

**637 ha**
invasive species cleared in the core area

**30.5 ha**
of severely eroded gullies restored

**17 of 18**
planned biodiversity census rounds completed

Other species give him grounds for cautious optimism, and the data bear him out. The gelada population, whose calls became familiar to him on the escarpment, increased over the monitoring period, with recent counts above 24,000 (the gelada, sometimes called the bleeding-heart monkey, is a primate found only in the Ethiopian highlands). The Ethiopian wolf — the world's rarest canid — remained broadly stable. He asks for what every field scientist asks for: logistics, vehicles and the means to keep monitoring a park small in land cover but vast in biodiversity.

But the milestone stands. Hundreds of hectares once lost to erosion and overuse are growing back, and an ecologist who has spent eight years on the work can stand at Ethiopia's highest point and feel the difference under his feet.




*A recovering landscape needs guardians. The next story is about who guards it now. →*

THE GENERATION THAT STAYS

# The “Baby Expert” Who Grew Up

**Eight years ago, Sissay Solomon sat quietly at a workshop. Newly appointed to Simien Mountains National Park, he lacked the confidence to speak up in gatherings, earning the nickname “Baby Expert.” Today he leads law enforcement across the park, coordinating 85 rangers. The nickname now marks his rise.**

“My journey with the African Wildlife Foundation in the Simien Mountains began eight years ago,” he reflects. “At that time, I was a baby expert. I didn’t have enough confidence to speak in large conference workshops. But now, thanks to the continuous technical and financial support from AWF, I have grown into the leader of the enforcement team.” He was born in a small town 25 kilometres below the park — close enough to watch tourists pass on their way to the escarpment, far enough that the mountains felt like someone else’s country. He chose to study wildlife and culture at university because the park was on his doorstep, and it has been the focus of his working life ever since.

His growth is intertwined with how the work itself changed. “Let me walk you through the ages,” he says. “Back then, everything was reported on paper. But now, we can see what the rangers do in real time throughout the park.” The team shifted to SMART-based monitoring — alongside EarthRanger and CyberTracker — adding GPS units and camera traps through a partnership between AWF and EWCA. Rangers log every patrol, every sighting of Walia ibex or wolf, every carcass and every illegal grazing incident on a smartphone, and the data appear instantly on a dashboard in Sissay’s office, visible to the federal authority in real time.



SISSAY SOLOMON: FROM A SHY WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT TO THE LEADER OF 85 RANGERS.





RANGERS ON PATROL IN SIMIEN MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK.

## A SYSTEM THAT NOW RUNS ITSELF

The institutional shift is measurable. In all, 205 law enforcement personnel, 110 scouts and rangers and 20 technical staff were trained in conservation law and enforcement. Performance incentives reached 105 rangers and scouts, and rations reached 115-support that improved motivation in remote, high-pressure zones. The park’s management effectiveness, measured by the METT, rose from 52.5 in 2018 to 60.9 at the final assessment in 2024, having peaked at 63.0 in 2022 before conflict pressures pared it back.

Sissay is candid about what remains: the Walia ibex has declined to 321, with poaching among the causes; there are just 10 smartphones for 85 rangers; rations and patrol equipment fall short; and the monitoring interface is still in English rather than Amharic. Yet 17 of 18 planned census rounds and a modern monitoring system now make the work tangible where reports were once compiled on paper and hard to verify. Asked how the end of the partnership feels, he does not speak of loss.

> The transition makes me happy, because we have built something that now functions on its own.
>
> **SISSAY SOLOMON**
> *Law Enforcement Lead*

That sentence is the whole story in miniature. A shy recruit became the leader of the enforcement team; external technical expertise gave way to a local professional at the helm. Where an outside hand once guided the work, a young man from a town below the park now represents it to federal authorities. The generation deciding the park’s fate is already choosing to stay and protect it.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **85 Rangers** | **205 / 110 / 20** | **SMART · GPS · Camera Traps** | **353 → 404** |
| now led by a home-grown enforcement chief | law enforcement personnel, scouts and rangers, and technical staff trained | real-time digital monitoring replaced paper reporting | park patrols per year (2023/24 → 2025/26) |

THE RESILIENT PARK

# The Lodge That Would Not Close

**Limalimo Lodge began as a dream shared by two friends, Meles and Shiferaw, who guided in the Simien Mountains for over a decade before building something permanent. Eno Azane Ayalew has been there since the first day of construction, watching it grow from bare walls into 14 rooms. He has seen the lodge fully booked for two years — and, during the worst of the pandemic, standing empty for months.**

The lodge embodies the park's economic story, tracking its ambition, its shocks and its stubborn refusal to disappear. Visitor numbers fell sharply after 2020, dropping to just 738 in 2022 before an uneven recovery to 4,092 in 2025 — a rebound shaped by forces far larger than any one programme. Through it all, the essential elements have held: the infrastructure remains, staff are still employed, and farmers still sell spinach and eggs to the kitchen. The programme's tourism work — a completed Jinbar Waterfall route, new signage and trained guides — leaves the park readier for visitors when they return.



## LIMALIMO LODGE: TIMELINE OF RESILIENCE

| Origins | Construction | Opening & peak | COVID-19 shock | Recovery | The dream ahead |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Two mountain guides dream of a permanent lodge | Built into the escarpment in rammed earth, using all local labour | Staff trained; strong international tourism | Guests recalled home almost overnight | Travel returns slowly; staff retained on shifts | Community buildings, a school and clinic planned |
| **10+ years guiding** | **200 labourers, ~1.5 years** | **55 staff, fully booked 2 yrs** | **6–7 months, no guests** | **43 staff, 1–5 guests** | |

- **Visitor numbers fell to 738 in 2022 under COVID-19 and conflict.**
- **Uneven recovery to 4,092 in 2025.**
- **150 tourism service providers (guides and cooks) trained.**
- **Jinbar Waterfall route, signage and master plan delivered to improve tourism readiness.**

ENO AZANE AYALEW HAS BEEN WITH LIMALIMO LODGE SINCE ITS FIRST DAY OF CONSTRUCTION — FROM TIMEKEEPER FOR 200 LOCAL LABOURERS TO ASSISTANT MANAGER.

PARTNERSHIPS IN BRIEF

# Three Ways the Work Was Shared

Some of the partnership's strongest results came from shared ownership — among AWF, EWCA, donors and, above all, the communities living at the park's edge. These three examples show how collaboration turned strategy into practical systems that can endure.

PARTNERSHIP · COMMUNITY-LED CONSERVATION

## THE WALIA AMBASSADORS

The monitored population of Walia ibex in the Simien Mountains has fallen to 321, and the species is found nowhere else on Earth. In 2025, AWF and EWCA produced Ethiopia's first national Walia Ibex Recovery and Conservation Strategy, a 2026–2035 roadmap for reversing the decline. When monitoring revealed the urgency of the situation, the partners launched the Walia Ambassador Programme, funded by Germany's KfW Development Bank, placing communities at the centre of the species' recovery rather than treating them as threats to be managed.

Ambassadors are selected from nearby communities for their local standing and proximity to ibex habitat, then deployed across six monitoring clusters.

Their role is threefold: systematically monitor the species by counting individuals, noting sex ratios, and recording water sources, illegal activity and signs of fire; raise awareness among neighbours; and advocate for coexistence by mediating between the park and surrounding villages. "They are preaching for the park and the community," says ecologist Ephrem Wendie. By giving people at the park's edge a real stake, the programme turns potential adversaries into advocates for the species' survival.

- **Community ambassadors deployed across 6 monitoring clusters.**
- **Data linked to the census series and the SMART/GPS/camera-trap system.**
- **Walia ibex monitored at 321 in 2026, down from a 2018 baseline of 619.**
- **Funded by KfW Development Bank.**

A WALIA AMBASSADOR IN THE LANDSCAPE.

PARTNERSHIP · FIRE & GOVERNANCE

# A Negotiated Fire Line

Fires in the Simien Mountains are rarely acts of nature. They are human-caused and often occur in places communities and park staff can identify by name. That reality makes fire management as much a matter of trust as of response. Rather than waiting to fight fires after they spread, AWF and EWCA worked with communities to identify fire-prone areas and build a prevention strategy: 20 community fire brigades were formed in the highest-risk kebeles (the lowest-level administrative unit in Ethiopia, equivalent to a neighbourhood or ward), 150 members were trained cumulatively with annual refresher training, and 9.73 km of firebreaks were constructed against a 10 km target.

The approach treats communities not as suspects, but as first responders. The results are striking: annual fire incidents fell from 38 in 2018 to four in 2026 — an 89.5% reduction — and about 99.7% of the park was fire-free at closure. “Because it is our home, we are ready to protect it,” says Nigus Adam, a member of the Gich association and a relocated farmer whose community was first to respond when fire broke out on land they no longer live on but still consider theirs. The relationships behind that response are reinforced through the Park Advisory Committee and the Gich community dialogue forums, where federal, local, and community voices make decisions together rather than receive them from outside.

**150**
members trained

**20**
fire brigades

**9.73 KM**
of firebreaks

**38 TO 4 PER YEAR**
fire incidents reduced

**~99.7%**
of the park fire-free at closure









PARTNERSHIP · PLANNING & INSTITUTIONS

# The Plan That Outlasts the Project

The AWF–EWCA partnership, supported by KfW funding from 2018 to 2026, was designed to prioritise capability over dependency, leaving behind systems that can continue through handover and beyond.

Two instruments anchor that durability. The first is the 10-year general management plan, developed to international standards and supported by five thematic strategies on fire, grazing, tourism, livelihoods and conserving the Walia ibex. These were developed through 188 kebele-level activities, 81 woreda workshops, eight federal and regional platforms and engagement with about 23,400 local people across six woredas and more than 42 kebeles. (A woreda is Ethiopia’s third-level administrative division, equivalent to a district.)

The second is the African Protected Area Directors (APAD) platform, which AWF helped create and which gives Ethiopia’s leadership a peer network for resource mobilisation and a shared African voice in global conservation forums.

**Governance supported through**

**188**
kebele activities

**81**
woreda workshops

**8**
federal and regional platforms

**23,400**
people engaged

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**COVER: A JUVINILE GELADA IN THE SIMIEN MOUNTAINS.**