



Photo: African and European students at a workshop at Bahir Dar University in northern Ethiopia. | © Mike Haas/Biocult.net

PLUS STUDENTS CONDUCT RESEARCH IN ETHIOPIAN “CHURCH FOREST”

Over the last few weeks, students from the Paris Lodron University Salzburg (PLUS) have been working with Ethiopian, Kenyan and other European students in an Ethiopian “church forest”, writing their theses and acquiring valuable life experience.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, 40 percent of Ethiopia was covered by forest. Today, less than five percent remains.. Besides a few larger protected forest areas, there are a total of 35,000 so-called “church forests”, which are scattered across Ethiopia. These small and isolated forests are valuable refuges for rare plant and animal species and provide important ecosystem services for humans.

A flight over northern Ethiopia offers a bird's eye view of the country: a brownish-yellow, largely treeless landscape with countless small fields, villages and partially deteriorated and eroded slopes. The extent of the heavily overused and deforested landscape becomes obvious.

Forest islands important for animals, plants and people

The closer you get to Lake Tana, the more often you notice small green circular spots with a coloured dot in the middle of this tawny landscape. These are the “church forests” mentioned above, which represent the last legacy of Ethiopia's biodiversity.

Most of these church forests are very small, geographically isolated from each other and often represent only a remnant of the original animal and plant diversity. Nevertheless, they are important islands of cultural and biological diversity.

These forest islands also provide numerous services to humans. The trees, some of which are very old and large, store carbon. Medicinal plants also grow in the forests. The organisms that occur inside the forest also have a positive effect on the surrounding fields, such as organisms regulating the soil, numerous pollinators, and birds that decimate pests.

African and European students conducting joint research

Over the last few weeks, PLUS students have been working intensively in a church forest near Lake Tana together with students from Ethiopia, Kenya and other countries in Europe, collecting valuable data sets to write their final theses.

The focus was on the biological as well as cultural relevance of these isolated forests. The field trip was led and supervised by scientists from the Department of Environment & Biodiversity at the PLUS. The trip also had an important intercultural effect, an experience that the PLUS students will remember for the rest of their lives.

Further information:

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