
Debrelibanos Gedam

Debrelibanos Gedam is of great importance to the Orthodox Church and thus receives many visitors. Human pressure is a threat to the natural woodlands, but the wild olive grove in particular. Western style type of burial is becoming prevalent and represents the single major problem confronting the site. When carried out under canopy it results in tree crown dieback.



Name: **Debrelibanos Gedam**

Status: monastery

Site Code: SU02

Floristic Region: SU

Region: 4 (North Shewa)

Altitude: 2400 m

Latitude: 09° 41' N

Longitude: 38° 51' E

Woodland/forest:

Status: relict

Size: ca 5 ha

Dominant species:

canopy: *Acacia abyssinica*, *Olea*

europaea ssp *cuspidata*

shrub/ground: *Calpurnia aurea*, *Clusia*

abyssinica, *Solanum nigrum*

No of woody species: 62

No of species with less than 5 individuals: 5

Threats: graves, grazing, wood extraction

Photograph: The church is situated next to the *Olea europaea* ssp *cuspidata* forest and the various fragments interspersed by eucalypts are found on the slopes leading to the cliff.

At the edge of the highland plateau on the flat ground below the first escarpment lies the well-known Debrelibanos Gedam monastery. During the rainy season a large waterfall provides a stunning backdrop to a largely wooded landscape.

The natural tree cover consists in two distinct areas. There is a large *Olea europaea* ssp *cuspidata* woodland below the church where large numbers of people are buried annually. On the steep slopes below the cliff there is a mixed woodland interspersed by many patches of planted eucalypts.

On the road to the monastery there is a large settlement which is growing rapidly. In the surrounding countryside there is some cultivation, but most of the land is now rough grazing. Around the settlement there are many patches of eucalypts.

Native woodland resources in the surrounding countryside are limited to scattered native trees and some areas of secondary scrub.

History

Debrelibanos Gedam is one of the best known orthodox sites and has great religious significance. It has been established for centuries and now receives a large number of pilgrims. The number of studies carried out at Debrelibanos reflects the importance of the site.

Conservation status

The conservation importance of the *Olea europaea*

ssp cuspidata woodland lies in its uniqueness. Woodlands of a similar type and size have all disappeared from the region. However, both the canopy and shrub layer are essentially monotypic, the latter dominated by *Calpurnia aurea*. The woodland on the steep slopes is more important from a species richness point of view, although the native tree cover is very patchy.



Although the ground vegetation is lush in many parts of the slope forest, grazing is high in places and the shrub layer and tree regeneration is often absent.



Recently introduced western style of burial is the threat to the survival of the *Olea europaea ssp cuspidata* woodland. When the hole is made all roots are cut resulting in tree crown dieback.



The *Olea europaea ssp cuspidata* woodland is species poor with a monotypic canopy as well as a monotypic shrub layer of *Calpurnia aurea*.

Threats

The widespread adoption of western type of graves in recent decades is a severe problem because a large pit is dug out and in the process all roots are severed. This results in tree dieback and ultimately threatens the existence of the wild olive grove. This is a major conservation issue and difficult to resolve because:

- people want to bury their dead under a tree cover
- Debrelibanos is a desirable site where to be buried, access from Addis Ababa is easy and lately made much easier due to road resurfacing,
- the monastery needs money and charging for modern graves provides essential revenue.

Human waste disposal is a problem more from a health point of view because from a woodland perspective it is probably simply a welcome supply of nutrients.

Heavy grazing pressure affects much of the upper woodland. With a rapidly growing population and increasing demand for wood, tree cutting will become a major threat.

Management

The issue of burial practice must be addressed to save the wild olive grove. Past plans to build latrines and produce gas from the human waste should be reactivated. The various patches of native trees below the cliff should be reconnected.