ECOLOGY

Saving Ethiopia's church forests

Wooded oases provide a refuge for biodiversity.

BY ALISON ABBOTT

If you see a forest in Ethiopia, there is very likely to be a church in the middle, says Alemayehu Wassie.

Wassie, a forest ecologist, has spent the past decade preserving, documenting and protecting the unique biodiversity in pockets of forest that surround Ethiopia's orthodox churches. These small but fertile oases — around 35,000 are dotted across the country — are some of the last remaining scraps of the tall, lush natural forests that once covered Ethiopia, but have now all but disappeared. This image shows the Mekame Selam Kolala Meskel church in South Gonder, 300 kilometres north of Addis Ababa.

In recent decades, much forestland has been sacrificed to agriculture to feed the country's growing population — now more than 100 million. But small research projects have started to document the depleted biodiversity. Wassie and US ecologist Meg Lowman have forged an unusual collaboration with the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church to try to save the forests.

The church, to which tens of millions of Ethiopians belong, views the forest as a symbol of heaven on Earth, where every creature is a gift from God and needs its habitat. The cool, humid church woods can range from 3 to 300 hectares and host evergreen trees, shrubs and flowering plants. They sequester carbon, conserve water, reduce soil erosion and provide natural medicine. For priests and communities, they provide shelter for buildings, space for prayer and burial areas.

"It's a remote part of the world, where the natural environment has become part of the spiritual environment," says Christof Mauch, who studies environmental history at the University of Munich, Germany. "It is culturally, as well as scientifically, important to save these pockets of forests," he says.

With grants, Wassie and Lowman have run workshops to educate priests about their conservation work, and they encourage communities to build protective walls around the forests. The two have organized research activities to catalogue bird and insect species, inviting experts to aid identification. "The priests gave us limited permission to enter the forests and take samples," says Wassie. He has now surveyed the vegetation in more than 40 woods. "We don't know how much diversity has been lost," says Wassie. "But it appears there is a very significant amount left — more than we expected." ■

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The Mekame Selam Kolala Meskel church in northern Ethiopia is one of 35,000 or so orthodox Tewahedo buildings that are surrounded by lush, wild forest.

