



Photo 4a: "Azzegea" (photograph G. Daimelli, 1905; in: Daimelli 1908:123)



Photo 4b: Hazzega towards the north (photograph by L. Lätt, 2004)

**Photos 4a+4b:** The village of Hazzega. In the photo taken in 1905 (top), the landscape appears to be totally devoid of trees. *Hidmos* can be seen in the background. This traditional house type has since been largely replaced by modern houses, as shown by the photo taken in 2004 (bottom).



Photo 5: "La conca di Senafe" (photograph A. Maugini 1936, IAO)

**Photo 5:** Near Senafe, 1936. The picture is dominated by open cropland or grassland, with occasional small shrubs and some sisal. Trees are conspicuously lacking in the plains.

## Concluding remarks

There is considerable evidence that the forest cover has not dramatically decreased over the last 100 years in the Eritrean Highlands: The old photographs and travel accounts collected to date suggest that these areas were already largely devoid of forest when Italian colonialisation began. Whatever forest cover there was in a more distant past in the Eritrean Highlands must have disappeared well before 1890 for the most part. Old photos also show that landscape evolution was dynamic, with areas of forest and woodland decrease and areas of regeneration; with plants disappearing and others emerging in their place. The efforts made in afforestation over the last 100 years are conspicuous on many photographs.

Historical photographs and travel accounts also show that crop and grazing lands already covered extensive areas by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The spread of cultivated land in a bid to feed an increasing population, often held responsible for the supposedly marked decrease in forest cover, seems to have been less significant than believed in the past 100 years, and was at the expense of grassland or bush rather than at the expense of forest.

Material on landscape history in Eritrea is still lean and spotty, which makes extrapolation of findings for wider areas difficult. In order to get conclusive and representative results for larger areas, additional information must be collected and analysed, if possible including aerial photos. The present info sheet should be seen as a short summary of what is known to date. We hope that it stimulates further research.

## References:

Boerma, Pauline, 1999: Seeing the Wood for Trees: Deforestation in the Central Highlands of Eritrea since 1890. PhD thesis, Oxford University.  
 Lätt, Louise, 2004: Eritrea Re-Photographed. Landscape Changes in the Eritrean Highlands 1890-2004. MSc thesis, University of Berne.  
 Liebi, Francesca, 1993: Landnutzungsstruktur und Landschaftsentwicklung im Hochland Eritreas 1800-1952. MSc thesis, University of Berne.  
 Rittler, Alfons, 2003: Forests, Land Use and Landscape in the Central and Northern Ethiopian Highlands, 1865 to 1930. African Studies Series A 19. University of Berne.

Apart from figure 4a, all historical pictures presented in this paper are stored in the archive of the Istituto Agronomico per l'Oltremare (IAO) in Florence and in the Museum für Völkerkunde (MVK) in Vienna. The author wishes to thank these institutions, as well as others, for access granted to their photo archives.

**This Info sheet was produced by the Sustainable Land Management Programme (SLM) Eritrea, 2005.**

Author: Louise Lätt (2004). Editing: Thomas Kohler; CDE University of Berne. SLM is funded by the Syngenta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture, Basle.

# Eritrea Re-photographed

## Landscape Changes in the Central Highlands 1890 - 2004

*Eritrea's forest cover is said to have dwindled from 30% of the land surface around 1890 to less than 1% today. However, recent research evidence from the Highlands casts doubt on the belief that an overall decrease of forests occurred over the last 100 years; whatever forest cover there was must have disappeared well before this period. By contrast, the efforts made in tree planting are conspicuous in many places.*

### The "narrative of deforestation"

This info sheet presents first results of research work done on landscape and forest cover change in the Eritrean Highlands over the last 100 years. The research is based on historical sources such as old photographs and travel accounts. It was stimulated by doubts relating to the so-called "narrative of deforestation", which says that woodlands and forests dramatically decreased in Eritrea during the last 100 years; that there was abundant forestland in Eritrea some decades ago; and that this was largely destroyed owing to the effects of the colonial regime, thirty years of war, and an increase in population.

### No overall decrease of forests in the Highlands over the last 100 years

Present research evidence on landscape and forest cover change shows the following:

- Comparison of old and new photographs does not show an overall decrease of forests in the Highlands over the last 100 years (1890-2004)
- Changes in forest and woodland cover were complex in space and time. Forests decreased in some areas, but increased in others due to afforestation programmes and natural regrowth most prominently around settlements and towns
- Old photographs show that terracing for soil and water conservation was most likely practiced already in pre-colonial times
- Owing to the limited quality of most old pictures, it is difficult to make statements on the extension and quality of non-forest vegetation (cropland, grazing areas).

**The following text and pictures** present the landscape history of specific areas and sites in the Eritrean Highlands in more detail.



**Photos 1a and 1b:** Enda Amanuel near Mendefera. The historic photo taken around 1920 shows single trees or bushes on steep hillsides. Terracing can be seen on cropland below the then settlement. The photo taken in 2004 shows less open bush on the slope, but trees in the village, which has moved downslope and consists mainly of modern housing.

Photo 1a: "Enda Michiel presso Adi Ugri", taken around 1920; photographer unknown.



Photo 1b: Enda Amanuel (photograph by L. Lätt, 2004)

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## Info Sheet