

## NATURE IN ERITREA

By  
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It is not possible to appreciate the natural life in Eritrea unless one first understands its geography. Eritrea consists of a triangular of 420.000 Sq.Kms of land bordered on the south by Ethiopia, on the west by the Sudan, and the north and east by the Red Sea. The country lies within the tropics on a latitude of 10 - 20 degrees north from the equator.

Eritrea, although comparatively a small country, has great diversity in its topography, climate and customs. Eritreans themselves divide their country into three main zones according to altitude and the resultant climate with its influence on agriculture and herding. DEGA is the temperate zone of the highlands 7,000 ft and above, WOYNE DEGA is the intermediate zone whose altitude ranges from 5,000 to 7,000 ft., and QUELLA is the low-lying and hot area from 5,000 ft down to the sea level. The first two zones are thickly inhabited while the third is sparsely inhabited by small groups of nomads who roam throughout the lowlands to where there is grass for their cattle and water for themselves.

Eritreas climate may be divided into two seasons, the dry and the wet. The wet or rainy season lasts from mid-June through August in the central plateau region while the coastal lowlands, only a ten minute flight, experiences its hottest and driest season. The highlands show a remarkably even temperature throughout the year and the fluctuation between the hottest (May) and the coldest (December) months of the year do not exceed 17° F. An intensely hot semidesert climate prevails in the Red sea coasts and in some parts of the western lowlands.

The plateau rises abruptly from the surrounding semi-desert areas on almost all sides, in a series of steep slopes or escarpments that in places have a sheer drop of several thousand feet. The western half of this tableland inclines slightly toward the Sudan, and most of the rivers run in that direction. The eastern part is tilted toward the Red Sea. Here the hillsides resemble many things. Some look like gigantic lions head with eye and mouth in the distance, others like apes and elephants. It is hard to believe that these shapes are accidental and not the work of some ancient people like the pyramids.

The central highlands are generally tilted westwards, but in places the dip is from south to north or vice versa. In the south elevation of 8,000 to 9,000 ft. are fairly common, in the north the plateau rarely exceeds 6.000 ft. The north has more open tableland and fewer lofty peaks than the south, with much broken and highly dissected rolling plateau. To the east mountains slope more steeply to the Red Sea plainformingh spectacular scene of escarpment. The Danakil plains, lying as they do in the "rain shadow" of the higlands, receive almost no rain during the highland wet season, though the floods of the eastern plateau produce extensive seasonal grasslands are dry. At that time of year winds blow inland from the Red Sea and masses of cloud may sometimes be seen banked against the eastern scarpment.

Eritrea has numerous rivers, but many of them are shallow and precipitous and are dry for the greater part of the year. Very few are perennial with frequent waterfalls. None of the rivers are navigable except the Gash river when it

reaches the lowlands and until it crosses the border with the Sudan to join the Nile. The northern part of Sahel lowlands is mostly sandy with rivers running between mountains and vast volcanic rocks, some with bushes growing up the lower slopes, but all grey and bare on the skyline. The river beds vary in size.

In this region in spite of the sand and rocks there are flowers everywhere, blue, white, yellow, red and multicolored. In september\october, after close of the rainy season, the mountains of the central plateau are covered with yellow wild flowers and green grass, when the smiling plant world is most attractive. The flora of Eritrea is as variegated as one may expect in a country of such contrasts of climate and altitude. In the lowlands tropical vegetation is generally dense with plenty of fruits mainly grapes, oranges papaya, watermelon, lemons, mandarines and bananas, whose perfume fill the night air. While in the highlands bushes and trees are found scattered and in small clusters rather than in large forests, though there are thickly wooded hillsides, especially in the medium altitudes. Among the vegetables of the central plateau, peppers, onions, garlic, cabbages, tomatoes, beans, lettuce and asparagus are very common.

Among the prominent trees of the highlands are large and evergreen coniferous trees of the juniper type. The plateau is today for the most part devoid of forest whose former extent can only be judged from the splended groves surrounding churches, where no trees are cut. The eucaliptus tree, whose origin is believed to be from Australia is planted in every inhabited place and makes an essential ingredient in the highlands landscape. The acacia is the most important tree in the lower regions of Eritrea. It is used for building and as fuel. It also yields gum. Other trees are sycamores, cedars, date palms, wild olives as well as many varieties of plants and shrubs.

Of the farm products, TAFF, the highlanders stable food is the most common cereal grain extensively grown in areas of the middle and higher altitudes. While TAFF is not suitable for the baking of European bread, it is ideal for making INJERA, the natives flat and porous bread. This cereal is virtually unknown outside Eritrea and Ethiopia. Durra is the main product of the lowlanders.

In the durra fields, a wooden platform upon which young boys frighten away the birds is a common sight. The sorghum fields in the western lowlands stretch for miles and before it is harvested it is easy to get lost among the bushes which are more like a forest than fields of crops. Barley is grown in most parts of the plateau, while maize is grown in the high rainfall areas of south Eritrea

Wild animals is less plentiful. This is mainly because of the uncontrolled deforestation (most farms depend for their energy resources on wood fire) and as a result of the two decade old war. Most common animal in the highland is the hyena, which can be seen, or more often heard, on its nocturnal outings. Baboons appear in large troops, descending from mountain tops, and have a most penetrating bark. In the lower lying districts, gazella exist in large numbers. Wild cats inhabit the hills and come down at night looking for chickens and other food. They have giant yellow eyes in round faces and long striped tails. The wolf, short and grey but very fierce, is another matter. He also comes down from the hills at night hoping to steal goats from the herds. For this reason most farmers keep dogs. These too are very fierce that one doge will fight off a wolf or a hyena on its own. Everywhere in Eritrea, however, there are rabbits. These are small, grey and very neat. Often at

night they hop across the roads in front of lorries and drivers slow down to let them pass.

From the domestic animals that add beauty to the natural life of the country side are, horses, donkeys, mules, sheep, goats, dogs, all kinds of domestic animals except pigs. These were extremely numerous but they have been a target of the Ethiopia aggression and are not so abundant today. The mule is by far the most popular animal, both for riding and the carriage of loads. In the hot region, camel is not only popular, but is indispensable to the nomadic family. It has the ability to survive for several weeks without food and water. Besides it can transport a family of four together with their household to any distance without difficulty.

Birds are numerous and often of beautiful plumage. They include doves which call all day, blue and black long billed birds that look like swallows, red and green love birds, and bee eaters which fill the trees with nests. Birds of prey are numerous, the kite being the most common of all. It is present everywhere and so bold that it would enter kitchen rooms and steal food from pans or any food left open. Flowering trees are frequented by one or two species of the richly multicolored African sunbirds. Bustards are quite common, especially in the Danakil plains. Fowls with black and white stripes, and partridges can be found in most parts of the country. Beautiful butterflies and birds fly over the fields and the undulating countryside shimmers under a cloudless sky.

FILFIL is one of the most spectacular scene of fertile lands on mountain sides. Filfil which means "river source" describe a vast range of mountains and not just the river which rushes down the mountains. Here there is a large agricultural project and coffee plantations run by the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front. It is a network of fields, mountains and valleys completely obscured by trees. A full moon gives the farm an ethereal appearance.

In the countryside of Eritrea, life starts at sunrise when herds are taken down to the pastures around the villages and the peasant goes to work in the fields. And at sunset to watch and hear the variety of herds with different colors and melody return back to their ranches from all directions mark the end of a day much close to nature.

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