

## Making a Future for Elephants

*Yosief Tekle*

Tracking through the forest in Gash Barka, Prof. Hezy Shoshani and his colleagues suddenly found fresh footprints and dung of elephants. In the thick wood, they could sense that they were nearing their quest, when surprisingly, Hezy's puppy "Coor-Coor" with all her curiosity came too close to an elephant.

The elephant trumpeted loudly and ran after the puppy, which disappeared into the wood. The elephant then charged the men who in their turn vanished except Hezy, who was focused on his video camera.

When he raised his head he saw the huge creature advancing fast towards him. He turned on his heels and ran, slipped and fell, tried to get up but fell again. By now the elephant was very close. Hezy covered his head and said, "Allah, Allah" his heart pounding, expecting to be smashed. Suddenly, frightened by a warning rifle shot, the elephant sheared away in a cloud of dust.

Despite this "near death" experience in January 2003, Prof.



*Elephants in Gash Barka*

Hezy, who teaches Biology at the University of Asmara, still continues his research on elephants in the Gash Barka region, seeking data on the number, distribution, and related ecological data about elephants.

It seems that during the Axumite period (first to third century A.D.) elephants were everywhere in Eritrea—even in the Danakil, Hezy said. Except in the Western Lowlands most of the elephants disappeared through time due to lack of water, food sources, and because of human encroachment.

According to Ato Hagos Yohannes, head of the Wildlife Conservation Unit of the Ministry of Agriculture, the highest number of elephants observed in Gash Barka was as far back as 1955, estimated at 100 to 200.

Elephants were able to survive in the

Western Lowlands because it is the only area in Eritrea that has a permanent watercourse, relatively high rainfall, and lush vegetation.

What Hezy and his colleagues from the Ministry of Agriculture have documented is a significant story of the contemporary African conservation process. In December 2001, close to 30 elephants were observed in Gash Barka, at least 10 of them newly born, all in apparently good health.

In January 2003, the University of Asmara and the Ministry of Agriculture's Wildlife Unit, with the help of the British *Born Free Foundation*, sent an expedition to the Gash Barka region and counted at least 83 elephants between the Gash and Setit Rivers. Expeditions mounted since then have confirmed a national population of about 100.

The BBC Wildlife Magazine reported that, "In a region noted for drought, famine, climatic extremes and racked by a 30-year war, the findings were almost

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**Making a Future ...**

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unbelievable.”

Hagos Yohannes and colleagues from the University of Asmara and the business sector of Eritrea plan to launch a new organization, *Friends of the Elephants of Eritrea*, which will advocate for elephant conservation.

The elephants of Eritrea require the shelter of a National Park that will give them legal protection. Elephants in Eritrea have short tusks and are physically, if not genetically, isolated from elephants in Ethiopia and Sudan

Hezy and his colleagues plan to continue their surveys on elephants and attempt to apply radio collars to study their migratory routes. In addition, they will continue ecological and behav-

ioral studies by collecting data on the biodiversity of Zoba Gash Barka.

In December 2003, Hezy took his biology students for a four-day field trip to the Haikota region to observe elephants. He believes field trips help the students to see what they learn displayed in real life.

On their first day out, December 26, they saw a dead elephant around Haikota, and the next day they waited by the Gash River in the evening before sunset and observed at least two elephants coming from the forest. Palm trees were in the background in the evening sun. It was such a very beautiful setting.

Hezy remembers that his students were very excited, as they had never seen elephants before. Some could not believe how big the creatures were, standing about 200 meters from them.

One student told Hezy that when she saw the elephants she could hear her heart pounding. “This is something that I will never forget in my lifetime,” she said.

**Students to Receive Guidance and Counseling**

*Tirhas Teklay*

Almost everyone finds the adjustment to University life challenging. More than a few students could use some help and advice along the way. To address the problems students encounter during their stay on campus - personal, educational or vocational - the University has opened a new guidance and counseling Center under the auspices of the Student Affairs Office.

Although this office will try to do its best to identify and assist students with special problems, it highly recommends that students should take the initiative in seeking the necessary guidance, and counseling from the Center.

The Center is located inside the University Clinic. Male students may contact Tesfamichael Hagos and female students should speak with Agazit Eyob.

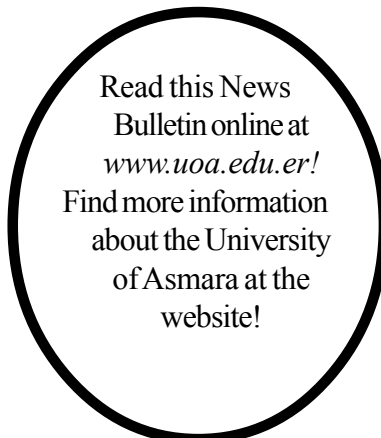
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**The UoA News Bulletin is published monthly by the Office of Public Relations and Communications, University of Asmara, Asmara, Eritrea.**  
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# New Geographic Information Systems Lab

*Tirhas Teklay*



*Dr. Zemenfes Tsighe*

The Department of Geography, in cooperation with the Center for Development and Environment, Institute of Geography, University of Bern, Switzerland/Syngenta Foundation, will soon open a new Geographic Information Systems Laboratory (GIS). This laboratory with geographic expertise, extensive software and hardware equipment, promises to make it possible for students, staff and others to prepare maps and perform other spatial analysis, recording and presenting.

The Department of Geography has been running its GIS classes outside the University (Department of Water Resources) for the last two years, due to the lack of space. But now the Department has decided to build this laboratory inside the University. According to Dr. Zemenfes, Dean of Social Sci-

ences, the new lab will be a valuable resource, both for undergraduate students taking courses and for faculty and graduate student research programs that will be launched soon.

Several regular GIS courses will be offered in the laboratory, giving students the opportunity to demonstrate practically what they have theoretically learned in the class, says Dr. Berhane Keleta, Head of Geography Department.



*The GIS lab almost ready for use*

Students will use the GIS Laboratory to store, retrieve, and analyze important data of various types such as population, soil, climate, and vegetation, within a common geographic area. Data obtained from such sources through actual field surveys, maps, satellite images, interviews, etc., will be processed in the laboratory to develop such a database.

Once fully operational, the new Laboratory will provide GIS related services to other Faculties within the University, and also link research projects that



*Dr. Berhane Keleta*

might be conducted in different faculties. Furthermore, it will become a training center for ministries and other institutions by providing GIS courses ranging from short-term (four to six-weeks) to long-term courses that might take up to three months.

According to the information we have from the Dean's office, a curriculum for a postgraduate diploma in GIS is under preparation.

When the Department of Geography gets the manpower it requires in GIS, it will start a Master's program in GIS and remote sensing as one area of specialization within the coming three to four years, depending on the personnel or faculty that will be developing in that period.

## Agriculture M.Sc. Curricula Ready for Approval

*Yoftahe Kibrom*

New graduate programs in agriculture promise major advances in the overall level of education that will be made available in this field.

The College of Agriculture held a one-day graduate curricula appraisal workshop for the programs it will launch in September this year.

Seventy people from different colleges of the university and partner institutions participated in the January 9 workshop on four M.Sc. curricula in agricultural sciences – horticulture, agronomy, animal production and soil science.

The workshop was meant to gather partners' and stakeholders' opinions on the curricula drafts to make the programs more relevant to the Eritrean situation.

The College with its core activities of teaching and research in agricultural sciences has 384 degree students in six programs and 46 diploma students in general agriculture. It has graduated 563 with B.Sc. and 70 with diplomas since 1990.

Dr. Woldelessie Ogubazghi, Dean of the College said, "The College's objective is to contribute to the institutional capacity in the national agricultural re-

search system through which the main priorities of food security and environmental restoration and protection will be pursued." The College has, therefore, increased the education level it offers to M.Sc. The Dean said that the M.Sc. programs combining coursework with research would encourage students to generate knowledge and solve complicated scientific problems.

Dr. Wolde-Ab Yisak, President of the University of Asmara said that it was time for the University to move into this "new chapter – a very exciting level of the University's development."

The M.Sc. programs will enhance and widen the skills and knowledge gained at the undergraduate level through "specialist training in research methodologies and natural resource management". They will save the expense of training Eritreans abroad and give the Eritrean reality the attention it deserves.

A taskforce in the College designed curricula that would "fit well" within the College's research framework – Sustainable Natural Resource Management: Nutrient Retention and Sensible Water Use (NURSE)– based on information collected from partners. It started reviewing the first draft in October 2002. The curricula will be submitted to the University Senate for approval after incorporating the workshop participants' opinions.

The institutional capacity of the Col-



*Workshop members refining a new curriculum*

lege has also been improved in terms of laboratories, lecture halls etc. The College thus believes it has the basic infrastructure, though "specific equipment needs" of a candidate have to be dealt with when the program starts. Its capacity, however, is not sufficient enough to provide all the desired training. Dr. Wolde-Ab said that the University was moving into this chapter with a strong belief in its partners. Stakeholders and partners can and have promised to contribute through their manpower and research facilities, as well as by sending students on scholarship.

The College has to launch its programs while trying to alleviate its shortcomings. Dr. Wolde-Ab said, "If all problems are solved before a program is initiated no program will be initiated."

## University Students Rescue UNMEE Military Observers

*Yosief Tekle*

Seventeen University students on a field trip from Dr. Mengist's Geology 321 class were totally absorbed in their observations of fresh 'aa' lava flows, volcanic cinder cones, craters, and folded pyroclastic deposits. Just when the professor was on the verge of finishing his explanation, a sudden thunderous crash broke the peaceful silence of the remote countryside of Arafile.

Not 50-75 meters away, a brand new Toyota four runner was spinning its wheels in the air with two UNMEE (United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea) Military observers trapped inside.

Surrounding the vehicle, the students quickly realized that it was up to them to save the lives of the two men. No tow trucks and emergency vans were about to arrive, and the men could be seriously injured.

Though the cause of the accident remains unknown, a student told *UOA News Bulletin* that the car was heading towards Assab when the accident occurred.

The driver was Gambian, while his passenger was from the Czech Republic. The 17 strong muscled students lifted the car up and removed the slightly in-



*Students looking at the UNMEE vehicle after the rescue operation*

jured Gambian driver. To the surprise of the students, the Czech man was almost untouched by the accident.

Once the men had been removed from the vehicle and found to be in relatively good shape, the students took them to their temporary camp in Arafile so that they could rest and recover from their shock. Meanwhile, the students continued their geologic pursuits for the rest of the afternoon, examining wonderful volcanic craters from a hillside.

The soldiers spent the night with the students and the next day (December

28, 2003) was time to return to Asmara. The students then drove the soldiers to Massawa, leaving them at the Central Hotel.

Back in Asmara, some days later, the students got warm thanks from the UNMEE Observers through an e-mail sent to Dr. Mengist. "Thanks for everything you did to us in the middle of nowhere. I really don't know how I can repay you for your cool brain help," said the man from the Czech Republic.

## Looking Back at Campus Experience

*Yosief Tekle*

Abdulhay Siraj is like any other graduating senior. He studied hard for four years; he is doing his university service with other colleagues. But one thing separates Abdulhay from most of his peers: he is blind.

After studying Political Science at the University of Asmara, Abdulhay now works at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Research and Information branch.

At the university, one would imagine Abdulhay might have difficulty finding his way around. After all, most new students do. But for Abdulhay, "getting around is no problem, actually."

Instead, Abdulhay developed his own ways to overcome difficulties such as uncomfortable teaching settings and lack of

enough teaching materials.

Blind and visually impaired students at the University must master an environment that is designed primarily for the sighted. They learn remarkably quickly how to find their way around, but academic success comes only by using special technology to access textbooks and computer screens they cannot see.

The University of Asmara first established a Resource Center for the Blind in 1995, which offered students access to a machine that could convert regular text into Braille. More recently, in 2002, the University introduced scanners, computers with embossers that change computer text into Braille prints, and a sound output (screen reader) that converts texts displayed on the screen to sound, and other equipment. Students also write their senior and term papers using these computers, instead of asking other students to write for them.

The major challenges facing these students include lack of enough appropriate Brailled textbooks for reference and a limited number of Braille computer terminals.

Although the university has a number of Brailled books, most are not relevant to academic subjects, said Azieb Ghebray, a fourth year blind university student.

By the time blind students (unless newly blind) reach college, they have probably developed many methods for dealing with the volume of visual materials. Most use a combination of methods, including readers, brailled books, and audiotope recorded books and lectures.

Azieb does most of her studying with the help of readers. She praises university students for their genuine cooperation in reading her books and handouts - even when they have their own exams.

"Being blind does not make that much difference in performance. If one studies hard and makes the necessary preparations, s/he will be successful," Azieb says.

Modern technology has made available aids for blind people including talking calculators and speech-time compressors. Paperless Braille machines, Braille computer terminals, voice-output computers, and reading machines are more recent devices.

Some of these devices are available at the university through the help of Abraha Bahta Elementary School for the visually impaired that provides Braille papers and some books. The University supplies Braille computer terminals, voice-output comput-

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*Blind students in the resource center*

# 400 New Computers On Campus

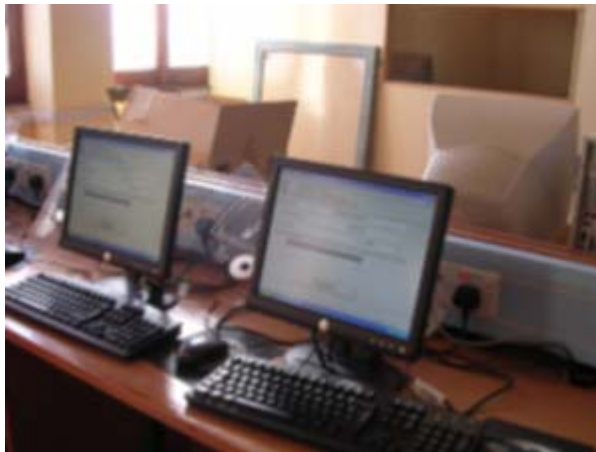
The University of Asmara has purchased 400 Dell Pentium 4 flat screen computers, 15 laptops, and ten Rack-mount server configurations with United States Aid for International Development funding.

Eighty-four of the flat screen computers will be for two labs of 42 each in the Computer Science Department; 45 for the engineering lab; 56 for the Digital Research Library; and 90 for the Consultancy, Training and Testing Center. The rest will be used by various administrative departments. Other items including 17 printers, two scanners, 15 projectors, two fax machines, a fax copier and a UPS have also arrived.

The number of computers on campus has doubled with the arrival of these machines. Tesfayohannes Tareke of the Information Resources Management Center (IRM) said, "Many of the existing computers are so old, many poorly operating, that the impact will be far more than just doubling in terms of the working capacity and speed of operation."

For the Computer Science Department, the changes will be particularly important. Currently, approximately 500 stu-

dents are registered in the introductory computer science course each semester. There is one computer for every three or four students, and in reality, some students never get their hands on a machine. With the new capacity, each student will be able to have access to a machine while in class, "learning by doing rather than just by watching".



*The new computer science lab*

The Digital Research Library will provide all-important online research opportunities for graduate students starting master's degree programs next September.

The Engineering Lab will be available for undergraduates and will make a great deal of difference in how courses are taught. They had a few old Pentium 2s, which particularly limit what can be taught in Electrical Engineering. Now they will have a much

larger computer component in the appropriate courses, giving students more advanced and sophisticated training.

Several other departments, including Journalism, Statistics, Business & Economics, and Geography, have been successfully pursuing grants to purchase computers for their students. All of these facilities will greatly enhance student access to computers and online research.

The bandwidth of the national gateway (source of Internet) will soon expand from two to eight megabits per second. The University hopes to receive one megabit per second of this space, which will hugely expand the current 128 kilobits per second, which makes online work exceptionally slow.

This expanded network connection will be essential if all of the new computers are to be hooked up onto the Internet. Without the additional space, the new computers would quickly crash the system when they came online.

## German Embassy Donates Sports Equipment

*Yosief Tekle*

The German Embassy in Eritrea gave a large selection of sports equipment to the University of Asmara on 19<sup>th</sup> of February.

Mr. Michael Heller of the Cultural and Consular Department of the Embassy handed over the items to the Sports and Recreational Center of the University.

Included in this contribution were 8 basketballs, 10 volleyballs, 15 footballs, 5 ball pumps, 4 basketball nets, 1 volleyball net, 2 basketball baskets, 1 pair of foot-

ball nets, 6 discuses, and 4 ball nets.

The donations are part of an ongoing program to support athletic programs sponsored by the German government. "The German government has focused particularly on sports programs because everyone is affected," said Mr. Heller. "Whether you watch sports on television, attend games, or play sports yourself, everyone is involved. So we do this all over the world."

Mr. Heller believes that the sports materials will fit the requirements of the University of Asmara and support the

sports activities of the students. Mr. Heller has established good relations with members of the University staff and has encouraged Ato Seyoum Yohannes of the Sports Department to continue to make requests for specific equipment.

"We certainly hope to go on trying to help the University in this way," said Heller. "It's not about the value of the items – these are the things you really need, and that is how we can make a difference."

## Looking Back...

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ers, a tape recorder and cassette for each student, and other equipment.

The university reserves a special study

room for the blind, as well as on-campus dormitories so they don't have far to go to classrooms and the cafeteria.

*The Office of Public Relations and Communications invites staff, faculty and students to contribute to the University of Asmara's monthly News Bulletin and other publications. We welcome everyone to use our office.*

You can visit the University of Asmara website at [www.uoa.edu.er](http://www.uoa.edu.er) for updated information on the University's activities.

Ms. Bernadette Van Spiegel, a resident of Groningen, The Netherlands, asked everyone invited to her recent retirement party to donate money for the University of Asmara Blind Students Resource Center, rather than bring presents. Ms. Van Spiegel knows of the Center through the University's long-term partnership with the University of Groningen. She and her friends sent a generous contribution of 500 Euros, which will be invested in new equipment for the Center.