



## Saving the Forests of Ethiopia, One Church at a Time

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**Speaker:** Professor Margaret D. (Meg) Lowman  
Director, TREE Foundation

**Chair:** Professor Matthias Roth  
Department of Geography, NUS

**Date/Time:** Friday, 31 January 2020, 3.30pm

**Place:** AS2 #02-03

### Abstract

In Ethiopia, much of the naturally forested landscape has been cleared for subsistence agriculture. One notable exception is the land surrounding churches that remain as sanctuaries for “all of God’s creatures,” some over 1500 years old. These fragments of Afro-montane tropical forest serve as important conservation reserves or “biodiversity hotspots,” especially in northern Ethiopia. However, the fragments are highly vulnerable to the impacts of global change, both directly from anthropogenic pressure and indirectly from rapid alterations in climatic regimes, particularly drought and heat waves. During the past few decades, church forest boundaries have been shrinking and their integrity degraded by livestock grazing and selective cutting. In a unique partnership between scientists and the Ethiopian Coptic church leadership, we have initiated a program of environmental stewardship to conserve the last remaining Ethiopian forests. Through the establishment of trust and respect of cultural heritage, diverse stakeholders such as priests have become important agents for global conservation. Once the Coptic priests were educated about the ecosystem services provided by their native trees, they were determined to save them. Using local stone and community labor, they are now constructing conservation walls around their church forests to ensure conservation of these “Noah’s arks” of biodiversity. Related programs are directed to educate the local school children about the importance of trees for providing fresh water, pollinators, medicines, shade, homes for biodiversity, honey, and sustainable timber, as well as a spiritual sanctuary. Similar success stories of forest conservation exist in other countries, including India where sacred trees are an important component of rural communities for millions of people. Partnerships between scientists and diverse stakeholders such as religious leaders represent an innovative approach to the challenges of global forest conservation.




### About the Speaker



**Margaret D. (Meg) Lowman**, Ph.D., Nicknamed the “real-life Lorax” by National Geographic and “Einstein of the treetops” by Wall Street Journal, Meg Lowman pioneered the science of canopy ecology. For over 30 years, she has designed hot-air balloons and walkways for treetop exploration to solve mysteries in the world’s forests, especially insect pests and ecosystem health. Meg is affectionately called the mother of canopy research as one of the first scientists to explore this eighth continent. She relentlessly works to map canopy biodiversity and to champion forest conservation around the world. Her international network and passion for science have led her into leadership roles where she seeks best practices to solve environmental challenges and serves as a role model to women and minorities in science. Meg is currently the Director of TREE Foundation ([www.treefoundation.org](http://www.treefoundation.org)) where she leads tree research, education and exploration. Her current priorities include creating a UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Reserve site in Malaysia’s rain forests and partnering with Coptic priests in Ethiopia to save their last remaining forests.

Lowman’s academic training includes Williams College (BA, Biology); Aberdeen University (MSc, Ecology); Sydney University (PhD, Botany); and Tuck School of Business (Executive Management). She has authored more than 140 peer-reviewed scientific publications, 8 books, and her first book, “Life in the Treetops,” received a cover review in the New York Times Sunday Book Review. Working tirelessly on sustainability initiatives at home and abroad, “CanopyMeg” was a Fulbright Senior Specialist Scholar to both India and Ethiopia.

ADMISSION IS FREE – ALL ARE WELCOME

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