The trees in natural forests also provided the raw materials for production of traditional farm implements that are crucial for subsistence farmers. In some cases, the forests provided ideal conditions for beekeeping. Meanwhile, dry branches and leaves were important as fuel, and the grass that grew under the trees was a source of fodder for communities that resided in the immediate vicinity of the forests.

Rules of traditional management
Certain features of the rules governing traditional management of the forests also contributed to their sustainable utilization, and hence to their preservation.

First, traditional forest management was efficiently handled in many places through rules on exclusion and rules that specified the modalities of utilization. The former excluded all people other than a group clearly delineated usually on the basis of kinship or territory. The latter rules sometimes specified seasonal utilization, and types of trees and purposes for which they could be used.

Secondly, the rules, as well as the way in which they were enforced, often reflected the evolution of traditional practices at a local level. As a result, they tended to be perceived as legitimate regulations, to be complied with in the same way as other community norms.
Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the rules on exclusion and utilization used to be part and parcel of the tenure system. This lent further legitimacy to traditional management practices, and allowed them to be backed up by the local judicial-administrative apparatus, as was the entire tenure system.

Community attributes
Additional characteristics of the communities have made crucial contributions to the enforcement and maintenance of rules governing the management of the common property forests. Chief amongst these traits is community cohesiveness.

History and myth as to the origin of the community, the existence of venerated community symbols, and fairly small size have led to the emergence and maintenance of a cohesive sense of community in certain localities.

For example, in the Amhara Region, belief in common ancestry, and identification with the ancestral Ark of the Covenant (tabot) and the hamlet (got) fulfilled such a function. In this region (as in Tigray) it was not uncommon to find traditional forest management rules that were effectively enforced because of the fact that they had been associated with and placed under the protective wing of a church or holy spring (tabal). Such, for instance, was the case with Wuraf forest in North Wello and Desse’a (tabal). Such processes have helped to set the stage for high levels of deforestation in the early-1990s.

Concluding comments
In areas where communal or sacred forests occupy inaccessible or unproductive land, and where there are relatively small, well-defined communities that have evolved local rules for their management, their preservation has been easier. Elsewhere, changes in land tenure, and the passing of responsibility for land management to the state, has probably contributed greatly to deforestation.