

MARA ELEPHANT PROJECT

NOT JUST THE ANIMALS

Colin Church



served as Chairman of the Rhino Ark Management Committee from November 2000 to July 2012. In this time he completed the electrified fence that now surrounds the entire Aberdare mountain range then launched for Rhino Ark the current major fence construction projects for the Mt Kenya and Mau Eburru. He has had many years of involvement in conservation in East Africa including serving as honorary Chairman of the KWS Board of Trustees in 2003 and 2004.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARA ELEPHANT PROJECT



Elephants in Mara North Conservancy

It is an historical warp that the Mara ecosystem - Kenya's greatest wildlife experience - has had such scant attention to ensure its future as a prime asset to its communities and to the nation.

The rolling plains and wooded riverines of this wildlife paradise hold more than one of nature's greatest 'wonders'.

Maasai communities surround its core protected reserves and it is they who have the opportunity to secure long-term income benefits – but only if dynamic livestock and wildlife management practices are followed.

For more than 50 years since the Masai Mara Game Reserve and the former Mara Triangle portion were gazetted as state protection zones, but with local authority management, the plunder of its seemingly boundless

wildlife revenues has been a blot upon the nation's reputation.

There have been many efforts to address these issues with little success. The blame game has been prolific.

Some leaders have stubbornly turned a blind eye to the need to ensure equitable and transparent revenue share of tourism access fees and to show leadership to drive through 21st Century livestock practices. Both are pivotal to a complex jigsaw 'fix'.

Perhaps there is a glimmer of reality now beginning to peek through. Good conservation practice for wildlife and

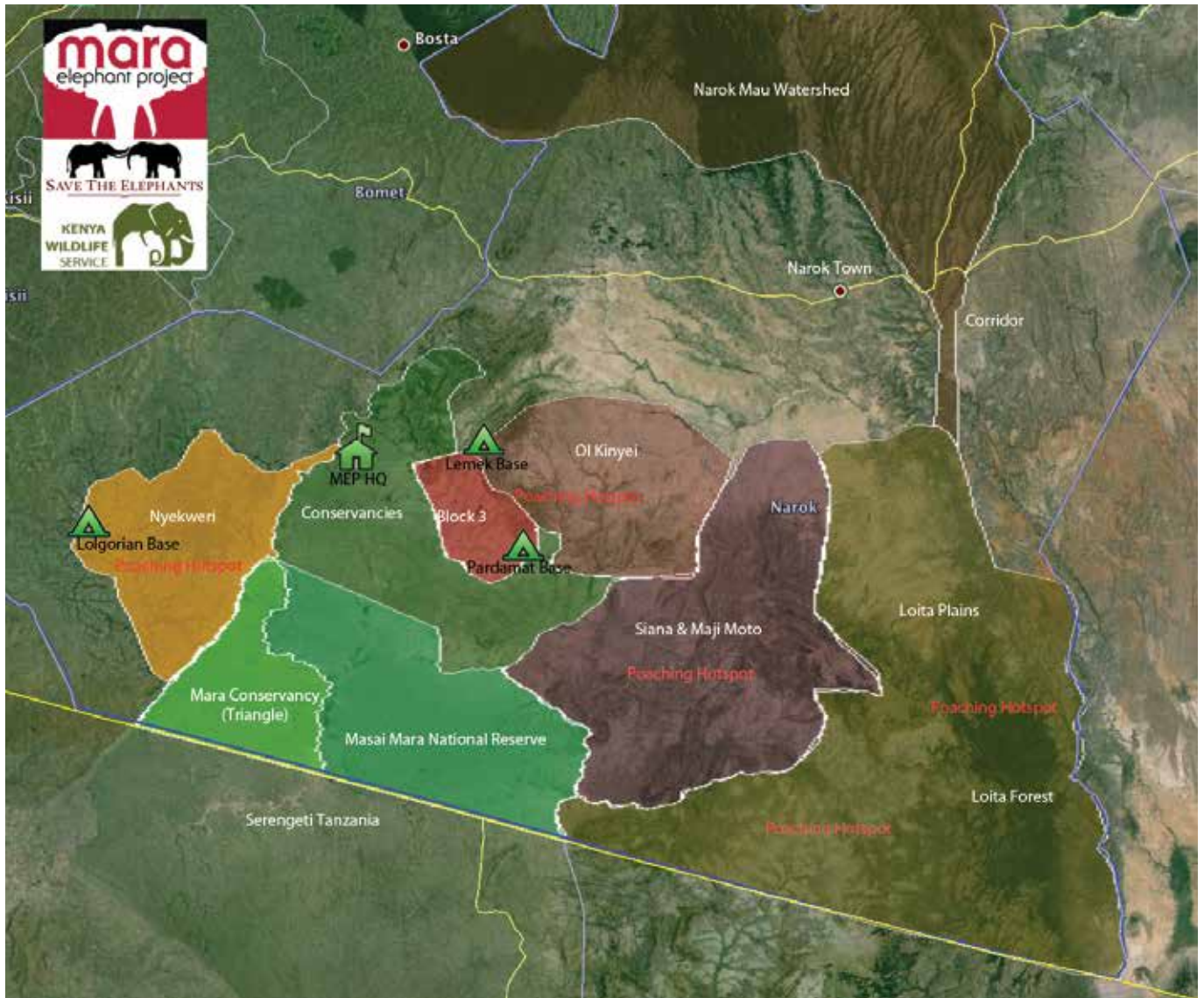
realistic stock policies is not a myopic wish. It is good for business and spreads benefits so that all family incomes grow equitably. Into the melee of blatant exploitation of the region's assets, an embryonic gathering of conservationists – from within the Maasai Community, Kenyan society and internationally – is demonstrating that joined up participation has a chance to work.

The Mara Elephant Project (MEP) was begun in 2011 – just one year after Kenyans voted for a 'devolution of power' Constitution. This people's referendum places the onus of regional

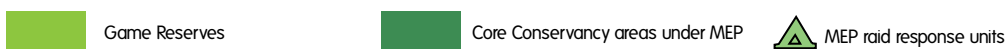
IT IS DEVELOPING CREATIVE WAYS TO SHOW THAT CONSERVATION PRACTICES CAN PROVIDE A FAIR SHILLING EARNED FOR ALL



CONSERVATION



Map of Narok County areas in brown/red/mauve where, with funding, similar security and community outreach is planned. Each is described in red as "poaching hotspot" .



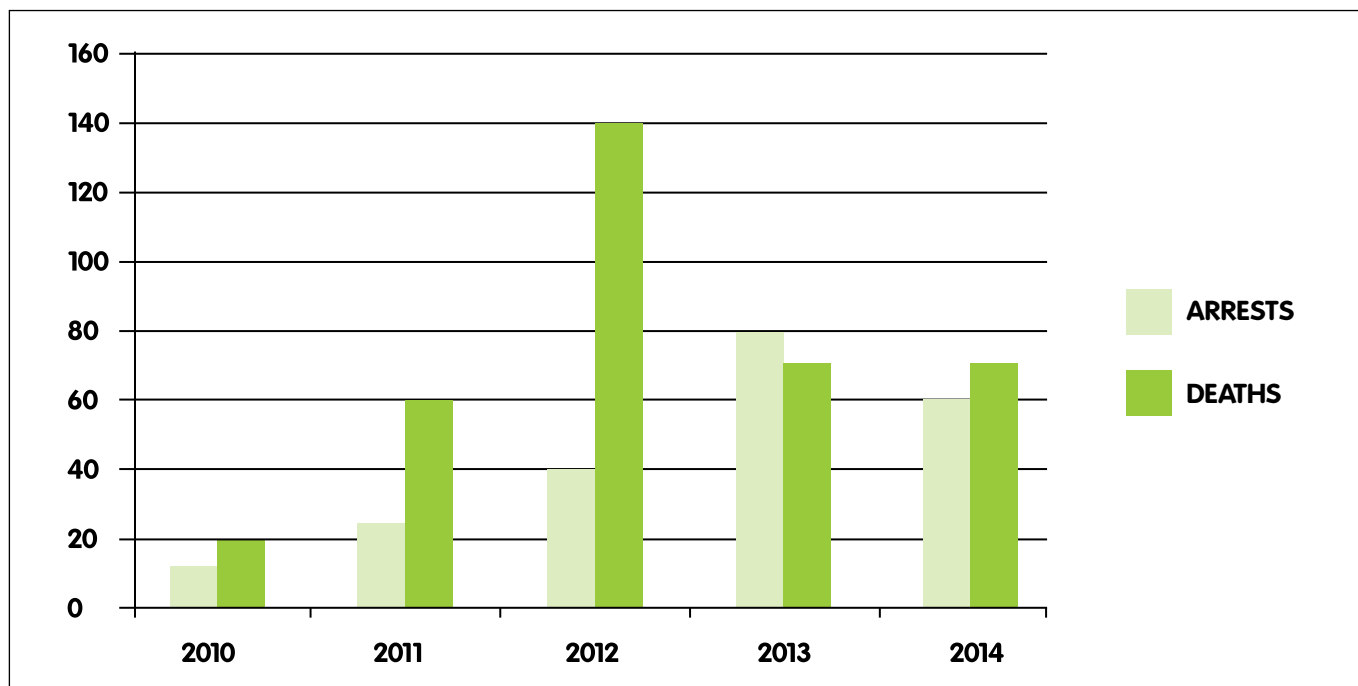
A Dealer (Mr. Daniel Karanja Muchiri) arrested in Narok town on the 30th of July 2014 and charged with illegal possession of 9 pieces of ivory weighing 84 kilograms (OB Number 92/30/7/14) .

revenue management firmly in the hands of county governments. Though still embryonic, MEP is fusing Mara communities and conservationists in an initiative that is achieving some impressive results. It is directly engaging with communities to tackle poaching. It is developing creative ways to show that conservation practices can provide a fair shilling earned for all.

MEP's emergence on the scene was triggered after 13 years of the well-recorded impact that privatised management secured for

the 'Triangle' sector when introduced by the former Trans Mara County Council. The founders of MEP saw the escalating human/wildlife conflict in the newly formed conservancies bordering the two game reserves – Mara and Triangle - as an opportunity to involve the communities in tackling human/elephant conflict.

Whilst elephants (and rhino) are today's most threatened wildlife assets due to unprecedented levels of poaching, MEP's actions are targeted at all human/wildlife conflict – lion and cheetah killing and the hideous bush



meat slaughter being amongst the most high profile. Wildlife is a benefit but also a curse for those with cattle and crops if ways are not developed to protect and compensate for damage or loss. MEP’s goal is to “protect and restore the African elephant population in the Mara/Serengeti ecosystem, while positively impacting the human-elephant relationship”.

MEP now has four patrol teams, with many recruited from the Mara region, all fully trained in tracking and with endemic understanding of the terrain and habits of elephant and all wildlife. They are equipped, uniformed and under disciplined leadership. They patrol the core areas in Transmara (west), Lemek (central) and Ol Donyo Erinka (east) bordering the Game Reserves. The Quick Response Unit is centrally based at the newly acquired centre near Aitong in the Lemek Conservancy. This crack ranger unit monitors elephant data. It responds fast to animal injury, human-elephant conflict and elephant killing reports. MEP works closely with KWS on all intelligence and poacher search operations. Each bolsters the other. MEP’s third sector is a newly formed intelligence unit that provides up to the minute information, is adept at infiltration and with a well proven record of leads to assist in poacher and bush meat arrests.

What of the impact on poaching and human elephant conflict?

The graph above tells the story.

Two years after start up, MEP partnered with Save the Elephants (STE) embarking on an elephant tracking operation with 14 collared by the end of last year. The



51 Degrees, a professional security company trains MEP rangers.

CONSERVATION



Left: Elephant carcass, cause of death was stepping into a charcoal kiln.

Below: Marc Goss MEP Programme Director (third from right centre) and Dr Iain Douglas Hamilton (fourth centre) of Save the Elephants collaring an elephant in the Masai Mara Game Reserve.

will inevitably require methods of quick response to drive elephants and ungulates out of crop fields as well.

MEP's long-term commitment is to use all means available to reduce and in some areas eliminate, human/wildlife conflict. With a funding mechanism in place, it is MEP's policy to consider both fencing and the other techniques in hot spot areas to keep elephants away from *shambas* (plots or gardens)

MEP was pioneered by entrepreneur Richard Roberts – and with strong financial backing from the US conservation trust – Escape – whose driving force is Susan Fehsenfeld – a frequent visitor to Kenya and committed

STE technical input gives hard evidence of movements into conflict zones and enables the Rapid Response teams to take immediate action. Further mechanisms being planned are for fixed wing, helicopter and unmanned monitoring devices. All this provides hard information but the most

important MEP asset is its ranger patrol and intelligence units in constant action on the ground.

MEP's ability to move swiftly where there are hard boundaries along cultivated smallholdings is of great significance. Modern realities mean that sections of the Mara ecosystem



global wildlife conservationist.

With a year one start up budget of \$100,000, the immediate impact of the MEP ranger force has encouraged a four-fold increase in the budget to expand operations from the core zones outward. As communities see the results, more are requesting MEP support in their areas. And more funds will be required.

In addition to Escape’s substantial underwriting of the operation, it is the MEP Board’s policy to broaden fund sources – not only from global conservation groups but also from within Kenyan society. Amongst those who have added to the usd 400,000 budget by 2013 are Northstar, Care for the Wild Kenya, Eden Trust, Ree Wildlife Park. Local participants include the Mara Conservancy and Cricket on the Wild.

Top Right: MEP teams treating elephant from spear wounds in Ol Donyo Erinka area.
Below: MEP Rangers in training.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARA ELEPHANT PROJECT

MEP’s chairman Brian Heath says: “Good conservation policies must create revenue sharing to all who are part of the conservancy outreach in the greater Mara Region. Every family has to benefit. This is not a top down process. MEP actions illustrate that there is a local opportunity. The big challenge is for the conservancies to commit to grazing protocols, consider livestock

upgrade and number reductions so that the land is managed to capacity and not to over-capacity.”

Board member Richard Roberts explained: “ It makes good business practice to ensure all benefit from the policies. This is not a practice that works only for the elite.”

The ‘all can benefit process’ is well illustrated in the Boma Fortification





Top: Elephants attacked by angry farmers after a crop raid crossing the Mara River. It was treated by MEP support partners David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust.

Below: Boma Fortification Project provides predator proof enclosures to over 300 bomas in MEP areas.

Project (BFP) where MEP has become involved to support the pioneering work of the Anne Kent Taylor Fund and Eden Trust. Predator protection is good business practice. Over 325 bomas are now secured.

In one of MEP’s high attention conservancies, experiments include a trial herd of cattle – each supplied from individual conservancy families that is illustrating a quicker fattening and higher sale value (one unit to ... acre). Current unit averages are times



that and imposes undue pressure on the land. Factor in income earned from wildlife viewing access fees and property land rents with fewer cattle at a higher unit value - that is a good business prospect for the landowner.

What of MEP’s strategy for the future?

Marc Goss Programme Director explains: “MEP is a grassroots initiative with international outreach. MEP demonstrates that there is a direct benefit from the protection umbrella. Crop off take is more secure and full per acre crop value achieved. Better livestock security now twinned with livestock/wildlife grazing protocols and access/rental fees are together showing real income value to the individual owner.”

“The tourist industry is a major potential partner. Their enthusiasm for MEP’s umbrella operations is not in doubt. Now we need the industry – even in this awful downturn time - to share the investment in the sustainability of wildlife and in community involvement so that their operations are secured long term,” Goss adds.

“We know many have their own special lodge-linked initiatives but budget support for MEP community efforts to stop elephant and predator killing and to the wanton bush snaring that targets mainly ungulates, is a good investment”.

Richard Roberts says: “Add contributions to protection of wildlife and reduction of human/elephant conflict by individual lodges and camps and a stronger basis exists for negotiating realistic access fees and land rental charges. The Mara now needs all to commit to a long-term investment. Gone are the days of quick bucks and quick returns for the politically advantaged”.

MEP is in for the long term. The time has come when a deep investment in the precious assets of the unique ecosystem is good business for all. ●

We people of the Mara region are the guardians of one of the worlds’ greatest spectacles of nature. We should never forget that wildlife has flourished off this land longer than we humans have. It is our duty, and our good fortune, to ensure that the greater Mara Ecosystem remains our most valued asset for everyone who lives on the lands bordering the two national reserves already under our stewardship.

The Mara Elephant Project (MEP) is a joint process between conservationists and the Masai Community to build sound management processes that will deliver long lasting income benefits from both livestock and wildlife.

Statement by Samuel K. Tunai, Governor Narok County