

Overview of Charcoal Burning in Nyekweri Forest

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The Trans-Mara District is located in South-Western Kenya and forms part of the Mara-Serengeti ecosystem. It has an area of 2,900 km² and neighbours the world famous Masai Mara National Reserve (MMNR). Natural corridors (approximately 25) link the Trans-Mara and MMNR through a steep escarpment, creating important linkages for wildlife to move between the two areas. The Trans-Mara is home to a growing human population of 168,000 people. The majority of the population is Maasai, but over the past few decades a large number of people from other tribes have moved into the area because of better farming opportunities.

Within the Trans-Mara is the last remaining indigenous forest, which is named 'Nyekweri forest' and has a total area of 216 km² (Figure 1). For many years the forest has been conserved by the local Maasai communities but in the last decade there has been a major shift in their livelihood system from pastoralism to agriculture. This is reflected all across the Masai Mara, where land is being converted into agriculture for crops such as maize and wheat. This has left the forest severely threatened, as it is being cleared for charcoal, logging, illegal settlement and agriculture. Our preliminary analysis shows that 25% of Nyekweri forest has been lost in the last 15 years.

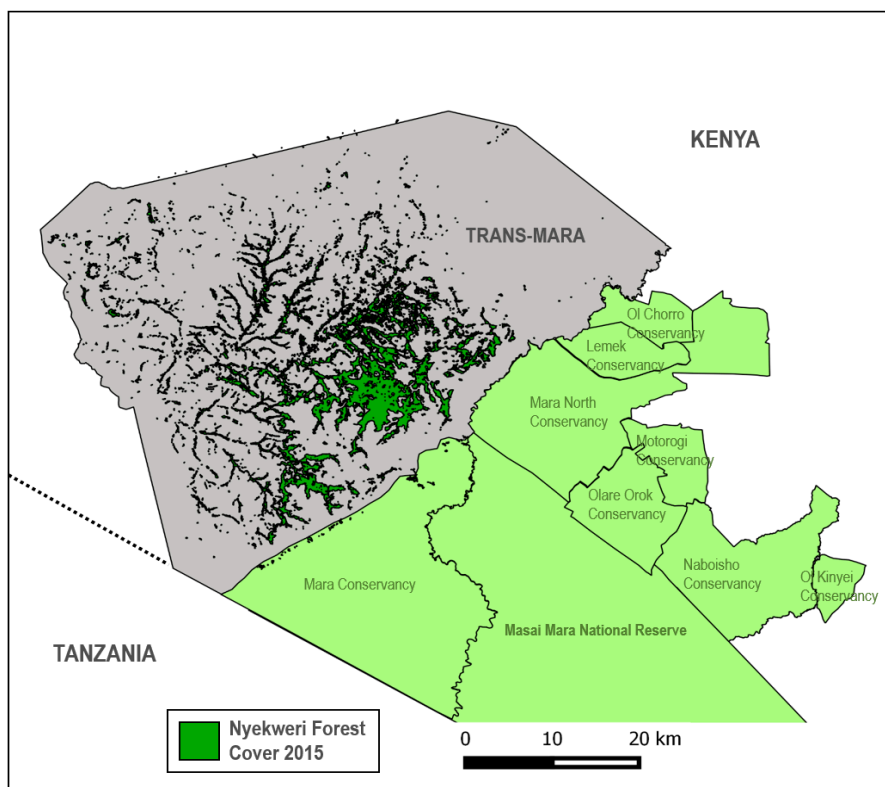


Figure 1: Map of the Masai Mara Ecosystem and Nyekweri forest.

Currently, the forest is owned communally by two group ranches, Oloirien and Kimintet, both of which are going through the process of land sub-division. This will give the title deeds of individual plots of

land to group ranch members. Once the land has been sub-divided, people can legally clear the land and do what they want with it. This could accelerate deforestation further, although some members of these communities are keen to protect their forest.

Clearing the forest for charcoal is illegal but it is occurring at high levels across the Trans-Mara. The forest is being cleared by tribes such as the Kisi, but it is the Maasai that are allowing the clearing to occur on their soon-to-be-official plots of land. People are attracted to the Trans-Mara because they see charcoal production as a lucrative business and there is a lack of jobs in their home regions. Depending on the market, the Maasai will earn 100Ksh (£0.65) for every bag of charcoal, the producer will earn approximately 800Ksh (£5.50) and the middle man will sell the bag on the market for 2000Ksh (£14). Producers will make approximately 100 bags of charcoal from 1 acre of forest. Older trees are targeted in the forest as they make “the best charcoal”.

The Maasai are clearing the forest for charcoal for several reasons: (1) Many of the local communities surrounding the forest are poor and do not see the benefits of the forest. There are very few conservation projects in the area trying to promote alternative livelihoods. (2) Some Maasai say they are clearing because they are worried the local governor will steal their land from them. They do not have the title deeds yet, so they want to make the land look unattractive to the Governor. (3) Others are clearing the forest to try and reduce human-wildlife conflict - the Trans-Mara is a hotspot for elephant crop raiding and leopard attacks on livestock. (4) Some Maasai are clearing the forest to simply make some quick cash and prepare their land for farming.

Last year there was a lot of media attention about the destruction of Nyekweri forest. Press teams from Nairobi came to visit and Nyekweri forest made it into the national headlines. After this media event, and with pressure from community conservation groups and various NGOs, the local governor said he would do all he could to stop the charcoal burning business. The police and Kenya Forestry Service put up a number of check points on the main charcoal routes to try and stop charcoal leaving the forest and to arrest charcoal producers. However, charcoal is still leaving the forest and no one has been arrested, as bribes are being taken to let vehicles pass. Moreover, it is rumoured that government officials are some of the middle men involved and that these officials bring in government trucks to transport the charcoal out of the forest without being questioned. There have also been a number of raids that have been carried out to flush out the loggers. These raids have been run by WWF Kenya, Kenya Wildlife Service and Kenya Forestry Service. However, before each raid there have been tip offs so loggers were able to leave the forest beforehand.

There are a number of reasons why the loss of Nyekweri forest is so concerning: (1) Nyekweri forest is home to a diverse range of wildlife and is an important dispersal area and dry season refuge for wildlife. (2) the forest is part of the Mara River Basin and provides ecosystem services such as river flow regulations, flood mitigation, recharge of groundwater, reduced soil erosion and siltation and water purification. (3) The forest provides communities with medicinal plants, honey, fodder for livestock, building materials and wood fuel. (4) Nyekweri is culturally important for the Maasai. For example, there are a number of ceremonies that take place around sacred trees in the forest.