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MEP June 2019 Report

Hippos in the Loita Forest were quite a welcomed site by MEP's Loita ranger unit.

GENERAL

This month we have received some out of season rain which comes as a relief as we were getting quite dry in the Mara. The wildebeest have also started moving north and we expect the migration to properly kick off shortly.

The single most exciting piece of news for June is that we took delivery of the Karen Blixen Camp Trust (KBCT) helicopter. The machine arrived on the 27th of May and was quickly assembled by the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) Airwing but then took a while to be cleared for flight. We finally got all of the paperwork completed on the 25th of June. Since then we have used it to locate an injured elephant in the Mosiro area, complete patrol monitoring of MEP collared elephants, visit unexploded mortars our rangers found, and visit our ranger team in Loita. The re-deployment of the KBCT helicopter is an asset that keeps on giving and we will now be able get back on track with a number of our more logistically challenging missions like collaring in the forests. The registration of the new helicopter is 5Y MEP. It was also a pleasure to present the helicopter to the patron of KBCT Mr. Karsten Ree when he visited with his family this month.

The KBCT helicopter at the MEP base in the Mara

We attempted to collar one female elephant with the KWS vet and scientist on the 15th using a hired helicopter, but the thick forest made it very difficult and we had to postpone the operation. We will attempt this again in July. We had a successful re-collaring of bull elephant Fred in June. Fundraising continues to be a goal for our organization in order to continue our current operations and to expand into areas in need of protection.

Earlier this year Lori Price made a significant donation to MEP and we were able to deploy one of our mobile teams to concentrate patrols in the Loita area. Lori's support coupled with the Landcruiser supported by Elephant Crisis Fund means that we will be able to have a permanent presence in the Loita and Mosiro areas.

SECURITY & ANTI-POACHING

This month we hosted the OCPD's from Mulot and Ololunga. The senior policemen are new to the area and it was good to get to know them better and share our work. They were very supportive, and we discussed a number of past operations and how we might collaborate more in the future.

SITREP:

The MEP intelligence unit continues to have success in June with the arrest of three suspects by KWS and Tanzania National Parks Authority (TANAPA) and seizure of 56.60 kg of ivory in Migori County. There was an additional arrest of one suspect in Loita by KWS in possession of 3 kg of ivory based on MEP intelligence. The Sheldrick Wildlife Trust Mau De-Snaring Unit

was very successful in June. They destroyed more than five illegal wood posts, uncovered and destroyed three poacher's camps, three kilns and eight sacks of charcoal. They also removed ten snares. The MEP ranger unit in the Maji Moto Hills recovered and destroyed 200 illegal wood posts.

A snare recovered by the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust Mau De-Snaring Unit on June 10.

Illegal logging found while on patrol on June 26 in Maji Moto Hills.

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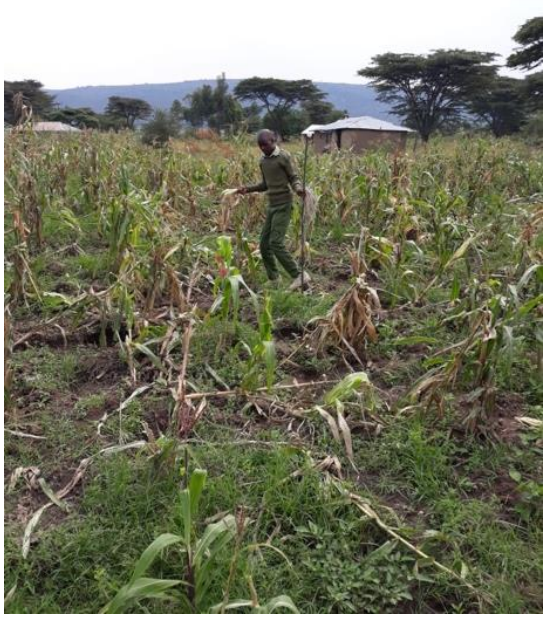
Human-Wildlife Conflict Incidents:

There were 14 human-elephant conflict incidents in the month of June most concentrated in Munyas where the crops were ripening. MEP rangers were responding day and night with bright lights, vehicles, fire crackers and loud drums to move elephants out of farms and into safety.



A MEP ranger assessing crop damage in June.

A flashing light fence being mended in an HEC hotspot in June by a MEP ranger.

MEP rangers responding to crop raiding elephants at night.

Ranger & Vehicle Tracking:

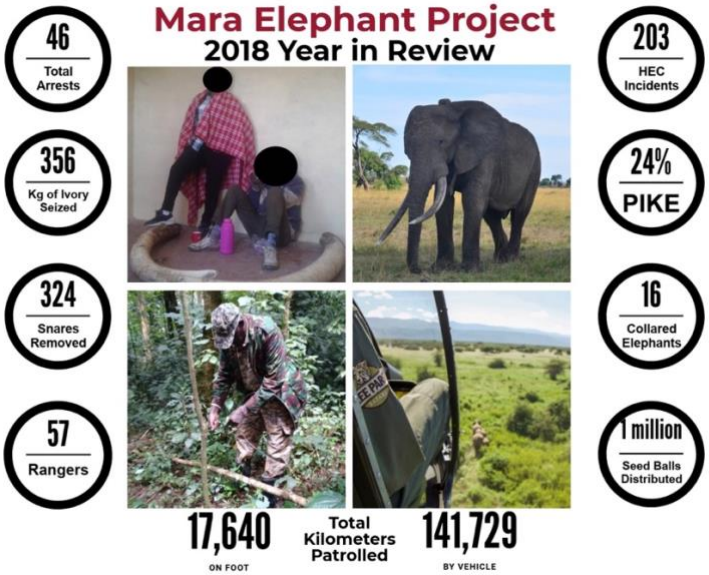
In June, MEP rangers covered a distance of 1,241 km on foot; 7,366 km by car and 3,005 km on motorbike. A new patrol vehicle, thanks to the support from the Elephant Crisis Fund, has been purchased and is currently being retrofitted. The Loita team covered the largest distance on foot this month at 312 km which was a result of their patrol in the Loita Forest, which was too tough terrain to use vehicles.

The Oloisukut MEP patrol unit.

The MEP Loita ranger camp.

COMMUNICATIONS & FUNDRAISING

Mara Elephant Project started June off by celebrating World Environment Day on June 5 with our social media followers. The headline for the month was the release of our 2018 Annual Report which was sent out via email, posted on the website and featured on a blog and on our social media channels. The highlights include: 46 total arrests, 356 kg of ivory seized, and 324 snares removed. Rangers responded to 203 HEC incidents and there was a reduction of PIKE to 24%. Sixteen collared elephants were monitored 24/7 and over 1 million seed balls from SeedballsKenya were distributed. Overall, rangers patrolled 17,640 kilometers of the Mara ecosystem on foot and 141,729 kilometers in a vehicle. We took this momentum into 2019 and continue to focus on fulfilling our mission.



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On June 8, MEP CEO Marc Goss meet a group of wildlife photographers that were in town for a Wild Escapes photo competition that benefitted MEP. We were excited to collect a check for $4,000 to support MEP's core operations. We appreciate the support from Wild Escapes and all of the photographers that participated. In June, we officially announced support from Paradise International Foundation for the long-term monitoring of two elephants for three years and the running costs of an anti-poaching vehicle for one year.

MEP CEO Marc Goss accepting the check from Wild Escapes.

Mahkana created a bracelet unique to MEP and is selling it as a way to give back to our organization. The MEP bracelet is officially for sale and can be found here. A big thanks to Stephanie for celebrating her birthday on Facebook by raising money for MEP. Overall, we received $257 in support from Facebook and $4,663 from PayPal. The MEP direct mail campaign is still on-going in the U.S. and a further $20,000 in donations were received from this in June. The campaign comes to an end in early July and final numbers on this will be available by the end of July. MEP also took delivery on the new Elephant Crisis Fund (ECF) vehicle. ECF is an initiative launched by Save the Elephants and the Wildlife Conservation Network, in partnership with the Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation and supported MEP with a new dedicated vehicle for the Loita Hills. The vehicle should be in the Mara by the middle of July.

The ECF vehicle before retrofitting.

The Greatest Maasai Mara photography competition had some amazing June entries benefitting MEP, thank you to everyone who entered.

An entry from Margaret Bishop featuring MEP collared elephant Kegol.

Finally, the President and Co-Founder of Elephanatics, an advocacy group in Canada and partner to MEP, visited MEP HQ and Dr. Jake Wall for the first time. Fran wrote a wonderful blog about her time at MEP, please take a read. Overall, MEP had five visits during the month of June and hosted CEO of Endangered Species Chocolate Cut Vander Meer and enjoyed lunch with CEO of WildAid Peter Knights.

Curt Vander Meer with his wife and children visiting MEP HQ with CEO Marc Goss.

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RESEARCH

Director's Update:

On June 3, we were happy to host Dr. George Wittemyer from Colorado State University for three nights at MEP HQ. George has been studying elephants since the late 1990's when he first characterized the Samburu elephant population. Since then George has published dozens of papers on everything from analyzing elephant movement using wavelets to determining the rates of poaching across the continent during the height of the most recent elephant poaching crisis. George was an advisor during my PhD and in 2015 I spent a year in Fort Collins as his Postdoctoral Researcher. George is now supervising Nathan Hahn who has begun his PhD at CSU and will be focused on the Mara elephants. We are delighted to have George involved with MEP research and looking forward to a long-term collaboration.

During June we continued to develop the MEP spatial database. Wilson and Nathan helped to create a hydrology layer by delineating the primary and secondary water courses across the ecosystem. Understanding where water is located is a fundamental step to understanding the spatial distribution of elephants. We also mapped all mineral points and tourist lodges and have added these the MEP database. We'll focus on roads in July.

We received news from Esri at the end of June that they will be supporting MEP with free GIS software to support our conservation efforts. Esri is the world's leading Geographic Information System (GIS) company and MEP is reliant on Esri products for analysis and cartographic outputs. We are delighted to receive this support from Esri!

Crop raiding has been in full swing this month and we're using our EarthRanger database to collect valuable information on the type and extent of human-wildlife conflict (HWC) incidents. MEP ranger teams have been involved in mitigating many of these incidents. We hope the data being collected and analyzed will help us refine our tool kit of how to help prevent elephants from crop raiding. The interface between humans and wildlife is only going to grow as populations expand and we need better ways of handling and preventing HWC.

In the Northern Mara MEP has collected a significant amount of elephant collar data which defines the northern extent of the ecosystem and continuous data on the MEP collared elephants residing in this area is essential to defining how the ecosystem is changing. This is why on June 13, MEP and KWS, with Kenya Wildlife Service approval, successfully replaced Fred's collar whose battery was due to expire. Fred is a large bull elephant that was originally collared in February 2013 and re-collared in November 2015. Fred is often found with other bull elephants Kegol and Hugo and has been known to crop raid from farms. The area of the ecosystem where he resides is changing fast and collaring Fred to ensure continuous data collection will be key for MEP's operations and advocacy.

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The MEP team gathering measurements on Fred while the collar is being fitted.

Fred spotted in early June before his re-collaring.

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Tracking Manager's Update:

Perhaps the most exciting development for MEP collared elephants in June was that we have a new baby! Namunyak now has a one-month old calf that was spotted with her in June and Hangzhou's nine-month-old calf was also photographed and doing well.

Namunyak with her tiny calf as photographed by Justin Matthews.

MEP collared elephant Shorty was streaking, meaning running very fast, as he was crop raiding in June. Hugo was also crossing the Mara River into farms and crop raiding.

MEP collared elephant Ivy spotted by rangers in June.

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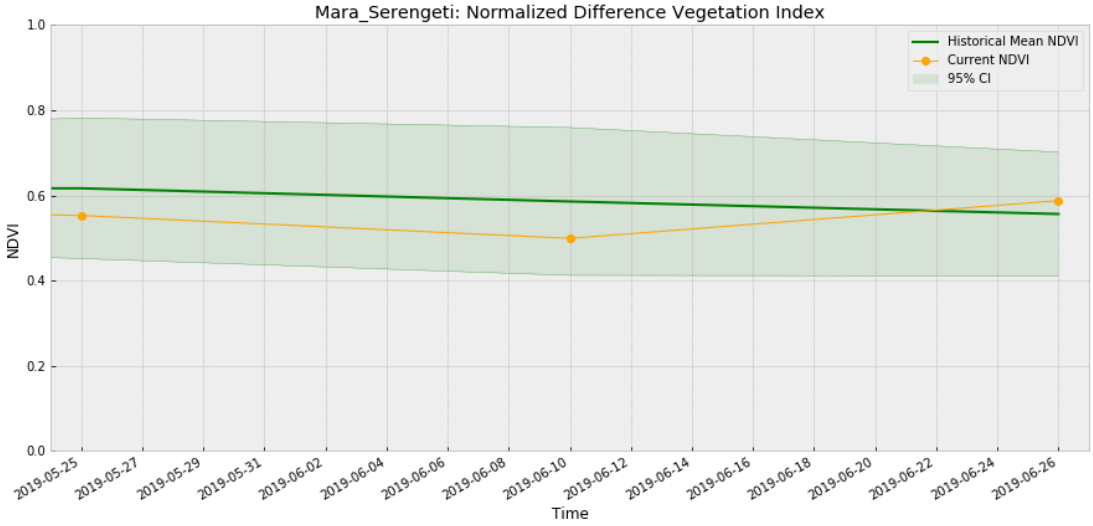
MEP collared elephant Hugo photographed in June.

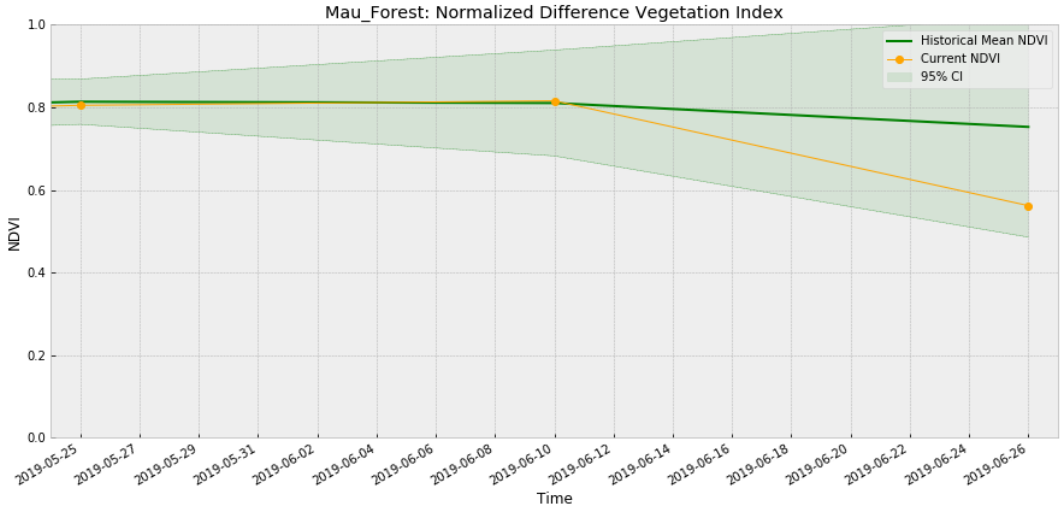
ENVIRONMENT

NDVI (Maasai Mara):



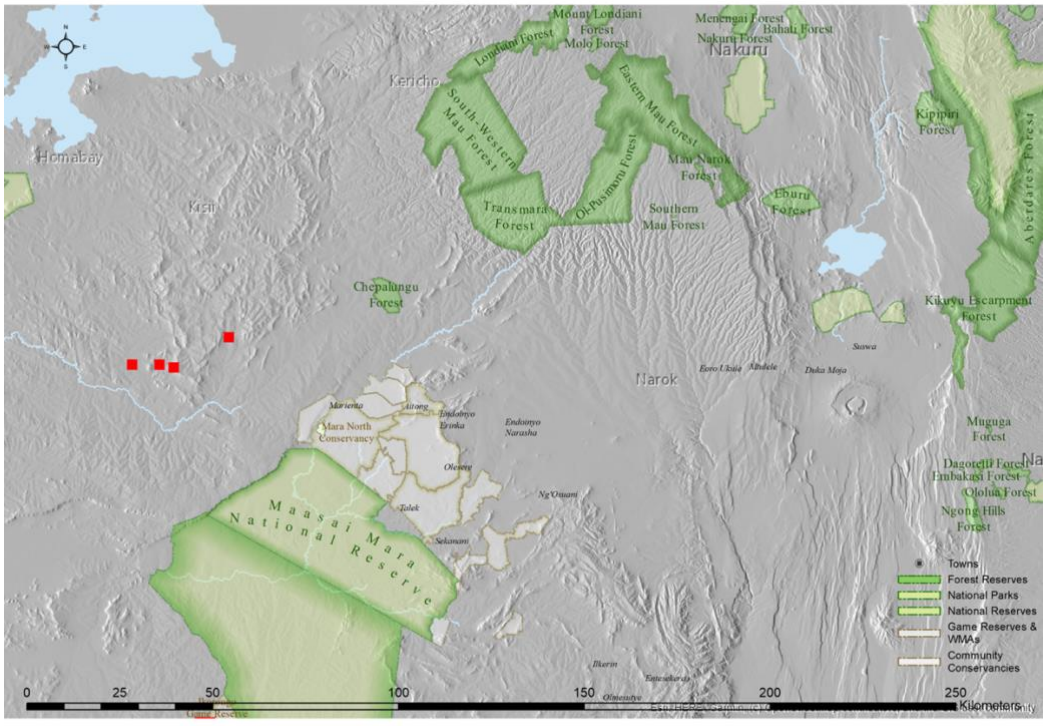
The Mara experienced lower than average vegetation greenness in May – a trend that has continued since April. On June 22 the trend reversed, and the current greenness levels are above average.

NDVI (Mau Forest):



Vegetation greenness in the Mau was closely tracking the mean until late June. On June 26 the greenness value seems to have dropped dramatically but this may be a function of cloud cover rather than a true decrease in NDVI value and the MODIS satellite not being able to measure the NDVI values accurately over the previous 16-day period.

Burn/Fire Areas:



Fire occurrence in Jun 2019. Red blocks indicate burn areas as measured by NASA's FIRMS dataset. Accessed through Google Earth Engine.