Protecting elephants to conserve the greater Mara ecosystem
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MEP July 2019 Report

MEP rangers stopping to greet kids on their way to school.

GENERAL

This month elephants in the Rift Valley region have been moving a lot! The "Mara Team" as Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) has come to refer to us has been very busy. This team has been made up of some key members from KWS, Sheldrick Wildlife Trust (SWT) and Mara Elephant Project and the glue for the team has been the Karen Blixen Camp Trust helicopter.

KWS Vet Dr. Limo with his dart gun and "The Team" prepping for a collaring operation.

This month we flew more operations than MEP has flown since inception. We collared a total of five elephants, four of which were in very difficult conditions. Elephants have been going into places where they have not visited for many years and "The Team" reacted to these incidents rapidly and effectively as would be expected with its combined experience. Not only were the airborne mobile team members critical to getting to these extraordinary

sites across Kenya, but the ground teams and technical support staff, made each operation a success. The collars which were deployed this month are going to give us unique insight on elephant movements over a very large area from Southern Baringo, Mau, Nairobi, Mosiro and Loita.

"The Team" successfully collaring Wangare in the Mau Forest.

While all of these collaring operations are critical to MEP fulfilling our mission, the one that might be the most interesting took place on July 30. "The Team" successfully collared a bull elephant located in the Thogoto Forest, on the western side of Nairobi with a population of over 3 million people. We received notice on July 28 that at least two elephants were spotted by the community in the heavily populated area of Dagoretti and KWS immediately responded by sending rangers to monitor their movements on the ground and keep both the elephants and nearby community safe. It was determined the best course of action was to collar this elephant in order to track his movements and collect data on where he came from, how he got there and why he may have ventured that close to Nairobi. The new bull is named "Hannibal" and will be closely monitored by MEP and KWS rangers on the ground and in real-time using the Save The Elephants Tracking App.

The collaring operation successfully pulled off by "The Team" in Nairobi.

MEP has been at forefront of human-elephant conflict mitigation, recording and characterizing conflict mitigation on Earth Ranger. Our conflict mitigation work put us in front of the National Human Wildlife Conflict Compensation Task Force. The team sent to

the Mara was chaired by Mr. Joseph Boinett and the meeting was a good forum to discuss some of the issues surrounding human wildlife conflict (HWC) compensation and mitigation. The appointed task force has a number of tasks, one of which was to get feedback from partners and stakeholders to help use past experiences to better develop the future national policies. The second meeting where MEP presented was held on the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy and a number of NGOs were able to share some of their experiences on mitigating HWC. Boinett and his interagency team was then able to join us on the second day. It was clear that instead of focusing on compensation we should focus on root causes. One of the items which was discussed as a tool in managing human-elephant conflict was collaring conflict individuals and sharing movement data in real time with key partners.

Well, this was proved later in the month in the Northern Rift Valley. The Suswa and Mosiro areas are both very dry and MEP is often called in to work with the KWS Mosiro outpost to react to human-elephant conflict in this area. In response to conflict in July which resulted in one death and one injury in the local community, on July 26, "The Team" successfully collared a bull elephant in Suswa. This was the perfect example of everyone working together to reactively collar an elephant in response to conflict.

The collaring operation in Suswa.

The annual migration of wildebeest, zebra, eland and thomson gazelle is in full swing. As usual the zebras are leading the charge and reports from tour guides say the crossings have been the best since 2007.

A submission in the Greatest Maasai Mara photo competition by Will Fortescue depicting the migration.

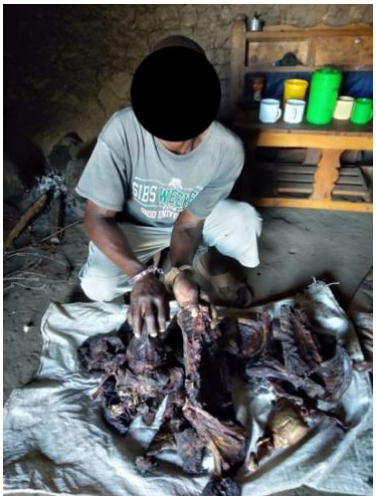
SECURITY & ANTI-POACHING

The MEP intelligence team continues to have success with arrests of suspects and ivory recovered. During the month of July, the MEP intelligence unit and KWS arrested two suspects in possession of 17 kg of ivory.

In the Mau Forest, the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust Mau De-Snaring Unit were able to improve forest security by taking government officials to the areas where logging, farming and charcoal production continue in the forest. This spurred a larger operation to evict these illegal users/exploiters of the forest. In July, SWT Mau De-Snaring Units recovered 720 pieces of cedar and arrested five suspects for illegal logging.

80 pieces of cedar recovered in the Mau Forest and one arrest.

MEP rangers along with KWS arrested one suspect for bushmeat poaching, seized 12 kg of bushmeat.



The arrest of one suspect and confiscation of 12 kg of bushmeat.

As noted above, the rangers also assisted with five collaring operations. One large bull in the Mau Forest named Maximus supported by WildAid, one sub-adult female in the Loita Forest named Wangare, a large bull in the Mau Forest named Vasco supported by the Indianapolis Zoological Society, a bull in Suswa named Napoleon and, finally, a bull near Nairobi named Hannibal.

Human-Wildlife Conflict Incidents:

MEP rangers responded to 28 cases of human-elephant conflict in July, an increase from previous months that indicate the ripening of maize. Most of the incidents were responded to in the Munyas area and all were able to be properly diverted using vehicles, firecrackers and bright lights.

MEP rangers were responding to HEC day and night in July.

Ranger & Vehicle Tracking:

In July, MEP rangers covered a distance of 1,471 km on foot, 8,908 km by car and 1,432 km on motorbike. A new patrol vehicle funded by Elephant Crisis Fund (ECF), an initiative launched by Save the Elephants and the Wildlife Conservation Network, in partnership with the Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation is newly deployed in the field. The Loita team covered the largest distance on foot this month at 356 km from their patrol in the Loita Forest.

The new ECF patrol vehicle being used to track a MEP collared elephant via VHF.

Helicopter:

After taking delivery of the Karen Blixen Camp Trust helicopter on the 24th of June, we have flown a total of 59 hours. To say we are relieved to have this vital asset back and operating in the Mara would be an understatement. The huge amount of flying time is reflected by the opportunities for collaring operations, elephant treatments and human-elephant conflict mitigation we were able to do in July. The new helicopter is owned by the Karen Blixen Camp Trust who believe in the work the helicopter can do for wildlife conservation. The registration of the helicopter is 5Y-MEP and it is painted British Racing Green which was the 2017 Robinson Helicopter Company color of that year. 5Y-MEP is running beautifully and seems to have a lot of power. During the last 59 hours almost all of this flying has been technical and demanding flying. On one occasion during the collaring in the Mau Forest there was really nowhere to land once the elephant fell asleep which meant that we "landed the tail" meaning that there was only space to land the tail rotor.

One of the confined space landings in the Mau.

The high altitude, hot and heavy conditions made for an interesting operation, but all went off without incident. During the Chemesusu collaring we actually used the helicopter to keep the crowd busy and away from the elephants. Although there were several hundred people around the helicopter during this operation, they were very excited and not hostile to the elephants. The community members were very polite, and we took a number of selfies and group photos with the helicopter.

MEP CEO Marc Goss with the curious kids after the collaring operation.

COMMUNICATIONS & FUNDRAISING

The month of July was busy for Mara Elephant Project's communications and fundraising efforts. First, Max, a 10-year-old Kenyan, attending The Banda School in Nairobi raised over $8,300 for Mara Elephant Project rangers through an appeal he sent to his classmates and friends. Max is the son of Hilary Hurt, a former MEP Trustee, and Nicholas Sadron. Since Max is a resident of Kenya and his Mom and Dad are familiar with MEP, he came to the Mara to visit the project and spent some time with the rangers. Max got to see what they do first-hand in the field, and they thanked him for his fundraising efforts. Max also got the opportunity to go out with MEP CEO Marc Goss to the Mau Forest. Thank you to Max and everyone who supported his efforts!

MEP rangers thanking Max during his time at MEP HQ.

Additionally, MEP would like to thank the five supporters who donated a total of 135 kg of seed balls from Seedballs Kenya to be distributed in the Lemek, Ngosuani and Naroosura areas of the Mara. In the first half of 2019, MEP rangers distributed these seed balls on foot or using their patrol vehicle. Thank you to Free Spirit, Margaret Cashion, Nalle Hukkataival, Michael Prosper and László Szatmáry for committing to keep the Mara green. Intel supports African wildlife conservation through innovative AI technology. Their newest Expedition Collection celebrates that innovation with one-of-a-kind merchandise and all proceeds will be donated to African wildlife conservation, including the Mara Elephant Project! Originally previewed exclusively for Intel employees in May, the collection is now available online! Shop the Intel Store's Expedition Collection today at http://bit.ly/2JFv0DC. Thank you, Intel, for supporting MEP! There was one Facebook fundraising from Mustafa in celebration of his birthday that exceeded his fundraising goal, thank you Mustafa!

Mara Elephant Project was featured on CGTN Africa on July 23 speaking about our human-elephant conflict mitigation strategies. Amy McConaghy visited MEP HQ and spent the day with Tracking Manager Wilson Sairowua and rangers. On July 16, Mara Elephant Project had the pleasure of attending the unveiling of two brand new toilet facilities at the Ngosuani Primary School during a ceremony that took place on school grounds. The toilet blocks, which MEP donated to the school, are built from re-purposed shipping containers and provide a safe and healthy environment for the boys and girls attending the school. MEP believes that by investing in the communities that coexist with wildlife in ways like this we are also fulfilling our mission of protecting the Mara's elephants and habitat.

MEP CEO Marc Goss greeting visitors that attended the school ceremony.

Adam Bannister featured MEP in a piece on the Angama Mara blog that received a lot of attention on their social media feeds. We had many wonderful entries for July in the Greatest Maasai Mara photo competition. Thank you to Will Fortescue, Lusine Avakian, Rosa Maria Pastor, Rihaz Sidi, Julien Bundun, Thorsten Hanewald, Rebecca Johnson, Lennart Hessel, Bettina Pedersen, Stephen Underwood, Kathy Houle and Margaret Bishop for supporting MEP!

A GMM entry supporting MEP by Lennart Hessel.

MEP celebrated World Ranger Day on July 31 with the release of the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust mid-term report and the world premiere of the updated MEP Results video that sits on our website. All of this culminated into a Facebook Fundraiser encouraging donors to support one-month of running costs for the MEP intelligence unit. The fundraiser will end August 5 but has already raised over $500. In total MEP raised $770 on Facebook and $4,000 through individual donors in July. MEP hosted a group of young teens from China at MEP HQ on July 22 thanks to Richard's Camp and had groups in from Karen Blixen Camp and Elephant Pepper Camp in July.

The group from Richard's Camp visiting MEP HQ.

The direct mail campaign that Mara Elephant Project began in March has come to a close and we're happy to report we raised a total of $45,118 for core operations. Finally, we're pleased to announce that on July 31, MEP Sergeant Dickson Njapit won a 2019 African Ranger Award given out annually by the Paradise International Foundation. Dickson started at MEP in 2011 and has risen to the rank of sergeant. He leads the Sheldrick Wildlife

Trust Mau De-Snaring Unit in the Mau Forest and was responsible for training the new team in early 2018. Dickson has an exemplary track record, is a role model for all rangers and is an ambassador in the Maasai community. Congratulations Dickson! We also enjoyed a visit from MEP Board of Trustees Chairman Colin Church in July.

RESEARCH

Director's Update:

On July 3, Wilson attended a meeting in the Mara on the proliferation of fencing and human infrastructure and presented the MEP spatial database tools and infrastructure for analyzing these types of data. The meeting, organized by Niel Anthony and Irene Amoke, was well attended. The meeting was also the launch of the One Mara Partnership Research Council that will help to be coordinate research in the Mara and encourage collaborations. Jully Senteu is the coordinator of this exciting initiative and we look forward to working with OMP and other partners in the Mara. We will have a follow up meeting in September to focus specifically on corridors and connectivity in the Mara and I'm helping coordinate this work now. There were some exciting elephant movements and collars deployed during July. One notable individual, called Vasco, was collared in a group at the north end of the Mau in the Chemesusu Forest and who streaked to the east across the Rift Valley near Mukuyuni and Lake Solai. He is currently in a small forest patch near sisal plantations and we're eager to see where he goes next as this was the first collared elephant to use this area. The second notable individual was collared in the Thogoto Forest just north of the Ngong Hills on the western fringe of Nairobi. After the collar was attached, he descended back down into the Rift Valley overnight and streaked 50 km in 24 hours. He's now positioned in the Mosiro area south of Mount Suswa in a place we've previously recorded elephants.

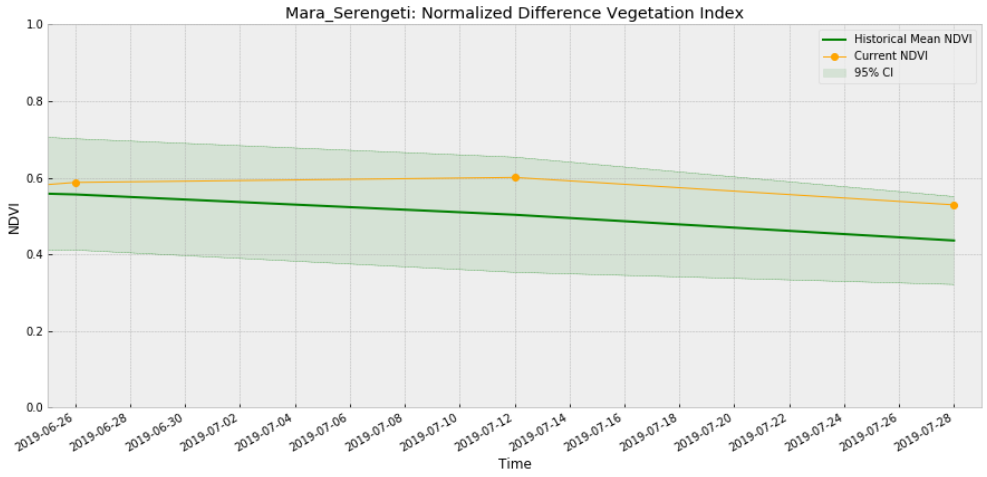
Tracking Manager's Update:

MEP collared elephant Limo seemed to be trailing a female collared elephant Namunyak's herd during the month of July. Collared elephant Caroline has been following water courses in July and avoiding hills, which has brought her, at times, close to fences and settlements. Kegol has been staying in the conservancy and was spotted with a small herd of fellow bulls.

Elephants visiting MEP HQ in July.

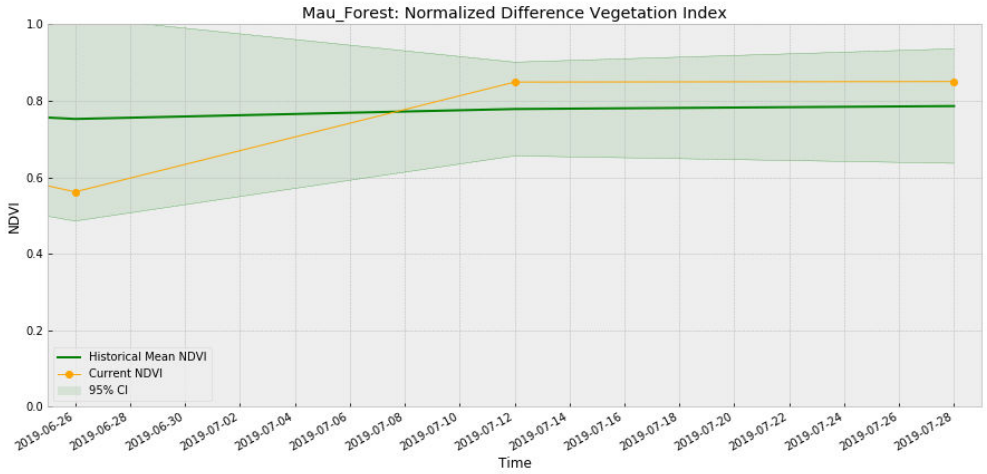
ENVIRONMENT

NDVI (Maasai Mara):



NDVI in the Mara was much higher than normal by the end of July and reflects the late rains received this year.

NDVI (Mau Forest):



NDVI in the Mau rose higher than average by the middle of July after being low at the end of June reflecting late rains received in the area.

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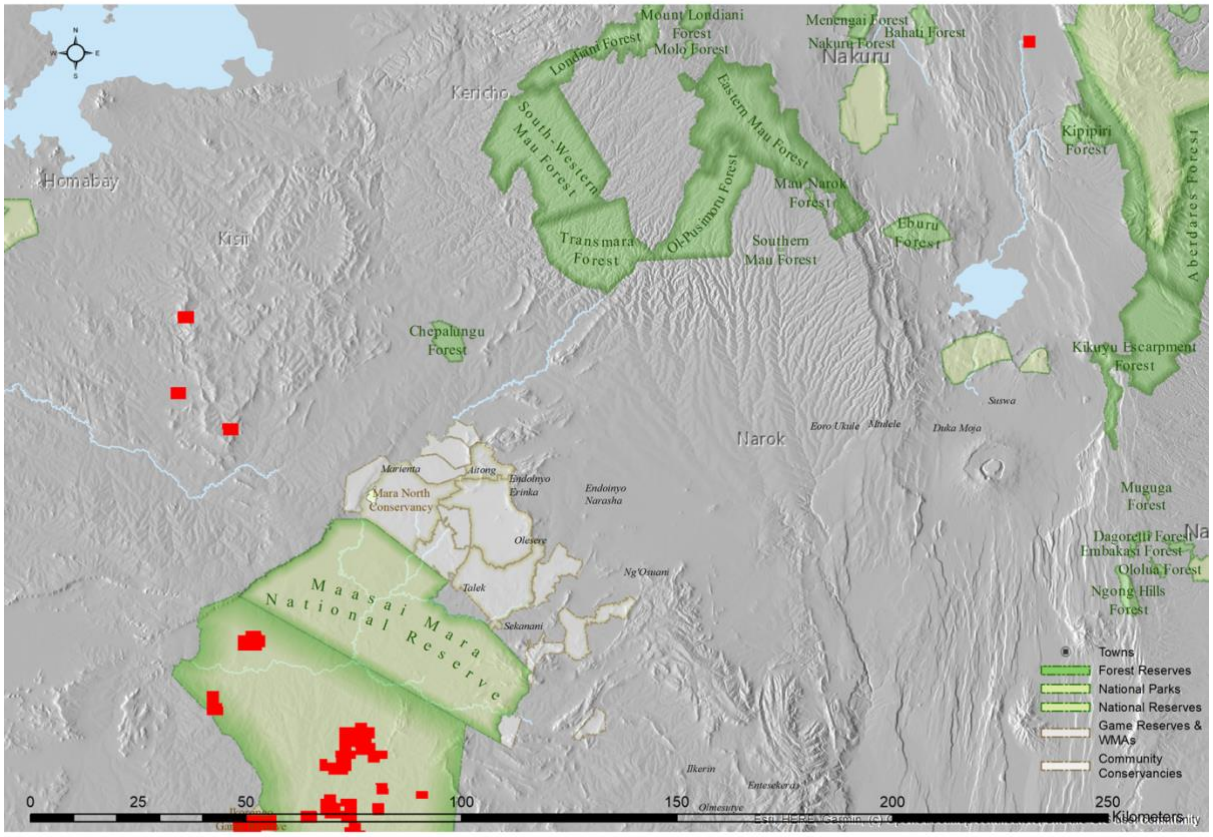
Burn/Fire Areas:



Fire occurrence in July 2019. Red blocks indicate burn areas as measured by NASA's FIRMS dataset. Accessed through Google Earth Engine. The Serengeti had many fires in July but none in the Mara.