Protecting elephants to conserve the greater Mara ecosystem
www.maraelephantproject.org

MEP February 2020 Report

On February 24, MEP's Director of Research & Conservation Dr. Jake Wall assisted KWS Vet Dr. Limo in the treatment of a very sick elephant calf. Unfortunately, despite the team's best efforts, the calf was not able to be saved.

GENERAL

Just as the abnormally high previous rains stopped, the short rains arrived in February which has taken a toll on infrastructure and the farming communities, who are struggling to remove the past crops from their fields and plant the next. On the positive side, MEP is experiencing relatively low conflict incidents and all wildlife is thriving in this season of abundant resources.

The biggest global issue at the moment is the spread of the highly infectious COVID-19 virus. It is already having a huge impact on the global economy and countries which have not taken the spread seriously have seen high death rates as hospitals cannot cope with the huge influx of patients. Kenya has recently circulated travel restrictions to foreigners and MEP is creating protocols which all staff will follow. We will ensure that MEP is an example of an organization taking the correct measures to deal with COVID-19.

On the 22nd we attended the Celebration of Life for MEP Founding Member Richard Roberts. Around 500 people attended the event and the ceremony was extremely touching. Our Chairman Colin Church gave a moving and informative speech about how Richard started MEP and how far it has come since its 2011 inception. Many people came up to me and said they had no idea how much Richard did for MEP and the impact MEP has had in the Mara. Each speech from family members and close friends captured a glimpse of the amazing man Richard was; truly a larger than life person. Our hearts are with his family during this difficult

time and we can only say that time heals all wounds. You are hugely missed by your MEP family. Kwaheri bwana.

MEP has been supporting the process of adjudicating the Loita Forest and attended two meetings with agency stakeholders and then community committee members. This transparent process is extremely important to get right to ensure that the forest is protected, the community is empowered with the tools to protect their forest, and that there is no land grabbing. The Loita community is one of the best examples of a properly managed community forest and satellite imagery supports this claim by indicating minimal forest cover loss in the last 20 years. As the adjudication process continues and individuals are given parcels of land surrounding the forest, we all must ensure that the forest remains intact. We will be working closely with the government and the community to ensure this process happens transparently and appropriately.

SECURITY & ANTI-POACHING

Along with the COVID-19 outbreak hurting the tourism industry, the U.S. Department of State, the UK Foreign Office and the FAA all issued terrorism warnings for Nairobi hotels and airlines flying at low altitudes. In the Mara region we are very lucky to have such a close-knit community of Maasai that do not tolerate suspicious outsiders. An example of this was a boda boda driver who reported a suspicious person taking pictures of road signs. He was reported to the Administration Police in Mararienta who then arrested him and found out he was part of a gang operating out of Kericho. MEP will continue to listen and act on any information about suspicious individuals in our area and will work closely with the tourism industry to ensure our area is protected. Reports have been coming in about an armed gang of seven individuals operating on the border between Kenya and Tanzania in the Southern Loita Forest. We will also conduct aerial reconnaissance flights in this area and the intelligence unit are working on several leads at the moment.

SITREP:

Overall, in February, MEP rangers destroyed 13 kilns, 36 bags of charcoal and a poacher's cave; recovered 1,000 pieces of cedar, 45 illegal posts; removed six snares and arrested 10 suspects for illegal logging or charcoaling in collaboration with Kenya Forest Service (KFS) and the local police.

SWT Mau team arrested three suspects transporting charcoal in Kericho Forest, both suspects taken to Kericho police station and booked.

The Transmara team destroyed two kilns and 36 bags of charcoal at Nyakweri Forest on February 21.

Human-Elephant Conflict Report:
There were 13 incidents of human-elephant conflict that MEP rangers responded to during the month of February. Most were mitigated using ranger's vehicles, firecrackers or drums. The helicopter was called in twice to move elephants out of settlements.

Ranger Foot Patrols:
In February, MEP rangers covered a distance of 1,046 km on foot, 7,817 km by car and 412 km on motorbike. The Alpha team in the Transmara covered the largest distance on foot this month at 247 km from their patrol in Nyakweri Forest monitoring Fitz and the herd.

HELICOPTER

The two most notable flights in the Karen Blixen Camp Trust helicopter in February were transporting the Kenya Wildlife Service vet to treat an injured lion and rescuing a poisoned vulture, our first bird passenger. According to the Mara Raptor Project, MEP's involvement with the rescue of the vulture sent a strong message about the importance of vultures in this ecosystem. Additionally, along with Seedballs Kenya, we were also able to re-seed some of the worst hit locations by charcoal makers in the Rift Valley.

The lion treatment in February.

MEP's first ever vulture passenger in the Karen Blixen Camp Trust helicopter heading for treatment.

COMMUNICATIONS & FUNDRAISING

A YouTube Originals series Age of A.I. recently featured Mara Elephant Project's Marc Goss, Dr. Jake Wall, Wilson Sairowua and rangers. Along with our partners from RESOLVE and Intel the episode demonstrates how TrailGuard AI anti-poaching system can stop poachers BEFORE they kill wildlife. MEP received 50 kilograms of seed balls from Seedballs Kenya in February thanks to a generous donor, Mergim Berisha and another 75 kg donation from Salmaan Visram, founder of Oak and Timbers. Thank you to Valerie for celebrating her birthday by raising $297 on Facebook for Mara Elephant Project. In total, during the month of February, MEP raised $129.88 on Facebook and $5,143 via PayPal. Creatura Wildlife Projects & Travel supported MEP this month with a $2,500 donation and brought along visitors from Richard's Camp to see MEP HQ and hear about the work we're doing in the Mara. We received a further $1,725 in donations in the form of checks from individuals as well as $60,348 in form of wire transfers into MEPs accounts. We had the opportunity to meet with a delegation from the ICCF U.S. Congressional International Conservation group and discuss the work we are doing and the challenges facing the greater Mara ecosystem. We also enjoyed visitors from Asilia Africa and Kicheche Mara Camp. The month of February had 17 captivating images in The Greatest Maasai Mara photo competition to benefit MEP! Thank you to Dave Richards, Harman Singh Heer, Vijay Harinathan, Stephen Underwood, Amish Chhagan, Pepe Arespacochaga, Gurcharan Roopra, Tommy Mees, Alison Mees, Yaron

Schmid, Diana Knight, David Roberts, Victor Kimathi, Ginger Lyvere Peck, Thorsten Hanewald, Phil Parks, and Kyle Borlase for supporting us!

A February entry in the GMM competition from Phil Parks that benefitted MEP.

RESEARCH & CONSERVATION

Director's Update:

February was another wet month in the Mara. The NDVI data tells us that the middle of February was nearly as green as it's ever been in the Mara. Here are some highlights of our conservation/research program in February:

- We welcomed Sarah Carroll to our team. Sarah is starting her PhD work through Colorado State University and MEP and will be helping to understand elephant distribution and density in the eastern part of the system connecting to the Loita forest.
- We've designed a MIKE form in EarthRanger and are now using ER to store the MIKE data securely.
- We hosted Sara Beery – a PhD student from Caltech – for a week. Sara helped us define technical project requirement documents and helped us connect with WildME in Portland, Oregon. A colleague of Sara's at Caltech will be coming to MEP this June to work on setting up an individual-based ID workflow that will integrate with both EarthRanger and Wildbook software.
- We continued to provide inputs to the Narok County Government draft spatial plan.
- We've updated the landscape dynamics base layer with the most recent spatial data being collected with our Njia application.
- We have continued with our fence line mapping exercise and have now nearly completed Pardamat Conservancy. We will continue with the Loita Plains.
- All MEP vehicles are now outfitted with Android phones and the new ER 'Roam' application for real-time reporting of their location. These data will help operations but also help us refine metrics of patrol effort.

Tracking Manager's Update:

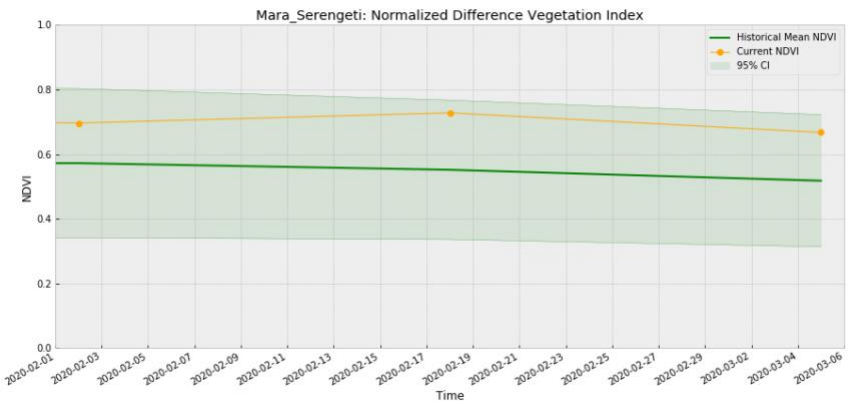
MEP's collared elephant Shorty visited Grumeti during this reporting period before safely returning to Kenya. Fred and Ivy spent time together, Namunyak was spotted by MEP rangers while on a monitoring patrol with a herd of 30, all in good condition. Lempiris was spotted by MEP rangers with a bachelor herd of four bulls. Patrol teams also visited Chelsea and she was reported in a herd of 40 individuals. Hannibal and Napolean continue to move together. Fitz and his herd have been actively crop raiding and the MEP Transmara ranger team was pushing them out of farmland regularly in February.

MEP collared Namunyak with her herd of 30 observed on the ground by MEP rangers.

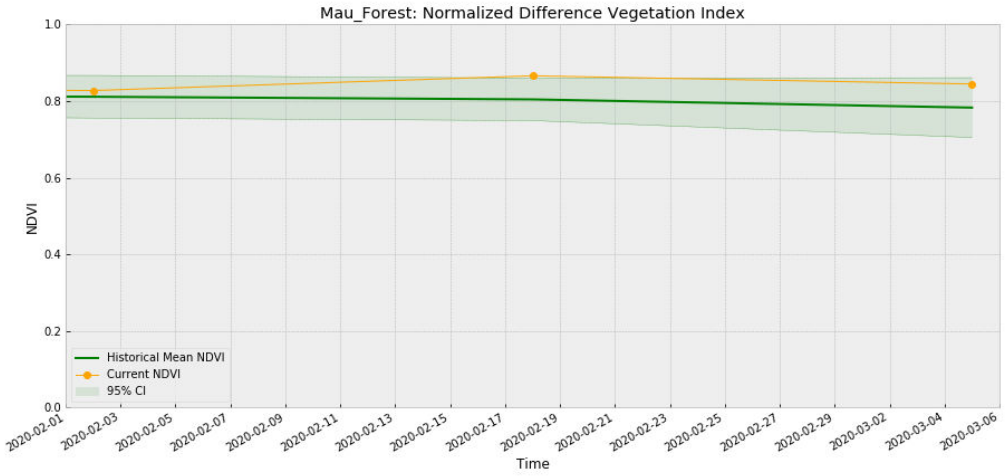
ENVIRONMENT: NDVI

Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) is a measure of plant photosynthetic activity. Higher NDVI indicates the plant is greener. The orange trendline shows the current value while the green area shows the 95% distribution of values centered around the green trendline from values measured back to February 2000.

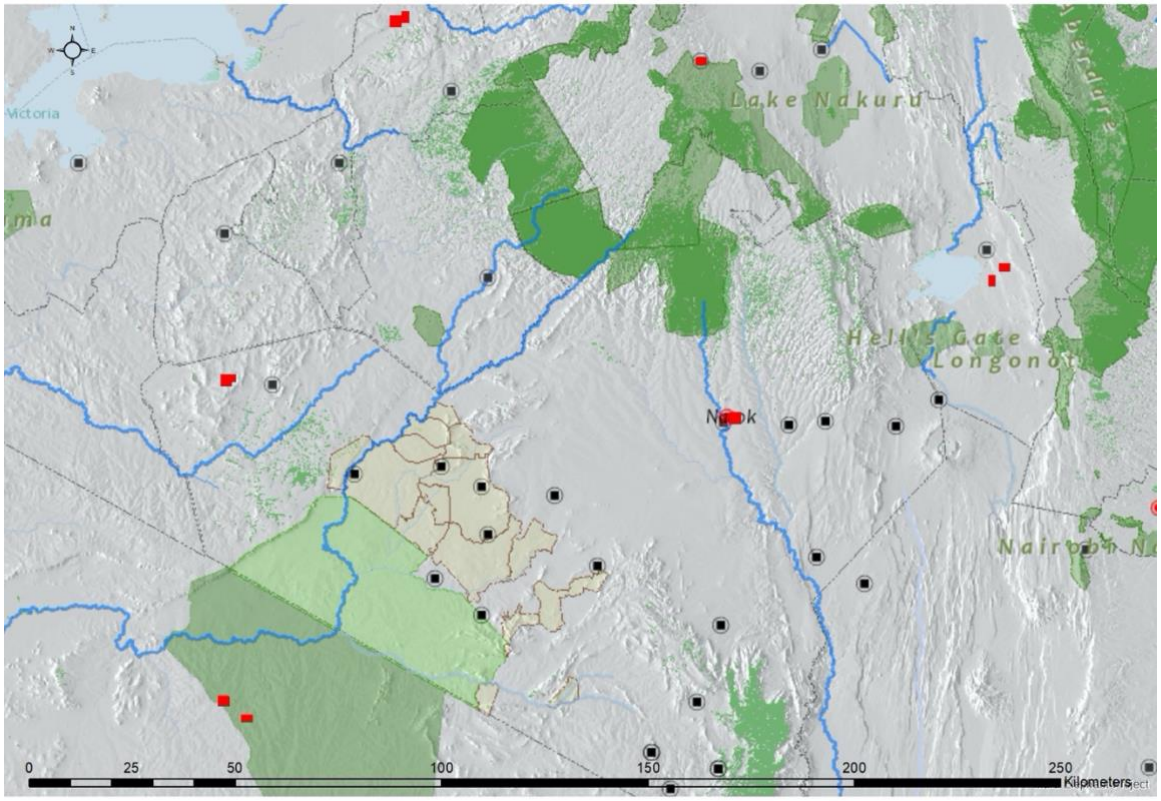
Mara – Serengeti



Mau Forest



ENVIRONMENT: Burn/Fire Areas



Red blocks indicate burn areas as measured by NASA's FIRMS dataset. Accessed through Google Earth Engine.