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

MEP March 2020 Report

MEP CEO Marc Goss wearing a MEP buff as protective gear while flying in March.

GENERAL

The rapid and global spread of the COVID-19 virus has brought with it challenging future implications for conservation, particularly elephant conservation in Kenya. Mara Elephant Project is deeply concerned about the pending socio-economic downturn that has been predicted and what that means for the communities we work so closely with to protect Kenya's iconic elephants and the Mara ecosystem. MEP would like to take this opportunity to update you about our response to the current situation during this devastating global pandemic. MEP is taking the COVID-19 situation very seriously and continues to reinforce and abide by all national and international guidelines to help reduce the spread of the virus and protect the health of MEP staff and the surrounding communities. At our headquarters in Lemek Conservancy, situated 10 km from the National Reserve, we have instituted an isolation policy amongst staff, set up hand washing stations and implemented a mandatory two-week stay at a quarantine camp for anyone who may have potentially been exposed. Continuing our efforts to support the communities, MEP has also provided extensive educational materials and training to all of our employees and encouraged them to be good examples of proper hand washing techniques, social distancing and protective techniques to minimize exposure. Read our full statement here.

The new lineup photo for a MEP ranger unit in March to show social distancing.

On March 26, Mara Elephant Project collared elephant Namunyak passed away from natural causes. The Olarro Conservancy rangers were the first on the scene and called us and the Mara KWS/SWT vet team. When they arrived, they found her body intact, but an autopsy showed an internal abscess on her spleen which caused an embolism, a natural death from a health defect. Namunyak was originally collared in Olarro Conservancy in January 2016 with support from World Wildlife Fund and she and her herd spent most of their time between the Olarro and Siana conservancies. Despite the high levels of conflict locally, Namunyak was not a habitual crop raider. She has left behind an almost one-year-old calf, born in May 2019 which was rescued and sent to the SWT elephant orphanage.

Collared elephant Namunyak.

On March 12, during an aerial monitoring flight of MEP collared elephant Ivy, it was discovered she had just given birth to a brand-new baby calf. Ivy's collar had been giving off a low speed alert over a 24-hour period and the Karen Blixen Camp Trust helicopter was deployed to check on her. She was tracked to a heavily wooded area of the Mara, and it was discovered that she had most likely given birth in the forest and was just emerging with the calf, a baby girl. Both mother and baby appear to be doing well, but MEP will continue to keep a close eye on her at this critical time.

Ivy with her brand-new baby.

SECURITY & ANTI-POACHING

Security in the Mara is an increasing concern and the Narok County Government has taken appropriate steps to secure the National Reserve. The national government also implemented a nationwide curfew from 7 p.m. to 5 a.m. on the 26th and an economic stimulus package aimed at assisting low income families. While these efforts are extremely helpful, there continues to be a huge economic strain on the whole county which will affect security. At MEP we are keeping our intelligence teams and patrol teams busy by keeping an eye out for any potential outbreaks of elephant and bushmeat poaching. Already we have noticed an increase in the logging and habitat destruction especially in the areas of Naroosora near Loita and the Mau Forest.

SITREP:

In March, MEP rangers removed a total of six snares, confiscated 32 illegally logged posts, 960 pieces of cedar, 58 bags of charcoal and destroyed 14 kilns. Additionally, along with Kenya Forest Service and Kenya Wildlife Service, MEP rangers arrested two suspects for illegal logging, one person transporting charcoal, one suspect with a spear and panga hunting and one suspect with 4 kg of bushmeat. Finally, the MEP team jointly with KWS

officers conducted a successful operation and arrested two suspects with two pieces of elephant tusk along the Kenyan/Tanzanian border.

The arrest of one person on March 6 with 4 kg of bushmeat.

A truckload of cedar posts in Naroosura that were confiscated by MEP rangers.

One of five kilns destroyed on March 13 by the Loita team.

Human-Elephant Conflict Report:

There were eight total incidents of human-elephant conflict in March. The Karen Blixen Camp Trust helicopter has been essential during this time of limited contact for quickly and effectively responding to conflict while maintaining recommended isolation. A total of six human-elephant conflict incidents in March required the helicopter to intervene in order to keep MEP rangers safe and isolated.

The helicopter responding to conflict in March.

Ranger Foot Patrols:

In March, MEP rangers covered a distance of 943 km on foot, 6,311 km by car and 492 km on motorbike.

HELICOPTER

We flew the helicopter for 44 hours this month and it was a critical piece of equipment as COVID restrictions increased in Kenya. Additionally, the MEP helicopter was crucial to two baby elephant rescues. On March 8 and March 14, MEP was called in to assist in the transport of young elephant calves to the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust orphanage in Nairobi and Tsavo. It is very rare to get these rescue calls but since we are the only organization in the Mara with a dedicated helicopter for wildlife, the Karen Blixen Camp Trust helicopter yet again proves just how vital it is to saving elephant lives.

The baby elephant found on the 8th in the helicopter being transported to the SWT orphanage.

On the 5th, MEP CEO Marc Goss flew the helicopter to Marmanet Forest in Baringo County to check on collared elephant Vasco and his herd.

Vasco with his herd photographed from the helicopter on the 5th.

The helicopter was also used to shuttle supplies to a stranded Narok County Government ranger post in the Maasai Mara National Reserve on the 18th as the Mara has seen a very high level of rainfall, which has made logistics very challenging.

The Karen Blixen Camp Trust helicopter loaded up with supplies for stranded rangers.

COMMUNICATIONS & FUNDRAISING

Mara Elephant Project celebrated World Wildlife Day, a global celebration of the beautiful and richly diverse forms of wild animals and plants on our planet. This year, the theme of "Sustaining all life on Earth" aims to stress wild animal and plant species as an important component of biodiversity and their importance to people, especially those who live closest to nature and depend on them for their livelihoods. Mara Elephant Project's mission is to not only protect elephants, but the communities they come in contact with and the habitat that they both depend on in the Maasai Mara, Kenya. We thank Vulcan, Inc. for their support and feature on WWD2020.

MEP was the proud recipient of the Shining World Compassion Award for using cutting edge technology and inventive solutions to protect elephants in the Maasai Mara. This award, given by Supreme Master Ching Hai and the International Association also included a $30,000 donation to MEP's core operations and MEP was featured on Supreme Master TV in an episode about our conflict mitigation work. MEP is humbled by this award and donation and we thank The Supreme Master Ching Hai International Association for their dedication to animal welfare around the globe. Creatura Wildlife Projects is devoted to the preservation of wildlife around the globe. They focus their fundraising efforts using a vast network on small boots on the ground organizations preserving wildlife and wild places. Mara Elephant Project is delighted to announce Creatura's support in 2020 with a beginning donation of $3,000. In addition to their financial support, Creatura is also including Mara Elephant Project in upcoming Kenyan safaris; they create custom luxury eco-focused safaris in East Africa for up to 12 people and give their guests the experience of the wild as it should be. MEP will be using Creatura's support to boost our core operations in 2020 to continue to protect elephants and conserve the Mara ecosystem. March brought out a lot of big cat photos in the Greatest Maasai Mara photo competition. Thank you to everyone who supported MEP in March: Laura Henning, Gurcharan Roopra, Charlotte Rhodes, Paaret Shah, Philippe Henry de Frahan, Nitin Michael, Stephen Underwood, Diana Knight, Barbara Krause, Greta Godbole, Susan Michel, Yaron Schmid, Ana Zinger, Mark Walker, Dileep Anthikad, Alison Mees and Jacques-Andre Dupont.

A Greatest Maasai Mara entry by Philippe Henry de Frahan.

During the month of March, MEP received $14,093 from individual donors and $60 from Facebook donations. Thank you to Rita Cabases for her generous donation to support more

flying time for the helicopter and also to Jennifer, Maryam, Gaudenz, Nathan, Nina and Brendan and everyone else for their generous donations. Additional thanks to the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust for their continued financial support of the SWT De-Snaring Unit operating in the Mau.

While the world deals with a new normal, MEP's fundraising efforts are on hold to instead focus on the task at hand, continuing to provide protection to the Mara's wildlife and communities while taking into consideration the great long-term implications of COVID-19. Our aim over the coming months is to provide our supporters with uplifting stories about the work that continues on the ground and be the bright spot in your social media feed during a dark and difficult time in history. We appreciate everyone's support big or small during this time, but we are especially grateful to core supporters, the Sidekick Foundation, Inc. for providing the stability our organization needs to focus on the task at hand.

RESEARCH & CONSERVATION

Director's Update:

At the start of March, our field ranger Amos continued his fence mapping exercise and we also took on a new field assistant, David, and a motorbike to help collect ground truth points for landcover mapping. I wrote new code within an open-source python library for uploading and downloading data from EarthRanger. Marc and I attended a KWS census planning meeting to prepare for the upcoming planned aerial census of the Mara in May. I was then supposed to attend an Elephant Protection Initiative (EPI) conference in Botswana where I was to give a presentation on MEP's human-elephant conflict mitigation work, but it was canceled at the last minute, and just a few days later the first occurrence of the COVID-19 virus was detected in Kenya.

In the latter half of the month, we developed protocols for dealing with the virus at our Headquarters and worked on training with the ranger teams and local staff and curtailed our field work. Much of our field-based research and conservation activities have now been re-focused to online work and virtual meetings and, especially for me, some much needed time writing and analyzing data. We've observed that Shorty in the Serengeti and Kiambi in the conservancies are in musth and moving quickly and over long distances. Unfortunately, in late March we lost one of our long-tracked females – Namunyak – to natural causes. Rainfall has remained high across the Greater Mara Ecosystem (GME) and the graphs of vegetation greenness show that it's currently about as green as it gets for this time of year.

Tracking Manager's Update:

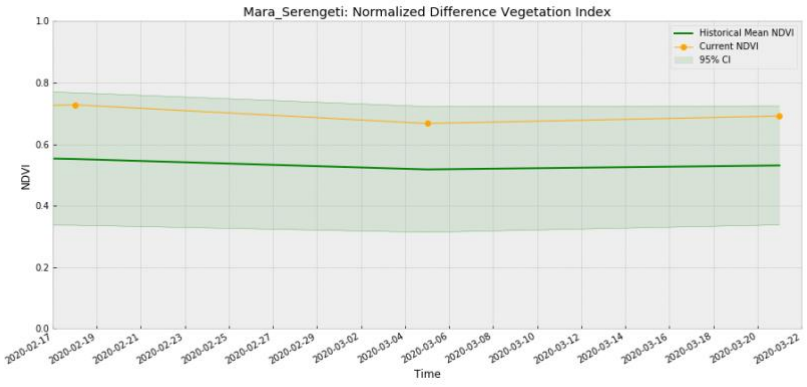
In March, Caroline was sighted with a family of 12 by the MEP fencing team. Chelsea was monitored on the ground by the Siana team and the herd size was reported to be more than 60 elephants. The MEP team in Kericho spent a week in Marmanet forest monitoring Vasco. Fitz was monitored by the Transmara team and they spent most of their time pushing the group from farmland back into the forest.

MEP collared elephant Tressa with her family herd as seen from the air on a routine aerial monitoring flight. Tressa spent the whole period on the border of Kenya and Tanzania.

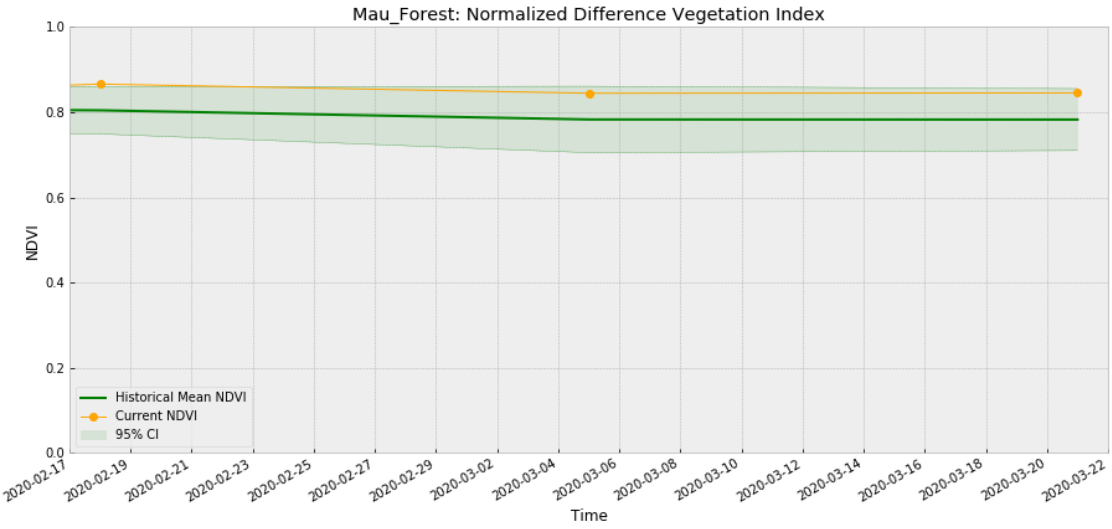
ENVIRONMENT: NDVI

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.

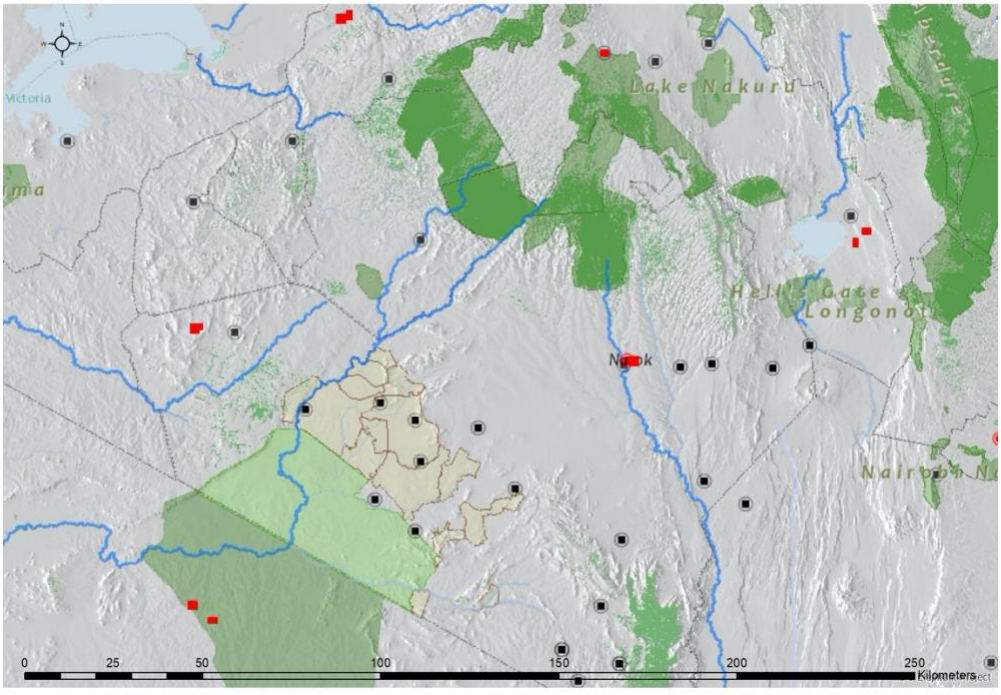
Mara – Serengeti



Mau Forest



ENVIRONMENT: Burn/Fire Areas



Red blocks indicate burn areas as measured by NASA's FIRMS dataset during the period Feb 1 2020 – Mar 1 2020. Accessed through Google Earth Engine.