Protecting elephants to conserve the greater Mara ecosystem
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MEP January 2020 Report

The river flowing over the Mara bridge in January photographed from the air.

GENERAL

Heavy rains persist in the Mara ecosystem and although the wildlife is very happy, 10 camps along the Talek River have been evacuated and many roads have been closed. The bridge across the Mara River in Mararienta has been impassable for much of the month and the southern baily bridge has also been impassable for several days. The Talek gate has also been officially closed. From the air one can see that large portions of the Mara are shallow swamps. For our rapid response teams, it has been a challenge to get around, but the helicopter has been a great help with logistics this month.

The ivory seized during a MEP intelligence operation on January 2 with three suspects arrested.

2020 was kicked off with two prominent successful operations by the MEP intelligence team that led to the recovery of a total of 81 kg of ivory and the arrest of four suspects. The year also began with Kenya Wildlife Service requesting Mara Elephant Project to collar two elephants on the southern coast of Kenya on the 2nd and 3rd. The Shimba/ Mwaluganje ecosystem has been hit hard by poaching and continues to see high levels of conflict, which is why collaring two elephants in the ecosystem was so vital. This area is in need of urgent help and contingent on funding, MEP hopes to roll out the MEP Method to protect elephants in the area.

Dr. Jake Wall and KWS Veterinarian Dr. Michael Njoroge collaring one of the elephants collared in Shimba Hills on January 2 and 3.

The new Sheldrick Wildlife Trust Mau De-Snaring Unit and Loita team's passing out parade was well attended by Police, Administration, Forestry, the cadet's families, and over 500 community members. Both teams were deployed in late 2019 and are already having an impact.

MEP CEO Marc Goss at the passing out parade.

Mara Elephant Project rangers experienced some resistance to their presence in the Naroosora area. MEP management attended a large community meeting to better relations in the area and our partners at the District Officer and OCS from the Kenya Police have been helpful to addressing the community's concerns. The MEP ranger team continues to operate in the area and have been successful in stopping the cedar logging.

SECURITY & ANTI-POACHING

During aerial patrols conducted with Kenya Wildlife Service in Shimba Hills National Reserve, there was evidence that poaching is still an issue in this part of Kenya and reiterates the need to start a rapid response team in that area. We will be working on a proposal to do this. The plan is to purchase a new vehicle, kit and hire nine community members from that

area and train them up in the Mara while we send nine of our seasoned rangers and a commander to that area.

Our intelligence team continues to shine and the two busts they led this month are evidence of their continued effectiveness. Their first bust was near the main road heading to Nairobi from Narok in Ntulele where one suspect was arrested with four tusks weighing 39 kg. The second bust of 42 kg of ivory was of a Ugandan who also had a huge sack of wildlife bones. This bust made the national news in Kenya.

The arrest on January 23 of a Ugandan with wildlife bones and 42 kg of ivory.

SITREP:
Mara Elephant Project rangers were very busy to start the year. Beyond the two large ivory seizures and subsequent arrests, MEP rangers also destroyed 15 kilns, confiscated 39 bags of charcoal, 3,610 pieces of cedar, 30 illegal logged posts and arrested five suspects for illegal logging or charcoal production in the Loita area, mostly the Nyakweri Forest. The Sheldrick Wildlife Trust Mau De-Snaring Unit destroyed 14 kilns, 21 bags of charcoal, seized 5 kg of bushbuck meat and arrested three suspects for bushmeat poaching, recovered 440 pieces of cedar, one power saw, 45 pieces of cypress, 12 illegal posts and arrested 10 suspects for illegal logging or charcoaling. Finally, a total of seven snares were removed and one suspect was arrested along with a power saw cutting down trees. The Karen Blixen Camp Trust helicopter was essential to an aerial reconnaissance mission that spotted two

lorries in the Loita Forest loaded with cedar posts. The Loita ranger team intercepted the lorries and all of the posts were transported to the Naroosura police station.

The 300 cedar posts recovered by the MEP Loita ranger team on January 7.

A kiln destroyed by the SWT Mau De-Snaring Unit on January 16.

The three suspects arrested for bushmeat poaching on January 27.

Bags of charcoal confiscated in the Mau Forest in January.

Human-Elephant Conflict Report:

There were 10 incidents of human-elephant conflict this reporting period. All but one were dealt with using the ranger vehicle or firecrackers. The helicopter was required in only one incident.

HEC damage recorded on January 26 in Loita.

Ranger & Vehicle Tracking:

In January, MEP rangers covered a distance of 1,230 km on foot, 6,817 km by car and 215 km on motorbike. Distance covered by rangers this month decreased as compared to previous months, which was caused by the heavy rains experienced in the Mara.

HELICOPTER

This month we have flown more than our average of 30 hours per month because of the recent floods. We provided support to our ranger teams, moved stranded tourists, attended key meetings, and patrolled some of the wettest areas by air. We also furnished the search and rescue mission of a lost woman. Unfortunately, she had already passed away from falling off a cliff, but the community was very thankful of our efforts to try and find her.

Maximus' herd photographed from the Karen Blixen Camp Trust helicopter while aerially monitoring he and Alice in the Mau Forest on January 6.

The KBCT helicopter being used during the search for the missing woman.

COMMUNICATIONS & FUNDRAISING

Mara Elephant Project ended 2019 with increased support from donors across the world. That momentum trickled into January, where we continued to see year-end gifts come in. MEP started the first quarter by applying for three different grants. We had over 100 kilograms of seed balls donated by two individuals from Seedballs Kenya for MEP rangers to distribute in the Mara ecosystem. MEP collected $937.69 from donor's support on Facebook thanks to four people who celebrated their birthdays by hosting a fundraiser for MEP. Thank you to Valerie, Hanna, Cajza and Tressa for your support. We received $13,556 through 66 individual donations via PayPal and a further $125,500 in donations, as well as $1,215 from Föreningen Försvara Elefanterna. Thank you to everyone for your generous support.

HQ hosted visitors from Richard's Camp, Asilia and Angama Mara in January, we appreciate everyone who sends passionate conservation focused people to MEP. There were incredible entries in January to kick off the 2020 Greatest Maasai Mara photo competition. Thank you to Diana Knight, Ken Conger, Alexandra Baumgart, Sascha Feuster, Mary Hayden, Romit Shah, Peter Muigai, Peter Coad, Marvin de Kievit, Antony Kitavi, Victor Kimathi, Stephen Underwood, VijayRam Harinathan, Harman Singh Heer, Margaret Bishop, David Rutter, Susan Michel, Paul Vorster, Fabrice Broche, Laura Henning, Sean McDermott, Charlotte Rhodes and Gurcharan Roopra for supporting MEP!

An entry for January in the GMM photo competition by Gurcharan Roopra.

RESEARCH

Director's Update:

We started out 2020 down in Shimba Hills where at the request of KWS, MEP deployed two collars onto elephants in the Mwaluganje Elephant Sanctuary. The Shimba elephants were badly affected by poaching in the last decade and little is known about their current distribution and range. These two collars (one on a bull and another on a female) will help give MEP and KWS an idea as to where they are travelling and how they are spending their time. We are working closely with KWS to monitor these elephants.

The rains in the Mara have been ongoing and the rivers are flowing at full capacity. We've made progress in developing the landscape dynamics database by mapping missing spatial features and collecting fence line data within Pardamat. We're also working on developing an agricultural layer and land cover map in conjunction with researchers at Grumeti. The Njia app along with a new Android phone tracking app for EarthRanger allows us to quickly collect missing layers and track our mapping team in real-time. I've spent time this month working on outputs for the Narok County Government Spatial Plan. These include elephant range maps, a speed map, a conflict and carcass map and a connectivity index map that quantifies how every part of an animal's range is connected to other parts of its range. We hope these outputs will help inform future land-planning within the county. We were able to recover the skull of our largest bull elephant – Hugo. It looks from the severe wear on his teeth that he died of old age and poor nutrition. (*see photo below*)

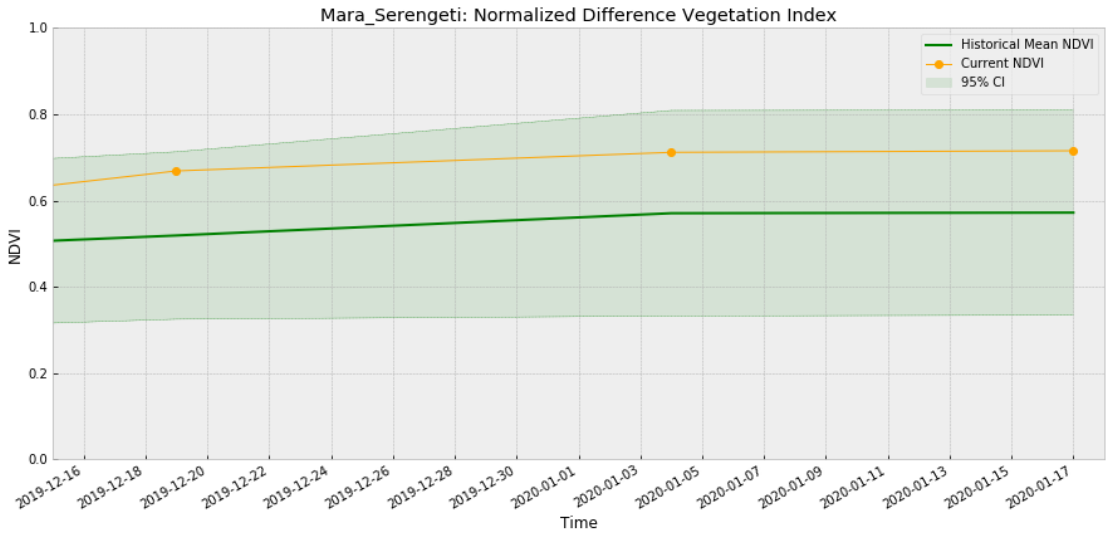
Tracking Manager's Update:
New collared elephant Gina was collared on the 2nd of January in Shimba Hills and newly collared Dicki was collared on the 3rd of January. We've seen little conflict the last month and believe that elephants are unable to cross the river right now. Ivy - one of our biggest crop raiders - has been spending her time around the MEP HQ with her herd. Lempiris proved to be a problem in January as he was crop raising in farms and breaking geofences. He met up at Kiambi at one point in a conservancy and from there stayed safely away from communities. Fitz spent his days in the forest and was moving into farmland at night. He and his herd of 65 were responsible for a large conflict incident on January 31 that caused the death of a community member. Unfortunately, Alice's collar stopped reporting on 11th of January.

MEP collared elephant Kiambi photographed by rangers while out on patrol in January.

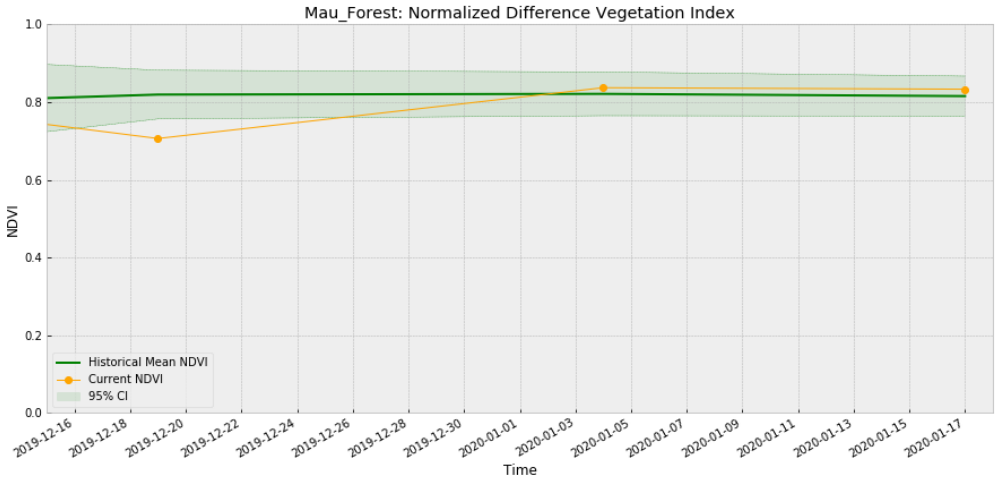
ENVIRONMENT: NDVI

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.

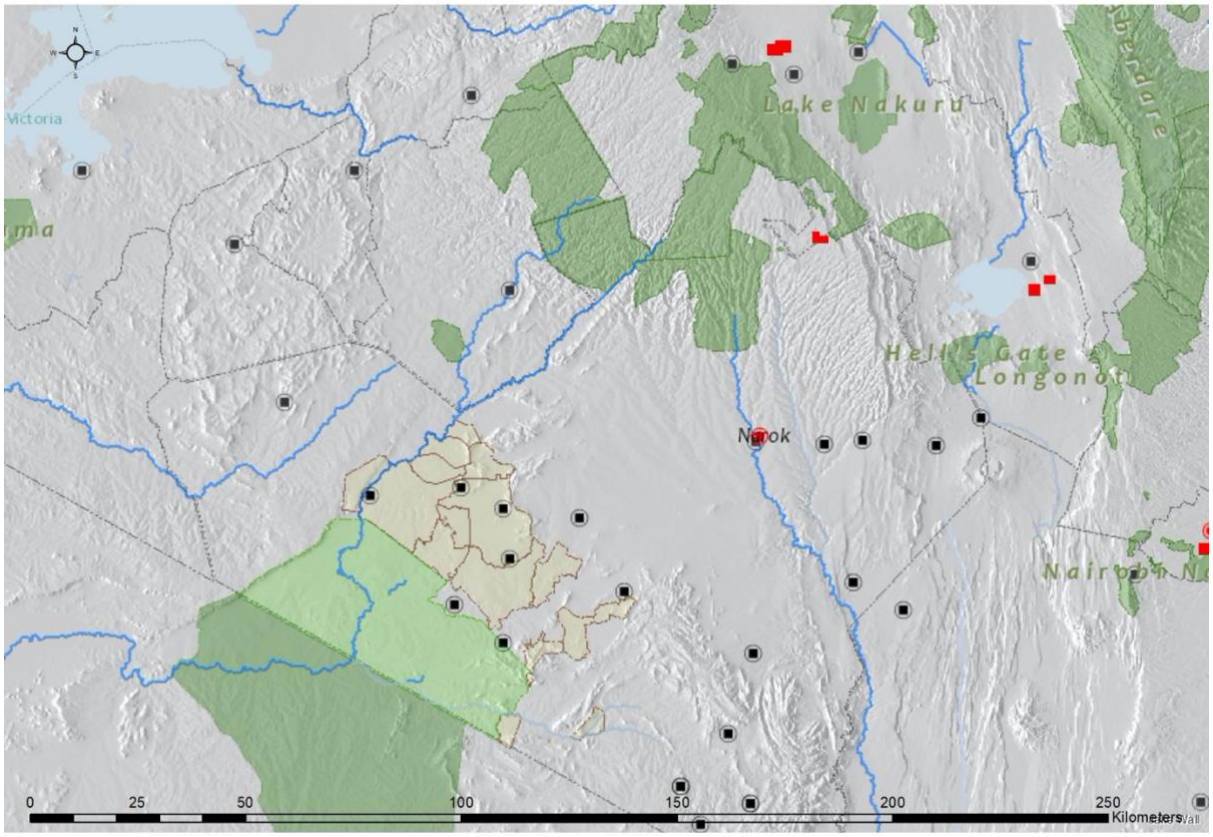
Mara – Serengeti



Mau Forest



ENVIRONMENT: Burn/Fire Areas



Red blocks indicate burn areas as measured by NASA's FIRMS dataset. Accessed through Google Earth Engine. There were no fires in the Mara or Mau during January.