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

MEP April 2020 Report

Bridges running over the river and most of the Mara was flooded in April. Photo Credit: Brian Heath

GENERAL

The most notable event this month has been persistent rain which has caused record breaking floods along the Mara River. In recent history the Mara has never experienced floods like we've seen in April. Camps and lodges along the river have been hit hard especially the private homes in the Enonkishu Conservancy, many of which had over 3 feet of water in them. Camps built on Oxbows or in between the Mara River and its tributaries meant that camp staff were marooned in a very short time as water levels rose. These camps including Ngerende in the Wild Camp, Mara Safari Club, Hammercop Camp and to a lesser extent Governor's Camp all needed to immediately evacuate any employees still on site. Luckily, camps are empty of most staff and tourists due to COVID-19; however, we were called to rescue two camp staff members from Ngerende in the Wild with the helicopter and transport them to safety. Not only have camps taken a beating during the floods, but many roads have become impassable. Three of the main bridges crossing the Mara River were impassable for a number of days effectively cutting off the Transmara from the Narok side of the county. We expect to get more rain in May, which is the last thing the tourism owners need. First the immense losses from COVID-19 and then actual damage to their properties. MEP is doing everything we can to be helpful to the during this difficult time.

A MEP ranger demonstrating how high water levels were while on patrol.

MEP is continuing our strict COIVID-19 protocols and they are starting to become the new normal. On the 6th of April, Nairobi was shutdown followed by Mombasa, Kilifi and Kwale counties for three weeks. The lockdown was again extended on the 20th, which means that no travel in or out of these areas except cargo and essential services is allowed. MEP rangers stationed in the field are making sure to practice proper hand washing technique despite their lack of access to running water. Four of our ranger stations are using a tippy tap and MEP has also built tippy taps for rangers at Mara North Conservancy and Lemek Conservancy headquarters. Additionally, we felt it was important to ensure the local community had access, so we built a tippy tap in the community area of Manyatta and at the entrance to Mara Elephant Project headquarters.

MEP teamed up with The Maa Trust this month to distribute food parcels to 637 families who work for them to make beaded artifacts and produce honey for sale in camps who have directly lost their livelihoods overnight. This project was funded by our main supporter the Sidekick Foundation and has made a huge difference to these families. All indications are that the situation is going to get worse and MEP will be looking for ways to improve food security in the rural communities we work in.

MEP sent staff and a vehicle to help The Maa Trust with distribution of food packages.

In May, we plan to distribute 800 kg of Dombeya and Cedar seedballs on land slides in the Mau and logged areas in the Loita Hills. A generous donor supported the purchase of the seedballs from Seedballs Kenya worth $5,000.

The seedballs being packed up for MEP.

SECURITY, ANTI-POACHING & CONFLICT

MEP and the South Rift Association of Landowners (SORALO) have been sharing intelligence information on the Mosiro area where MEP collared elephants Hannibal and Napoleon reside. Due to increased poaching threats, there is an immediate need for better ranger coverage. There were increased requests from the community in the Naroosora area to help with mitigation efforts, so MEP deployed a ranger team to prevent crop raiding. The team has also been reacting to illegal logging and assisting local administration to enforce curfew rules. In the Mau our Sheldrick Wildlife Trust team has also been affected by the flooding as they cannot cross many of the rivers which are normally streams. This month they have been engaging with Kenya Forestry Service to plant trees in the Emitik area.

A normal stream in the Mau Forest was a fast-moving river as photographed by rangers in the field.

An illegal logging arrest on April 18.

Elephant herds in the Nyakweri Forest including MEP collared elephant Fitz have been frequently crop raiding. In response to this, the community's reaction to elephants has escalated so MEP partnered with Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) and sent a 4th rapid response team to this area to increase security and respond to conflict. In addition, KWS has posted rangers at MEP HQ to improve conservancy security.

In April, MEP rangers seemed busier than ever despite COVID-19 restrictions. The ranger units arrested eight suspects for illegal activities related to charcoal production or illegal logging, confiscated two power saws and 1,878 illegal posts and destroyed 12 charcoal sacks. In total, there were 11 incidents of human-elephant conflict that MEP rangers responded to in the month of April. We experienced persistent conflict in the Mararienta center this month where a group of stubborn bulls go right into the center to feed on the fruits of Warburgia Ugadensis (Elephant Pepper) trees. We have been pushing these elephants out of the center on nearly a daily basis. The other main conflict area has been in Naroosora and the rangers have been chasing elephants out of these farms at night. In most incidents, drums, bright lights, ranger vehicles and firecrackers were able to mitigate the situation.

MEP rangers responding to conflict in April as crops ripened.

Two people with a power saw were arrested on April 5 cutting cedar post and booked at Naroosora *police station.*

Ranger Foot Patrols:
In April, MEP rangers covered a distance of 1,623 km on foot, 6,802 km by car and 442 km on motorbike. Charlie team in Loita cover a largest distance this month of 353 km in Naroosura and Loita Forest.

HELICOPTER

On the 2nd we furnished an Emergency Medical Flight for a Mara Conservancy ranger who blew off several of his fingers on his right hand with a firecracker while chasing a hippo out of a community dam. It occurred when the hippo charged, and he forgot to let go of the firecracker. During the flight he was still in good spirits and said, "he thanks the firecracker as the hippo was about to kill him." Two of his fingers were amputated at Tenwek Hospital.

The ranger being handed off to doctors at Tenwek Hospital after being airlifted by MEP.

On the 4th, MEP conducted an aerial patrol of the Mau Forest where we recorded several significant landslides on steep slopes of the recently reclaimed area.

The Mau Forest landslides photographed from the helicopter.

On the 25th we rescued two staff members from the Ngerende in the Wild Camp who were surrounded by water. Luckily there was a small knoll of grass which I could land on to load them into the helicopter and transport them to safety. On the 11th of April, we conducted an aerial patrol flight in the Loita Hills and Loita Forest. In the Loita Forest we found several Podocarpus trees felled for timber production and relayed the coordinates to the ground teams for follow-up. We then proceeded to the Loita Hills southwest of Naroosora Center where several large cedar logging operations were spotted. This information was sent to the MEP human-elephant conflict team based in the area, which quickly mobilized with the police and arrested one suspect and destroyed all of the illegal posts. MEP continues to monitor for illegal activity on the ground and in the air to keep the Mara's wildlife, communities and habitat safe.

COMMUNICATIONS & FUNDRAISING

During difficult times like these, having a funder like the Sidekick Foundation is critical to ensuring small organizations like MEP and The Maa Trust continue to make an impact in the Mara. MEP's support of vehicles and staff was mentioned alongside the real stars, The Maa Trust and the Sidekick Foundation, in several national newspapers including The Insider and Talk Africa. The Maa Trust also wrote a blog thanking MEP for our help.

An employee of The Maa Trust putting food packages together.

Two tour operators highlighted MEP in April. Elevate Destinations mentioned MEP in a blog and The Explorations Company released their annual charity guide, which features two pages on MEP. Additionally, travel journalist, Mary Holland visited MEP in 2019 and wrote two articles mentioning us as an organization to support; one in CN Traveler and one published on Bloomberg. Finally, photographer Klaus Tiedge who passed away in 2019, produced a documentary about his final trip to the Mara in 2018 that featured Mara Elephant Project. On April 22, MEP celebrated the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day by releasing a blog and interacting with other organizations celebrating. MEP announced Ivy's new baby to start off April and highlighted several new donors and dynamic videos of the helicopter in action. Many posts in April were spent thanking healthcare workers, showing how to build a tippy tap or proper handwashing protocols and making sure our supporters stayed informed on MEP's reaction to COVID-19 and the changing landscape.

In terms of donor support, despite the economic downturn, we still had amazing loyal supporters reaching out to Mara Elephant Project to support our work. We must start with a donation of $78,000 from the estate of Mary and Maurice Woulfe. Mary was passionate about conservation and unfortunately passed away in early 2020. She wanted her legacy to focus on the protection of elephants and MEP is honored to be able to fulfill that for her through this donation. We received a donation from Lori Price of $52,000 to support the new Loita ranger team for 2020. At the recommendation of John Dillow, long-time friend and supporter of MEP, we received a grant of $7,500 from the J E Fehsenfeld Family Foundation to support our core operations. Elephant Cooperation supported MEP with a donation of $2,400 that went directly to increase the flying time for the helicopter during the COVID-19 crisis. We also received 57 Individual donations via PayPal totaling $11,046. Our thanks to Creatura Wildlife Projects, Angela Crisler, Dustin DiMisa and everyone else for your generous support. We also raised $153.51 on Facebook. Thank you to Renes for your birthday fundraising supporting MEP. The LEAD Ranger Program donated medical kits to MEP rangers.

MEP ranger Caren photographed with the donation of supplies from LEAD.

Including the 800 kgs of seedballs donated, we had had two more donations totaling 75 kg of seed balls from Seedballs Kenya to distribute. Thank you to Lisa Perez, Margaret and Katrina for your support of this partnership to regreen the Mara. We also had many great entries in the Greatest Maasai Mara photo competition that benefitted MEP. Thank you to David Roberts, Anna Maria Gremmo, Tracy Miller, Thorsten Hanewald, Julie Lovens, Roisin Allen, Romit Shah, Andrew Campbell, Ole Ekelund and Fabrice Broche for supporting us!

An April entry from Roisin Allen in the GMM photo competition.

RESEARCH & CONSERVATION

Director's Update:

April was again a very wet month here in the Mara. The Mara River is purported to have been as high as at any time in recent memory and possibly since the 1960's. Our tracked elephant 'Fred' was caught on the western side of the river as it rose and had to spend several weeks waiting for the water levels to subside before crossing back. The vegetation greenness index (NDVI) measured in the range of the elephants in the Mau Forest was outside the 95th percentile range of values measured historically and was generally much higher than the average across all regions that elephants are ranging.

A big focus during the month of April was to work with other research and conservation partners in the Mara to restructure the 'One Mara Research Hub' with which MEP has helped since its inception in early 2019. The inspiration for the Hub is to be a mechanism to facilitate collaboration and communication amongst researchers and conservationists in the Mara. We are working on growing the network of people involved in the hub, and from the pool of human and scientific resources, form dedicated working groups to tackle large, landscape level conservation issues. One such working group was established last November to submit wildlife-specific inputs to the Narok County spatial plan. MEP, working together with Smithsonian, KWS, WWF, KWT and other partners, has been able to advise on the locations of elephant corridors, high density core areas and less frequently-used elephant dispersal areas in the hope that these data will inform land-use planning by Narok County Government in the years to come.

We continued in April by cleaning data layers within the Landscape Dynamics database that will be used in our analysis of elephant movements across the Greater Mara Ecosystem. A Kenyan student – Ivone Masara - based at the University of Arizona, is now helping with the

data cleaning. The landDx spatial data layers are critical to a current analysis we are running on elephant spatial distribution within the Mara. I spent time in April upgrading the 'Roam' mobile app developed by Vulcan to record data more reliably in patchy network. We hope that a low-cost Android based tracking solution will help to keep better records of ranger and vehicle movements.

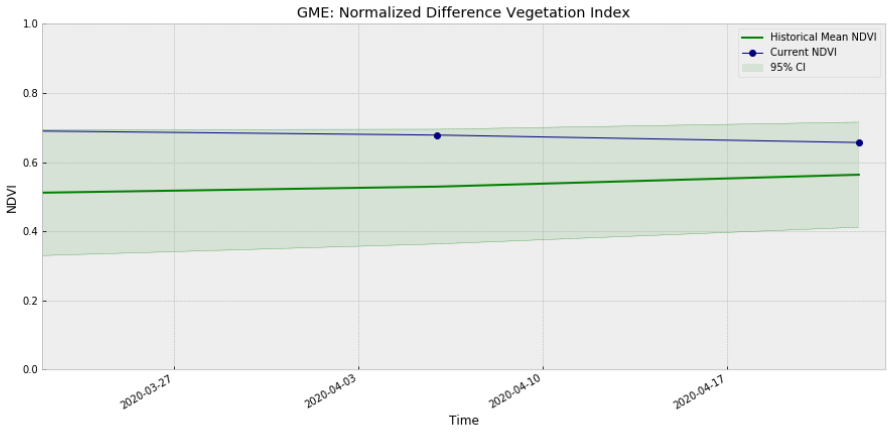
Tracking Manager's Update:
Shorty spent the whole period in Tanzania and Tressa crossed the border a few times in April. As mentioned previously, Fitz and his herd in the Nyakweri Forest were moving to into farms at night and coming back to the forest in the early morning.

Elephants photographed by MEP rangers while on patrol enjoying the long green grasses of the Mara.

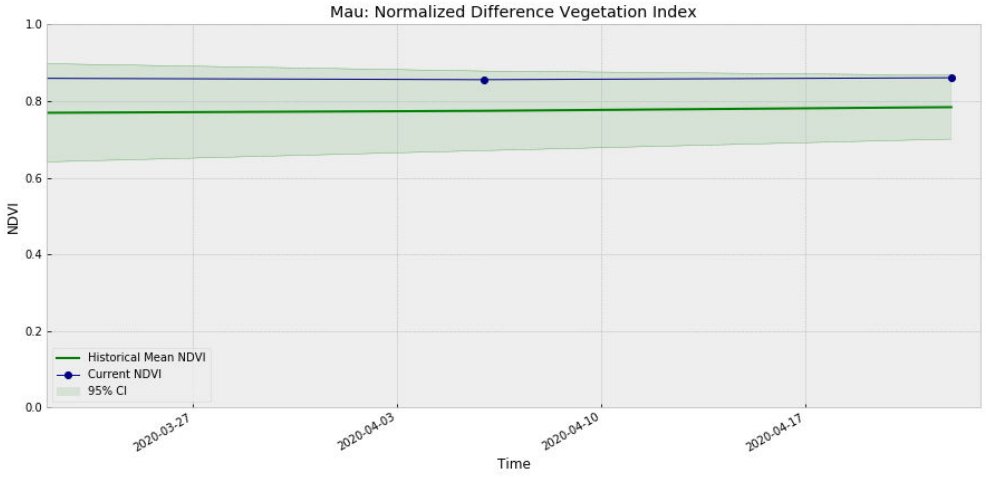
ENVIRONMENT: NDVI

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.

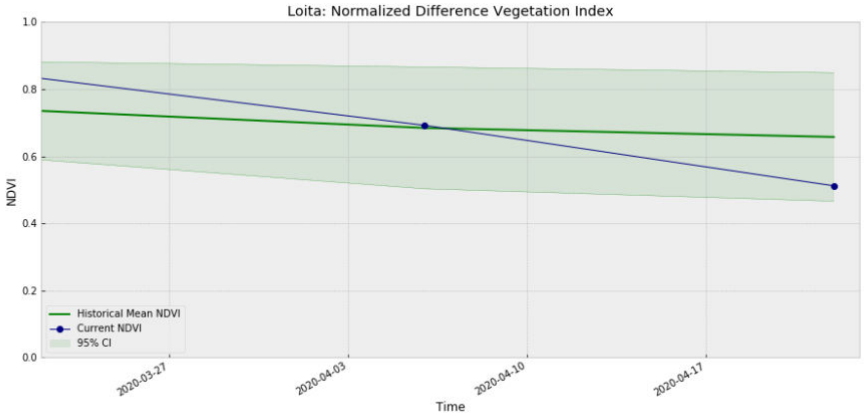
Greater Mara Ecosystem (GME)



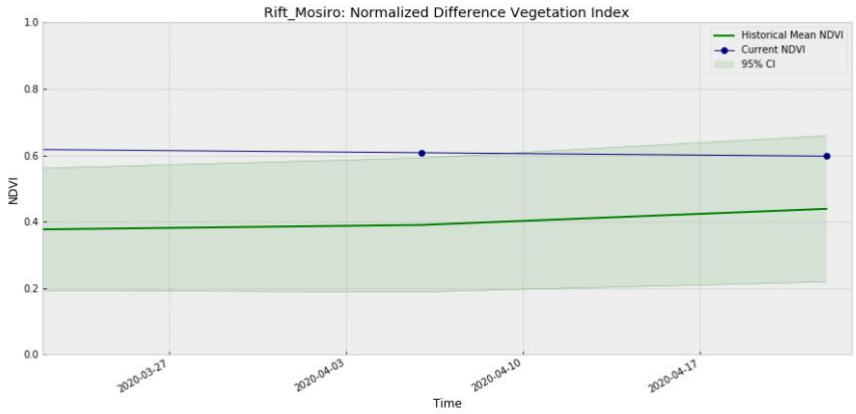
Mau Forest



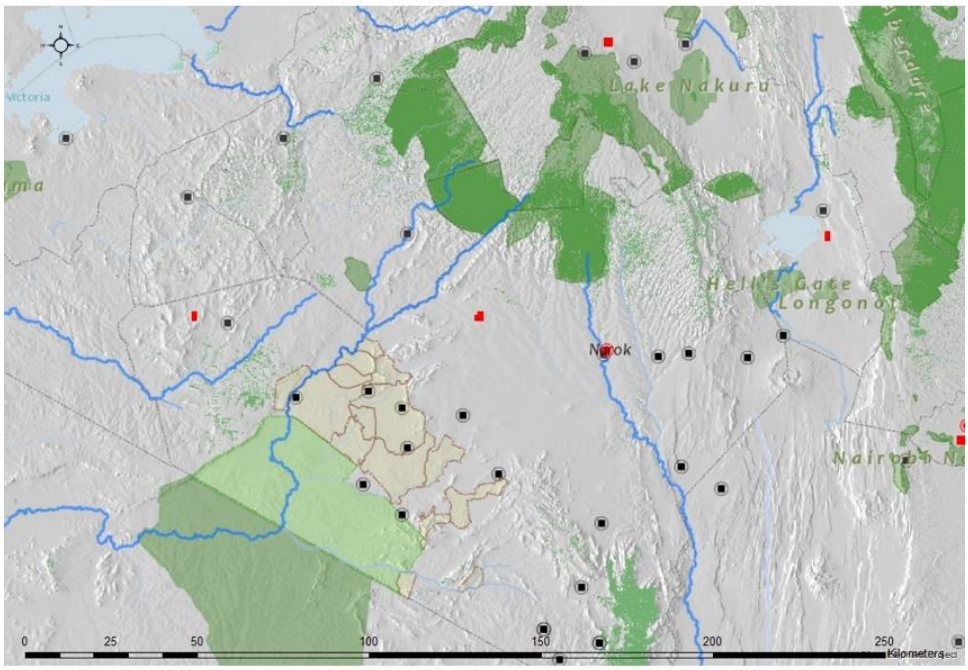
Loita



Rift Valley



ENVIRONMENT: Burn/Fire Areas



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