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

MEP July 2020 Report

On July 13, endangered wild dogs were spotted in the Mara by a MEP ranger unit.

GENERAL

Last month we reported the highest level of seizures of illegal logging since the inception of MEP. Well, this month we saw even higher levels of logging, charcoal making, and bushmeat poaching. The bushmeat poaching in the Mau Forest has increased at an alarming rate. Our partners at the Bongo Surveillance Project (BSP) also reported very high levels of bushmeat poaching using snares surrounding the bongo hot spots which is extremely worrying as there are probably less than 20 bongo antelopes left in the forest. BSP CEO Mike Prettejohn reported that in July their trap cameras only took one fleeting photo of a bongo the whole month. MEP's Sheldrick Wildlife Trust (SWT) Mau De-Snaring Unit will team up with BSP and Kenya Forest Service again next month to fight the snaring which plagues this area.

The SWT Mau De-Snaring Unit transporting seized cedar posts and charcoal on July 18.

MEP rangers removed 32 snares on July 29 in the Mau Forest.

On the 24th I was asked to take a team of journalists from K24 around the Nyakweri Forest to illustrate the level of deforestation. This piece came out one week later and can be found here. This forest is home to over 50 elephants including Kenya Wildlife Service and MEP collared elephant Fitz, sponsored by Angama Foundation. His movements are illustrating how the elephants are using the forest. During the day they don't really move and as soon as night falls, they go crop raiding in the surrounding farms which continue to encroach into the forest.

Fitz photographed during one of the conflict incidents.

From the 9th to the 22nd I took some off time and travelled to the Shimba Hills where I was able to see collared elephant Gina and her herd in the Mwaluganje Elephant Sanctuary but from the ground it was impossible to see her specifically due to the thick cover. Dicki, the male elephant, was even harder to see as he was in thick forest inside the Shimba Hills National Reserve. The roads inside the Mwaluganje have been repaired with support from

the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust which should attract more local tourism and enable management to increase patrols in the sanctuary.

On July 17, MEP CEO Marc Goss managed to capture an image of collared elephant Gina in the Mwaluganje Elephant Sanctuary.

COVID Update: The virus has reached the "community transmission" stage which means that it is now in communities and continues to spread. As of the end of July, there are 20,636 confirmed cases and 341 deaths in Kenya. During the last address the President indicated that the cessation of movement would be raised in Nairobi and Mombasa and further restricted the sale of alcohol at restaurants. MEP has changed our protocols to a mandatory 2-week quarantine at the HQ for staff coming back to work from off and leave to return to their patrol bases. While we need to do the best we can to flatten the curve and keep safe and isolated, we do need to continue with our work.

SECURITY, ANTI-POACHING & CONFLICT

The MEP intel team with Kenya Wildlife Service backup is still picking up stashes of ivory when the dealers decide to sell it. This month we had two ivory recoveries, one from the southern end of the Loita Forest and one in the Kehancha area of Transmara. The total number of kilos recovered was 18 and three suspects were arrested. The Kehancha recovery and arrest made the national news.

The suspect arrested on July 13 with three pieces of ivory.

The 11 kg of ivory recovered on July 23.

During one conflict mitigation operation near Aitong our Suzuki vehicle was damaged when one of the elephants drove its tusks through the rear side window. The helicopter was brought in to assist and the elephants were moved safely out of the area. Toward the end of the month many farmers started harvesting their maize crops and we should see a drop in conflict in farms.

MEP rangers stationed in the Kilae/Kilaye area of the Nyakweri Forest pushing elephants out of farms nightly.

In the southern area of Olderkesi near Cottars 1920's Camp we got reports of rogue bulls coming into settlement areas and also raiding tomato farms along the Sand River. We sent

the Charlie Rapid Response Team into this area to respond. We plan to collar one individual here to both monitor and react to conflict and better understand the connectivity between the Maasai Mara National Reserve along the Sand River to the southern Loita Forest.

An illegal logging arrests made on July 24 with a power saw and 25 cedar timbers.

SITREP:
Overall, in July, MEP rangers and government partners made 51 arrests: one bushmeat poaching suspect, three ivory poaching suspects and 47 habitat destruction suspects. We recovered a total of 58 snares, confiscated 30 kg of bushmeat, 18 kg of ivory and four power saws. MEP rangers destroyed 12 charcoal kilns, 21 bags of charcoal and recovered 2,580 posts, 501 pieces of timber and six logs. There were also 18 total conflict incidents MEP rangers responded to in July.

Ranger Foot Patrols:
In July, MEP rangers covered a distance of 1,024 km on foot, 10,214 km by patrol vehicle and 1,064 km on motorbike.

HELICOPTER

The Karen Blixen Camp Trust helicopter flew for 8.5 hours during the month of July and was used for patrol missions in the Mau Forest, collared elephant monitoring and brought in for one conflict incident in Mosiro.

Collared elephants Napoleon and Hannibal were involved with a conflict incident on July 5 that the Karen Blixen Camp Trust helicopter responded to.

COMMUNICATIONS & FUNDRAISING

MEP celebrated World Ranger Day on July 31 with a video featuring Wilson Sairowua and Marc Goss talking about how important rangers are to the organization. We entered rangers Caren and Zakayo for the 2020 Paradise Ranger Award, but unfortunately, they were not one of the 10 applicants accepted to win this year. We were nominated for a Glassy Baby White Light Fund grant by long-time supporter Ellen O'Connell. Those awards will be given out in August and we are anxiously awaiting the outcome. As mentioned previously, MEP was featured on a podcast supported by Terra Conservation that was officially published and posted in early July. MEP's Chairman Colin Church was featured in an article in The Star discussing his new book and his lifetime of conservation work. Mustafa Suleimaji celebrated his birthday by raising money for MEP on Facebook. We continued to see supplies from MEP's Amazon Wish List come in. Thank you to the anonymous donors and Jennifer and Walter who donated Life Straws, lithium batteries, backpacks and rain jackets for our rangers. One major push that we undertook in July was to get Charity Navigator to rate the Sidekick Foundation, Inc. and include a profile for us on their website. Many donors use this resource to do their due diligence on charities and though Charity Navigator uses GuideStar as a guide to rate charities, MEP still has not been included on that. You can vote here to help. We also successfully registered MEP on MyGivingCircle on which individuals can make a donation to the charity of their choice and also vote for organizations to receive a grant.

On July 7, Mara Elephant Project rangers distributed masks donated by Paradise International Foundation in the Naisoya area of the Mau Forest; a very remote community that lives alongside the forest. Keeping the community safe during the COVID-19 outbreak has been a top priority for MEP. We received a total of $40,038.70 in donations in July from over 123 supporters. We raised a total of $422.70 on Facebook and 88 individuals supported us through PayPal donating total of $6,393. Thank you to Ellen O'Connell, Craig & Stephanie Brater, Steve and Deborah Kerr and everyone else who has supported us financially in July. Thank you to all of the photographers that entered into the July edition of the Greatest Maasai Mara photo competition and supported Mara Elephant Project.

MEP rangers distributing masks on July 7.

Finally, one of our long-time supporters passed away this month in India. His Holiness Acharya Swamishree Maharaj visited MEP HQ yearly to meet with Marc Goss and supported our organization wholeheartedly. In addition, His Holiness encouraged society to stop poaching and killing wildlife. To the entire Shree Swaminarayan Gadi fraternity please accept MEP's deepest condolences and heartfelt sympathy.

MEP CEO with His Holiness on a previous visit to MEP HQ.

RESEARCH & CONSERVATION

Director's Update:

In July, we saw the return of the migratory wildebeest from the Serengeti. Data from tracked animals has recently shown that the wildebeest are spending less time in the Mara portion of the ecosystem possibly due to human pressures and competition with livestock. The lesser known Loita Plains migration which used to number 100,000 individuals, has been severely affected by infrastructure development and we hope that the fence data being collected by MEP across the conservancies/Loita plains will help to explain the changes in movement patterns of both elephants and wildebeest. We were lucky to have Evans Imboma join us at MEP during July. Evans is doing his undergraduate degree at Eldoret University and previously spent several months as an intern at the MEP HQ and starred in the documentary *Mabingwa*. While he waits for classes to start again in the new year (delayed because of COVID-19), we asked Evans to help support the KWS led dung

decay rate study in the Mau Forest. Measuring dung-decay rates is critical to the success of the upcoming dung survey that will estimate the number of elephants living in the Mau Forest during October. Both of our field assistants David and Amos are working on mapping fences, roads and landcover ground-truthing points using motorbikes and our Njia app.

In late July, a Caltech student based in the US – Peter Kulits – setup an instance of Wildbook for elephants in the Greater Mara Ecosystem. Wildbook software is designed specifically for individual based identification of animals and recording encounters while in the field. Wildbook uses advanced machine learning algorithms to help identify individuals and was pioneered on species such as whale sharks and zebras that have distinctive visual markings. Attempts have been made to use elephant ear contours but so far with limited success. Peter has managed to link our Elephantbook with the MEP EarthRanger platform and is researching ways of using different machine learning approaches to help identify elephants based on visual characteristics. We are grateful for the collaboration with ElephantVoices on this project who have shared a vast archive of elephant photos and sighting records with us from the Mara.

The elephant Fred (seen here on the left with another bull on Mara North Conservancy) was the first elephant sighting we entered in the new Mara 'ElephantBook' software platform.

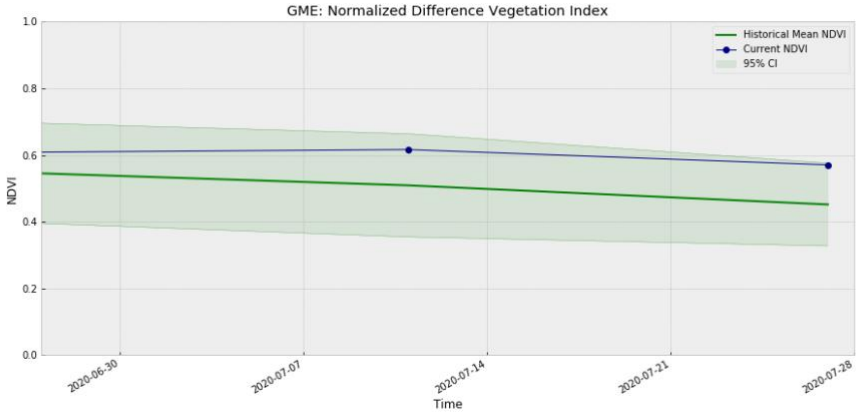
Tracking Manager's Update:
Hannibal and Napoleon continued to move together during the month of July. They were involved in a conflict incident in early July that required the MEP helicopter to respond. Ivy continued breaking geo-fences and Fitz and his herd in Nyakweri required regular conflict mitigation from the MEP ranger team stationed there. Newly collared elephant Ritan has been crop raiding nightly. Matali is a collared bull elephant that was translocated by KWS from Nairobi in May to the Reserve. His movements are being tracked by MEP and he is now moving into Tanzania.

ENVIRONMENT: NDVI

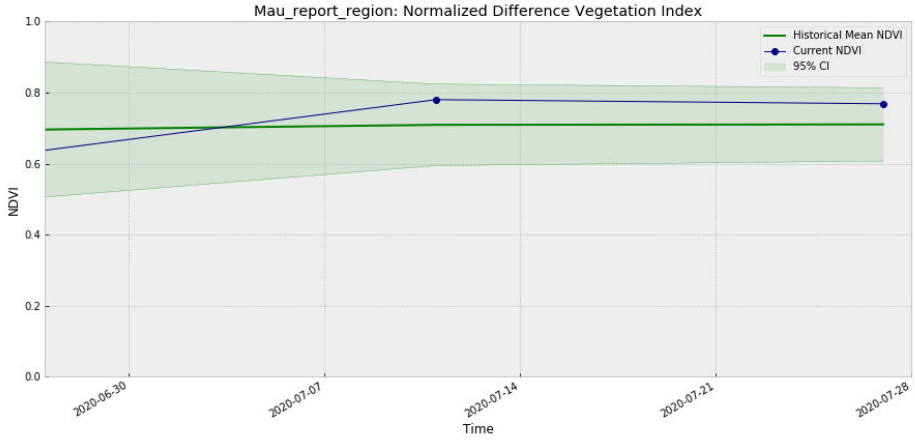
Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) is a measure of plant photosynthetic activity. Higher NDVI indicates the plant is greener. The blue trendline shows the current

value while the green area shows the 95% distribution of values centered around the green trendline from values measured back to February 2000.

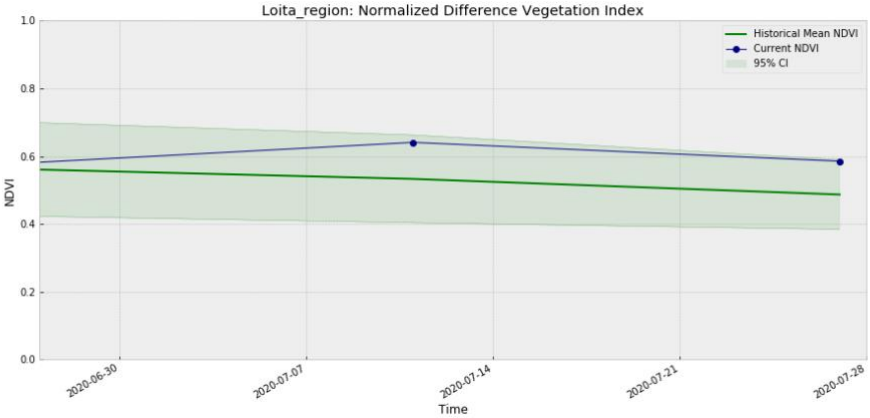
Greater Mara Ecosystem (GME)



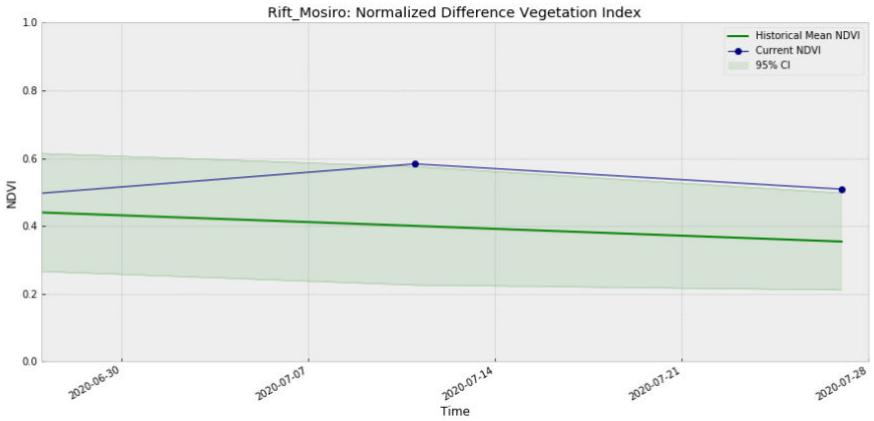
Mau Forest



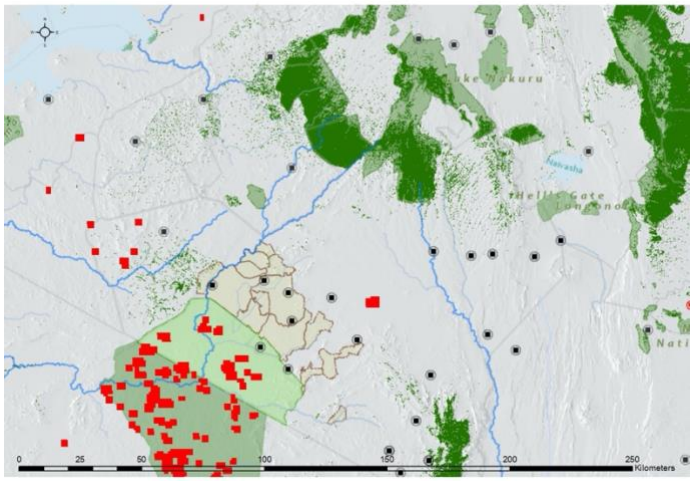
Loita



Rift Valley



ENVIRONMENT: Burn/Fire Areas



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