

MARA MONTHLY

JUNE 2009

African Jacana and Hippo
relax in the sun on the
bank of Mara River



M&C Denis-Huot

MARA CONSERVANCY CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT FOR JUNE 2009

By **Brian Heath**
GENERAL

The heavy rains continued into early June, with exceptionally heavy storms on the 1st and 2nd. The rains then subsided until the last week of June, when we had one or two storms and a few days of scattered showers. The western Mara has been exceptionally lucky, it is one of the very few areas in Kenya that has had normal or above normal rainfall. Most of Kenya has been suffering a very severe drought. Pastoralists, including the Maasai, have already suffered huge livestock losses – and we are only just starting the dry season - in most areas there is no expected rain until November. Other areas of the Mara, and some National Parks, have seen huge incursions of livestock from drought stricken areas. This comes with a host of problems – human/wildlife conflict has escalated and we have seen predators killed and a number of elephant deaths in the greater Mara ecosystem. This situation will get worse, not better, in the coming months.

The two bloodhounds, Morani and Memusi, arrived with their handlers John Lutenberg and Linda Porter on the 31st May. John and Linda immediately got to work with the dogs and prospective handlers at Ngiro-are. The training went extremely well and we now have eight competent handlers and two very well trained dogs. John and Linda left on the 27th and we can not express our appreciation sufficiently for all they have done for us.

The Chief Executive gave a talk to 18 students from Michigan State University on the 3rd.

The simmering row between the Council and Mara Conservancy came to a head on the 9th June, when some members of the Council held what appears to have been an illegal meeting to remove the Conservancy and have the management done by the Kenya Wildlife Service. This was followed-up by a letter from a lawyer purporting to be the Council lawyer terminating the management agreement. Due process was not followed and the High Court issued a stay order forbidding the Council from acting on the resolutions and/or holding any further meeting on the matter. The campaign did not stop there – the Member of Parliament brought the issue to Parliament for the third or fourth time and Parliament has given the Ministry of Local Government sixty days to investigate and respond. The matter is now in the hands of the Courts and Parliament and we hope that this will lead to a final resolution to the matter.

Thank you to Asuka Takita for the \$10,000 she raised from Japanese donors, it has gone a long way to support our work this month.

There has been some excellent progress in securing a substantial part of Koiyaki for conservation. Koiyaki is a key dispersal area for the National Reserve.

The Disney film crew returned in June and we have given them a new campsite closer to the lions that they are concentrating on – the Serena/Rekero pride.

Tracker dogs, Memusi and Morani, squeeze in the back of landrover together with their handlers during patrol.



WILDLIFE

Wildebeest started trickling in towards the end of the month, with the first small groups arriving on the 23rd. The migration should be in full swing by the middle of July. This will depend on the rain, more rain will delay their arrival.

The Serena/Rekero pride crossed back into the Mara Triangle towards the end of June. This pride had been based near Rekero for the past two months. We understand that four lions are missing from this pride on their return from the Narok side of the river - some of the lionesses were very thin and the male, “Fang” would probably not be able to hold onto the pride alone.

A three-year old rhino was reported as possibly poached on the Narok side of the river; a three-day old carcass was found, minus the horn. This followed a confirmed poisoning of at least one lion, in retaliation to the killing of a cow, in the Reserve on the Narok side of the river. An estimated 30-40 vultures were also killed in the same incident.

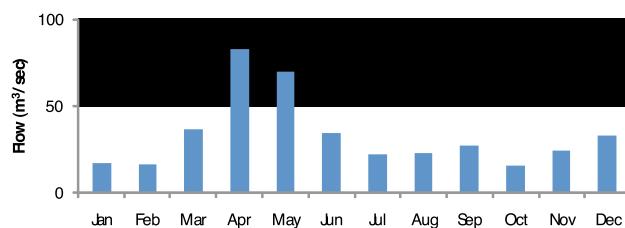
COMMUNITY

The community has been split by the political wrangling over the Conservancy – with some members openly campaigning for our removal and others staunchly in favour of the Conservancy. This could lead to a volatile situation, and possible conflict, between the different factions. Unfortunately, some camps and operators who have benefited from the Conservancy being here have joined in the anti-Conservancy campaign and would appear to be providing financial support to members of the community in opposition.

RESEARCH

We received a number of reports on the Mara River from Amanda Subalusky and her husband Chris. Amanda and Chris have been researching the river for the past year and have come up with some very interesting and somewhat alarming findings, particularly in relation to dry season flows. I quote extracts from one of their reports: “Assessing Reserve Flows for the Mara River, Kenya and Tanzania” and also from their EPA Presentations and Policy Brief, May 2009. These reports were authorized and published by the Lake Victoria Basin Commission of the East African Community

“Over the past fifty years of monitoring, the Mara River has never dried up completely. However, dry season flows have steadily decreased, while flood events have gotten larger. This shift in hydrological regime has been attributed to land-use change in the upper catchment, including deforestation of the Mau Forest and poor soil management practices on small-scale farms.

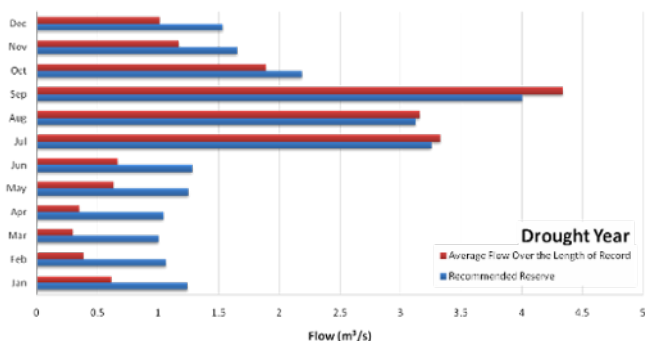
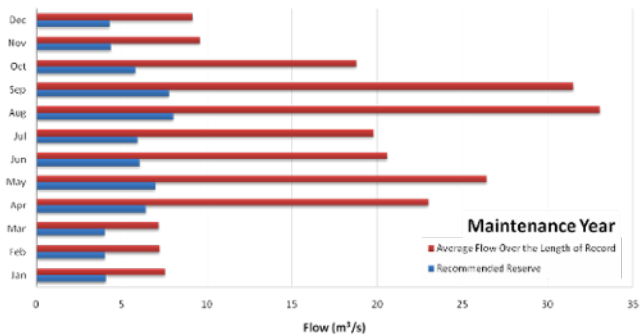


Monthly flow at EFA Site 3 on the Mara River, averaged over all the years of record (1970-1990).

Based on projections of population increases in the Mara Basin, meeting the minimum needs of people in the basin will require 0.2 m³/s of flow in 2010 and 0.3 m³/s of flow in 2020. This assumes that all residents in the basin draw their basic water needs directly from the river. These flows represent only a small fraction of river discharge and are accommodated by the larger flows required to protect the second component of the Reserve flow, which is ecosystem health.

The assessment found that, during years of normal rainfall (maintenance years), there is ample water to provide for both the Reserve and abstraction for consumptive use. Reserve flows, for example, account for 25-35% of the average monthly flow recorded over the period of record. However, the percent of flow held in the Reserve varies over the course of a year, mirroring the natural highs and lows of the system. The majority of water available for abstraction is therefore concentrated in a few months when flows are high. Far less water is available for abstraction during dry season months.

The situation is quite different during years when rainfall is low (drought years). The assessment found that drought year flows over the period of the record have dropped below the recommended Reserve during several months of the year at Sites 1 and 2. The observation that drought year reserve flows are not being met in the upper and middle reaches of the Mara may be the first clear evidence of a trend toward unacceptable alterations of the Mara River's flow regime. Upstream impacts are necessarily linked to downstream resources, and poorly managed water abstraction above the wildlife reserves will ultimately affect the downstream reaches as well.



Furthermore, the Reserve estimates in this assessment have not taken into account the environmental flow requirements of the Mara Swamp, which may be different. The Reserve also does not include flow volumes necessary to meet the extractive water needs of Tanzanian communities and industries between Serengeti National Park and Mara Swamp. Thus, flow levels reaching Tanzania must be high enough not only to sustain the Reserve but also to meet Tanzanian extractive needs.”

The reports clearly show that there are insufficient flows in drought years in the upper and middle reaches of the river to meet basic human needs. The Table below – from a Powerpoint presentation - clearly shows river flows in the Mara River between July 2008 and February 2009. It should be noted that when the river levels dropped considerably; river flows dropped to around 1 m³/sec, the levels of dissolved oxygen in the water dropped by 50%, salinity increased eightfold and water temperatures also rose. These factors probably led to a fish die off that was witnessed in late February and was also witnessed at the same time last year. This is not a healthy river – neither 2008 nor 2009 have been drought years in the Mara ecosystem.

I would like to thank Amanda and Chris, together with other researchers working on this project, for highlighting the issues and, more importantly, quantifying the changes. We hope that we can host Amanda and Chris in the Mara Triangle from August 2009, so that they can continue with their invaluable work.

STAFF

Mr Samson Lenjir reported in late May as Chief Park Warden. Samson has already made an impact; it is great to have a professional Warden in charge of the security section after months of indiscipline and political wrangling within the staff.

Eight trainee dog handlers all completed their training and passed out with flying colours. We are most grateful to John and Linda for the dedication and amazing skills in training the handlers.

The Chief Executive was supposed to take two weeks off and managed only one week.

TOURISM

Tourism has begun to pick up after a very slow low season. Tourist numbers are not as high as one would hope for at this time of year and it looks like we will have a similar high season to last year's; with excellent occupancy rates in August until mid-September, but a slow start and a rapid drop off.

We have had a number of cases of driver indiscipline as the season starts. Offences include, off-road driving, crowding and crossing the border into Tanzania. The new Park rates have a provision for fines of Ksh 10,000 per offence and this will be implemented. We will be holding a number of responsible guiding courses in late July and are most grateful to Dr Cheryl and Mr Manny Mvula for holding these workshops.

SECURITY

A total of seven poachers were arrested in June, all of them in the Serengeti, this was excellent, given that there was hardly any sign of poaching in the region. This was very surprising as June is usually a month when poaching picks up, in anticipation of the migration. The surprising decline in poaching activity was attributed to inter-clan fighting between two wa Kuria clans near the border. The total arrests to date are 1,188; over 10,500 wire snares have been collected.

One poacher, with two wire snares, was arrested near the Ngiro-are swamp on the 9th. He appeared to have missed his companions and was acting as if he was lost.

Two poachers were arrested by a combined Tanzanian, Ngiro-are and Iseiya team on the night of the 25th near the old Saiyari Camp in the northern Serengeti. The poachers were part of a group of seven who had not killed anything.

Four poachers were arrested by the Iseiya team at 7.00 pm on the 28th, near Lemai. The four were entering the Serengeti and had not started hunting. 16 wire snares were recovered.

REVENUE AND ACCOUNTS

Revenue collection in May was the lowest this year – we always have a problem meeting our financial obligations at this time of year and must rely on reserves accumulated throughout the year. Our share of revenue for May was Ksh 2.9 million, when expenditure is in the region of Ksh 7 million. It was the same in April and similar in March.

We should expect to see revenue begin to increase in July, when we implement the new Park Fees structure on the 1st July and should see a very significant increase in revenue for the high season.



John Lutenberg oversees the tracker dog training near Ngiro-are.

Revenue Collected Lowest This Year Should Increase In July With New Fees

Collected	Gate Revenue		Balloon Revenue	
	US\$	Ksh	US\$	KSH
Ticket sales	63,736.00	1,104,620.00	-	364,997.90
Non-ticket sales	525.00	124,150.00		
Balance for Distribution	64,261.00	1,228,770.00	-	364,997.90
Distributed				
Trans Mara County Council	23,233.71	465,945.70	-	200,748.85
Group Ranches	12,109.84	209,877.80		
Sub-total	35,343.55	675,823.50	-	200,748.85
Mara Conservancy	28,917.45	552,946.50	-	164,249.06

DEVELOPMENT

We put up a notice board at Purungat Bridge and another at the Serena airstrip;

We purchased sufficient culvert rings to install at least six culverts on damaged sections of the road. Work will start in July;

We cleaned all the culverts between Oloololo Gate and Purungat Bridge and would like to thank the Ministry of Public Works for their support in funding this project;

We repaired the concrete drift at Kishangaa, an important crossing on the way to Ngiro-are;

We graded the road to Oloololo Gate and the Kichwa Tembo airstrip and have started on the river road between Mara Serena and Purungat Bridge;

We cut game viewing tracks around Oloololo and also around Serena, the tractor will now work towards the Tanzanian border and should complete work in mid-July;

One of our Cheetah vehicles was overturned, the driver has been disciplined and the vehicle taken to Nairobi for repair;

We had a number of problems with vehicles and machinery in June – these have now been rectified and we hope that we will be able to repair severely damaged sections of the road in July. We plan to replace one of the Land Rovers in August; it has been giving us a lot of problems recently. Our vehicles are worked very hard and we can only expect three years use from them before we start having problems.

REPORT ON FOCUS ON JUNE

Train dog handlers	Done
Complete work on culverts along road to Oloololo Gate	Done
Start grading roads	Started and on-going
Repair damaged sections of river road	Started
Cut grass game viewing tracks	Started and on-going

FOCUS FOR JULY

- Hold responsible guiding workshops;
- Install new culverts;
- Install vehicle tracking devices in the vehicles;
- Assist in financing cross-border meeting to be held in Narok;
- Complete grading roads;
- Complete cutting grass tracks; and
- Work on resolving political wrangles.



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