

MARA MONTHLY

MARCH 2009

The savannah rainstorm forces the cats to take a shower, something they do not enjoy



M&C Denis-Huot

MARA CONSERVANCY CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT FOR MARCH 2009

By Brian Heath

GENERAL

There was an exceptionally heavy rainstorm on the 14th, over 100 mm in near Mara Serena. This completely flooded some areas and washed away sections of road. This rain continued for a few days before the return of hot, sunny days. There was another change in the weather at the end of the month, with cloudy afternoons and heavy drizzle. This should indicate the start of the long rains – eagerly anticipated in many parts of the country.

The Masai started a fire near the salt-lick when they came down to water their cattle on the 1st, the fire spread towards the Hammerkop camp and our staff had to be mobilized to put it out.

A Governor's Camp vehicle overturned near the 4 km sign at 6.30 pm on the 5th. The driver had compound fractures on his right arm and had to be flown to Nairobi the following morning.

The Chief Executive met with Mr Benson Mbwagwa of Centre for Urban and Regional Planning, to discuss a possible survey of the western boundary of the Triangle. They will do a preliminary survey, once they get Council approval, before giving a quotation. The major cost of any survey will be in erecting beacons.

March was a very difficult month with politics completely dominating the scene in Trans Mara. A large part of this focused on a faction making a concerted effort to remove the Mara Conservancy and Chief Executive. This culminated in a visit from the Commandant of the Tourism Police and policemen from the Provincial Headquarters on the 27-28th. They had heard of the problems and were concerned about the issue affecting tourism.

WILDLIFE

One elephant was found dead on the 28th February, near the saltlick. The Tanzanians had reported this elephant in the northern Serengeti: with two arrows in its hind right leg.

A young elephant was reported with a wire snare round its neck on the 5th. Dr Mijele came and removed the snare the same day – unfortunately the snare had cut through the animal's windpipe and it may not survive.

Several thousand zebra returned to the Triangle from the 8th, they continued crossing the river until it rained on the 12th.

A young male elephant was found dead near the salt-lick, it had a snare wound around a front leg. This elephant had

This snare was successfully removed from the young rhino after an extensive search for the animal over four days



Young Rhino Gets Caught in a Snare Two More Snares Removed from Elephants

been seen about two weeks previously and had then disappeared. Another elephant was found dead on the 24th, it appeared that the elephant was struck by lightning – it was under a tree that had obviously been struck.

A young rhino female, the first calf, now five years old, born to “Narushu” the female that live in the Triangle alone for years, was found with snare around her rear horn and upper jaw on the 21st. We mounted n extensive search and finally found her again on the 25th. Drs Gakuya and Mijele from the Kenya Wildlife Service came and removed the snare that morning. During the search we found that Narushu had just given birth to her third calf.

A young female elephant had a snare removed from a front leg on the 24th by Dr Mijele. The snare had cut very deep and we are not sure that the animal will survive. It was last seen on the 30th, in the same area.

COMMUNITY

The Chairman to Trans Mara County Council and four councilors visited the Mara Triangle on the 13-14th on an unofficial visit. They used the opportunity to politic with selected members of staff, causing considerable disruption, a breakdown in staff discipline and morale – as well as splitting the staff into two different political camps. At no time did the group inform the Chief Executive, nor did they meet with him. This visit seemed to be part of a well-orchestrated campaign by the local politicians, the Chairman and a few Councilors to discredit, and ultimately, take over control of the Mara Triangle.

The local community held a mass meeting in support of the Mara Conservancy on the 20th, it was attended by approximately 500 people and was covered by the press. A few days later some of the press visited the Mara Triangle to talk to the staff and see the Conservancy for themselves.

RESEARCH

The Chief Executive met with Irene Amoke, a student from Oxford Brooks University, who will be doing a PhD on “Ecological and social impacts of ecotourism ventures in Kenyan wildlife areas: A case study of the Masai Mara Ecosystem, Kenya”. Mara Serena will be one of her case study sites.

Dr Jens Jung and a team of Swedish students returned to the Triangle, after an absence of two years, to follow-up on some of the studies they had been doing in the past. We are particularly interested in the *balanities* study, to see what is causing the lack of growth in young *balanities* trees. This species is one of the most iconic species in the western Mara. It would seem that young trees protected by both a wire cage and netting grew considerably better than those that were unprotected, we look forward to the results of their study to date. The group have set up 20 much larger cages to protect the strongest saplings that were in cages and we will continue to monitor them.

STAFF

The visit by the Chairman and Councillors had a very bad impact on staff discipline and morale. We hope that the situation has been contained and look forward to staff working together again.

Mr William Deed took time off for two and a half weeks; he is due back in early April.

TOURISM

Mara Serena had an excellent first three weeks of March, visitor numbers dropped off fairly dramatically in the last few days of the month. Serena seem to be the exception; many properties in the Mara were reporting occupancy rates in the region of 10-15%, whereas Serena ended the month at around 55%. We have just heard that African Safari Club have closed their camp in the Mara, Mara Buffalo, and we can expect the closure of several other camps in the coming months.

We are concerned that a casualty of the downturn in tourism will be the fledgling efforts by the tourism industry to invest in the conservation of areas in which they rely on for tourism. This has been a major positive step for conservation in the greater Mara.

SECURITY

A total of 18 poachers were arrested during March. This brings the total number of poachers arrested to 2,146. 12 wire snares were collected during the month. Nearly all the poaching at this time of year is conducted at night, much of it for Thompson’s gazelle – it is extremely difficult to be in the right place at the right time and the rangers did well to arrest as many people as they did. We did notice an increase in fish poaching this year; several groups were coming in just to fish.

A routine patrol with our Tanzanian counterparts along the Mara River, downstream from Saiyari, arrested three wa Kuria poachers with approximately 200 kg of fish. They were apprehended at 6.30 am, after they had poisoned a number of pools – they had started at 2.00 am.

The Ngiro-are and Kinyangaga teams arrested one person, from at least 25, in an operation that started at 2.00 am and ended at 4.00 am on the morning of the 4th. The gang were hunting Thompson’s gazelle with dogs near Nyanguki and had killed an estimated 50 gazelle. 30 carcasses were recovered and the remainder were eaten by hyena.

There was an attempted stock-theft on the night of the 12th, the Ngiro-are team sent out a patrol at 3.00 am to close off any possible escape route. They missed the thieves but found tracks and, in the morning, followed and arrested one person near Masanga in the Serengeti. This person was almost certainly one of the thieves, he had a powerful torch, was not wearing the usual “uniform” of tattered and blood-stained clothes that are favoured by poachers, and his shoes exactly matched the tracks that had been followed.

The Ngiro-are team arrested two, of four, people fishing along the Mara River, near Mlima Hotel on the morning of the 15th, at 11.00 am. The rangers saw the poachers along the North bank of the river and sent people across the river to intercept them if they escaped. The poachers saw the

group crossing the river and ran back into the ambush set on the northern side. Two of them remained on an island in the middle of the river and escaped when their comrades were being arrested. The river came up in spate during the operation and we never found the poachers camp.

We have had persistent problems with a group of poachers that operate in the Triangle, but have never managed to find where they base themselves. We found the base on the 16th, the day after they had left, having killed some warthog. The base is in a most unexpected place very close to Mara Serena and had been used on several occasions. We are confident that we will now apprehend the poachers when they next come into the Triangle.

On the 20th the Ngiro-are team arrested one poacher near Kokamange, in the Lemai Wedge.

On the 21st the Iseiya team set out on an overnight patrol on the northern bank of the Mara River, opposite Saiyari. That evening they arrested one, of three, poachers who had killed a zebra. Five wire snares were recovered. The team stayed and arrested another two people early the following morning. The two were part of a group of five who were fishing along the river.

A combined Iseiya and Ngiro-are operation arrested seven poachers near the Mara River, on the northern bank opposite Saiyari, on the night of the 25th and morning of the 26th. Five people, out of 14, were arrested at 10.30 at night, as they crossed the river to hunt – they had not killed anything. The following morning two more people were arrested as they returned home after hunting and fishing all night. They had killed an impala and also had some fish. One wire snare was recovered.

REVENUE AND ACCOUNTS

The Mara Conservancy is no different to so many other organisations suffering from a downturn in tourism; this time caused by the global financial crisis. However, we continue to be very careful with expenditure and should be able to make it through to the next high season without any lay-offs.

Our income for the first nine months of the year was Ksh 77.8 2million – Ksh 17 million from donations, against a

Catfish congregate in the pool of mud. Several other fish were found dead in the Mara River during this month



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KWS veterinarian removes the snare from young elephant. The wire had cut through the poor animal's windpipe, leaving slight chance of recovery



We Have Now Caught 1,146 Poachers 50 Gazelles Killed in One Night

budget of Ksh 74.9 million. We managed to keep expenditure to within 1% of budget – Ksh 63.8 million against a budget of Ksh 63.1 million. We have been fortunate in that the Kenya Shilling has devalued against the US\$. However, this is bound to catch up with us as the price of imports become more expensive in response.

REVENUE COLLECTED & DISTRIBUTED FOR THE MONTH OF FEBRUARY 2009

Collected	Gate Revenue		Balloon Revenue	
	US\$	Ksh	US\$	KSH
Ticket sales	111,883.00	1,789,840.00	-	387,624.00
Non-ticket sales	1,153.00	2,379,935.00		
Balance for Distribution	113,036.00	4,169,775.00	-	387,624.00
Distributed				
Trans Mara County Council	40,912.03	1,953,306.65	-	213,193.20
Group Ranches	21,257.77	340,069.60		
Sub-total	62,169.80	2,293,376.25	-	213,193.20
Mara Conservancy	50,866.20	1,876,398.75	-	174,430.80

Part of the snared rhino search team taking a well earned break following the successful snare removal



DEVELOPMENT

We completed all the work at Oolololo Gate and the new pit latrine is now operational.

We painted many of the buildings at Iseiya and did minor repairs.

We repaired all the gates and barriers, they needed welding and we hired a machine for a few days to complete the work.

We were given US\$ 10,000 for the continuation of the Japanese project using ballast and plastic sacks; this time the sacks are much bigger and we did a short section along the river road to Oolololo Gate.

We repaired damaged sections of the road to Ngiro-are and Oolololo Gate.

Both tractors are out of commission: 1 with a clutch problem and the other with a leaking hydraulic ram.

(79ksh:1US\$ at the current rate of exchange)

REPORT ON FOCUS ON MARCH

Complete renovations at Oolololo Gate	Done
Open the Bridge over the Mara River	Done
Start work on dog kennels for the two bloodhounds due in late May	Order given for materials, they are due to be delivered at the beginning of April
Continue with road-works on river road	Ongoing
Touch-up damaged sections of the roads to Ngiro-are	Stopped by rain
Push for approval of ten-year management plan	On hold

FOCUS FOR APRIL

- Hold Board meeting and AGM on 17th April;
- Repair both tractors;
- Resolve political issues with Council; and
- Construct kennels at Ngiro-are;



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