

Mara Conservancy

Chief Executive's report for the month of May 2008

General

We had sporadic, and light, rain throughout the month. This was far less than normal for this time of year.

We met with two groups of Directors from the Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA) who were on a familiarization tour of the Kenya Wildlife Service, the Mara Reserve and Lake Nakuru National Park. The first group came in on the 7th and the last group arrived on the 16th, they all stayed at Mara Serena. The Chief Executive and Mr George Orr, of Earthview, were able to meet the groups and brief them on Reserve management and revenue collection.

We held a second protected area management meeting for the 10 year Management Plan on the 8th and 9th at Keekorok Lodge. A lot of the discussion revolved about a proposed zoning plan that proposes to split the Reserve into high and low use areas, with a significant price difference to use the low use area. In the end it was decided that, in order to reflect the long-term goal of making the Mara a "premier" destination, three zones would be created: a river zone, a high-use zone and a low-use zone. The river zone was included to reflect its important ecological and biodiversity value, and to ensure special status and protection. It was proposed that the low-use area only be available to recognized four-wheel vehicles and that minivans be restricted to the high-use area. The price differential would then be levied on all four wheel drive vehicles and their passengers.

The lion paralysis case generated a great deal of interest. We had people down to take additional samples and there was a great deal of interest from journalists. Most of the interest was generated by a Press Conference given by Dr R Leakey on the use of Furadan, but it was too late to see anything in any of the samples.

The Chief Executive held with meeting with Dr Kay Holekamp, from the hyena research project at Talek on the Narok side of the Reserve on the 12th. The project would like to establish a camp in the Mara Triangle to compare hyena populations, look at interactions between hyena and other predators and investigate diseases in hyenas. The project would also conduct simple environmental monitoring and the effects of fire on wildlife movement and distribution.

A meeting was held in Narok on the 13th to present preliminary findings of the 10-year management plan to the Executive Committees in each Council. Two possible management options were presented to the Narok team, as there are concerns about Reserve management being able to implement the management plan under the present structure. The Narok team rejected any possible outside management, saying that they had the capacity to manage the Reserve.

Mr Martin Forster, CEO of the CMC Group of companies, and Chairman of the Mara Conservancy, donated Ksh 150,000. We are most grateful for his continued support.

The Chief Executive attended an Honorary Warden's meeting at the KWS offices in Nairobi on the 15th. The Honorary Wardens have just been re-gazetted for three years.

We started burning our proposed block as early as was practical – it was still slightly too green and the burn was rather patchy. We have decided to delay a week and then burn again at the beginning of June.

We held a trustees meeting for the Staff Retirement Benefit Scheme on the 27th to review and ratify the first set of accounts. We discussed the possibility of seeking alternative areas for investment of the fund as it grows.

Wildlife

Dr D Mijele, the veterinarian resident in the Mara, treated a wounded giraffe on the escarpment on the 7th.

The first herds of zebra started crossing back into the Triangle on the 20th. The first crossings always provide spectacular viewing, with large concentrations of crocodiles attacking and killing zebra. All the indications are that the migration will be early this year and we can expect the Wildebeest in late June or early July.

The Manager of Little Governor's camp reported an injured elephant on the 22nd we searched for it, but were unable to locate it.

A third lion carcass was found near the Serena breakfast site on the 23rd. It was a mature female and had been dead approximately a week. A lioness from the Serena pride appeared with two very small cubs around the middle of the month. They were probably born in late April, the lioness is very thin and we hope that she will be able to keep her cubs.

Staff

Mr Johnson Leiyen, the ranger wounded in the incident last month spent three weeks in hospital and was then discharged. Leiyen returned to the Mara on the 31st, after a second check-up. He has gone home and will return to Nairobi in a month's time for a final check. His hospital bill amounted to Ksh 550,000 (US\$ 9,000) and his evacuation cost another Ksh 450,000 (US\$ 7,500). We were advised by the doctor that if Leiyen had delayed another two hours in getting to hospital, or had been driven to hospital, he would probably have died.

Mr E Nkoitoi, the Warden Operations, will take his annual leave in June.

Ms Caroline Wachira completed her professional secretarial course through Penn Foster and passed with excellent marks.

The Wardens and NCO's held a meeting on the 16th to discuss security and management issues.

One of the Anne Kent-Taylor scouts, Mr William Korose Karia resigned to become Assistant Chief of Kawai. We wish all the best in his new posting.

Mr Charles Gitau visited the Mara to resolve a number of issues relating to salaries on the 26th and 27th. Many of the staff have taken out Kentours loans that require heavy repayment schedules. We agreed that in future all loan applications will have to be approved by management, to ensure ability to repay and leave enough funds to live off.

Tourism

There has been a slight increase in the number of tourists to the Mara, although it is still well below our normal occupancy rates for May. The indications are that we can expect a reasonable, albeit lower than normal high season.

We revised the Park rules and then circulated them to the travel industry, through the Kenya Association of Tour Operators (KATO) and all camps and lodges in the Mara. We will also be holding two one-day workshops for resident driver/guides in early June to promote responsible guiding. These workshops are being supported by the UK-based Travel Foundation and will be conducted by Dr Cheryl and Manni Mvula.

Security

Only two poachers were arrested during the month. This brings the total arrests to 1,031.

Approximately 30 cattle were stolen along the escarpment on the night of the 11th. Our rangers were immediately mobilised and recovered all the cattle by 3.00 am. The cattle rustlers had at least three firearms and there was an exchange of fire between the rustlers and members of the local community following them. It would appear that the wa Kuria are beginning to arm themselves with firearms and this is bound to lead to an escalation in armed conflict and cattle rustling between the local Masai and Kipsigis, on one hand, and the wa Kuria on the other. It is important that the Tanzanian Government clamps down on illegal weapons along the Kenya/Tanzania border before these weapons are used to increase tensions between the local populations on either side of the border, or turned to armed robbery against tourists.

One Kipsigis poacher was arrested on the 18th by a combined Oloololo and community scout team on the escarpment near Kawai. He was part of a larger group, of up to 20 people who were hunting – they had killed two bushbuck. The previous day a zebra was found dead in the same area; it had been killed with a poisoned arrow.

The Ngiro-are team arrested one, of two, wa Kuria poachers in the Lemai Wedge on the 29th, as they came into the Park. They were on their way to camp in the Serengeti and had six wire snares.

Revenue and Accounts

The financial situation since January has been extremely difficult. We managed to reduce our monthly operating expenses from about Ksh 6 million (US\$ 100,000) per month to around Ksh 4.2 million (US\$ 70,000). Our average monthly collections have been in the region of Ksh 1.5 million (US\$ 25,000). Not enough to pay basic wages, let alone run the Conservancy. Without support from Dr Asuka Takita – who has raised US\$ 71,357 (Ksh 4.3 million) and WildlifeDirect – through which we have channelled approximately US\$ 35,000 (Ksh 2.1 million), we would not have been able to continue operations.

We can expect our serious financial position to continue through June, thereafter we hope that things will start improving. Our financial projections for the next six months anticipate a 20% drop in revenue over last year and a 10% increase in most of our operating costs. This means that we will have to be extremely careful on our expenditure and continue to cut back on capital and recurrent expenditure.

Revenue collected and distributed for the month of April 2008

Collected	Gate Revenue		Balloon Revenue	
	US\$	Ksh	US\$	KSH
Ticket sales	47,570.00	588,780.00	-	-
Non-ticket sales	185.00	16,720.00		
Balance for Distribution	47,755.00	605,500.00	-	-
Distributed				
Trans Mara County Council	17,226.95	221,156.80	-	-
Group Ranches	9,038.30	111,868.20		
Sub-total	26,265.25	333,025.00	-	-
Mara Conservancy	21,489.75	272,475.00	-	-

Development.

The contractors completed the main road between Mara Bridge and Mara Serena. Their work was approved on the 6th. The contractors started work on the Oloololo section on the 24th and we expect this work to be completed in early June.

We continued work on the river road towards Oloololo Gate and completed work on one more flooded section. This leaves us with one more bad section to work on in the dry season. We also graded a road joining up two roads to the river – this road will form the boundary of the River zone once we start implementing the zonation scheme.

We completed a car shelter for three vehicles at the Serena office.

We installed a rain-water tank at Serena.

Report on focus for May

Hold meeting for 10 year Management Plan on 8 th	Done
Consultants to present preliminary report to Council Executive Committees	Done
Complete Six month plan	Done
Complete staff appraisals	Pending
Meet with Board members from the Ngoro-Ngoro Conservation area	Done
Work on car shade for vehicles at Serena office	Done

Focus for June

- Grade roads in preparation for the high season;
- Cut grass tracks;
- Hold Board meeting on the 4th;
- Hold two one-day workshops for responsible guiding in the Mara
- Complete Government contract on road from Oloololo;
- Hold community and tourism sector meetings for the 10 year plan; and
- Work on housing at Ngiro-are.