VOICE OF THE MARA

Providing you with the latest news about the Greater Maasai Mara Ecosystem
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Greetings and a warm welcome to our very first issue of Voice of the Mara e-newsletter!

We couldn’t be more excited to have made it to this point where we can share our progress and milestones as well as update you on our future plans toward strong and thriving Maasai Mara community wildlife conservancies.

The start of 2017 has been characterized by transition of the Chief Executive Officer position from Helen Gibbons who diligently served and nurtured MWWCA to greater heights for three years. This has been quite an exciting and challenging phase for me as the new CEO trying to fit into the big shoe left by Helen to manage the complex program under very challenging circumstances with diverse partners with different interests. I want to sincerely thank her very much.

MMWCA as it goes through change management, it is committed to continue working in partnership on problems identified and articulated within the greater Mara ecosystem. Tremendous progress has been made towards several fronts including the signing of the Single Management Entity by Mara North Conservancy and Naibosho while Olare Motorogi Conservancy is expected to follow suit soon.

We are also actively engaging the media to showcase the threats and challenges facing the Mara ecosystem and our intervention strategies. In March, local media houses - KTN, NTV, The Standard and Citizen well as BBC radio toured Mara Conservancies and published various articles highlighting the challenges and MMWCA’s approach to tackling them. In case you missed, please find the links here:

TV reports:
Maasai women in conservation
Human wildlife conflict in the Mara
Establishment of Conservancies improving conservation

Newspaper article:
Saving the Mara through conservancies

We are also pleased to have our three years strategic plan (2017-2020) completed after a long process. Some of our newest work is informed by the strategy and already starting to develop in positive and encouraging ways.

Moreover, we have received funds from US-AID’s Planning for Resilience in East Africa...
through Policy, Adaptation, Research, and Economic Development (PREPARED) Project to roll out the use of the Wildlife Information and Landscape Data (WILD) Mobile Application in 10 Mara conservancies. The WILD application will help prevent poaching and human-wildlife conflict by improving monitoring, coordination, and analysis of anti-poaching and human wildlife conflict deterrent efforts.

In March, we relocated our headquarters to Narok from Nairobi. The relocation not only increases MMWCA’s visibility by being close to the project site but also enables closer collaboration with our key stakeholders – the Narok County Government and the local communities. In addition, the long-awaited establishment of the MMWCA Mara Base at Aitong that will host the field staff started off in earnest with a ground breaking in April with the first phase set for completion in mid-May.

Finally, I am particularly proud about our increasing focus on reaching out to landowners in critical wildlife areas but still not under the lease especially opening up the corridor that links Naibosho with Siana Conservancy to the east and to Pardamat Conservation Area to the north.

This newsletter can only cover a snapshot of the many things that MMWCA has been doing and plans to do going forward. Please follow us on our online platforms for more on the work of so many committed and thoughtful people working on the conservation of nature and cultural heritage, eco-tourism, and the enhancement of livelihoods for the local communities in the Maasai Mara.

We appreciate your support and are so happy to have you as a reader of the Voice of Mara Newsletter.

With warmest thanks,

Noah Sitati (PhD)
Chief Executive Officer - MMWCA
In a bid to improve accessibility and movement within Mara conservancies, MMWCA has undertaken a study of the existing road network and proposed ways of improving interlinkage between conservancies.

The current road network is largely poor, with road users creating alternative and illegal diversions which are deemed more travelable. In most instances, the diversions are inside conservancies land. This has led to destruction of biodiversity, prompting soil erosion and degrading the land. The study entailed carrying out a comprehensive inventory of existing key roads, identifying priority roads for maintenance, carrying out conditional survey, designing and estimating costs for improvement of the road within the selected conservancies notably: Ol Choro, Olare, Motorogi, Mara North, and Lemek). Selection of priority road networks was guided by a number of factors including stakeholder views, availability of building materials from nearby sources, and available budgets.

Inception and preliminary reports have recommended for the repair and maintenance of 61kms of a road network entwining the five conservancies. This first phase will cost an estimated $35,000, and will commence by July 2017.

It is expected that an improved road network will lead to easier and more comfortable mobility for the community and tourists alike, resulting in increased business opportunities, more revenue for communities, and an improved perception of the value of conservation by communities and other stakeholders.

In order to ensure sustainability, the works will incorporate training and capacity building sessions for selected conservancies’ staff. MMWCA additionally intends to purchase basic machinery to assist in the road maintenance and repair works. The machinery includes a water bowser, a tractor, and a tipper truck.

The importance of an established and well-maintained road network within conservancies cannot be gainsaid, and MMWCA will continue to seek partnerships with stakeholders, to raise more resources for all-time maintenance works for the existing roads.
The Maasai Mara Wildlife Conservancies Association (MMWCA) has partnered with Planning for Resilience in East Africa through Policy, Adaptation, Research, and Economic Development (PREPARED) project to help 10 Mara conservancies efficiently collect and collate data on ranger patrols, illegal activities and human wildlife conflicts.

Through the project, 227 rangers and 10 managers from Mara North, Olare, Motorogi, Lemek, Olarro, Olchorro Oirowua, Enoonkishu, Naboisho, Olkinyei, Olderkesi and Pardamat conservancies will be trained on the use of the Wildlife Information and Landscape Data (WILD) application. They will also be provided with smartphones, data bundles, network and data storage infrastructure.

**MMWCA PARTNERS WITH PREPARED TO IMPROVE WILDLIFE MONITORING**

A ranger will capture information on incidences that occur, such as the sighting of a poacher, the sound of gunfire, human-wildlife conflict

WILD is a mobile based application which tracks a patrol unit’s movement using global-positioning software (GPS) on a smartphone. Using WILD, a ranger will capture information on incidences that occur, such as the sighting of a poacher, the sound of gunfire, human-wildlife conflict, identifying a rare species, discovering a snare, or finding suspicious footprints, as well as taking and logging photographs.

This data will be relayed in real-time to a central hub and because the phones use GPS technology, a ranger’s position can be determined immediately in case of an emergency.

The initiative is the first of its kind in the Mara and is expected to revolutionize wildlife conservation by communities. According to the Wildlife Conservation and Management Act 2013, conservancies are expected to monitor and protect wildlife as well develop management plans. Protection of wildlife populations and conservancy management will be highly effective in the Mara conservancies with availability of data guaranteeing the future of the Mara Ecosystem with approximately 95 mammals and about 550 birds but now threatened by unique modern day challenges associated with rapid unsustainable human development activities, illegal resource off takes (including rhino and elephant poaching) and increasing human-wildlife conflicts.
MMWCA has commenced coordinating research and conservation activities in the Mara conservancies. Research is directly relevant to management of wildlife and their habitats as it offers important insights into questions and empirical approaches to addressing them. Over the past few months, through a partnership with Kenya Wildlife Trust (KWT), we have made several steps in our research work.

**NEW MAP FOR MARA CONSERVANCIES**

In November 2016, a mapping exercise was carried out that defines proposed primary and secondary conservation areas, shows all existing and proposed conservancies, and highlights critical wildlife areas within the Maasai Mara Ecosystem. It is expected that this map will be utilised by Narok County in its spatial plan and provide guidance for conservation activities across the ecosystem.

The mapping exercise was in response to our stakeholders proposal during the development of MMWCA’s Cultural & Natural Resource Conservation Plan in September 2015. Participants reckoned the current extent of the ecosystem has changed due to the rapid land use change in the region.

**RAPID ECOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT**

At the end of January 2017, MMWCA in collaboration with University of Eldoret undertook a Rapid Ecological Assessments in three conservancies in the Mara. The main aim of this assessment was to: develop a baseline of the biodiversity and socio-economic status of the Mara conservancies, identify potential conservation targets and recommend strategies by building on previous research as well as indigenous knowledge. These initial assessments of Mara conservancies identified a total of 180 plant and 46 medium and large mammal species, including three listed by IUCN as threatened. Of the 119 bird species recorded in the three conservancies, 8 are considered species of interest and two are near threatened. MMWCA is actively fundraising to carry out similar assessments in the remaining conservancies in order to establish a robust biodiversity baseline data.
Blockage of wildlife corridors through fencing of plots and unplanned human settlements is one of the key challenges threatening the wellbeing of the Mara ecosystem.

One such critical corridor is the Naboisho Eastern corridor, which connects the central conservancies (Naboisho, Olare and Motorogi) with the eastern conservancies (Siana and Olarro). MMWCA has stepped up efforts to reach out to landowners in these critical wildlife areas with the object of convincing them to lease their land to conservancies. This will restore and secure the areas for conservation as well as ensure unrestricted movements of Zebras, Wildebeests, Giraffes and Elephants hence avoid human wildlife conflicts.

Working with Basecamp Foundation, MMWCA has identified a total of 37 and 40 parcels in Siana and Naboisho areas respectively which totals to about 4,000 acres. The land search for these parcels has been completed and the process of finalizing land leases with the owners well underway.

The land leases upon being signed will see fences pulled down, homesteads relocated and further encroachment into wildlife corridors averted.

In the newly established Pardamat Conservation Area, we are also engaging the local communities on the importance of opening wildlife corridors. Eight land owners with plots covering a total of 330 acres have pulled down their fences creating free movement of wildlife in and out of Naboisho as well as linking to Mara North Conservancy through the Lemek hills. The Pardamat area is important to the wellbeing of the greater Mara ecosystem. It is adjacent to Naboisho, Olkinyei, Lemek and Mara North conservancies and serves as a migration route from the Loita plains that connects the four established conservancies to the Mara Triangle and then to the Maasai Mara National Reserve. Additionally, its hilly and forested terrain is cherished by elephants for browsing, which makes the area susceptible to human wildlife conflict.

Blockage of wildlife corridors is best exemplified by the Loita plains wildebeest migration. There
are observed changes in these movements, where majority of the Loita groups are now confined in Naboisho, Olkinyei, Olare and Motorogi conservancies.

Mara conservancies are small units geographically isolated from each other, a situation that may hinder the viability of this important landscape. Sound landscape conservation approaches underscore the need for connectivity of essential habitats, ecological process and movement of focal species. One of the main threats to the existence of viable populations within the conservancies is lack of connectivity.
Construction of our base in Aitong Maasai Mara is well underway with the first phase comprising of two blocks set for completion in mid-May.

The base construction supported by USAID, is being constructed using prefabricated technology to ensure that there is minimal disturbance to the environment. Furthermore, the structures have been designed to harvest rain water and will also feature a biodegradable sewer system, incorporating green innovations for a sustainable ecosystem. To counter off any possible effects of soil erosion (as the site is located on a slope) we are engaging landscapers to develop solutions that will mitigate any water run off during the rainy season.

By the end of 2017 our intention is to be fully embedded within the local community in the Mara and engage stakeholders to propel our mission - Conserving the greater Maasai Mara ecosystem for the prosperity of all – biodiversity and wildlife, the local population, recreation and tourism for the nation of Kenya.
For close to three years, MMWCA operated from Nairobi away from the project site in the Maasai Mara and our primary stakeholders - the local communities and the Narok County Government.

Toward the end of 2016, the Board resolved to relocate the office and we have now established our head office in Narok town. In Narok, our burgeoning team has adequate space to work and proximity to critical government services necessary to execute our mandate has enhanced our programme implementation activities. The Narok community has also embraced our presence and we are thriving from their goodwill. You are welcome to our new location at Lenana Estate in Narok town.

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Challenged by low literacy levels and a deeply entrenched patriarchal system, Maasai women have remained side-lined in the management of and benefits derived from Maasai Mara’s rich natural resources.

Yet, in Kakaa Naurorí who six months ago was elected to the board of Naboisho conservancy, they have unearthed a steadfast champion and a keen communicator whose involvement has quickly become a stark reminder of what they may have missed for long. “I attended several meetings with women from other conservancies where we were informed that women needed to join the leadership of conservancies,” explains Kaagaa who confesses to being inaudibly dismissive bearing in mind the entrenched male dominance of conservancies’ management and cultural prejudices unfavourable to women.

I simply decided to just listen and take back the message to fellow women.

Kakaa Naurorí

“Naboisho conservancy members at the general assembly chose me to represent women. I was hesitant but they encouraged me to accept the role,” says Kakaa. Although she had undergone some governance and leadership training organized by Maasai Mara Wildlife Conservancies Association (MMWCA), Kakaa wasn’t so sure of her role at her first board meeting. “I simply decided to just listen and take back the message to fellow women.”

After the first meeting, Kakaa attended a function at a local school where she requested the head teacher for an opportunity to make an announcement. “I knew most parents are members of Naboisho conservancy. I asked them to pass by my home so I could share in detail what we discussed at the board meeting that concerned them,” she explains.

She did not expect the many people – both men and women who turned up. “To my surprise, I discovered what made people hesitant and doubtful of conservancies was as a result of lack of information.” She now takes advantage of any community gathering to pass important messages to Naboisho conservancy members whilst seeking their points of view.

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Around the world, men and women use natural resources differently. As a result, they are affected differently by changes to these resources. Yet too often, these differences are not understood or acknowledged. This scenario is best exemplified in Maasai Mara where due to cultural practices, women have been denied access to resources, have limited power in decision-making, and their knowledge and ideas are often discounted.

Naboisho conservancy has proactively embraced gender considerations in their conservancy management. Championed by MMWCA, the purpose of gender inclusivity in conservancies’ management is to ensure that both men and women fully engage in, and equitably benefit from, conservation and livelihoods initiatives.
MMWCA’s establishment is premised on a unique approach of partnership and joint decision making by local communities, land owners and tour operators to Sustain, Develop and Create Conservancies and Conservation Areas, Facilitate, Coordinate and Implement Conservation and Social Development, and Advocate for a Better Conservancy Framework.

**Mara conservancies are managed as individual units and tend to operate in isolation of one another.**

Recently, we have made tremendous progress towards several fronts to actualize this purpose. One key milestone is the signing of the Single Management Entity by Mara North and Naboisho conservancies with Olare Motorogi Conservancy expected to follow suit soon. The signing was a result of intense discussions involving Land Owners Committees, Tourism Parties and Management Companies of the conservancies.

Currently, the Mara conservancies are managed as individual units and tend to operate in isolation of one another. This, despite the fact they cover an inter-connected and inter-dependent wildlife landscape, where the activities and events occurring in one conservancy will always affect (positively or negatively) its neighbours. It also ignores the reality that individual conservancies are too small to survive as standalone, distinct and viable conservation units.

Whilst current management is addressing a wide range of issues at the level of each conservancy, coordination at a landscape level in land use planning, law enforcement, livestock management and infrastructure development is still weak. This creates inefficiencies and substantively weakens each conservancy. Furthermore, there are a suite of differing approaches, policies and regulations applied across each of them, which complicates communications and engagement with landowners and other Mara stakeholders.

Further, in some cases, conservancies have completely outsourced management, which in our opinion compromises capacity, self-sufficiency and identity. Moreover, these conservancies remain at risk of a management vacuum if the contracted management entity departs, as well as leaving them asset poor.

Better coordination is required across all management functions if conservancies are to adequately address conservation threats. Moreover, com-
munication and engagement with landowners, government and other stakeholders needs to be simplified by a consistency in approach and a harmonisation of policies and regulations.
MMWCA is a Kenyan commitment, to conserve the greater Maasai Mara ecosystem, through a network of protected areas (conservancies and conservation areas)

Mailing Address:
PO Box 984, Narok 20500, Kenya

Phone Number:
+254 (0) 715 047 047
+254 (0) 717 047 047

Email:
contact@maraconservancies.org