

RE: Threatened Elephant Maternity in the Nyakweri Community Forest

The Anne K. Taylor Fund

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At 2 AM one night in early July, the AKTF anti-poaching team awoke to the sounds of elephants outside their tents. Their camp is on a cleared patch of grass below the Ooloolo Gate, right inside Maasai Mara National Reserve. Sometimes there are one or two elephants that walk through, the site being so close to their daily route from the Mara savannah to the Nyakweri Forest and back. This time it wasn't one or two, but an entire family herd of them. A few dozen elephants crowded onto the makeshift lawn, and this included babies the naturalists on AKTF's team reported to be only two weeks old.

Why did these elephants insist on bringing their babies so close to humans?

To know the answer, we need to understand a little about the area, especially the Nyakweri Forest and how it plays into the local elephants' life cycle. The Nyakweri is a large forest sitting atop the Ooloolo Escarpment at the northern tip of the Mara Triangle of Maasai Mara National Reserve. It is not covered by the original boundary of the Reserve; however, it is now clear that the Forest should have been included since it plays such a vital role in the lifecycles of the ecosystem's most charismatic wildlife. Specifically, the forest is a safe haven for elephant mothers to give birth and protect their babies, especially at night. Unlike the tall grasses of the Mara Triangle that provide such excellent cover to approaching predators like hyenas and lions, the Nyakweri Forest's dense canopy shades out the undergrowth and provides a considerable line-of-sight distance through the woods. This allows elephants to let their babies explore, play, grow – and sleep at night – without fear of a surprise attack.

However, as a result of its exclusion from official reserve boundaries, the Nyakweri's natural community is daily threatened by degradation from poaching and illegal logging. To get to the protection of the forest on top of the escarpment each night, elephants walk up the streambed gullies overhung with trees that leads up the hillside. It is along this corridor to safety, though, that poachers wait on top of the gullies with spears poised to hurl down onto the elephants as they pass below. In Narok County, it seems that people are manufacturing metal spears – much stronger and heavier than the traditional Maasai spear – tough enough to pierce elephant skin and stab up to a meter inside. These spears are being painted with poison to assure that if the wound itself doesn't kill the animal, the infection surely will.

Two days before the elephant herd camped out with the AKTF rangers, an enormous bull elephant was found dead at the border of the park. It was a brother of one of the Mara's most famous bulls, 'Heritage', and he himself was well known at the Ooloolo Gate, where he would peacefully stand near the road and watch cars go past. On a trip up the escarpment, though, he had been stabbed with a poisoned spear, and had managed to get

himself just inside the Reserve boundary before he succumbed. He was found with his trunk cut off and eyes still open. The poachers had fled just before being discovered, leaving the tusks, which were confiscated by Kenya Wildlife Service.

The same thing happened the next night to another majestic elephant on the same journey to the forest. In terror, and knowing somehow that the Mara Conservancy rangers and the AKTF team at the Gate could protect them, the rest of the herd fled back down the escarpment. They lay their babies down on the cut grass of the camp, where the mothers could keep an eye on them without hyenas sneaking up. And as soon as the sky began to lighten with dawn, they left and walked the rest of the way back into the savannah.

Subsequently, AKTF's anti-poaching team began patrolling the Nyakweri more frequently in an effort to protect the elephant herd that provides such a central role to the area's tourism industry. As they searched for poachers and spears, they found another form of destruction: an illegal logging camp of 200 woodcutters. These people held no title deeds to the land, nor had they been given permission by the office of the Chief, yet were cutting trees – especially the slow-growing hardwoods – for charcoal as fast as possible. The rangers suspected some of the loggers to be poaching bushmeat as well to sustain their efforts – as evidenced by a giraffe killed by lions, but its carcass clearly stripped of meat by humans – but with so many people working in the area, it is difficult to tell them apart.

The Nyakweri forest is too valuable to the local tourism industry to be destroyed. Such unchecked clearing of the land will continue to shrink habitats not only for elephants, but also the rare giant forest hog, as well as the bird species not found anywhere else in the Mara Triangle, including within the Reserve. The forest sits close enough to the lodges around the Oloololo Gate that it could easily draw eco-tourists wanting to see the rare birds as well as the site of such a vital elephant nursery.

Beyond habitat for some species, the forest also plays a foundational role in the local climate and rainfall. Forests like the Nyakweri pull moisture from deep in the ground and release it into the air through leaves; this allows clouds to gather enough moisture overhead to rain as they leave the forest. As more of the forest disappears, the region will continue to become drier: the grass and crops will suffer, the cows will have nothing to eat, and the people – most of all – will be in danger.

Only a few local authorities seemed concerned. Chief Nang'inda, whose jurisdiction includes a large fraction of the forest in which the destruction is occurring, has been exceptionally supportive of AKTF's anti-poaching efforts in the area. On several occasions, the Chief has called in the anti-poaching patrols himself. Unfortunately, Nang'inda does not have the power in his office to catch and prosecute illegal poachers and loggers in the forest.

There is a Narok County ranger station in the Nyakweri Forest. But it is currently unmanned, and even if it were occupied, more stations would be needed to sufficiently protect the entire forest. If possible, more KWS rangers could be deployed in the forest to protect the Mara's resources, especially since so many of those resources lie beyond the reserve's boundary.

Narok County government must act immediately to stem the loss of wildlife and trees in the Nyakweri Forest. If they visited the site, senior government officials would see the destruction firsthand and understand the severity and urgency of the ecological degradation in the Forest.