Mpala Newsletter

March 2025 | Issue #28

Mpala Researchers and staff participating in Race4Daraja 2025

Letter from the Executive Director

Dear Mpala Community,

This month, our traditional partnership with Daraja academy was re-launched with 24 Mpala staff and researchers cycling 30km for the annual Race4Daraja campaign. The funds raised will directly support students at Daraja Academy, an all-girls boarding school that provides exceptional students from low-income backgrounds with school fees, academic supplies, uniforms, and essential needs. By investing in education, we are investing in a brighter future.

We were also honored to host a high-level delegation from Denmark led by Minister Christina Egelund, Minister for Higher Education and Science. She was accompanied by representatives from her ministry and distinguished rectors from leading universities in Denmark. Their visit underscored a shared vision for advancing scientific research and international collaboration. Despite the demanding journey from Nairobi, their engagement and curiosity were evident. The conversations sparked exciting possibilities, including welcoming Danish researchers and students to Mpala to deepen knowledge exchange and strengthen global partnerships.

We are very pleased to announce that this month we welcomed our new research liaison officer, Dinah Ayoma. She will work closely with research teams to support the research permit applications and processing through various government departments.

Warm regards,

Dr. Winnie Kiiru, Executive Director

Updates from the Field

Meet Naserian and Laigwanai, two newly collared lions at Mpala

A collared lioness at Mpala Research Centre

In February, Mpala deployed two lion collars to help manage human-lion conflict and increasing livestock depredation within and around Mpala. A female lion was captured and collared near Ranch House. She was mating with a large male the evening of the collaring; as soon as she woke up from the anesthesia, he returned to her side and they walked off into the night together! A male lion was later collared at Soingashi Dam; he is part of a coalition of four young males who like causing trouble with livestock. After the collarings, Mpala staff voted on names for the two lions: Naserian ("peaceful one") won for the female and Laigwanani ("leader") won for the male. Special thanks to Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) and Lion Landscapes for making this possible. The collars will enable Mpala to monitor and track lions, helping to reduce livestock predation. There is ongoing research and a broader project focused on the sustainable coexistence of communities, cats, and cattle.

Learn more about this project

Mpala is (controlled) burning

Burn team setting the KLEE reseaplots on fire

The Kenya Long-term Exclosure Experiment (KLEE) has been implementing controlled burns within the different herbivore exclosures since 2013. A subset of research plots is burned annually and a second set is burned every 3 years, which they completed at the beginning of March. The team has been measuring how herbivores and fire interact to affect herbaceous plant composition, tree growth and mortality, microbial community composition, root growth, and soil carbon. None of it would be possible without the outstanding contributions of the MRC field assistants and supporting staff, including the amazing burn team that gathers each March to implement the burns!

Learn more about this project

Faces of Mpala

Featured Researcher: Frane Barbarović

Frane Barbarović is a postdoc researcher in the EON Lab at Ghent University and Rubenstein Lab of Integrative Organismal Biology at Columbia University. As a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow, he is interested in the diversity of plumage coloration and its evolutionary origins, with a particular focus on structural colors. For his postdoctoral research, he is investigating the cellular mechanisms involved in the development of iridescent strcutural color in African starlings, specifically focusing on melanosome modifications.

Featured Publications

Getting better with age: Lessons from the Kenya Long-term Exclosure Experiment (KLEE)

Corinna Riginos, Duncan M. Kimuyu, Kari E. Veblen, Lauren M. Porensky, Wilfred O. Odadi, Ryan L. Sensenig, Harry B. M. Wells, Truman P. Young

The Kenya long-term exclosure experiment (KLEE) was established in 1995 to examine the separate and combined effects of livestock, wildlife and megaherbivores on their shared environment. The long-term nature of this experiment has allowed researchers to measure these effects and address questions of stability and resilience in the context of multiple drought-rainy cycles. This article outline lessons learned over the last 29 years, and how these inform a fundamental tension in long-term studies: how to balance the need for question-driven research with the intangible conviction that long-term data will yield valuable findings.

Continue reading

Effects of large mammalian herbivory, previous fire, and year of burn on fire behavior in an African savanna

Truman, P. Young, Duncan N. Kimuyu, Eric M. LaMalfa, Chhaya M. Werner, Connor Jones, Phyllis Masudi, Robert Angila, Ryan L. Sensenig

Fire, herbivores, and climatic factors are all major drivers of savanna and grassland dynamics, and they interact in complex ways, which are still in the process of being explored. In particular, herbivores can reduce fire intensity by removal of biomass, and this could be reinforced by herbivores' attraction to recently burned sites, although grassland resilience may limit the temporal depth of such effects. Using a set of controlled, replicated experiments, this study examined the effects of year of burn, herbivory by livestock and wildlife, previous burn, and weather history on fire behavior in an African savanna.

Continue reading

Wild herbivores and cattle have differing effects on postfire herbaceous vegetation recovery in an African savanna

Sherril R. Masudi, Wilfred O. Odadi, Duncan M. Kimuyu, Charles K. Gachuiri, Ryan L. Sensenig, Truman P. Young

Fire and herbivory have profound effects on vegetation in savanna ecosystems, but little is known about how different herbivore groups influence vegetation dynamics after fire. This study assessed the separate and combined effects of herbivory by cattle and wild meso- and megaherbivores on postfire herbaceous vegetation cover, species richness, and species turnover in a savanna ecosystem in central Kenya. The study demonstrated that savanna ecosystems are remarkably resilient to infrequent fires, but postfire grazing by cattle and wild mesoherbivores exerts different effects on recovery trajectories of herbaceous vegetation.

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Mpala explores solutions to current and emerging challenges by advancing transformational ecosystems research and teaching, conserving our environment, and partnering with our community

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Our Partners

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