



BATUK launches Ksh 2.78 million Laikipia community land restoration project in partnership with Mpala Research Centre

The British Army Training Unit (BATUK) launched a Ksh 2.78 million land restoration project in the Ilmotiok pastoral community, located in Laikipia North. Implemented in partnership with Mpala Research Centre, this initiative will improve climate resilience and strengthen pastoral livelihoods. The project is set to restore 30 acres of community land for livestock grazing and food crops. 5 of these acres will be dedicated to the Ilmotiok Women's group to improve nutrition and boost household incomes. 20 hives were also donated to the Women's group to support their beekeeping business. This program combines environmental sustainability, community development, and conservation support in a climate-vulnerable region prone to drought.

"Partnerships are built on trust, respect, and genuine engagement," Acting British High Commissioner to Kenya Dr. Ed Barnett said at the project inauguration. "Today we are launching the Land Regeneration Project with Mpala Research Centre and the Ilmotiok community — a result of collaboration between BATUK, scientists, local authorities, and, most importantly, the community itself."

Mpala will work closely with BATUK to mitigate the environmental impact of military training in the area and restore pastoral land. The program will involve the planting of indigenous trees and the construction of sand dams to ensure long-term ecological resilience and food security in the region. This project seeks to enhance climate resilience, empower women who are diversifying their streams of income, and mitigate human-wildlife conflict, benefiting over two thousand residents of Ilmotiok.

"Mpala is deeply excited about this project and the opportunity it brings to the women of Il Motiok, whom we have proudly supported in their journey toward empowerment," said Mpala Community Outreach Officer Fardosa Hassan. "The secured 5-acre piece of land represents more than just space, it is a foundation for independence, dignity, and sustainable income. Through harvesting and selling hay, the women will not only generate their own livelihoods but also become the primary suppliers to their community, removing the need to source from towns. This shift places them at the heart of local economic growth. Alongside this, the introduction of a kitchen garden will play a vital role in strengthening household nutrition and overall well-being."

As part of its partnership with BATUK, Mpala will also work to improve infrastructure in local schools and dispensaries. Upcoming projects include fencing the local school, and powering the Ilmotiok medical dispensary.

Letter from Mpala

Dear Mpala Community,

April brought welcome rains and a renewed sense of life across the Mpala landscape. Fresh green grass, sprouting plants, and even the first dikdik birth caught on camera at Mpala reminded us why this place is unlike any other.

This month, Dr. Nina Wambiji announced that she will be leaving her role as Chief Research Officer at Mpala. We are grateful for Dr. Wambiji's contributions to Mpala's research program and the support she has provided to our community in advancing research work. We are working closely together with her to ensure a smooth transition over the upcoming period.

"I am incredibly honoured to have worked at Mpala Research Centre, a world-renowned institution. I want to express my sincere gratitude to the Mpala Community, the leadership, fellow staff and the researchers, students and countless individuals who have supported and collaborated with me since I joined the team as the Chief Research Officer," said Chief Research Officer Dr. Nina Wambiji. "It has been an incredible journey with new learnings, experiences and an opportunity to venture into this breathtaking savannah landscape. Collaboration is the essence of scientific progress, and I am deeply indebted to all the researchers and professionals who have inspired and challenged me along the way. I continue to reflect on the challenges that demand our attention as conservation scientists. It is my commitment to continue pushing the boundaries of human understanding, to tackle the pressing challenges that our world faces, and to contribute to the betterment of society. I say, so long with great memories etched in my mind, new friends and the beautiful land. Thank you once again for the space and time shared."

Cosmas Nzomo, Guest and Logistics Manager, who has already been working closely with Dr. Wambiji on course management, PI coordination, and research engagement will take on this role in an interim capacity to support day-to-day operations alongside Acting Executive Director Nelly Palmeris. Laboratory functions will continue under lab technician, Tevin Onyango. Compliance, permitting, and licensing support will be provided by Diana Namayi, who is currently providing maternity cover for Dinah Ayoma.

We recognize the importance of maintaining consistent support for research, and we are committed to ensuring that operations, permitting processes, and engagement remain steady during this transition. Simultaneously, the Board will be taking the opportunity to reflect on the most appropriate long-term leadership model for Mpala's research program to best support its growth, partnerships, and strategic direction going forward.

We remain grateful for the dedication, collaboration, and shared purpose that define our community.

Warm regards,
The Mpala Team

Featured Project

A group of dikdiks spotted along the Mpala landscape

Mpala Road-Based Animal Density Surveys

About this Project

Before this project launched in June 2025, the most recent published data on animal population densities at Mpala was over 20 years old. Using monthly day and night road surveys, the team generates updated, landscape-wide estimates for a wide range of species, from elephants and giraffes down to dikdiks, leopards, and hares.

The data is designed as a shared resource for the broader Mpala research community, providing important context for ongoing work such as the UHURU herbivore exclosure experiment, and serving as a baseline to monitor change over time as management decisions unfold across the landscape.

"We are very interested in sharing these data widely with other researchers. If you are a researcher who would find this data useful as a covariate in your work or as preliminary data when planning a project, please do not hesitate to reach out."

~ Megan Sullivan, Princeton University

Guest Article

Featured Guest: Dominic Clarke

First-year PhD Student at Zoological Society of London, Studying how African wild dogs are adapting their behaviour and hunting patterns in response to climate change.

A few hours old and this is their most active time so it's little more than a starting point. We head out and get out the radio tracker as we get closer – a large antenna that beeps louder when pointed in the direction the dogs currently are.

7:00am. We have a signal from the tracker which means they're close! The problem is we're in a hilly area, the signal is bouncing around and just as strong in multiple directions. They never make life easy.

7:15am. "It looks pretty wet and muddy here, are you sure the car can handle it without getting stuck?" "Yeah, don't worry, Land Cruisers can handle everything"

A word-for-word conversation in the car between myself and my passenger as we turned down what can only very loosely be called a 'road'.

7:16am. We're stuck in the mud. Whenever it rains, black cotton soil is the bane of every Laikipia researcher's existence. Turns out I was wrong about the Land Cruiser – it may be able to handle most things, but definitely not 'everything'.

After some increasingly desperate digging and overly optimistic attempts to use stones and logs to provide grip, we concede defeat and have no choice but to call for assistance. At least the view is good and we have plenty of chai with us.

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A day in the life of a wild dog researcher

6:00am. Early start. We're looking for the Phoenix pack. A pack of six wild dogs that spend most of their time within the confines of Mpala. Almost 10 years ago a devastating disease outbreak killed nearly every wild dog across the Laikipia landscape. A female dog (subsequently named Phoenix as she was the one to 'rise from the ashes') was the only one to somehow survive. These six dogs are her descendants. If we find them today, the plan is to put a 'Daily Diary' on one of the dogs for the next two months – a very special collar that records movement data 40 times a second. This allows us to identify not only where a dog has been, but exactly what it was doing (resting, running, eating etc.) at any given moment – even when we can't see it.

6:30am. Our last GPS ping tells us the dogs were only a few kms from camp, but it's already

The Faces of Mpala

Over the past sixteen years, Grace has worked on a wide range of taxa and ecosystems, from butterflies in California to mountain gorillas in Rwanda, to answer the same core question: how do individual decisions scale up to collective outcomes?

Her doctoral research examined collective movement and social foraging decisions in capuchin and spider monkeys in tropical rainforests, which brought her to Mpala in 2018 to work on the baboon project. Here, she began exploring how bilogging tools such as GPS collars could be used to study social behavior in the wild.

She currently conducts research at Mpala as a Postdoctoral Fellow on the Vulturine Guineafowl Project. Her ongoing project focuses on extending optimal foraging theory to social species and testing these ideas in the wild using long-term data.

Grace Davis
Postdoctoral Fellow,
Vulturine Guineafowl Project

[Read more about Grace](#)

By the Numbers

362 baboons collared since the project began

500+ vulturine guinea-fowl poo samples collected

4 leopards spotted in 3 days (a record high)

800 microlitres of wasp larval saliva extracted

Featured Publications

Tracking the Flight: Exploring a Computational Framework for Analyzing Escape Responses in Plains Zebra
Duporge, I., Minano, S., Sirmipilatz, N., Tatarnikov, I., Wolf, S., Tyson, A.L., and Rubenstein, D.

Using drone footage captured at Mpala, this study develops and tests a computational framework for tracking how plains zebras respond to predator-like threats as a group. By separating animal movement from drone motion using computer vision techniques, the researchers extracted individual trajectories from a herd of 44 zebras mid-escape, revealing how the group tightens its coordination and alignment during flight. The findings offer a scalable, open-source tool for studying collective animal behaviour in the field.

[Continue reading](#)

Labile Soil Carbon Heterogeneity Driven by Consumer Engineering of Aboveground Structure in a Kenyan Savanna
Forbes, E.S., Moore, D., Mantas, J.N., Schimel, J., Young, T.P., and Young, H.S.

Drawing on Mpala's long-term Kenya Long-term Exclosure Experiment (KLEE), this study examines how large herbivores such as elephants and cattle shape savanna structure, and how that structure drives carbon storage in soils.

[Continue reading](#)

Multi-species Impacts of Invasive Opuntia Cactus on Mammal Habitat Use
Stewart, P.S., Hill, R.A., Oduor, A.M.O., Stephens, P.A., Whittingham, M.J., and Dawson, W.

Using camera traps across Laikipia County, this study investigated how invasive Opuntia cacti affect the habitat use of 12 mammal species, highlighting behavioural change as a key but often overlooked pathway through which invasive plants reshape ecosystems.

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News Brief



Students Welcomed for Internships at Mpala
Category: Community & Education

Four exchange students from Saint Lawrence University undertook their internships at Mpala in April, gaining hands-on experience in research and conservation while working alongside scientists in the field. Mpala also welcomed two students from the Daraja Transition Program, giving them the chance to explore environmental science and conservation careers up close and build practical professional skills through real-world experience.



First Baby Dik-Dik to be Born on Camera at Mpala Research Centre
Category: Wildlife

Mpala is celebrating a special milestone with the first recorded birth of a dik-dik at the centre. Spotted just behind the control office, the tiny newcomer marks a moment of new beginnings and reflects the thriving biodiversity supported by Mpala's conservation efforts. [See more photos](#)



Mpala Staff Member Triumphs at Binti Run Charity Race
Category: Community

Mpala took part in the Binti Mwangaza Charity Run, a 10km event supporting menstrual health, gender equity, and raising awareness around period stigma. The team showed up in full force with 15 staff members, and Mpala's Steve Karuri Wangari was crowned race champion.



Mpala Hosts BATUK Environmental Training
Category: Partnerships

Mpala hosted a two-week integrated field training for British Army Training Unit Kenya (BATUK), focusing on applied bushcraft, wildlife rangelands, survival skills and conservation practices. 22 participants took part in the programme, strengthening collaboration whilst promoting sustainable approaches to conservation and land management.

Support MPALA

Africa's painted dogs need more than protection. They need a landscape that works for everyone.

African wild dogs disappeared from Laikipia for decades. Since 2000, the Samburu-Laikipia Wild Dog Project has worked to bring them back by fostering coexistence between wild dogs, people, and livestock entirely outside protected areas. The work is ongoing, and every contribution helps keep it that way.

When you donate to Mpala, you are directly funding the overarching research infrastructure that makes critical initiatives like the Samburu-Laikipia Wild dog Project possible.

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