

Project Update: February 2009

My last update in November 2008 described the final preparations and monitoring of the experimental fields at the heart of this large scale trial to test the efficiency of my beehive fence design against crop-raiding elephants. We have now trained three field assistants to help with this task and established a weekly monitoring routine which was working very well.

As our monitoring continued into December '08 we realised that our rainfall measurements had ceased and by Christmas time the records showed that the community had not had a drop of rain since the 15th November. This raised alarm bells with us all as the rainy season usually lasts from the end of October through to the beginning of January (often to late January as in 2008).



After returning from a Christmas break I arrived in Ngare Mara in January to find a very sorry sight. The majority of the experimental fields of crops had withered and died and a serious and widespread drought had taken its grip on our area of northern Kenya. We spent a week monitoring the whole situation and by the end of that week at the end of January all the fields of crops had died. This spells complete disaster for the community farmers who have already suffered from a failed harvest earlier in 2008 due to lack of rain. This second harvest failure was unexpected and is a serious problem for the community who were already thin and struggling to feed their families.

In mid January we also witnessed a fascinating event. Within one week ALL the bees in the occupied hives swarmed and abandoned their hives. We had about 25 beehives abandon in one week leaving only 4 occupied hives out of 150. This phenomenon must have been linked to the complete lack of surface water in the community and a lack of grass and wild flowers for nectar. I wish I knew where they have flown to - the elders have guessed towards Mount Kenya where there are constant streams and the climate is cooler.

On my return trip to Ngare Mara at the beginning of this month (Feb) I witnessed government food aid camps setting up and distributing food aid to our communities in response to the declaration of "A National Disaster" by President Kibaki at the end of January. This is as serious as it can get in Northern Kenya and unfortunately the incidents of cattle raids and banditry has risen as people are getting desperate to feed their families. Our security in Samburu has been stepped up to ensure our personal safety in the field and now we are all hoping for new rains.

As you can imagine, the problems faced by our communities far outweighs the disaster that the drought has spelt for my experimental work. With no crops there can be no crop-raids by elephants and I have been unable to test out the fence's effectiveness. All I can do now is keep all the beehives well maintained (we have weekly maintenance routines in place) and

to wait for the approaching March- April rainy season. The farmers have already started to prepare their land again for the anticipated rains and have all been actively involved in the beehive maintenance.

I'm sorry to pass on disappointing news but the one aspect of this experiment that was out of our hands was rainfall. I'm worried that this may be a sign of climate change already having its effect on this semi-arid part of Kenya. I hope you appreciate our problem and will be interested to follow my progress over the next few months when (or if) the rains arrive allowing us a new field season of data.