

# Kenya's hippos hard hit by drought

30 August 2009, by Francois Ausseill



A group of hippos bathe in a shallow pool of water in the Tsavo West National Park, in southern Kenya. Kenya's persistent and bruising drought is having a serious impact on the country's wildlife, one of its main tourist attractions, obliging the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) to feed hippos to keep them alive.

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In Tsavo West national park, a vast expanse of shrubby savannah and majestic rocky outcrops in the south east of the country, hippos are dying in large numbers and other species have been forced to change their diet.

Some 15 hippos have been found dead in the park in the past few weeks for lack of any grass to graze on around the pools where they spend their days submerged to keep out of the sun.

"For the past one month, the research team has recommended that in order to have the hippos in (good) condition... we give them four bales of hay every two days," KWS ranger Edward Njuguna told AFP.

Edward and his colleague spread out the hay on the bank of a small pool where a dozen or so hippos are splashing about, just metres (yards)

away from the remains of one of their number who died a month ago.

"It has been a challenge to remove the carcass. The other hippos are very defensive, one in particular - we suspect him to be a son of the dead [hippo](#)," Njuguna said.

Some of the park's lodges have followed KWS's lead and have started spreading hay or vegetable peelings to feed the hippos and keep them in the vicinity of the lodge to ensure that their visitors can enjoy the sight of hippos feeding as they sip their gin and tonic on the verandah.

Cedric Khayale, a KWS research scientist, explained that hippos have been particularly hard hit because in periods of [drought](#) other species that would normally graze further away come closer to the banks and eat the grass the hippos would normally eat.

This forces the hippos to look for grass further away and many succumb to exhaustion. Even a healthy hippo can only look for food in a radius of about seven kilometres from the river or lake bank.

Other herbivores have responded to the absence of grazing land by changing what they eat.

"When the situation worsens buffaloes start eating leaves and branches and elephants uproot trees and strip the bark from acacias. That's not something you see often when there's rain," Njuguna said.

The situation is by no means unique to Tsavo. In the past 12 months, the parks and reserves of the Samburu region, further to the north have recorded 38 deaths of elephants directly linked to the drought.

In the park on the banks of Lake Nakuru, world famous for its flamingoes, KWS has set up artificial water points. The lake water is too salty for the animals and the rivers that normally flow into the

lake have dried up.

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The drought has also brought about a massive and illegal intrusion of livestock into the country's national parks.

"What is happening now is the result of three consecutive failed rainy seasons," said Daniel Woodley who heads the KWS team at Tsavo West.

"The communities around Tsavo didn't get crops... Their reliance on other natural resources increased: timber, honey, charcoal, which is probably the main cash crop in drought period, bush meat, and illegal fishing."

Woodley said that in times of drought people take their livestock wherever they see a patch of green and some water.

"It's easy to manage the communities that are living outside our boundaries through community programs, rotation grazing," Woodley said.

But when the number of head of livestock hits 200,000 in Tsavo West park and a similar number in Tsavo East it has a hugely disruptive effect on the environment, he said.

Some of the cattle brought into Tsavo have been herded hundreds of kilometres in search of grass and watering points.

The more cattle are herded into the park, the more elephants move out, destroying the already poor harvests of local farmers.

"Helicopters, aircraft, rangers... We put a lot of effort into getting livestock out of the park and elephants back into it," Woodley said.

[Kenya](#) is normally hit by severe drought once every 10 to 15 years, Woodley said.

"But not on this scale. We've never had such a huge livestock invasion... nor was the population around the park so reliant on other natural resources. And nor was the country was so economically weak."

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