Herders and wildlife face an extended severe drought in Amboseli after poor short rains

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Situation report

Herders in the Amboseli ecosystem face an extended drought after the poor short rains in November brought a short respite. Most families moved their herds to Chyulu Hills and Ukambani to take advantage of the localized rains. Some herders moved as far as 150 kilometers to Mutha and areas north of Tsavo East National Park. The migrations saw a slight improvement in cattle body condition and market prices.

However, the large concentrations of animals from as far off as the Rift Valley and Narok quickly used up the localized pastures. Coupled with the cost of leasing grazing rights in Ukambani and watering their animals, most herders soon moved their cattle back to Amboseli to graze in the permanent swamps. In our February aerial count, we recorded 10,000 livestock in Amboseli National Park. Were it not for Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) granting herders access to swamp grazing under supervision, thousands of cattle would have died.

The situation for wildlife is somewhat better than livestock. The scattered short rains around Amboseli in November temporarily drew zebra, wildebeest and elephants out of the park. Coupled with the outward migration of livestock, the swamps sedges recovered sufficiently to improve wildlife body condition and prevent further deaths.

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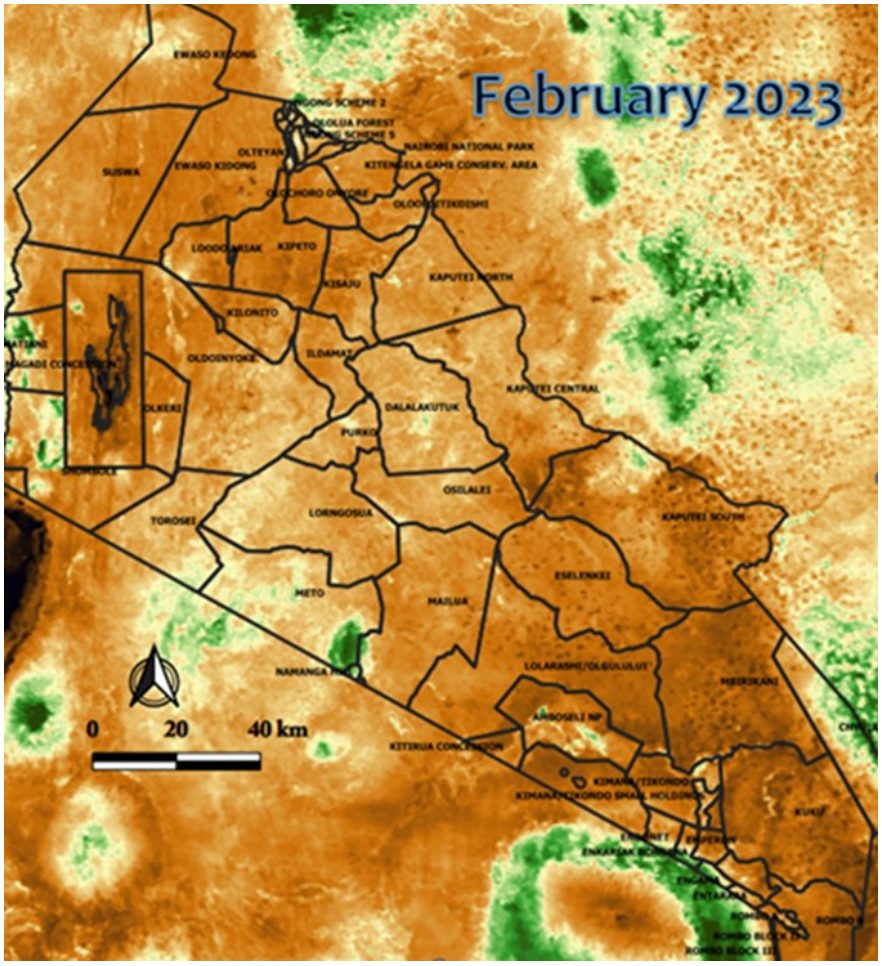

Figure 1: Despite scattered rains in December, Kajiado County remains drought-stricken, as shown in the satellite greenness map for February. Herders migrated to the localized green flushes on the slopes of Kilimanjaro, the Chyulus Hills and Ukambani to the north. The heavy concentrations of livestock from across southern Kenya and costly grazing fees in Ukambani saw herders move their cattle back to Amboseli to graze the permanent swamps in the national park.

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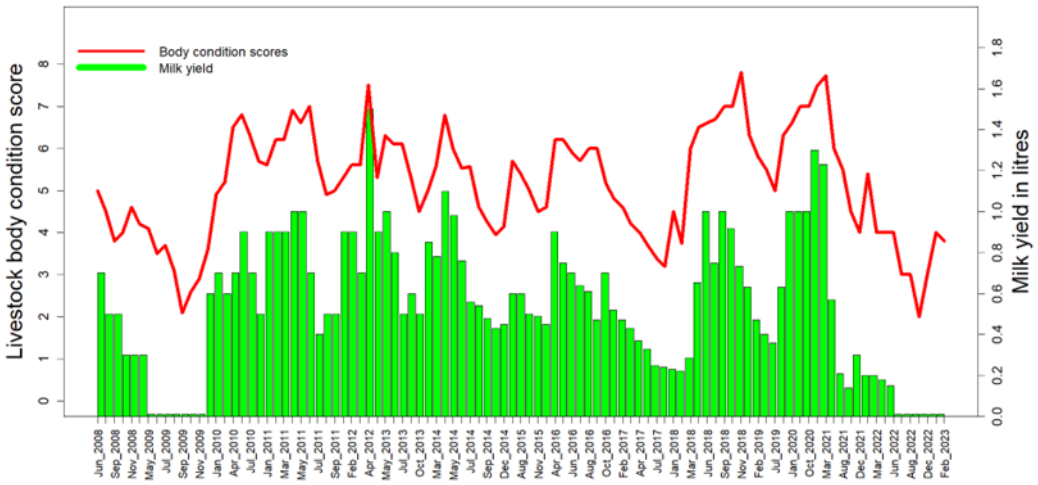

Figure 2: The short rains and migrations to localized green pastures outside Amboseli saw a slight improvement in livestock body condition in January and February. Milk production remains stalled and will continue to be low for months after the drought ends and herds recover condition.

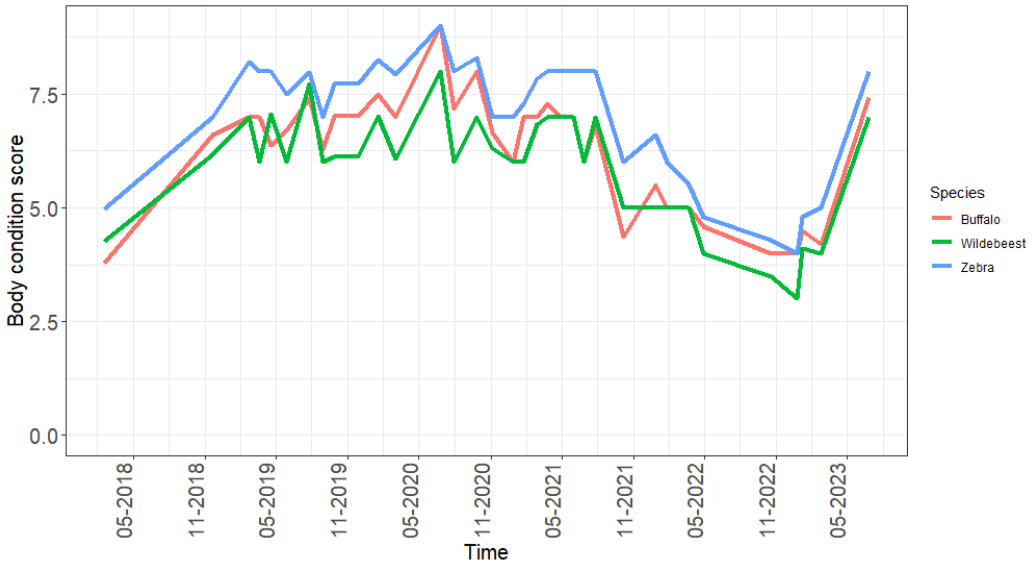

Figure 3: Variations in zebra, wildebeest, and buffalo body condition scores. Unlike livestock, wildlife body conditions improved following the December rains and the availability of swamp vegetation. No further deaths have been recorded since late November and wildlife will survive the drought until the long rains if livestock are restrained from competing for swamp grazing in the central park.

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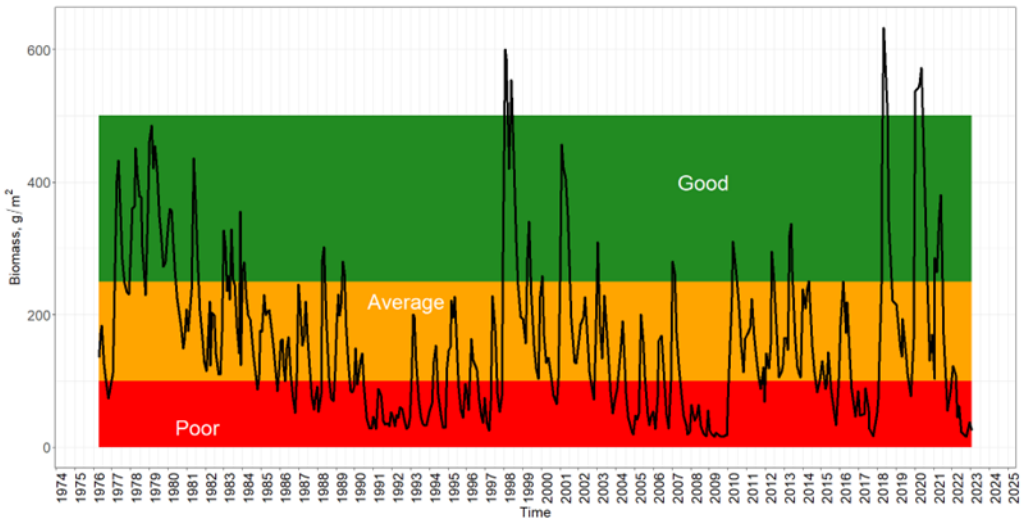

Figure 4: ACP's pasture barometer shows conditions remaining deep in the red zone following the poor short rains in November. With the long-range weather forecasts projecting weak long rains in April and May, large numbers of livestock are likely to succumb to the drought and families will face severe hunger.

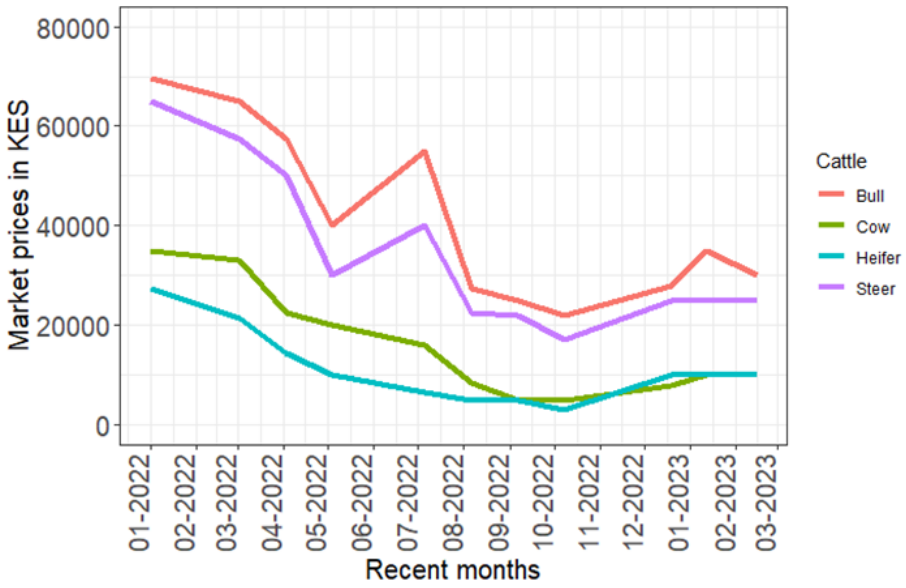

Figure 5: Despite a short-lived improvement in cattle body condition and market prices resulting from migrations to localized green pastures during the short rains, prices have leveled off again and will likely fall steeply in the coming weeks as grazing conditions worsen (Figure 6).

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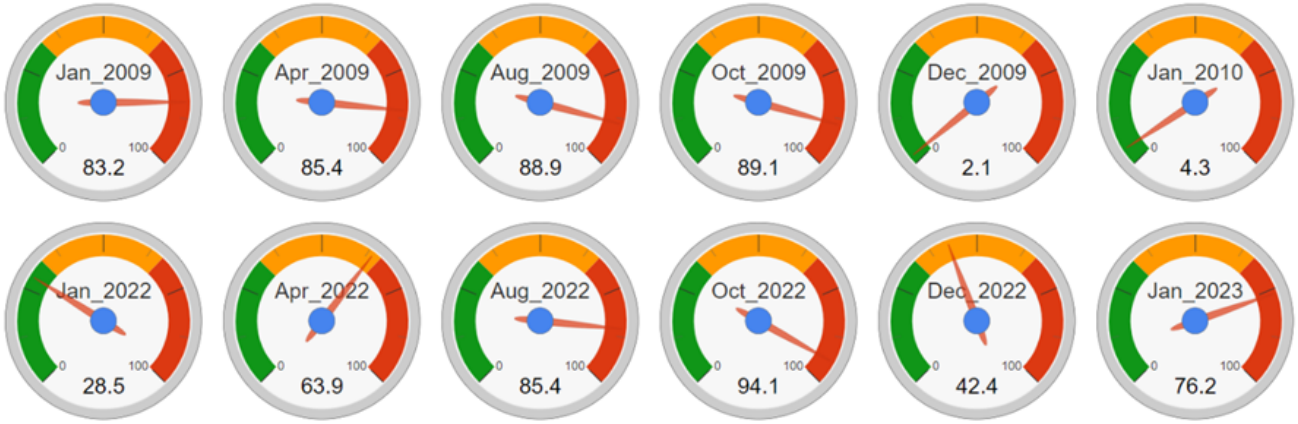

Figure 6: The grazing pressure gauge for Amboseli shows the current drought is continuing long after pasture conditions for the 2009 drought recovered. The continuing extreme conditions result from a combination of poor long and short rains in 2022 and heavy grazing by livestock kept alive by large expenditures on supplementary feeding which was lacking in the 2009 drought. The carry-forward effect of heavy grazing will intensify the drought in the coming weeks and see heavy livestock losses.

Large numbers of Maasai livestock have moved back to Amboseli and survived by feeding on the peripheral swamps in the national park. (***Photo: David Maitumo***)

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Outlook in the coming weeks

We are resuming the red alert for the current drought after the brief improvement to amber in December. This means the red alert conditions will continue far longer than in 2009 drought when heavy livestock and wildlife deaths and good short rains in November produced a flush of good pasture which ended the drought.

Given the grave outlook for livestock, herders should sell whatever animals they can and focus on their prime animals to avoid starvation and see them through to the long rains. The school feeding programs supported by NGOs in the Amboseli area should be resumed and expanded to ensure children stay in school and relieve the hardship on their families.

The outlook for wildlife is less dire, given the slight recovery in swamp grazing and in body condition. The mortality of zebra and wildebeest will likely remain low, provided the long rains arrive late March or early April. If, however, the livestock influx grows and moves from the peripheral swamps to the central portions used by wildlife, the outlook for wildlife will rapidly worsen too. KWS should ensure livestock use only the peripheral swamps to spare the central areas for wildlife and minimize conflicts.

The prolonged heavy grazing and resulting heavily degraded pastures across the Amboseli ecosystem since sedentarization began in the 1990s has severely reduced grassland productivity. Periods of severe pasture shortage have increased (Figure 4) and livestock productivity has declined (Figure 2). The outlook will worsen with the subdivision unless provisions are made to keep large areas open for livestock and wildlife grazing.

We suggest that once the rains resume, the Amboseli Ecosystem Trust on behalf of the landowners, KWS and conservation organizations take stock of the lessons learned from the current drought, restore pasture health and avoid losses to livestock and wildlife.

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