Conditions set to worsen in Amboseli and the Southern Rangelands

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Introduction

This ACP report is one of our regular series tracking the conditions of the rangelands, pastoral economy and wildlife in Amboseli. We also give pasture conditions across the southern region from Narok to Taita-Taveta which may dictate cattle movements across the region this dry season.

Our report shows that pasture and livestock conditions have not recovered sufficiently with the long rains to avert harsh conditions until the short rains late in the year.

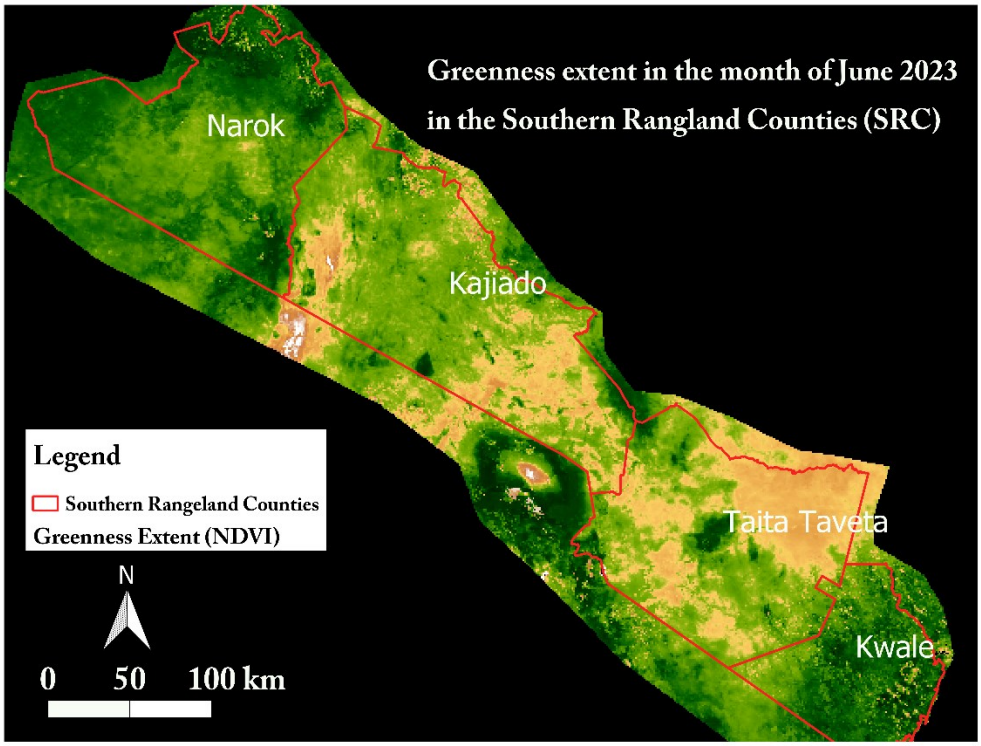

Figure 1:Sections of Kajiado around Amboseli and South Rift as well as parts of Taita-Taveta are already suffering pasture shortages. Many Kajiado herders are shifting to neighboring Narok in search of sufficient forage.

The post drought outlook

To assess the health of the rangelands in the Amboseli region, we use data collected from ACPs permanent vegetation plots monitored by David Maitumo since the 1970s, and recently by the resource assessors. Detailed information on the methods and findings are cited at the end of the report and at www.amboselimonitoring.org and www.amboseliconservation.org.

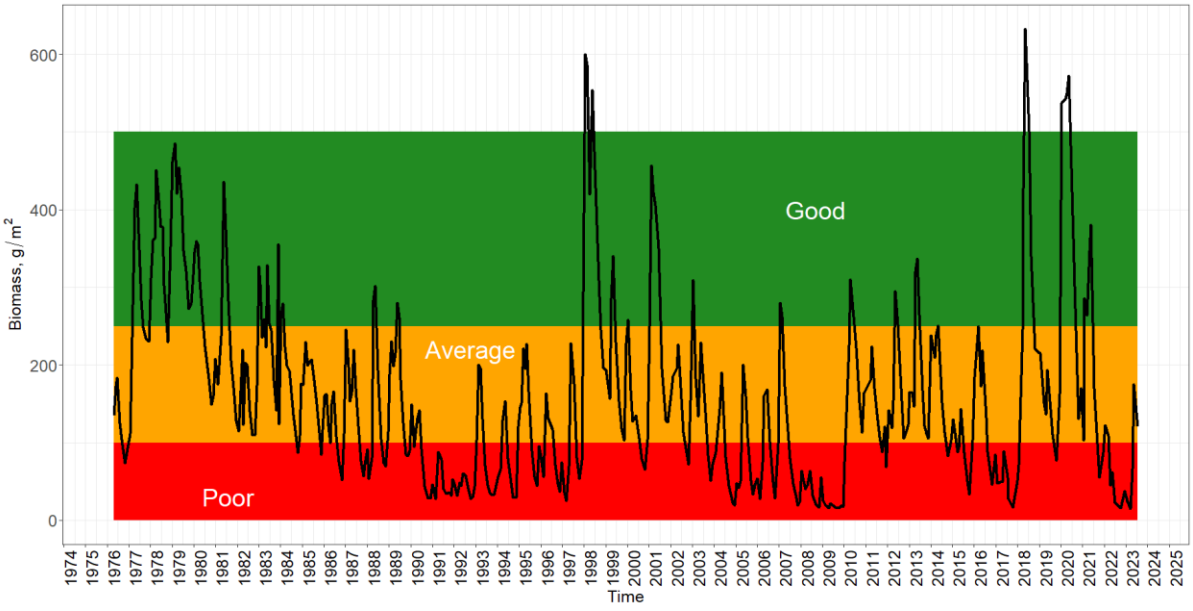

Figure 2: Monthly pasture abundance has moved into the amber zone in the Amboseli region. Measurements since the 1970s show rangeland health to be declining into the red zone more frequently. In contrast to strong pasture recovery with the rains in the 1970s, recovery since 2000 is weakening and taking longer. The poor pasture years of the 1990s, which coincided with permanent settlement, were relieved by the El Niño rains of 1998. Pasture conditions declined in the following years until the extreme drought of 2009 when over half the livestock and wildlife died. Heavy rains in 2018 and 2020 produced abundant forage but heavy grazing and a large influx of livestock led to severe pasture shortages within weeks.

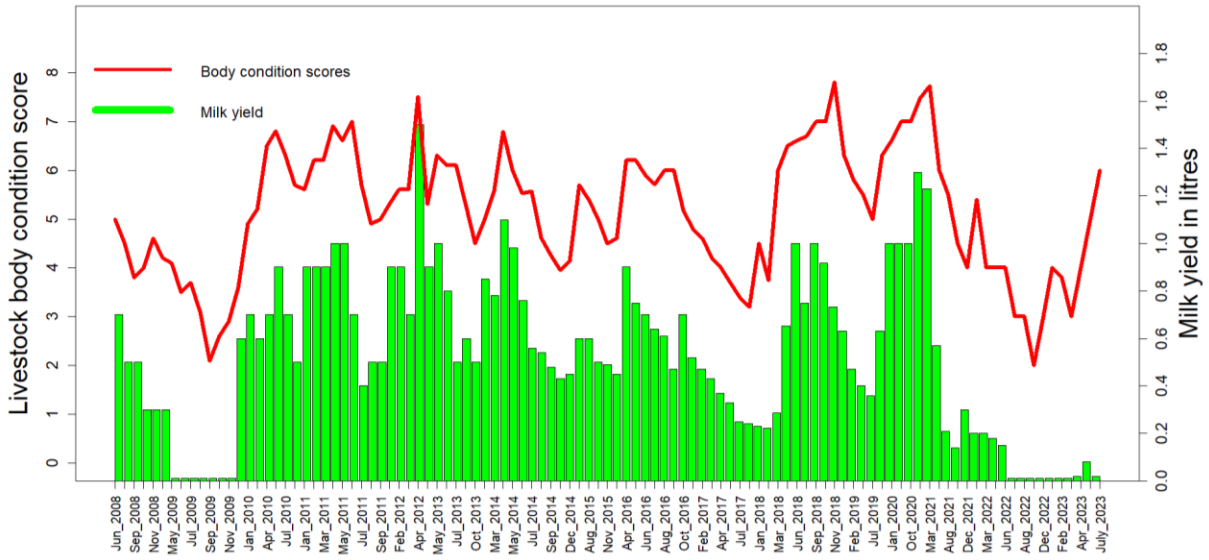

Figure 3: The impact of the 2022 drought on cattle condition and milk yields is as severe as the 2009 drought which saw 70 percent of the population succumb. The resumption of milk production will, however, take far longer due to the higher numbers of surviving livestock and slowed body recovery.

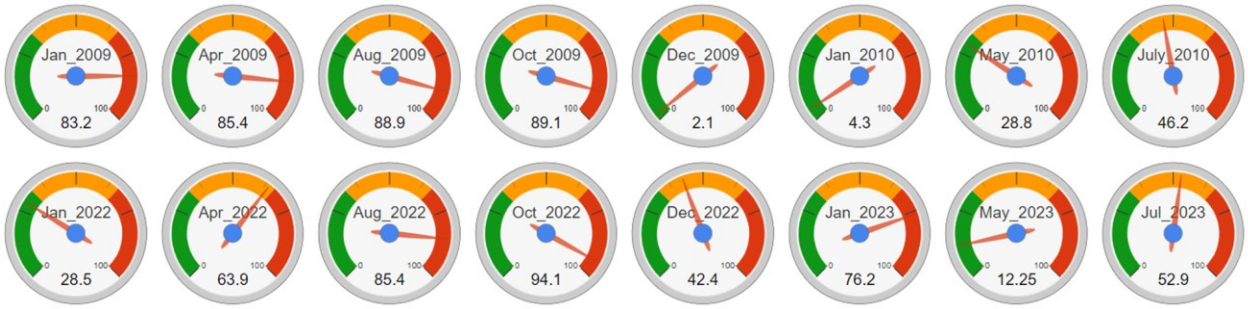

Figure 4: A comparison between pre- and post-drought conditions in 2009 and the 2022-23. Green indicates good pasture, amber fair and red extremely poor conditions. Grazing pressure gauges show post-recovery status in 2023 to be far slower than in 2009-2010. At the end of the rains in January 2023 pasture conditions had already moved into the red zone compared the rapid pasture recovery post-drought 2010. The recovery during the 2023 long-rains will be short-lived due to the poor pasture recovery and continued grazing pressure.

The Amboseli group ranches outlook

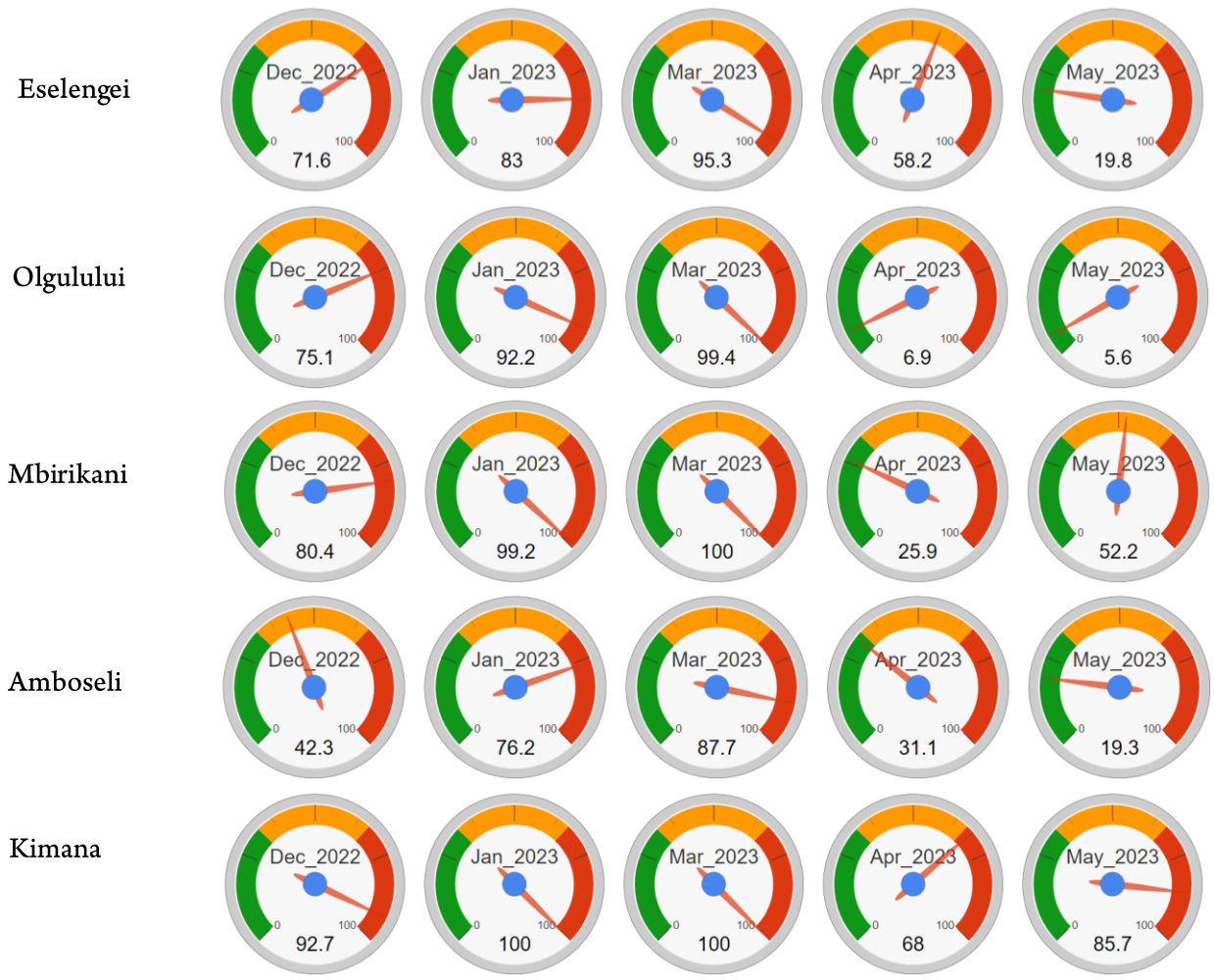

Figure 5: Grazing pressure in Amboseli Park, Olgulului, Kimana, Eselengei, and Mbirikani group ranches. The gauges show reduced grazing pressure in Amboseli Park, Olgulului, and Eselengei during April and May due to moderately good rains. Kimana and Mbirikani had poorer rains and heavy grazing, forcing many herders to move to Amboseli and graze in the park. Over 6,000 cattle were grazing in the park in late June.

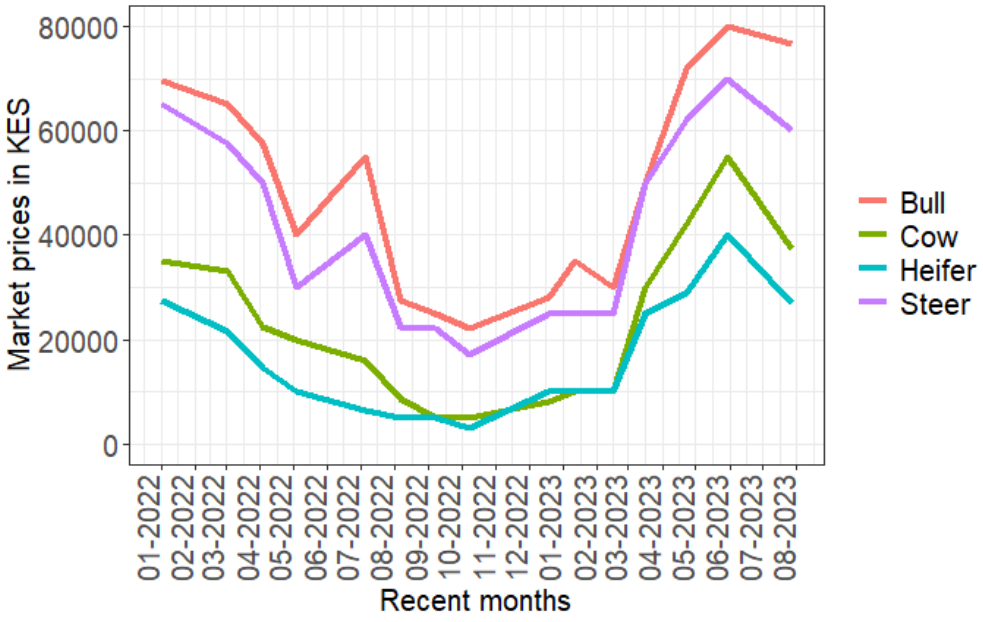

Figure 6: Livestock prices tumbled during the 2023 drought due to the glut of weakened animals up for sale. Sale prices have risen sharply following the rains and shortage of animals up for sale as families target rebuilding their herds.

Figure 7: Wildlife body condition scores in Amboseli shows buffalo, wildebeest, and zebra recovering from a severe drought but still far below the peak of condition in the heavy rains of 2018 and 2020.

Current conditions and outlook

Losses of livestock and wildlife in 2022-23 were half those of 2009. The surviving populations are sufficient to see numbers recover within three or four seasons, far faster than in 2009. This is the good news.

The bad news is that pasture recovery of pastures has been severely depressed by years of heavy sustained grazing, due largely to pastoralists taking up permanent settlement. The economic losses will take herders several years to recover, given the heavy outlays on buying hay and feed supplements to spare their herds.

We project the outlook in the coming dry season in Amboseli and other areas in the southern rangelands to be severe. The depleted cattle herds and lengthy delay in the recovery of milk yields will put families under considerable distress. There is sufficient late season pasture in Amboseli National Park to see wildlife through the dry season. However, wildlife too will face another harsh season in the event that the current large influx of livestock continues.

We shall be posting a detailed assessment of wildlife and livestock losses on completion of an aerial count of eastern Kajiado we are conducting with DRSRS.

Sakimba Kamiti and other ACP field staff will also be posting an assessment of how pastoralists fared in the drought, the measures they took and the steps they intend to take to avoid future losses.

The swamps in Amboseli National Park are showing some recovery after the recent drought and should see wildlife through the dry season unless there is a large influx of livestock which saw large numbers of zebra, wildebeest and elephants die.

David Maitumo measures pasture abundance in a one of the 20 permanent plots measure monthly to track range conditions.