

## **Fires on Mount Kenya may have been set by poachers**

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An area of forest that was burned to the ground by forest fires is seen on the slopes of Mount Kenya, the second-highest peak in Africa at 5,199 meters (17,057 feet), in Kenya Tuesday, March 20, 2012. Fires that have been raging across Mount Kenya may have been set by poachers trying to create a diversion from their illegal attacks on animals, a wildlife official said Tuesday. (AP Photo/Ben Curtis)

## **Fires burning on Mount Kenya may have been set by poachers; flames rage through bamboo area**

**20 March 2012**

**MOUNT KENYA, Kenya — Fires that have been raging across Mount Kenya may have been set by poachers trying to create a diversion from their illegal attacks on animals, a wildlife official said Tuesday.**

**Poachers target the elephants that roam the forested slopes of Mount Kenya for their ivory tusks. Robert Njue, the assistant director in charge of the mountain conservation area, said honey hunters may have also started the fires, in order to produce smoke so that they can harvest wild honey.**

**Flames rushed through a bamboo patch on the mountain Tuesday, thwarting attempts to extinguish the mountain's many fires. Most other fires are under control but may be moving through the underground root system. Njue said lightning was likely not the cause since the region has been experiencing dry weather and hasn't seen any recent storms.**

**Mount Kenya is the second-highest peak in Africa, at 5,199 meters (17,057 feet). Elephants are among the many animals fleeing the flames. Poachers also target smaller game for their meat.**

**Associated Press reporters rode in a helicopter Tuesday above the burning slopes, where hundreds of acres of indigenous forest were already burned to black ash, blighting the picturesque green slopes and rugged cliffs of the snowcapped mountain. Elephants grazed a dozen kilometers (5 miles) from a bamboo forest that had reignited after firefighters thought they had put it out.**

**Simon Gitau, the deputy warden of Mt. Kenya National Park, worked to get 100 men to the bamboo forest, saying it could be a challenge to put it out if it spreads. Firefighters could be seen cutting down burning trees and dousing flames on branches.**

**The flames have sent elephants crashing down the mountain in search of safe forest. Fire has not killed any big game but likely has led to the deaths of smaller animals, Njue said.**

**"Some will escape. Some will burn, especially the crawling animals," Njue said. "Most big animals are faster than human beings. Elephants are faster than people think. Animals can be good in detecting danger and they move elsewhere."**

**A helicopter pilot said he flew over areas of the mountain on Tuesday where it seemed the flames had just been lit.**

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**"Poachers are known to start fires to draw attention from what they are doing," said Shawn Evans, the chief pilot of the Lady Lori helicopter company, which has been hired by the government to help battle the flames.**

**"If you look at the where the fire starts it's always suspicious," said Evans, who has 10 years of firefighting experience in Canada.**

**Evans said he extinguished a fire on Monday suspected to have been intentionally set. The flames were moving toward a school before being extinguished. Evans said he used 40,000 liters of water to put out the fire.**

**"They (school children) didn't realize the danger they were in," he said. "They came out of the class and started cheering at the helicopter."**

**Despite the heavy smoke around Mount Kenya, the fires have not deterred hardcore adventure seekers from trekking up the mountain**

**Carlos Gomez, a 28-year-old biologist from Spain, said he didn't cancel his holiday plan to climb Mount Kenya because his guide advised him that it was safe.**

**"I heard about the fire and they are professionals. If they say we can do, we can do it," he said. However, Gomez's guide, Charles Wanja, said six tourists from the U.K. cancelled their trip he was set to lead because of the fire. Wanja said the fires threaten the livelihoods of about 3,000 people who work as porters and guides on the mountain.**

**Wanja said fires typically break out around Mount Kenya between February and early March, but are extinguished naturally by seasonal rains, which have not yet arrived this year.**

**Fires in a neighboring national park — the Aberdares — have been mostly contained. Mount Kenya is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The U.N. organization describes the region as "one of the most impressive landscapes of Eastern Africa, with its rugged glacier-clad summits, Afro-alpine moorlands and diverse forests."**



Burned scrub lies smouldering on the slopes of Mount Kenya, the second-highest peak in Africa at 5,199 meters (17,057 feet), in Kenya Tuesday, March 20, 2012. Fires that have been raging across Mount Kenya may have been set by poachers trying to create a diversion from their illegal attacks on animals, a wildlife official said Tuesday. (AP Photo/Ben Curtis)



Simon Gitau, deputy warden of Mt. Kenya National Park, takes photographs of forest fires from a helicopter, in order to show to those on the ground trying to locate and extinguish the fires, over the slopes of Mount Kenya, the second-highest peak in Africa at 5,199 meters (17,057 feet), in Kenya Tuesday, March 20, 2012. Fires that have been raging across Mount Kenya may have been set by poachers trying to create a diversion from their illegal attacks on animals, a wildlife official said Tuesday. (AP Photo/Ben Curtis)



The shadow of a helicopter carrying park officials and media is cast on an area of forest that was burned to the ground by forest fires on the slopes of Mount Kenya, the second-highest peak in Africa at 5,199 meters (17,057 feet), in Kenya Tuesday, March 20, 2012. Fires that have been raging across Mount Kenya may have been set by poachers trying to create a diversion from their illegal attacks on animals, a wildlife official said Tuesday. (AP Photo/Ben Curtis)



Simon Gitau, deputy warden of Mt. Kenya National Park, seated center, discusses strategy with other members of the Kenyan Wildlife Service as they attempt to put out forest fires on the slopes of Mount Kenya, the second-highest peak in Africa at 5,199 meters (17,057 feet), in Kenya Tuesday, March 20, 2012. Fires that have been raging across Mount Kenya may have been set by poachers trying to create a diversion from their illegal attacks on animals, a wildlife official said Tuesday. (AP Photo/Ben Curtis)



Members of the Kenyan Wildlife Service point to locations of fires on a map as they discuss their strategy to put out forest fires on the slopes of Mount Kenya, the second-highest peak in Africa at 5,199 meters (17,057 feet), in Kenya Tuesday, March 20, 2012. Fires that have been raging across Mount Kenya may have been set by poachers trying to create a diversion from their illegal attacks on animals, a wildlife official said Tuesday. (AP Photo/Ben Curtis)



Members of the British military, working with Kenyan Wildlife Service workers wearing high-visibility orange jackets, gesture to indicate their success at extinguishing an area of wild fire, to an over-flying helicopter carrying park officials and the media, on the slopes of Mount Kenya, the second-highest peak in Africa at 5,199 meters (17,057 feet), in Kenya Tuesday, March 20, 2012. Fires that have been raging across Mount Kenya may have been set by poachers trying to create a diversion from their illegal attacks on animals, a wildlife official said Tuesday. (AP Photo/Ben Curtis)



A hiker approaches the Chogoria Gate on the slopes of Mount Kenya, the second-highest peak in Africa at 5,199 meters (17,057 feet), in Kenya Tuesday, March 20, 2012. Fires that have been raging across Mount Kenya may have been set by poachers trying to create a diversion from their illegal attacks on animals, a wildlife official said Tuesday. (AP Photo/Ben Curtis)



Forest fires burn across the slopes of Mount Kenya, the second-highest peak in Africa at 5,199 meters (17,057 feet), in Kenya Tuesday, March 20, 2012. Fires that have been raging across Mount Kenya may have been set by poachers trying to create a diversion from their illegal attacks on animals, a wildlife official said Tuesday. (AP Photo/Ben Curtis)



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An elephant takes a dust bath as he grazes on the lower levels of Mount Kenya, the second-highest peak in Africa at 5,199 meters (17,057 feet), as forest fires burn on the slopes above, in Kenya Tuesday, March 20, 2012. Fires that have been raging across Mount Kenya may have been set by poachers trying to create a diversion from their illegal attacks on animals, a wildlife official said Tuesday. (AP Photo/Ben Curtis)



A helicopter from the Lady Lori charter company drops water from the air in an attempt to put out a fire on the slopes of Mount Kenya, in Kenya Monday, March 19, 2012. A fire on the slopes of Kenya's tallest mountain has already consumed hundreds of acres of forest and is sending big game animals like elephants fleeing for their lives, as wildlife agents and British troops are fighting to put out several fires, officials said Monday. (AP Photo/Sokomoto Images, Teeku Patel)



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A patch of forest burned by forest fires on the slopes of Mount Kenya is seen from a helicopter, in Kenya Monday, March 19, 2012. A fire on the slopes of Kenya's tallest mountain has already consumed hundreds of acres of forest and is sending big game animals like elephants fleeing for their lives, as wildlife agents and British troops are fighting to put out several fires, officials said Monday. (AP Photo/Sokomoto Images, Teeku Patel)



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