

Tanzania day 3: Welcome to the Jungle

Today we go into the field. Woken by laptop charger fizzling – electricity is available but a bit variable here. Breakfast with sweet milky tea – the tea in it is grown and picked here in Mafinga. We drive past tree plantations – pines, for their wood. I ask about the rice; Tanzania is a major rice grower, and much of it comes from Morogoro. I meet the rest of the team, and explain Ushahidi and my own skills to them, as asked, armed with a notebook, pen and much arm-gesturing. We drive off to the site; on red mud roads, fast. The team truck has a snorkel and I worry they might be using it. Finding routes to the sites is an issue, and the gps units fill up if the team tries to track roads: we talk about roadmapping using their GPS-connected tablets and Funf, and about OpenStreetMap traces from Bing's satellite images.

This area (Mafindi)'s economy is based on trees, tea and maize; I see eucalyptus (grown for its wood) and other trees grown for paper. I see some cows - we talk about the perceived difference between pastoralists (many cows, with perhaps a small piece of land for vegetables) and farmers (mostly crops, with perhaps few cows), the conflicts between them, and how farmers often don't count the cows as part of their farming. We see the first tea plantations of many – I'm surprised that the tops of the plantations are flat rather than tea bushes.

We drive fast for 2 hours on dirt roads – we're remote but trade is visible; motorbike repair shops and women wearing cloth made in Nigeria. We see cabbage fields – European missionaries settled here because the climate was familiar to them; there are some churches but also many schools in this area. It rains again – the roads are getting muddy now.

We stop on the road. We're 7km from the site, so we go back and try another road. The logging trucks are out now (11am) – Mafindi Paper company, and little trucks with offcut bark. If only we had a roadmap. We talk about how to improve tea production efficiency, and wonder about mechanical harvesters – just before we see mechanical tea harvesters: giant lawnmowers pulled over the tops of the tea plants. We reach a dead end: 6km away now. Really really need better roadmaps for this project; I can feel an OpenStreetMap session coming on. And here's how to help: there's Internet here in the sticks, but it's slow – too slow to sensibly edit maps from here. But internet is good in New York, London etc: so if you help OpenStreetMap make better maps of this region (southern Tanzania), local people can get on with the things that they need to do, like plant monitoring, instead of getting lost. I'm told it takes 4-5 hours to process each plot, and that each plot will be revisited every 3 years. If you add getting lost onto that, it becomes a very very slow process.

We stop at a dead end 5km away from the sample site. It's getting late, so Joseph, the field team lead, asks me if I'm okay with walking 5km (3 miles) – he explains that 5km straight is probably going to be a lot further on the trails, and that it might be a bit up and down. I look at the tea plantations around us, and think “hey, this is just like walking in Dorset”. We set out... across the team plantation and down into woodland – walk downwards for a while, then retrace our route

because two of the team are yelling that there's a river in our way. We set out again... down through woodland, across a small brook (which I'm hoping is the river), up past a small shack with a fire going, and small garden with mint and vegetables (Joseph explains that sometimes the farmer stays with his fields), and up through a maize field. The field is closely planted – I follow the voices ahead of me. The field is underplanted with courgettes, which I take care to step around; and then we're out into another field – some type of wheat? at the top of a hill. We go down through woodland again – a slippery muddy path that looks well-used. Someone mentions that we're going down to the bridge the plantation workers told us about. I think "ah – a roadway; great". They don't mention that the 'bridge' is a pair of tree branches across the river. The guys walk across one of the trees then jump onto the far bank; Avery and one of the guys wade waist-deep across instead. I take the tree – the guys build me steps down out of their field plates. This is the first time I hear them say MamaSita; I hear that a lot soon. We walk along a small trail going up through the trees – and then the trail stops. It's panga time: Joseph starts hacking a trail through the jungle, and the walk becomes a long repeat of ducking under vines, picking "wait a moment" (bramble-like plants) off our arms and heads and waiting for enough of a trail to be cleared. There are holes in the jungle; I step over most of them, but it's muddy, and sometimes I slide thigh-deep into them. The guys talk all the time – laughing, teasing each other, talking about politics. We stop every so often, and call out the distance to the sites. First stop, it's still 5km. Then 4.8 km; we have a picnic" of samosas (or in my case samosa innards: it's tough being gluten-free in the jungle). After 3 hours ducking through the wait-a-moment (jungle: I thought snakes and big cats would be an issue: turns out it's falling into holes and picking big thorns out of your head), it's 3:30pm, we're 3.6km away from the sites, and have 3 hours of light left for the day. We turn back, planning to return the next day. The route back takes 1.5 hours: when we return, Nicky has collected local pears for us all. We drive back past towns with repair shops and chickens, past recently-logged areas and more logging trucks. I'm exhausted and covered in scratches and bruises – I crawl off to sleep for a while.