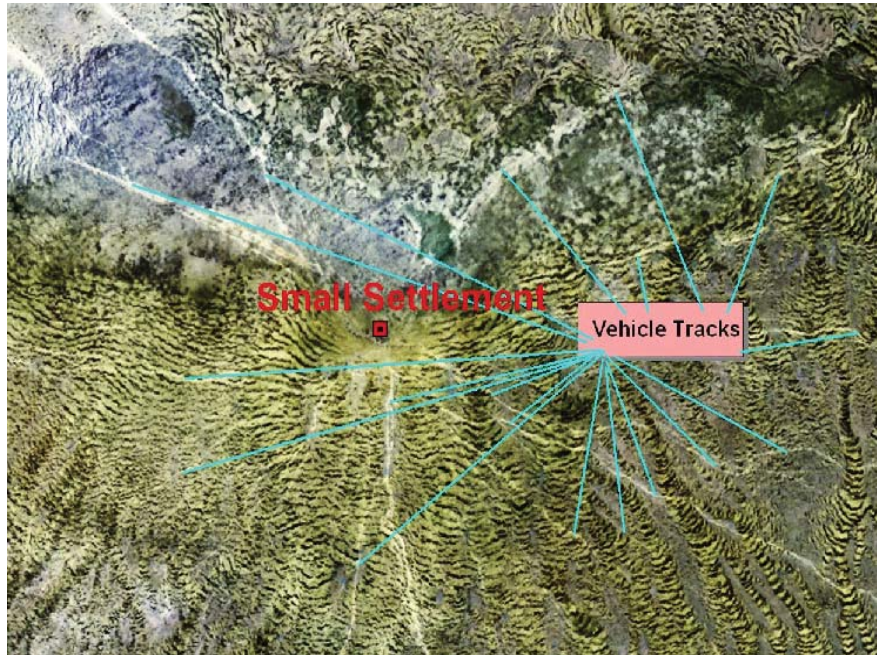




Pictures Tell a Story

My name is Simon Mumuli Oduori, and I'm a photo-interpreter at SWALIM. My job is to look at photos taken from satellites in space and figure out if anything environmentally significant is happening. Obviously, with pictures taken from so far away, I can't see everything, but I've had specialist training in recognising shapes and patterns that enable me to make educated guesses about what's going on. Besides, one of the fun parts of my job is that after I determine what I think is going on, I get to go to the area and verify it on the ground.

Not too long ago, when I was studying a pastoral area in Puntland, I came across the photo on the right. It's a satellite image that shows acacia woodlands (the green part) surrounding a small settlement of some 1,200 people.



What I found interesting about it is the number of vehicle tracks leading out of the settlement, as if it were a much larger town. Even more interesting is that with the exception of one, all of the tracks lead to nowhere! Under normal circumstances, I would not have been able to make a hypothesis for this strange combination of features. However, I had visited the area some two years before, and while I didn't actually go into the woodlands then, I had observed a number of trucks loaded with charcoal, within the settlement and coming out of the woodlands. My guess, therefore, was that the vehicle tracks had something to do with charcoal.

The opportunity to verify my hypothesis came about a month ago. This time, I did go into the woodlands, and made a point of following every track I had identified



on the photo. If you're familiar with what's going on in the country, you won't be surprised – I observed charcoal production everywhere, and the photo on the lower left speaks for itself.

Charcoal has been the major cooking fuel source in Somalia for a long time. Before the collapse of government in 1991, however, mostly dead trees were used to produce charcoal. Today, live trees are cut down to produce charcoal for both local consumption and export. There's not much replanting, and the woodlands are thinning out. Perhaps the next time I look at a photo of the area a few years down the line, the green will be gone.

Acacia bussei is the main source of charcoal in this area. The tree's importance is fundamental to the way of life of Somali pastoralists. The trees are used for construction of housing frames and livestock enclosures, and as sewing and weaving materials. They are widely browsed by camels, cattle, sheep and goats, and provide them with precious shade. Their roots are used for lining well walls to protect against termites, and making storage sacks for sorghum and wide mesh baskets to protect large water or milk vessels. The bark contains tannin, and is used for tanning skins used for carrying water. The bark is also used for making rope. The young thorns are edible. Indeed, to pastoralists, *Acacia bussei* is a wonder tree.

Back in the office, moving on to other photos taken from hundreds of kilometres away, I can't help but wonder - What will happen if these trees disappear?

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Issued on 21st May , 2007