

Darwin Initiative, Darwin Plus and Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund Covid-19 Rapid Response Round - Final Report

Project reference	CV19RR10
If linked with an ongoing project, please include that project reference here (e.g. IWT001)	IWT076
Project title	COVID-19 Response to Reduce IWT Impacting the Guatemala-Mexico Green Corridor
Country/ies	Guatemala & Mexico
Lead organisation	Wildlife Conservation Society
Partner institution(s)	Asociación Balam, Environmental Justice Forum of Peten (EJF), Fundación para el Ecodesarrollo y la Conservación (FUNDAECO), Asociación de Comunidades Forestales de Petén (ACOFOP), Centro de Estudios Conservacionistas (CECON), Ministerio Publico (MP), Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas (CONAP), Pronatura Península Yucatán (PPY), Comisión Nacional de Areas Naturales Protegidas (CONANP), Secretaria de Medio Ambiente, Biodiversidad y Cambio Climático (SEMABICC), Guatemalan Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance (MSPAS)
Start/end date of project	January 5 th 2021-March 31 st 2021
Which fund was this project relevant to?	Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund
Grant value (£)	£. 55,967
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1. Project Summary

Guatemala's recently launched national strategy to combat wildlife trafficking highlights how biodiversity loss across the Guatemala-Mexico Green Corridor (**Figure 1**) is increasingly driven by illegal hunting and poaching of select, high-value timber species. Despite on-going efforts to build trans-frontier partnerships, additional challenges persist due to inadequate resources for cross-border collaboration between Guatemala and Mexico, especially among governmental actors.

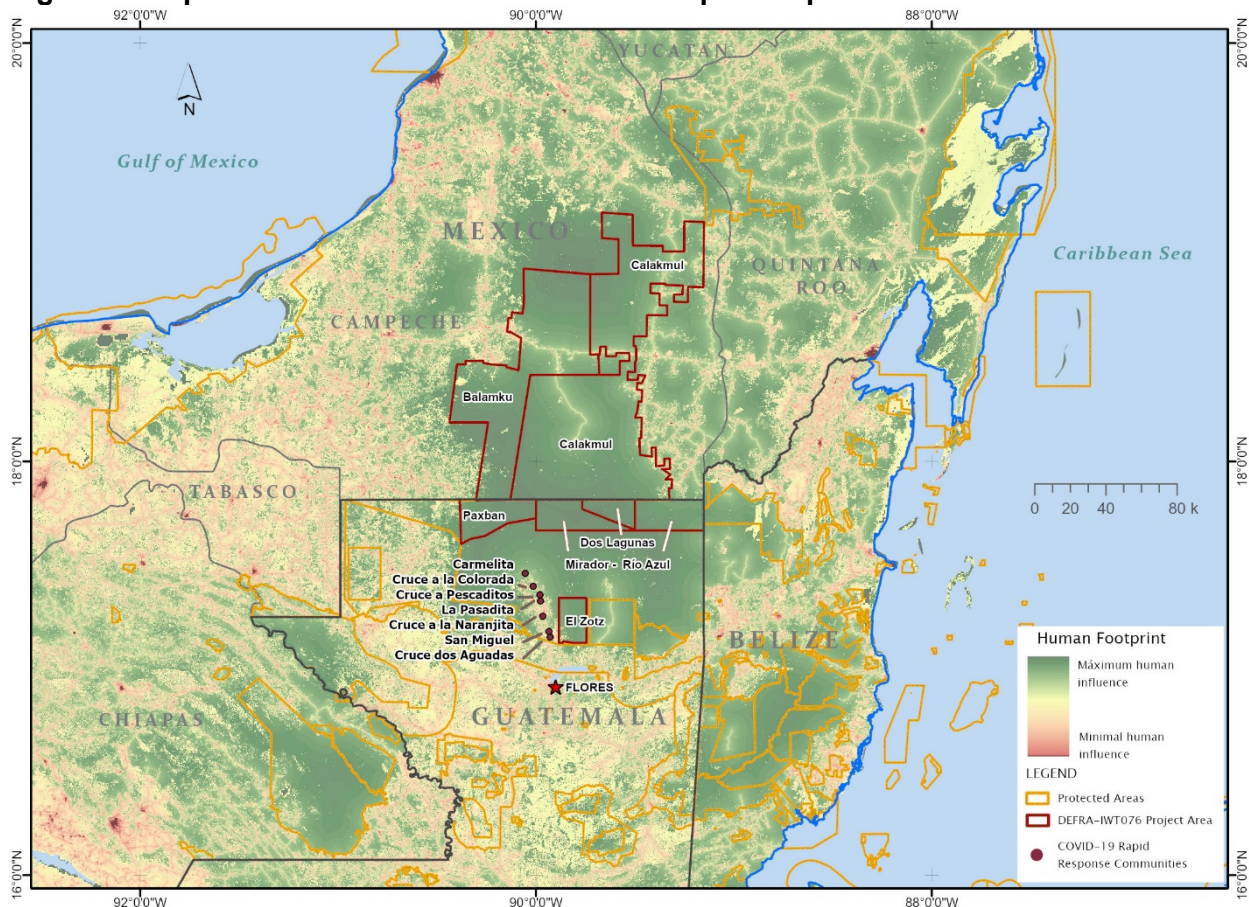
Unfortunately, over the last 16 months, the societal impacts of COVID-19 expanded far beyond affecting human health. Economic impacts propelled by the pandemic reduced operational funding available to governmental and civil society institutions, forcing partners to reduce staff and resources for field operations (e.g. IWT patrols) – rendering remote sections of the tri-national “Selva Maya” more vulnerable to trafficking. For example, beginning in July, 2020, reduced finances led Guatemala's National Council of Protected Areas (CONAP) to furlough field technicians in the Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR); similar reductions impacted

operational capacity to detect and thwart IWT, through reduced budgets for vehicle maintenance, fuel and other supplies, and the provision of field equipment. These tendencies impacted partners in Mexico, including the National Commission for Natural Protected Areas (CONANP), the Secretariat for the Environment and Biodiversity Conservation of the State of Campeche (SEMABICC), and Pronatura Peninsula Yucatan (PPY), the IWT076 civil society partners in Mexico. At the same time operational capacity waned, project personnel and partner organizations were also restrained by limited access to personal protection equipment (PPE), and the resources to undertake agile COVID-19 testing and treat staff if infected.

Rural communities involved in WCS’s IWT076 project were also impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic. They suffered from the reduced presence of governmental and CSO partners as pandemic concerns and reduced budgets stalled government livelihoods programs and left impoverished rural communities without PPE, and uninformed regarding best practices for mitigating infection, thereby increasing the vulnerability of rural households.

DEFRA COVID-19 Rapid Response funding increased investment in three key fields of operation, allowing IWT076 partners to adapt to the COVID-19 crisis, while increasing investments in rural communities and developing new partnerships focused on rural health. The project: 1) strengthened field protection by Guatemalan and Mexican national partners financially debilitated by COVID-19, increasing support for field operations, repairing field vehicles, and providing equipment; 2) expanded livelihoods investments through support for subsistence agriculture, apiculture, and habitat restoration within rural Guatemalan communities; and 3) collaborated with Guatemala’s Ministry of Health to expand the provision of PPE, COVID medical kits and rapid testing for rural communities/project partners, while supporting outreach to raise awareness about COVID-19 within rural communities.

Figure 1: Map of the DEFRA-IWT076 COVID-19 Rapid Response Focal Area



DEFRA-IWT076 Project Area: COVID-19 Rapid Response



2. Project Achievements

Project outcome: *Rapid response support will restore the effectiveness of field enforcement efforts, improve the economic recovery of partner communities, and increase rural community and partner resilience to the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Project activities were organized under three lines of action: a) COVID-19 Response and Awareness; b) IWT Patrols; and c) Rural Livelihoods. We describe the results within each line of action below.

a. COVID-19 Response and Awareness: WCS partnered with the Guatemalan Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance (MSPAS) to raise awareness about the pandemic and deliver PPE to rural communities within the IWT076 area of influence in Guatemala. We provided PPE, testing, and medical kits for early treatment of COVID-19 to IWT076 partner organizations, including FUNDAECO, *Asociación Balam*, the Environmental Justice Forum of Peten, Guatemala's National Council of Protected Areas (CONAP), Guatemala's Public Ministry (MP), and new IWT076 partner the Centre for Conservation Studies of the University of San Carlos (CECON). In Mexico, WCS provided a £. [REDACTED] sub-grant to PPY, to deliver PPE to IWT076 partners including CONANP and SEMABICC. PPY was also able to install protective barriers within their administrative and technical offices to reduce the potential for transmission of the virus and ensure operations continued. Specific outputs under this line of action included:

- 1. Provision of COVID medical kits/PPE to project partners:** In Guatemala, we provided COVID-19 medical kits to 9 partner organizations (CONAP, MP, MSPAS, FUNDAECO, FJA, Balam, ACOFOP, CECON, y WCS), including a total of 2,950 KN-95 masks, 6,050 surgical masks, and 1 gallon of alcohol gel to 6 partners to prevent COVID infection (**Annex 2a1.1**). In Mexico, PPY received 60 KN-95 masks and provided 100 KN-95 masks each to CONANP and Balamku (**Annex 2a1.2**).
- 2. Increased COVID rapid testing capabilities for project partners:** In Mexico, PPY purchased 16 COVID antigen tests for all partners engaged in the IWT076 project, including CONANP and SEMABICC (**Annex 2a2.1**); PPY utilized 4 tests, with one individual testing positive, and 12 tests remain available for project partners. In Guatemala, WCS purchased 25 COVID antigen tests for use by all project partners, with 3 used and 1 positive case (**Annex 2a2.2**). A total of 22 tests remain available for project partners in Guatemala.
- 3. Provision of PPE to rural Guatemalan households:** WCS and the MSPAS partnered to provide PPE to 734 rural households along the Road to Carmelita, reaching 3,531 individuals. Communities supported included Cruce a dos Aguadas, San Miguel la Palotada, La Naranjita, Pasadita, Cruce a Pescaditos, Cruce a la Colorada, and Carmelita. Most PPE was provided via visits by MSPAS personnel to rural households, occasionally in partnership with WCS technical personnel. Each household typically received 15 masks, and a bottle of alcohol gel. MSPAS advised against asking families to sign for reception of the supplies. Photographic evidence of the PPE distribution among rural households is provided in **Annex 2a3**.
- 4. COVID outreach campaign with MSPAS:** WCS and the MSPAS also partnered to develop COVID educational materials, including posters with basic facts about COVID that were hung at rural stores, community offices, etc. WCS estimates that the COVID outreach campaign reached a rural population of 5,000 individuals. Educational materials and evidence of the outreach campaign are provided as **Annex 2a4**.
- 5. COVID-safe modifications in PPY office:** PPY addressed a COVID outbreak in their central office located in Merida, Mexico, isolating the administrative area through the installation of drywall. This modification allowed the administrative personnel to continue functioning throughout the COVID pandemic, thereby ensuring PPY's implementation of field activities. See **Annex 2a5** for evidence of the infrastructure improvement.

b. IWT Patrols: WCS provided in-kind support to IWT076 partners to sustain, and in some cases increase, the efficacy of field patrols within the Guatemala-Mexico Green Corridor. Support allowed CONAP to develop updated guidelines for Control Posts within the MBR Multiple Use Zone, helping to reorganize CONAP's field staff responsible for manning

checkpoints along the Carmelita Road, the main access route to the intact frontier area shared with Mexico. In-kind investments included support for vehicle repairs, rations, and fuel, as well as the purchase and delivery of additional rugged GPS/Smart Phones capable of recording patrolling data using SMART. Finally, rapid response funding allowed IWT076 partner CECON to expand anti-IWT field patrols into the El Zotz Biotope, an area increasingly subject to timber poaching. Specific results are detailed below.

1. **CONAP control post guidelines updated:** DEFRA support allowed CONAP and partners to finalize a plan to restructure control post operations along the Road to Carmelita, and the rest of the MBR Multiple Use Zone (attached as **Annex 2b1**). This plan was subsequently put into practice through the re-assignment of authority for control and vigilance activities under the Director of the MBR Multiple Use Zone, portending more effective strategy of anti-IWT patrols and protection in the area.
 2. **Vehicles repaired:** In Guatemala, rapid response arrived as a godsend after an extremely rainy wet season that left IWT076 partner organization vehicles in severe disrepair. Support allowed us to ensure the functionality of 16 vehicles, including four-wheel drive pickups, four-wheeled motorcycles, and 2-wheeled motorcycles. Among project partners, CECON repaired 5 vehicles, CONAP repaired 4, FUNDAECO repaired 2, and WCS repaired 5, helping to ensure mobility as the high-threat dry season set in. A complete list of the vehicles repaired per institution is provided as **Annex 2b2**.
 3. **Provision of Blackview rugged SMART phones/GPS:** WCS purchased and delivered 9 Blackviews to project partners, including CONAP (3), FUNDAECO (2), CECON (2), and WCS (2). Savings allowed us to obtain 12 Blackviews instead of the 10 budgeted, so we provided one-each to three key community-based partner organizations engaged in field patrols, including the *Asociación Forestal Integral de San Andrés* (AFISAP), the *Asociación Forestal Integral de Cruce a la Colorada* (AFICC), and *Selva Maya del Norte*. Evidence of Blackview purchase and delivery, as well as an example of the DEFRA branding utilized, is provided as **Annex 2b3**.
 4. **Additional SMART patrols:** Partners in Guatemala and Mexico planned for 20 additional field patrols using rapid response funding, but in Guatemala alone undertook a total of 52 anti-IWT SMART patrols, including patrols within the new project area of El Zotz Biotope managed by CECON. Project partner FUNDAECO reported 27 patrols to the Mirador-Rio Azul National Park priority area. CECON reported 6 patrols within the El Zotz Biotope, our new project focal area made possible by rapid response support. And in Mexico, CONANP and SEMABICC personnel reported 8 patrols. Details on SMART patrols are provided within **Annex 2b4**.
- c. **Rural Livelihoods:** Rapid response livelihoods support focused exclusively on Guatemala due to the country's high rate of poverty and WCS' ongoing livelihoods investments under the aegis of the IWT076 project. Within that project, we set an ambitious goal of strengthening sustainable livelihoods for 100 households, but later found that our limited livelihoods funding would not allow us to adequately attend that number of households. Rapid response funds thus allowed us to reach our IWT076 livelihoods intervention goal, mainly through the engagement of the *Asociación Forestal Integral de Cruce a la Colorada* (AFICC), and Cruce's landless farmers within a new forest restoration program. Farmers received a daily "incentive" to raze exotic pasture grass on reclaimed cattle ranches, develop a network of access routes with the support of a bulldozer, and prepare the land for native tree planting. In return, farmers received permission from CONAP to cultivate the reclaimed areas with annual crops (beans, corn, and squash) as part of a 2-year transitory phase designed to ensure the permanent elimination of the stubborn exotic pasture grasses. As long as exotic pasture grass remains in these areas, vegetative cover remains highly vulnerable to fire, which in turn retards the regeneration of natural forest. We also provided support to farmers in the community of San Miguel experimenting with the same model. Rapid response allowed us to make additional investment in beekeepers already engaged within the IWT076 project, providing supplies including sugar used to sustain hives during the non-flowering season. Finally, while we did obtain CONAP's permission to experiment with the harvest of grass to be sold by rural farmers as livestock silage, we were unable to undertake a pilot experiment with this new potential source of income for rural farmers due to a delay in obtaining the grass mulching equipment originally planned within

a separate, leveraged project. We adapted by channelling resources planned for the experimental silage component into the forest restoration/subsistence agriculture component. Specific outputs under this line of action included:

1. **Access to land for Cruce a la Colorada farmers:** With the support of rapid response funding, forty-six (46) farmers from Cruce a la Colorada signed agreements to cooperate with CONAP, WCS, ACOFOP, and AFICC, the local community organization responsible for management of the Cruce a la Colorada forest concession area. This agreement ensured that farmers would receive access to at least one hectare of land and CONAP's permission to plant and harvest subsistence crops; most of these individuals lacked access to land, and/or were perennially forced to raze standing forest to provide for the subsistence of their families. The agreement detailed commitments by community members to support the restoration initiative after 2 years of farming, the rights of farmers to cultivate the areas and receive technical support and inputs, their commitment to avoid trafficking of wildlife, and the commitments by WCS, ACOFOP, and Rainforest Alliance to support AFICC and participating farmers (**Annex 2c1**).
 2. **Cruce a la Colorada land prepared for farming:** As detailed above, rapid response allowed WCS and AFICC to prepare pasture areas for farming and forest restoration. A bulldozer cleared fire breaks along the perimeters of 2 extensive, former pasture areas spanning 95 hectares in total; in 2010 illegal ranchers were prosecuted and expelled by CONAP from both areas, but the areas never reverted back to natural forest due to annual recurrence of fire – most likely instigated by the former “owners”. Interior fire breaks were also established to allow for fire to be used sequentially to reduce the exotic grasses, and more effectively apply green-labelled herbicides to eradicate the grass permanently. **Annex 2c2** provides evidence of the ongoing transformation of the area. Cruce's farmers are now planting corn in the prepared areas, and expect to obtain their first harvest in late July or early August.
 3. **San Miguel land prepared for farming:** In San Miguel, WCS, CONAP, and community members expanded our on-going collaboration to restore forest through the temporary utilization of reclaimed pasture lands for farming by community members. Rapid response funding supported 37 community members, including 11 women, to raze pasture, and implement controlled burns over 20 hectares as a way to prepare land for cultivation and/or forest restoration activities (**Annex 2c3**).
 4. **CONAP permission to generate and sell silage:** As detailed above, we were not able to undertake the experimental project to reduce the density of exotic pasture through the harvest of pasture grass and the sale of silage to legal farmers outside of the Maya Biosphere Reserve. We did however receive CONAP's permission to undertake this experiment (**Annex 2c4**), and plan to proceed with this pilot intervention in the near future.
 5. **Increased investment in beekeeping/honey production:** Rapid response extended our support for 48 honey producers along the Road to Carmelita, including 8 female beekeepers. Partnering beekeepers received sugar, stamped beeswax, and medicinal supplies to ensure their hives thrived and survived the flower-poor dry season. Honey is currently being harvested in the MBR, with the 2021 harvest considered one of the best recently. We plan to report honey-based income from the joint IWT076 and rapid response investments in the IWT Half-Year Report, due in October 2021. In the interim, **Annex 2c5** details the support provided to beekeepers with rapid response funding, and provides examples of the harvest underway.
 6. **Leveraged resources:** Restoration activities in Cruce a la Colorada coordinated with ACOFOP and Rainforest Alliance (RA) yielded leveraged support from non-UK sources. **Annex 2c6** details the financial commitments made by partnering organizations ACOFOP and RA, AFICC, and community members (i.e. in-kind value labour based on the estimated value of daily wages not paid).
- d. **Gender Inclusion:** We promoted gender equity by focusing COVID-related outreach on women heads of the rural households targeted to receive PPE samples as well as informative pamphlets developed in partnership with the MSPAS. In Guatemala, comparatively higher percentages of rural men express scepticism about COVID-19 and its lasting health impacts, so female nurses from the MSPAS focused most of their outreach on

women. Through our partnership with MSPAS we were able to support two female nurses engaged in outreach to be first in line for Astra-Zenica vaccines. In regard to livelihoods, only 3 women signed the agreements for access to farming land, however in keeping with the agrarian culture of Guatemala, we expect that women from all participating families will support the planting and harvest phases and benefit from the yield; we plan to follow up with monitoring of gender participating in the upcoming months when the first harvest arrives. Within the honey production livelihoods component, we supported 8 female beekeepers, continuing the commitment developed under IWT076. The forest restoration and agriculture component in San Miguel included 11 women, roughly 30% of the participants in that intervention.

- e. **Value for Money:** Rapid response delivered value for money by surpassing our goal of leveraging £. as reported in section 2c6, above, and by building on the ongoing IWT076 project. Throughout rapid response implementation we highlighted DEFRA branding to increase public awareness of UK government support to Guatemala, including the use of a banner highlighting the DEFRA-IWT076 project during public events such as the inauguration of the COVID-19 campaign undertaken in partnership with MSPAS (**Annex 2e**). Finally, strong collaboration with MSPAS greatly reduced the cost of delivering PPE and undertaking COVID-19 related outreach focused on rural communities.
- f. **Safeguarding and Ethics:** WCS previously reported regarding our IRB certification obtained to undertake socio-economic surveys among rural households engaged in livelihoods projects. This remains relevant to rapid response, since WCS will continue to track and report on the benefits/income obtained by beekeepers and rural farmers through this pulse of additional support. Rapid response also helped WCS and DEFRA ensure that project partners were able to continue operating anti-IWT patrols, supporting livelihoods projects, and implementing the diverse aspects of the IWT076 project without sacrificing their safety due to a lack of PPE, testing, or medicinal support.
- g. **Delivery of IWT Challenge Fund Objectives:** Rapid response reinforced our three key lines of action designed to reduce IWT in the Guatemala-Mexico green corridor. We were able to maintain and even strengthen IWT patrols despite the global pandemic. We increased investments in legitimate, sustainable rural livelihoods, helping to reduce the lure of wildlife and timber trafficking to rural households. And we increased awareness about wildlife trafficking among rural communities, by for example, including a voluntary commitment to avoid IWT by beneficiaries of the forest restoration/agriculture pilot project (see **Annex 2c1**, referenced above).

3. Lessons learnt:

One aspect of the project that was experimental, and provided remarkable results was the investment in forest restoration and agriculture. At the same time, the experimental component related to the production of silage failed to materialize, forcing us to focus livelihoods support on other interventions.

The project was designed and implemented quickly, providing little chance for adaptation midstream. This celerity, combined with WCS' previous documentation of livelihoods options for the area and the emergence of unique experimental opportunities (i.e. restoration/agriculture) led us to propose extremely ambitious goals, some of which relied on external sources of leveraged support which did not materialize (i.e. the silage livelihoods component). In this sense, a key lesson learned is that a solid baseline for potential livelihoods investments may allow for bold proposals and experimentation with innovative approaches, while ensuring that alternatives remain available should experimental initiatives fail to advance.

Secondly, working through broad, multi-sector partnerships linking government, civil society organizations and rural communities provide the best value for money and the greatest opportunity to leverage support, obtain social momentum for the conservation of natural resources threatened by illegal trade, and increase public awareness of the valuable support provided by the UK to Guatemala.

4. Other comments and feedback

We would like to express our most sincere appreciation to DEFRA and the UK for the very timely rapid response support provided. The extra pulse of funding allowed us to maintain and expand crucial operations in the face of social and economic challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, through the implementation of new, experimental approaches to improving livelihoods and bringing back forest, while reinforcing the important message against the Illegal Wildlife Trade among a rural audience that is often quite hard to reach due to their focus on day to day survival.