

Darwin Initiative for the Survival of Species

Half Year Report Form

Project Title	Darwin Initiative Biodiversity Conservation in Cuba
Country	Cuba
Organisation	BioNET-INTERNATIONAL
Project Ref. No.	162/10/001
Report date	3 November 2002

1. Outline progress over the last 6 months against the agreed baseline timetable for the project (if your project has started less than 6 months ago, please report on the period since start up).

The SEM shipment arrived in Havana. During the current reporting period, the long-awaited shipment of donated equipment finally arrived in Havana. Cuban colleagues visited the warehouses of the *Instituto Cubano para la Amistad de los Pueblos* (the *Cuban Institute for Friendship of the Peoples*) and located about 50 of the 65 cartons containing donated materials. These materials are now believed to have been extracted from the warehouse and transported to the *Jardín Botánico Nacional* and *Instituto de Ecología y Sistemática*. Some boxes are still unaccounted for. The SEM and freeze drier are also believed to have been located and transported to their correct destinations, though there are still uncertainties. The condition of donated materials after almost a year in storage is not known. On his forthcoming visit to Cuba, Dr Minter plans to spend time in Havana helping colleagues to locate missing material, and to distribute everything correctly. Mr Alan Bennell of Edinburgh Royal Botanic Garden will accompany him to Cuba (at no planned cost to the project), and his experience and expertise with SEMs will be useful in trying to revive the donated machine after so long in storage.

Dr Minter visited Cuba. In June 2003, Dr Minter visited Cuba to review progress in the project and to work with Cuban colleagues on the text of an extension proposal for the project. At that point preparation of management plans by *Flora y Fauna* was progressing well. The visit included a trip to Mil Cumbres during which it was possible to evaluate in person possibilities for a new visitors' centre and biological station there. Following the visit, Dr Minter finalized and submitted to the Darwin Initiative the extension proposal they had invited him to prepare.

Other outputs. Although poor health of Dr Rodríguez Hernández made active work on his part impossible, his assistant, Mr José Manuel Pérez has been able to make two visits to Viñales to collect and to continue work on the identification guide to common Cuban plants. Dr G. Recio and Dr S. Maldonado have also each made one visit to Viñales to collect. The enormous website of *Electronic Distribution Maps of Caribbean Fungi* mentioned in the previous report was transferred to CD format and the English edition published during the present reporting period. Latitudes & longitudes were calculated for and added to thousands of records of Venezuelan fungi in anticipation of further major outputs next year.

2. Give details of any notable problems or unexpected developments that the project has encountered over the last 6 months. Explain what impact these could have on the project and whether the changes will effect the budget and timetable of project activities. Have any of these issues been discussed with the Department and if so, have changes been made to the original agreement?

Deterioration of relations between Cuba and the European Union (including the UK). On 5 June 2003 the European Union made public a diplomatic demarche protesting against human rights abuses in Cuba. Cuba responded by parading a million people in front of the Spanish and Italian Embassies in Havana. This was compounded by a statement by Fidel Castro on 26 July (an important national day for Cuba) to the effect that Cuba would not humble itself to accepting developmental aid from EU countries. The result has been that a lot of Cuban / UK scientific collaboration has been unilaterally cancelled from the Cuban side. The British Council, for example, is currently in a very difficult situation in Cuba, with 7 out of the 8 Science Links cancelled unilaterally by the Cuban authorities, and the 8th continuing only to the end of this year. Not only this, but all British Council involvement in other science projects, and conferences is also at a complete standstill. Projects funded by other European Union countries are similarly affected, including some which were giving this Darwin Initiative project added value through mutually beneficial collaboration. Dr Minter understands that the limited amount of

information he has received from his Cuban colleagues in recent months may indicate their need to maintain a low profile at present. For that reason it is difficult to report with confidence on a workshop which was scheduled to be held in September. In the present political environment in Cuba, the present Darwin Initiative project has up to now led a charmed life: in spite of this freeze, even in July it was possible to obtain letters from a very high level within the Cuban government in support of the extension proposal which the Darwin Initiative invited Dr Minter to submit.

Health problems of key Cuban contacts. The health of Dr M. Rodríguez Hernández, the Cuban co-ordinator of this project, has deteriorated considerably during the last six months. He is now in a very poor state and is not expected to live much longer. Founder and twice President of the Latin-American Mycological Association, he is undoubtedly one of Latin America's most distinguished mycologists. Although he was able to provide direction for some of the project work at the start of this reporting period, his absence from the Darwin Team in Cuba is now keenly felt. Dr M. Camino Villaró has taken over and is proving very able and energetic. She, however, has had at the same time to take much day-to-day responsibility for direction of the Jardín Botánico Nacional because of the ill-health of its Director, Dr Angela Leiva, also a good friend of our Darwin Initiative projects. Such problems never come singly. On the home front during this reporting period, Dr Camino's daughter suffered a broken leg and her partner was admitted to hospital with a suspected cardiac infarction, fortunately not confirmed. Under these conditions Dr Camino is showing outstanding dedication in her work, although participation in the myxomycete workshop in the Great Smoky Mountains (USA) mentioned in the last report became completely impractical.

Other domestic factors of key Cuban contacts. At the end of this reporting period, news came from Cuba that Dr Hugo Iglesias, one of the most able and useful members of the Darwin Team, had won the USA's visa lottery. He plans to emigrate with his wife and daughter from Cuba to the USA in mid-November. This is another major loss to the project, since his enthusiasm for hard work and his ability to keep aged computers alive will be hard to find elsewhere. With the illness of Dr Rodríguez Hernández and the departure of Dr Iglesias, the project loses its two main modes of transport - Dr Rodríguez Hernández's ancient Moskvitch car and Dr Iglesias' even older Jupiter motorbike & sidecar. Without these two pieces of transport, moving about Havana and western Cuba is clearly going to be more difficult and more costly in the last part of the project (though Dr Minter hopes to contain any rises within the existing budget). Happier news, but still affecting work, is the expected arrival of Dr Diana Enriquez's baby in November - the second "Darwin" baby in Cuba and the third "Darwin" baby of all Dr Minter's projects (it is a matter of personal joy that Darwin Initiative projects have provided enough security for younger colleagues and their families to feel able to start families in otherwise very insecure and tough environments).

Delays and frustrations. Dr J. Mena Portales has been very occupied with his DSc thesis and, as a result, work on the guide to insects on sugar cane is behind schedule. Dr Minter has been promised the full manuscript during his scheduled visit to Cuba in November 2003. Development of the *Regional Fungal Identification Service* was delayed by the events of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent anthrax and ricin terrorist scares. The current very difficult political climate between Cuba and the European Union continues to make practical implementation of the service impossible. Under these frustrating conditions Dr Minter will continue efforts to make the service work, though he is not optimistic. Progressing Cuba's membership of CARINET, BioNET-INTERNATIONAL's Caribbean Loop, is also likely to be problematical, though again efforts are continuing. A similar situation affects attempts to establish a Cuban mycological society. The *Identification Service*, CARINET membership and the putative Cuban mycological society aside, the project is still on target to deliver all main objectives. Unless political problems lead to Cuban unilateral cancellation of the rest of the project, none of the problems described here are expected to impact on the project's budget or final results. Unilateral cancellation would, of course, mean that final production of management plans and other major outputs (all otherwise progressing well) might become severely delayed or even impossible.

3. Are there any other issues you wish to raise relating to the project or to Darwin's management, monitoring, or financial procedures?

All members of the Darwin Team in Cuba send their thanks to the Darwin Initiative for its continued support of their work.

Please send your **completed form by 31 October each year per email** to Stefanie Halfmann, Darwin Initiative M&E Project Manager, Email: stefanie.halfmann@ed.ac.uk