

Biodiversity Challenge Funds Projects Darwin Initiative, Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund, and Darwin Plus Half Year Report

Note: If there is any confidential information within the report that you do not wish to be shared on our website, please ensure you clearly highlight this.

Submission Deadline: 31st October 2023

Project reference	28-016
Project title	From National Contest to National Network: Friends of Felids
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	Costa Rica
Lead partner	University of Costa Rica (UCR)
Partner(s)	Asociación Amigos de Felinos (AMFE), Gente y Fauna, Soul Communication, SPECIES, DINADECO
Project leader	Ronit Amit
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	October 2023 HYR2
Project website/blog/social media	Website: http://amigosdefelinos.com/concurso Social Media: @amigosdefelinos Instagram and Facebook

Outline progress over the last 6 months (April – Sept) against the agreed project implementation timetable (if your project has started less than 6 months ago, please report on the period since start up to end September).

Comments on Annual Report Review: Concerns about the role of local coordinators and their appointments, in particular the low performance of the coordinator of entrepreneurship, have required several interventions. Please see below in next section.

Progress during Q1 (April to June 2023) – The Second Contest opened on April 1st with invitations sent to 8 prioritized communities: Piedades Sur, El Porvenir, Cuajiniquil, Las Armenias, Nueva Guatemala, Río Naranjo, Patastillo y Los Olivos. We contacted leaders to explain the new format of the Contest and asked to confirm their interest. Five communities replied positively, and we proceed with visits to delve into the Second Contest Guidelines. We opened our Call Center for communications and support in logistics; at the same time, we started collecting Wildlife Acceptance Capacity pre-test data for the Second Contest. The next step were field inspections in May, each with a workshop focused on inclusion of community members for filling out of the Contest Application Form, and also a rapid socio-ecological assessment of evidence on wildlife conflict and coexistence. Only 4 applications were received. Evaluation by the expert jury was held between early June, there were 10 experts who each independently reviewed the 4 applications with the same process than the previous year. Winners were Las Armenias for “Wannabe Friends of Felids” category (with a score of 68.1 out of 100), and Piedades Sur for “Already Friends of Felid” category (score of 72.7). The communication campaign had a refreshed graphic design and started with personalized invitations, and a [video](#) tutorial for the Second Contest. The strategy had two phases, first by making visible the communities and the impact of the Contest, and second, by promoting the Awarding Ceremony (and its press coverage). Social media was very active with photo albums for all participants. For the winners, [Las Armenias](#) and [Piedades Sur](#), as well as last year's winner, [Las Brisas](#), we made additional publications narrating their process.

Follow up for Las Brisas, has been intense. The local wildlife monitoring team keeps on training, completed camera instalment, carried out first data collection and data management, with photocaptures of ocelot, coati, tayra and tapir that evidenced strong interactions with

domestic free-range pigs, poultry, and others. The Mural painting (prize of the contest) was a very special occasion for the community to gather and take part. Accompaniment for the pilot communities was constant to oversee wildlife monitoring, with specific cases of felid predation on dogs (by jaguar) and chicken (ocelot); also, we keep motivating entrepreneurs in production. The Upala Municipality (local government body) joined as another ally. They coordinated with AMFE, and prepared and shared a video about the entrepreneurship team on their [Facebook](#) account, inviting people to visit the pilot communities.

Progress during Q2 (July to September 2023) – The second Awarding Ceremony was held festively on July 4th (National WildCat Day) at the UCR. We supported 35 representatives from 8 communities (4 participant communities for the second edition, last year's winner, and 3 pilot communities) so they could attend the event. In total, we had an attendance of 105 people, including several government representatives and allied organizations. Special guests were the President of the University of Costa Rica, Dr. Gustavo Gutiérrez-Espeleta; the representative from the Ministry of Environment, Dr. Carlos Mario Orrego, and Mr. Bryn Orton representing the UK Ambassador. The event was live streamed on [Facebook](#) (715 views to date) and covered by the [UCR News portal](#). As part of the National WildCat Day celebrations, AMFE and Gente y Fauna also collaborated in a collective exhibition: [Destellos ocultos](#) (Hidden sparkles). This exhibition was inaugurated the same day of the Awarding Ceremony, thus the community's representations got to experience it and got excited about the potential applications of results they could get when implementing photo trapping monitoring at their communities.

AMFE's [Annual General Assembly](#) was held in July 23rd with 56 people present, including representatives from Las Brisas, Las Armenias y Piedades Sur. The Assembly agenda included reports from local teams and the salient directive board, and the election of the new board for the period 2023-2025. This was a bonding opportunity, with visitors getting to see how pilot communities manage the association, and the pilot communities felt proud and responsible for improving now on.

Soon after in August, capacity building modules began at [Las Armenias](#) and [Piedades Sur](#) with an improved learning guide and evaluation rubric. There, local teams were structured, camera trap deployment begun, and local products and services were assessed. Currently, Las Armenias has 12 people as their entrepreneurship team and 11 as the monitoring team. At Piedades Sur, the entrepreneurship team has 15 people, and monitoring has 18 people. Both communities are proactive, already reporting on sights of tracks and wildlife around their community, also making plans for projects to acquire more cameras and expanding impact. Additionally, pre-test interviews resulted in a total of 163 interviews at 5 communities.

During this period, key consultancies advanced on building business and commercialization frameworks. First, Yo Emprendedor implemented a strong training program for entrepreneurs at Las Brisas and the pilot communities focused on the generation of business skills, design of operation models and finances for startups in the initial phase. They provide personalized mentoring for 10 entrepreneurs at the pilot communities and 13 at Las Brisas. Their diagnosis is helpful to fill gaps and led to a second phase for the next months leading to marketing tests. Secondly, SPECIES consultancy on advancing international retail opportunities for AMFE's products resulted in letters of intent from 3 potential business partners: Project Survival/Cat Haven, Amazing Animals, Inc., and Tigers for Tomorrow (all of them US based). The pace is slow on negotiations, given by retailers, but considerations and advice in order to sell artisanal products originating from outside the United States is informative and leads activities for the following months. Seems unlikely a test for international sales will work for this year, and SPECIES is planning further actions for 2024.

Other results for the period include a collaboration with the Zootechnic School at UCR for a basic [training](#) on poultry farming management (6hrs) related to the parallel project of the *Gallinero Amigos de Felinos* (AMFE Chicken Coop). We collaborated with felid conservation colleagues for a celebration event for the August 30^h International Day of the Puma with talks and stands in Osa, southern Pacific. Separately, AMFE started to prepare for a 2024-2025 project lead by Costa Rica Wildlife Foundation on improving capacities to maintain forest connectivity; for that transition, our coordinator provides technical advice. AMFE social media has been active disseminating the photo trapping results at [Las Brisas](#) (last year winner community) and at the [pilot communities](#).

2. Give details of any notable problems or unexpected developments/lessons learnt that the project has encountered over the last 6 months. Explain what impact these could have on the project and whether the changes will affect the budget and timetable of project activities.

Many challenges are providing lessons, we first refer to the pilot communities and Las Brisas. We had unexpected developments related to intense social problems beyond our project that remind us that we selected vulnerable populations. There is a perception that a post-pandemic recovery has not been achieved, and that crime in communities has increased (which is currently a reality at a national level). Locals cannot prioritize project activities over their livelihoods, and still, they manage to make the time to check cameras, attend predation events and advance on entrepreneurship. Furthermore, access to services (transportation, technology, etc.) and health continues to be a daily obstacle. Articulation with other projects in both areas is a gap because we are unable to invest the time, those are mostly trainings about tourism and some other educational opportunities. Barbilla National Park, at Las Brisas is one of the less visited nationally, while Rincon de la Vieja Volcano at the pilot communities maintains high activity and warnings, with negative impact on tourism. This context makes difficult for participants to keep motivated in expectation for when it would be that Amigos de Felinos will achieve sustainable sales. In the meantime, consultants Yo Emprendedor and SPECIES are advancing on the marking component related to those expectations.

At the pilot communities, the directive board of AMFE has required much accompaniment on administration and financial management. Many mistakes (of good faith) accumulated further difficulties, in particular the failure with the appointments of the two local coordinators led to financial struggles. In retrospective, the board assigned an incorrect figure in the contracts that, in consequence, added, instead of including, legal obligations fees. Contracts then were finished in March, with a debt handled from other funds. Getting finances in order resulted in extreme delays and inconveniences. Without hired local coordinators, the teams depended again on volunteer work. Alejandra Araya, loyal to the project, has maintained that role for the wildlife monitoring team as best as she can. María Mendoza, who already resulted a burden, dropped out, and it was until September that the role of coordinator for the entrepreneurship team was assigned to Israel Lara. Importantly, the directive board was somewhat modified with a new election in July. The directive, with new vice-president and vocal, has ups and downs to control all issues. We are facilitating tools and alliances to fill capacity's gaps on administration and accountability. Many steps will be still required for sustainability in these matters.

At Las Brisas, we perceived participation got colder during this period, with apparent low activity and without the consolidation of local leadership and empowerment. However, we detected that our team's reliance on remote communications is a bias because the lack of fluid and explicit communication from local participants has cultural roots and technological barriers that have not been overcome. At the same time we question if Las Brisas will continue as active members of AMFE after the project, we reflect on the specific context where participants are active but do not report until direct conversations occur. The other very relevant challenge continues to be the relationship with the Nairi Awari Indigenous Territory, which has been complicated to navigate given our newness to working with indigenous communities. Seeking advice, we had a meeting with attorney Yasmin Granados from the National Commission for Indigenous Affairs (CONAI, in Spanish). She provided legal advice and gave insights for our meeting with the board of the Territory, and we reached an agreement for a cordial relationship without involvement of the indigenous territory. Indigenous leaders expressed the design of our project was meant for "whites", they prefer not to participate, and they will not interfere; however, they forbid their members to affiliate to AMFE. We lost 6 members because of this; it was sad and frustrating for them and for us. We maintain visits to inject motivation and reinforce commitments. In person, all participants show they care about activities, providing evidence of fieldwork and production. Two volunteer local coordinators (both females) were elected for the entrepreneurship team, which is made of 13 members. The monitoring team, with 12 members, kept their two, also female, coordinators and promised to improve communications.

About internal challenges for the project, this period we have had to deal with several administrative inconveniences and delays by FundaciónUCR. This included an additional

Request Changes in July to approve specific consultants. However, the main administrative issue was a temporal freezing of project funds due to a sudden new national regulation, which required confusing data from DEFRA. FundacionUCR failed to communicate in time the importance of this document, which generated delays a period close to a month without access to the account. We controlled major impacts on activities with our staff willing to continue despite the delays in receiving salaries, and risking assuming expenses, waiting to be reimbursed. The vice-rector for research, Vice-president of the university, intervened to allow the reactivation of the project account. To date we are unsure if all documentation was satisfactory. We also report that counterpart funding from the UCR to cover partial time of our coordinator was completely rejected; the reason was the rigorous and inflexible wording in regulations intended not to double pay personnel, knowing all this case was not double paying. No further options remain to claim that support originally promised as counterpart.

3. Have any of these issues been discussed with NIRAS and if so, have changes been made to the original agreement?

Discussed with NIRAS:	Yes
Formal Change Request submitted:	Yes, two for the period
Received confirmation of change acceptance	Yes, two requests accepted

Change request reference if known: CR22-118, CR23-039

4a. Please confirm your actual spend in this financial year to date (i.e. from 1 April 2023 – 30 September 2023)

Actual spend: ██████████

4b. Do you currently expect to have any significant (e.g. more than £5,000) underspend in your budget for this financial year (ending 31 March 2024)?

Yes No Estimated underspend: £

4c. If yes, then you need to consider your project budget needs carefully. Please remember that any funds agreed for this financial year are only available to the project in this financial year.

If you anticipate a significant underspend because of justifiable changes within the project, please submit a re-budget Change Request as soon as possible. There is no guarantee that Defra will agree a re-budget so please ensure you have enough time to make appropriate changes if necessary. Please DO NOT send these in the same email as your report.

NB: if you expect an underspend, do not claim anything more than you expect to spend this financial year.

5. Are there any other issues you wish to raise relating to the project or to BCF management, monitoring, or financial procedures?

Our administrative offices close mid-December, we will rely in our digital systems to check remanent funding on real time to execute final needs, expecting . No additional issues to report in our case.

Please note: Any planned modifications to your project schedule/workplan can be discussed in this report but should also be raised with NIRAS through a Change Request. Please DO NOT send these in the same email.

Please send your completed report by email to BCF-Reports@niras.com. The report should be between 2-3 pages maximum. **Please state your project reference number, followed by the specific fund in the header of your email message e.g. Subject: 29-001 Darwin Initiative Half Year Report**