



Darwin Initiative/D+ Project Half Year Report (due 31st October 2019)

Project reference	DPLUS063
Project title	The Ascension Island Ocean Sanctuary (ASIOS): planning for the Atlantic's largest marine reserve
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	Ascension Island
Lead organisation	Ascension Island Government Conservation & Fisheries Department
Partner(s)	University of Exeter, SAERI, University of Western Australia, University of Windsor, University of Birmingham, Army Ornithological Survey
Project leader	Dr Sam Weber
Report date and number (e.g. HYR3)	HYR3
Project website/blog/social media etc.	

1. Outline progress over the last 6 months (April – Sept) 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 to end September).

The majority of work in Q1-Q2 of Y3 has focussed on Outputs 7 and 8, as planned in the baseline timetable of the project.

Output 7: International best practice is incorporated into the design and planning of the ASIOS, and experiences and knowledge gained during the project are widely shared.

The UK Overseas Blue Belt Symposium, which was held at the University of Exeter's Cornwall Campus from 29th – 31st July 2019 (<https://bluebeltsymposium.org.uk/>), was one of the flagship outputs of Year 3 of the project and was a resounding success. The Symposium, which was co-hosted by University of Exeter, Ascension Island Government, Great British Oceans Coalition and the Blue Belt Initiative, grew considerably in size and scope from the event proposed in the original project application and resembled a small international conference, attended by more than 90 people, including delegates from 11 of the UKOTs along with international academics and representatives from UK Government, NGOs and charitable foundations. The principle objectives of the meeting advertised on the Symposium website were to:

1. To forge personal relationships and share knowledge and experiences for addressing common challenges across Blue Belt OTs
2. To celebrate the achievements of Blue Belt and inspire its future progress and extension into new areas
3. To create an environment conducive to the development of collaborative projects across the Blue Belt
4. To explore new technologies and techniques that could revolutionise our ability to enforce or monitor large marine protected areas (MPAs)
5. To explore options and share experience of maintaining resources and capacity within the OTs
6. To establish an active network across the OTs that will develop ongoing means of information sharing and organise future symposia

Over three days, the [programme](#) addressed three cross-cutting challenges facing large, remote marine management zones in the UKOTs: sustainable financing and stakeholder engagement, evidence-based decision making, and surveillance and enforcement. These complex topics were approached through a combination of 29 oral presentations delivered by a diverse group of speakers, interspersed with workshops, Q&A sessions and open forum debates. The symposium also provided a forum for side events, including workshops focussing on the future of the Blue Belt programme in the Caribbean OTs (organised by the Marine Conservation Society and the Foreign & Commonwealth Office) and on the management of marine plastics (organised by Zoological Society of London part of Darwin Plus project DPLUS). The meeting opened with a welcome address from Lord Ahmed, Minister of State for the UKOTs, and attracted a number of well-respected keynote speakers from the international marine conservation community which helped to boost the profile event. Live social media coverage orchestrated by ExeterMarine achieved potential reach of 5.3 million people over the three days (see highlights [here](#)) and a short film documenting the event is currently in its final stages of edit and will be released online shortly. An article on the event has also featured in the UK Government's [Marine Developments blog](#).

The organising committee received a huge amount of positive feedback from those who attended the Symposium. Some of the comments included:

“Of all the conferences I’ve attended it was the most constantly engaging, informative and constructive that I’ve ever been to.”

“Thanks for organising such a fantastic meeting this week. I really enjoyed it and found it exceptionally useful, not only for the contents of many interesting talks, but also for the opportunity of meeting new folk”.

“I thoroughly enjoyed it and learnt a lot about the OTs, so while it was a long trip, I certainly felt it was well-worth the effort.”

It was widely agreed that the opportunities for face to face meetings, knowledge exchange, networking and partnership development had been universally beneficial for the various organisations involved in delivering the Blue Belt Programme, as well as helping to raise the profile of the UKOTs internationally, and that similar events should be organised on a semi-regular basis in future.

Output 8: The ASIOS is formally designated and management structures are put in place to ensure its long-term success.

Finalisation and stakeholder review of the Ascension Island MPA Evidence and Options Report and submission to the Ascension Island administration, originally planned for Y3 of the project were completed ahead of time in Q3 of Y2. Based on the range of scientific and economic data presented in this report, in August 2019 (Q2 of Y3) the [Ascension Island Council voted in favour of designating a marine protected area covering 100% of the Ascension Island’s 445,000 km² EEZ](#). A draft management plan has now been prepared in collaboration with Blue Belt project partners, although this will not come into full effect until a long-term funding arrangement is agreed with UK Government. Political conversations on the nature of this arrangement are ongoing but are beyond the scope of this project. These developments effectively deliver the project’s intended outcome of delivering a “large scale MPA underpinned by strong science and long-term monitoring and enforcement capabilities”. The remaining three months of the project will be used to finalise legacy planning, including the publication of key project scientific outputs and the preparation of monitoring and surveillance plans.

2a. 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.

In July 2019 the Darwin Secretariat approved a three month no-cost extension to the project to allow additional time for finalising and publishing project outputs, and to ensure that MPA designation could be completed within the life of the project.

2b. Have any of these issues been discussed with LTS International and if so, have changes been made to the original agreement?

Discussed with LTS: Yes

Formal change request submitted: Yes

Received confirmation of change acceptance Yes

3a. Do you currently expect to have any significant (e.g., more than £5,000) underspend in your budget for this year?

Yes No Estimated underspend: £

3b. 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 rebudget Change Request as soon as possible. There is no guarantee that Defra will agree a rebudget so please ensure you have enough time to make appropriate changes if necessary.

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

If you were asked to provide a response to this year's annual report review with your next half year report, please attach your response to this document. Additionally, if you were funded under R25 and asked to provide further information by your first half year report, please attach your response as a separate document.

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

Please send your **completed report by email** to Darwin-Projects@ltsi.co.uk. The report should be between 2-3 pages maximum. **Please state your project reference number in the header of your email message e.g. Subject: 25-035 Darwin Half Year Report**