

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	DPLUS111
Project title	Building resilient, participatory management of marine biodiversity in hurricane-prone BVI
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	British Virgin Islands
Lead partner	Marine Conservation Society (MCS)
Partner(s)	Association of Reef Keepers (ARK); Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DOAF), Government of the Virgin Islands; Ministry of Natural Resources, Labour and Immigration (MNRLI), Government of the Virgin Islands; University of Exeter (UE)
Project leader	<i>Peter Richardson</i>
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	<i>HYR4</i>
Project website/blog/social media	https://www.bviark.org/steel-project.html

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).

Output 1. Assessment of the status, nature and extent of the traditional turtle fishery:

The local project team members have been meeting remotely and using the project WhatsApp group platform for continuous comms. The wider team has met once during this reporting period (August 2023), specifically to start the process of determining draft turtle fishery legislative recommendations informed by the CVM consultative process (see Output 3). An overseas fieldtrip by the Marine Conservation Society in April/May also culminated in a project-partner debrief meeting that also involved Junior Minister for Fisheries Karl Dawson. The key informant socio-economic questionnaire surveys (Activity 1.6) has also been analysed and written up by MCS's UKOT Officer Amdeep Sanghera and is currently receiving project-partner critique. This has provided vital insights into the nature of the turtle fishery, with this understanding important in informing final project outputs.

Output 2. Development and management of national BVI Sea Turtle Database, including updated assessment of turtle populations and habitats at key index sites

Eliin Meek completed her MSc thesis, entitled "*Opposing Population Trajectories in Two Species of Sympatric Marine Turtles in the Caribbean (British Virgin Islands)*". This was a compilation of all in-water tagging data collected from 2003-2023 and completes the assessment of BVI turtle populations. Hawksbill sea turtles showed a decline in catch per unit effort (CPUE) while green turtles increased. Both species showed broad size distributions

(hawksbills - 19.0 cm-87.0 cm / greens 24.4 cm -97.5cm). Recaptures identified high site fidelity within the BVI and 10 recaptures within the region demonstrating the need for more regional collaboration.

A total of 11 tagging days were completed from April to September, with 22 new individuals tagged and 4 recaptures. Sizes ranged from 20.8cm-62.4cm curved carapace length. All data was entered into the database.

As an effort to help expand our knowledge of foraging grounds, the BVI SEE Turtle Survey was launched. This programme engages the visitors using local charter and dive companies to fill out a short survey if they see any sea turtles during their visit to the BVI. Information available on the website :[SEE Turtle Survey \(bviark.org\)](http://SEE Turtle Survey (bviark.org))

ARK
www.bviark.org

THE BVI SEE TURTLE SURVEY

GREEN

We currently monitor 6 turtle "hot spots" throughout the Territory, but extending our efforts is critical for marine conservation management efforts.

WE NEED YOUR HELP!

See a turtle during your holiday? Let us know by using the QR code above to complete a short form or visit our website for more information.

Your efforts will help to build our "inventory" of resident sea turtles over a greater spatial extent, identify new feeding grounds, changes in what life stage they reside here and any new threats.

HAWKSBILL

IF YOU SEE AN INJURED OR DISTRESSED TURTLE, CONTACT US ON WHATSAPP 284-546-0164 / 284-496-7998

Total leatherback activities since April was 9 (Little Bay, Josiah's Bay, Trunk Bay, and Long Bay, Tortola). Only two nests are known to have hatched, one nest from Josiah's Bay with only a 25% success rate, and the other speculated to be the one from Long Bay as one hatchling was found in the water at Sandy Cay nearby around the expected hatch date.

Hawksbill nesting activities on Little Thatch (8 activities) and Virgin Gorda numbered approximately 48 activities. One site on Virgin Gorda may be a key nesting ground but was not identified as a nesting beach until after an observer intentionally withheld information and a volunteer started monitoring the beach. Crooks Bay, Virgin Gorda potentially had up to 29 activities alone (other beaches totalled 11 activities). An additional nest that hatched was identified as a green turtle nest from photographs.

Two key resorts with adjacent nesting beaches were visited to initiate a monitoring programme specifically with their staff. Scrub Island was once a significant hawksbill nesting site and a meeting with the general manager showed interest in her staff becoming more engaged with monitoring nesting turtles. Additionally, it was recognised that one of the beaches could be restored that is currently being used for construction storage. We met with one of the managers at Peter Island resort (opening in 2024) about working towards training their staff in turtle nest monitoring as well as initiating a similar programme like Little Dix Bay Resort, where ARK visits the resort and carries out in-water monitoring/tagging along with guests.

Site assessments on key foraging habitats indicate decreasing live coral coverage and increased anchor scarring on seagrass beds.

Output 3. Recommended amendments to Virgin Islands Fisheries Regulations and Endangered Animals and Plants Ordinance, and revised STRAP:

A comprehensive public consultation campaign was carried out in April/May 2023 across the BVI archipelago (Activity 3.8). This involved 6 screenings of the Community Voice Method (CVM) documentary (30-minute film contextualizing turtle conservation, turtle fishery management and habitat conservation within issues in the BVI). There were additional screenings for the Governor's Office and invitees in Tortola; the Rotary Club; and an additional screening for the [M.A.L.E young organization](#) at the Brigado Flax School in Virgin Gorda. The locations of the main screenings are shown in the flyer below which was promoted to the public as part of a bespoke outreach strategy led by the Government of the Virgin Islands (Gov VI) Information Officer Sonjé Greenridge (Activity 3.7 & 4.5). As part of this strategy, [a press release](#) was also issued highlighting the screening workshops, with select members of the project team also taking part in a [local media online event](#) to publicise and discuss the consultative process. The format of each workshop event was tailored depending on the audience. Registers taken show that at least 175 people attended the events.



Generally, the events began with an introduction to the project by the Marine Conservation Society and the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DOAF), followed by a presentation on the biological aspects and findings of the project led by Association of Reef Keeper's Dr. Shannon Gore. The CVM documentary was then screened and catering provided. After viewing the films, participants were invited to discuss their views on turtle fishery management and conservation in a structured workshop setting and present their considered views on flipchart forms. All written responses from the workshops were collected as well as voice recordings that have been transcribed. Qualitative analysis has been carried out on the workshop proceedings, and a CVM report has been produced that is supporting developing recommended draft turtle fishery legislation amendments (Activity 3.9). A [Gov VI press release](#) was also issued at the end of the CVM process summarising the consultative process, while project partners also participated in a [Gov VI online event](#) to evaluate the screening workshops too.

Output 4. Disseminate project findings to national, regional and international audiences

As part of the CVM outreach strategy (Activity 4.5 & 3.7), the [project's CVM film](#) was hosted on the Marine Conservation Society website (Activity 4.6). It was also accompanied by an online

survey to further support stakeholder input into developing draft turtle fishery legislative amendments, with both film and survey being promoted by a [Gov VI press release](#).

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.

While we had an agreed project extension to the end of September 2023, for a number of reasons we were unable to complete this output by the end of the agreed extension period. Key MCS staff member Amdeep Sanghera, our UKOT Conservation Officer, suffered a family bereavement at the beginning of the year, and his absence during compassionate leave has had knock-on impacts on the timing of all his UKOT work. Dr Shannon Gore of the Association of Reef Keepers, our local lead partner, has recently been dealing with the onset of serious nerve damage to her left hand, reducing her capacity to work, impacting an already heavy workload and particularly affecting her typing. This has occurred at the same time that Shannon is caring for her ailing and aged mother in the USA, and her husband, who was seriously injured in a traffic accident in August 2023. All of these issue issues have delayed the delivery of the final project outputs, and fortunately Shannon's hand (and her husband) are recovering, and Shannon is now back at full capacity. Due to these circumstances, we requested an additional project extension of 6 months to the end of March 2024, although we are very likely to complete before then within Year4 Q4. We are grateful that NIRAs were generous enough to oblige.

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

Received confirmation of change acceptance Yes

Change request reference if known: N/A

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

Actual spend: £ [REDACTED]

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)?

No Estimated underspend: [REDACTED]

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?

None

If you are a new project and you received feedback comments that requested a response, or if your Annual Report Review asked you to provide a response with your next half year report, please attach your response to this document.

All new projects (excluding Darwin Plus Fellowships and IWT Challenge Fund Evidence projects) should submit their Risk Register with this report if they have not already done so.

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**