

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	<i>DPLUS135</i>
Project title	From Pseudoscorpions to crickets: securing Ascension Island's unique invertebrates
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	Ascension
Lead partner	Ascension Island Government Conservation & Fisheries Directorate (AIGCFD)
Partner(s)	MAISG, UKCEH, SHNT
Project leader	<i>MAISG, UKCEH, SHNT</i>
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	<i>HYR3</i>
Project website/blog/social media	

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).

Although we are not looking for specific reporting against your indicators, please use this opportunity to consider the appropriateness of your M&E systems (are your indicators still relevant, can you report against any Standard Indicators, do your assumptions still hold true?). The guidance can be found on the resources page of the relevant fund website.

Progress is reported below against activities in the agreed project timeline. Many activities are completed already, and the majority of the rest are on target for completion with the project time-frame.

Activities under Output 1

1.1 Training and upskilling of Project Officer in UK and St Helena, by knowledge exchange with existing UKOT invertebrate specialists

Completed previously

1.2 An invertebrate record database template is built with appropriate fields and format that will allow comprehensive recording as well as integration into wider data systems

All data continues to be uploaded into the Access database as taxonomic identifications are returned by specialists. *Will be completed on projection end.*

1.4 Undertake invertebrate surveys on 100 sites, taking samples and recording associated environmental data.

Completed previously

1.5 Survey samples are processed and identified using initial sorting to groups and family by Project Officer and groups labelled, and sent to external specialists in St Helena National Trust, Natural Museum.

All pre-sorted specimens from survey efforts have now been transported to relevant specialists (> 20 experts) for formal identification. Some taxonomic groups, including ants, beetles, flies and spiders, have already been fully or nearly-fully identified. Others, including moths, mites and springtails, are in the process of being identified and there are contracts and agreements in place to ensure completion. For a minority of taxonomic groups, complete identification would not be possible within the scope of the project, as expert individuals were lacking or low in available capacity and would not accept payment. For these groups, a subset of specimens will be identified within the project scope to build at least an initial species list for the island. **Will be mostly completed within the project time-frame.**

1.6 Voucher specimens linked to DNA samples of each species stored on Ascension and sent to BIOSCAN project to establish DNA reference collection for Ascension

Samples have been stored in ethanol for DNA barcoding. For all identified specimens, a sample is kept in ethanol for future barcoding. Barcoding will begin as and when morphological identification of individual taxonomic groups is completed. **Will be mostly completed within the project time-frame.**

1.7 Verified species records added to Ascension Biodiversity Catalogue (ABC) and made available via SAERI

The project database continues to be updated daily. The database will be made available via SAERI on its completion. **Will be completed on projection end.**

Activities under Output 2

2.1. Red listing process is undertaken working with MAISG and appropriate IUCN taxon Specialist Groups is used for review, and submitted for publishing

Six species have been assessed and accepted via the IUCN Species Information Service portal. These include five species assessed as Critically Endangered and one as Vulnerable. Red Listing has taken place in collaboration with MAISG and under review by the appropriate IUCN specialist groups. Information now exists to assess at least four more. These assessments will be written up over the next six month period. **Will be completed on projection end.**

2.2 Endemic invertebrate conservation plan written based on background information and consultation with project partners

Area-based management was previously decided to be the most appropriate method of invertebrate conservation on Ascension. Dr Sharp has designed two new and one expanded protected area in aim of endemic invertebrate conservation. Ecological research has identified specific threats faced by endemic species, and that information has been instrumental in developing informed conservation strategies for species within those protected areas. The formal plans for the protected areas have been approved by local council, have the support of the Ascension Administrator, and await formal implementation. **Will be completed on projection end.**

2.3 Invertebrate actions, species and broader actions, are incorporated into protected area management plans and development control guidance

Management actions to protect endemic invertebrates have been written into protected area management plans for the Green Mountain National Park and Mars Bay and Waterside Nature Reserves. Actions will be written into plans for the protected beaches within the first quarter of the upcoming year. New management plans focussed on invertebrate conservation actions will accompany designation of two new

protected areas and the significant expansion of an existing Nature Reserve within the next year. **Will be completed on projection end.**

2.4 Training in invertebrate conservation is delivered to AIGCFD staff and volunteers by the Project Officer supported by international specialists

Dr Sharp has delivered training on endemic invertebrate monitoring, invasive cricket control and invasive ant control to the entire AIGCFD staff, 100% of whom showed an increase in invertebrate conservation knowledge following the training (assessed via a series of questions). Separately, Dr Sharp has facilitated the visit of ant specialist Noel Tawato (Fera Science Ltd) who has delivered in-depth ant identification to the AIGCFD biosecurity officers. **Completed.**

Activities under Output 3

3.1 Profiles of 19 invertebrate species including best-practice surveillance and control methods will be researched and written using existing invasive species databases and partner input.

The profiles have been completed and are available to AIGCFD staff members, including the Biosecurity Team. **Completed.**

3.2 Training on surveillance and control of 19 high-risk invasive invertebrate species provided to 3 staff in the AIGCFD team

Dr Sharp has developed new biosecurity protocols targeted at those 19 high-risk invertebrates and delivered training on their implementation to AIGCFD biosecurity officers. **Completed.**

3.3 Surveillance methods for high risk invertebrates implemented as part of existing biosecurity monitoring

New methods are already being implemented. **Completed.**

3.4 Control methods for high risk invasives incorporated into existing AIG biosecurity response protocols

Control methods have been conceived and written into instruction documentation and will be implemented by the end of the current project year. **Will be completed on projection end.**

3.5 Control methods for BHA applied in trial sites and complementary monitoring undertaken to understand impact of control

Control of Big-Headed Ant has been trialled across two native habitats and five non-native habitats, with significant reduction in abundance documented across all trial sites. Monitoring over a two-month period showed long-term reduction in ant numbers following control implementation. **Completed.**

Activities under Output 4

4.1 A short booklet on Ascension's endemic invertebrates is written and designed and published both as a hard copy and an online version

Booklet has been designed but is yet to be printed or published online. It will be available by the end of the project year. **Will be completed on projection end.**

4.2 Plan and deliver school events run, engaging 65 pupils with Ascension's invertebrates

Completed previously

4.3 Produce a video showcasing Ascension's invertebrates and distribute via AIGCFD website

Dr Sharp has designed and commissioned a two-minute animated video showcasing four of Ascension's endemic invertebrate species and their threats. The video has been disseminated by AIGCFD via both Facebook and Twitter, and has been shown at scientific presentations in the UK. **Completed.**

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.

No significant problems have been encountered over the last six months. The vast majority of objectives are due to be completed within the project time frame, omitting only finalization of some especially difficult invertebrate taxonomy by third-party specialists which could not previously be planned for.

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

Discussed with NIRAS: No

Formal Change Request submitted: No

Received confirmation of change acceptance No

Change request reference if known:

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)?

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?

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**