

## 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: 31<sup>st</sup> October 2023**

<b>Project reference</b>	DPLUS141
<b>Project title</b>	Habitat restoration and wise use for Akrotiri and Cape Pyla
<b>Country(ies)/territory(ies)</b>	Cyprus - Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia
<b>Lead partner</b>	BirdLife Cyprus
<b>Partner(s)</b>	Terra Cypria - The Cyprus Conservation Foundation Cyprus Sovereign Base Areas Administration - Environment Department (SBAA ED) Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
<b>Project leader</b>	Martin Hellicar
<b>Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)</b>	31 October 2023, HYR3
<b>Project website/blog/social media</b>	<a href="http://www.visitakrotiri.cy">www.visitakrotiri.cy</a>

**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).**

**Horizontal activities** that have taken place during this period, include:

- 5<sup>th</sup> Project Steering Committee Meeting: It took place on 17<sup>th</sup> July 2023 and all involved team members from the Project Partners participated. Items covered during the meeting were: progress update, discussion & exchange of ideas & thoughts on various project issues and next steps.
- Financial monitoring of the project (templates, time sheets, expenses recording, etc) within and amongst the Project Partners.
- Project promotion communication actions: Social media posts about project actions

**Output 1. Support for sustainable management of invasive *Acacia saligna*, with a focus on post clearance habitat restoration on Cape Pyla**

**1.2 Field trials:** During these months, the two field experiments took place in Cape Pyla, with the aim to test methodologies for sustainable management of *Acacia saligna* in areas where clearance of acacia has been implemented. The 1st experiment tested different intensities of soil solarisation (this took place during June to July 23) and the 2nd experiment tests the effectiveness of grazing, revegetation and chemical treatment (this is taking place from January to December 23). At the same time, vegetation surveys, seed count and seed viability analyses took place before the experimental treatments, and will be repeated after treatments are completed. In this way, the results of the experiment will be evaluated.

**1.4 The programme for monitoring of illegal mist netting levels** by BirdLife Cyprus, with RSPB support, continues and autumn surveys were carried out successfully in September/ early October 2023.

## **Output 2. Reed management solutions successfully piloted at Zakaki Marsh**

**2.1 Review of water management in Zakaki Marsh:** The hydrological study was completed in February 2023, which provides a very clear identification and description of the hydrological regime of Makria Lake. Accordingly, an ecological assessment and a review of management options was carried out by the Darwin Team and Partners (especially with the input of RSPB experts), with habitat restoration as a target, with the needs of target species as a key indicator. A stakeholders' meeting took place in June 2023 where the finding and management recommendations were presented and thoroughly discussed in order to agree on the way forward.

**2.2** The next **mechanical reed clearance** in front of the existing hide at the marsh is scheduled to take place in November 2023.

**2.3 Bird counts at Zakaki Marsh** have taken place every month to monitor the occurrence and numbers of the priority species *Aythya nyroca* and *Himantopus himantopus* and also of other birds (resident or migrant visitors) using the wetland.

## **Output 3. Sustainability established for conservation cattle grazing at Akrotiri Marsh**

**3.1 Management of cattle grazing on Akrotiri Marsh:** As was noted in previous reports, there is a clear need for better on-going management of the area in order to address long-standing issues. The Darwin team has drafted a proposal for regular management actions needed for Akrotiri marsh in order to facilitate the formulation and implementation of a better overall management of the area. There have been some encouraging steps in this direction recently, as the SBAA Environment Department started organising stakeholders' meetings with the aim to formulate a management committee of the area with clear roles and responsibilities. The project team and partners remain in close communication and cooperation with the SBAA team in order to assist and advise on the various steps in this process. Additionally, the updated grazing capacity estimate for the area has been finalised and is being discussed internally, before it is communicated and discussed with the relevant stakeholders (next step).

**3.2. The Marketing Strategy and Plan for the local cattle breed (including Akrotiri Marsh cattle)** and the accompanying graphic design work were presented and discussed with the graziers in September 2023. The graziers welcomed the outcome and communications tools. We remain in close communication with them to support and guide them towards implementation of this plan.

**3.3 & 3.4 In situ and ex situ actions for conservation of Akrotiri Marsh flora:** Vegetation surveys & monitoring took place every month according to the flowering period of each plant. Seeds of all four target plant species (*Euphorbia hirsute*, *Ipomoea sagittate*, *Mentha aquatica*, *Schoenoplectus tabernaemontani*) were collected during spring and summer 2023 and deposited at the seed bank of the Cyprus Agricultural Research Institute. In addition, seeds, cuttings and rhizomes of all four target species were planted in situ within the fenced -for plant conservation- areas in the Marsh. Outcomes to date have been positive, while managed grazing continues. Additionally, plants were planted in ex situ areas and monitoring of their viability and numbers / cover is ongoing.

**3.5 Increased engagement of local graziers** in the management of the marsh and in maintaining Cyprus cattle on the site is being facilitated through frequent meetings with the graziers in the field, in order to discuss issues/ problems/ needs they have and this is reinforced by actions 3.1 and 3.2 (better management of the Marsh and Marketing of beef).

## **Output 4. Reduced disturbance to key wildlife species, including birds and marine reptiles, through the implementation of an access management plan for sensitive Akrotiri habitats**

**4.1.** The **Access Management Plan** has been completed and has undergone consultation with the different stakeholders through the SBAA, resulting in the agreement of a number of access management actions (installation of gate bars, creation of soil embankments), a number of which took place in February - March 2023. Additional relevant actions will take place over the next 2-3 months (after an approved change request -07/2023- to move budget for these actions). These actions are very important for the protection of key habitats from access disturbance to species and habitats and for the prevention of littering and other illegal practices.

**4.2 Monitoring of birds** (occurrence, numbers and breeding activity) took place on a monthly basis.

**4.3 Monitoring of turtle nesting** was done by the SBAA during the breeding (summer) season 2023.

**Output 5. Eco-tourism opportunities enhanced within Akrotiri peninsula, benefiting in particular the approx. 900 local residents of Akrotiri community**

**5.1** Results from the **automatic visitor counters** are being collected every month and are being analysed to understand visitation patterns.

**5.2** The **website for Akrotiri visitors** has been online since March 2023 (<https://visitakrotiri.cy>), both in English and Greek with an average ~500 visits per month.

**5.4** The **1<sup>st</sup> Spring Akrotiri festival** took place during the weekend of 13-14 of May. It was a great success, with more than 500 participants. During this weekend, visitors had the opportunity to participate in activities such as bird ringing, bird watching, fun educational games and crafts for families, hiking, basketry workshops, etc. at various locations on Akrotiri Peninsula.

**5.5** The implementation of **two walking trails** is underway. There remain some procedural aspects that need to be finalised, but the aim is for the routes to be completed by December 2023.

**5.6** The design and initial phases of construction of an **information point structure and viewing screen** at the beginning of Lady's Mile road have been completed. Onsite installation will take place at the beginning of November 23.

**5.7 Wildlife guide app:** Through an approved change request (07/2023) this action was changed from "Production of Akrotiri visitors' wildlife guide in form of a mobile application" to the **production of a short video/ promotional spot** to highlight and promote Akrotiri Peninsula as an ecotourism and wildlife-watching destination. The plan is that this video will be used by Project Partners, the Akrotiri Community and the Deputy Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Cyprus, to promote an alternative tourism and visitation pattern to the area. The contract with the video producing company was signed and already shootings have started. We decided to take advantage of shooting during different seasons (autumn, winter and spring) to highlight the beauty of the area all year round. Thus, while shootings will take place during the whole time from now to spring 2024, the promotional spot will be ready by May 2024.

**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.**

As was reported in previous Progress Reports, during the course of this project there were some notable problems and unexpected developments and lessons learnt. Over the last 6 months, no notable new problems were encountered, apart from lengthy bureaucratic procedures that continued to delay the implementation of some project actions (e.g. action 5.5 walking trails). We do not, however, expect these delays to have any serious impact to the overall results of the project.

In July 2023 we sent a change request form, which was approved, in order to reallocate budget from Output 1: 'Support for sustainable management of invasive *Acacia saligna*, with a focus on post clearance habitat restoration on Cape Pyla' --> to Output 4: 'Reduced disturbance to key wildlife species, including birds and marine reptiles, through the implementation of an access management plan for sensitive Akrotiri habitats'. This change was made in order to address an 8-month delay in output 1, borne of procedural difficulties in implementing the Acacia field experiment, due to an unexpected precondition set by the SBAA Area Office (issue of Public Liability Insurance worth £500,000). This delay resulted in unspent sums within the financial year 2023-2024, which were allocated to Output 4, in order to implement a number of access management measures/ actions in Akrotiri Area.

**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: *NIRAS Reference N00066*

**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?**

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**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](mailto: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**

### **Response to Annual Report Review – Comment No 3:**

***“The project indicates that the site is suffering an almost complete lack of management, aside from that done by cows and graziers. It expresses some concern over the slow progress in setting up a management scheme structure with the SBAA, but it is not clear what action that the project can take to encourage and speed up this process”.***

As was noted in the previous progress reports, Akrotiri Marsh indeed suffers from an almost complete lack of on-going management. Specifically, there is a need for:

1. An updated and agreed management scheme for the area – currently, the roles and responsibilities amongst different stakeholders are largely unclear.
2. More support for ongoing management actions, such as water management, adaptive grazing regime according to conservation targets, ongoing monitoring, maintenance of existing infrastructures.
3. Further needs for conservation, restoration and management actions – Important plant species conservation, maintenance of open pools/ lakes for birds, etc.
4. Further needs for promotion and upgrading of the site for ecotourism purposes

With the exception of the SBAA Environment Department, the project partners are not in decision-making positions and roles. However, and in general terms, and in order to address the above gaps:

- a) actions that are implemented through projects such as Darwin Plus, or own-funding, contribute to better understanding of key management issues (such as hydrological studies, monitoring of plant species, access management plan etc). They can also help through implementation of conservation actions that help in the better management of the area (such as grazing management and in situ/ ex situ plant conservation in the Marsh).
- b) effective communication, ongoing cooperation, organisation of stakeholders’ events etc, contribute in bringing stakeholders into common grounds and bridging the gaps.
- c) Interaction, lobbying and exerting pressure for better environmental and protection management schemes by key persons in decisions making roles, can guide practices towards this direction.

Within the above framework, the project Partners and Team have and are undertaking the following actions that encourage and speed up this process towards better management in Akrotiri Marsh:

- Actions that contribute to better understanding of the system and conservation of key biodiversity, including in situ/ ex situ plant conservation actions, monitoring plant populations in the Marsh, clearing of drainage channels, updating the grazing capacity of the Marsh, etc – actions taking place both thanks to Darwin Plus funding and supported by own funds.
- Ongoing meetings, discussions and field visits continue to take place to discuss issues/ problems/ needs/ solutions, while building/ renewing close cooperation with various stakeholders such as Akrotiri Council, Graziers, the Forest Department, the Water Development Department, etc.
- Organisation by BirdLife Cyprus, with own funds and thanks to RSPB support, of a trip to Lake Kerkini, in Northern Greece (March 2023) with the aim to visit a designated environmentally protected area in order to understand and to explore how this area has been promoted and has developed to become a top eco-tourism and birding destination, promoting also local meat products from water buffalo. This trip had many synergies with the Akrotiri Marsh and its stakeholders. The participants were Akrotiri Marsh graziers, the Mayor of nearby Ypsonas Municipality, two environment wardens of the SBAA ED and BirdLife Cyprus team representatives.

- At the same time, in order to facilitate the formulation and implementation of better management of this key site, the Darwin team drafted (at beginning of 2022), a proposal for priority site management actions as a tool for consultation with all involved stakeholders. Since then, there have been some steps taken in this direction. The SBAA Environment Department has started organising stakeholders' meetings with the aim of formulating a management committee for the area with clear roles and responsibilities. The project team and partners remain in close communication and cooperation with the SBAA team in order to assist and advise the various steps in this process, engaging fully with this process.

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