

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	DPR9S2\1018 / DPLUS142
Project title	Bathymetry, and seafloor habitats within Ascension Island's nearshore waters
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	Ascension Island
Lead partner	British Geological Survey
Partner(s)	AIG/UKHO
Project leader	<i>Rhys Cooper</i>
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	<i>HYR 2</i>
Project website/blog/social media	<i>www.bgs.ac.uk</i>

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.

Intro/Background

The nearshore habitats of the Ascension Island Marine Protected Area (AI-MPA) comprise high biodiversity and are most at risk from anthropogenic development and climate change. This project will determine the character, distribution, and extent of these key habitats through an integrated programme of hydrographic and ground-truthing surveys. Resulting seafloor habitat maps will provide urgently needed tools to better monitor and protect marine ecosystems, and underpin the evidence-based management of the AI-MPA.

Progress

April – September - Planning for the first phase of field work due to start in October 30th – 15th November 2023 and creation of preliminary seabed maps, continued research into appropriate survey methodology for deployment in remote & exposed marine survey location.

The following is a log of actions undertaken.

April 2023 – Kongsberg engineer visits BGS Edinburgh – training in survey equipment and various modifications required to enable multibeam survey equipment operation from a small 8m RIB boat.

May – October – Numerous ‘Zoom/Team’ meetings with Kerrie Howard at UKHO – data sharing and input into UKHO priority areas. Note: BGS are a member of the UK Seabed mapping Centre alongside UKHO.

May – Various discussions with external partners and experienced survey geologists at BGS and AIG staff to decide best approach to ground truth sampling of multibeam surveys. Due to water clarity a GoPro with 60m waterproof housing purchased for deployment from existing AIG sledge/drop camera. Success of this during first field season will determine future sampling methodology.

June – confirmation of flights and accommodation on Ascension for first field season. October – November.

June – BGS undertake a ‘warm-up’ survey at Port Edgar, Edinburgh. This was a test run to mobilise the survey equipment on a boat with identical dimensions as the one to be used on Ascension. Does the proposed solution work and is it safe to operate in the more challenging conditions of Ascension. This survey was a success and the decision made to continue, informing subsequent Risk Assessments and Standard Operating Procedures.

April – September – BGS Geologists work in preliminary seabed mapping. Substrate and geomorphology maps (see images below)

September – Survey equipment packed and shipped to Ascension using Richard James shipping agents. Equipment takes one month to arrive and will be there for our arrival end of October.

April – September – Assessment of HMS Protector data (both bathymetry and backscatter) continues – this will enable a targeted approach to survey operations. The size of boat in Ascension will limit area of operation so proposed surveys are targeted. We will attempt to infill shallow water areas, compare backscatter returns and collect higher resolution data over features of interest.

September – Attend Kongsberg FEMME conference in Edinburgh. This is the manufacturer of survey equipment and represents a great opportunity to attend workshops and discuss project with experienced peers operating in diverse environments. Raise profile of project and networking event. Too early to discuss actual project survey, BGS will be invited to present at the next event.

September – In consultation with AIG and UKHO, BGS produce a series of priority polygons for survey during first field season. See image below for extent of Protector data and proposed survey areas.

September – paper submitted to various geomorphology and seabed acquisition techniques conference.

September – attend RYA first aid course, RYA power boat handling in readiness of fieldwork in Ascension. De-risk / H&S recommendation.

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 unexpected problems – still at planning stage and desk study.

Slight delays in confirmation of actual fieldwork dates with AIG and flight/accommodation confirmations create uncertainty at a time of high demand on staff availability.

Decision taken to limit fieldwork to two periods of approximately 2.5 weeks. This is an attempt to de-risk the project by minimising the effects of following:

- Weather – Ascension is exposed and the boat we are using is small. An extended period of bad weather and/or swell will significantly hinder operations
- Proof of concept – BGS have undertaken a warm-up/test survey and are confident the proposed multibeam survey solution will work. However, there are still various unknowns due to location, staff, boat, launch/recovery etc. Shortening trip duration reduces implications on cost and having staff deployed unable to work.
- Sampling – knowledge of local boat and how drop cameras work will determine improvements for second period of fieldwork.

None of these require discussion with NIRAS or submission of change requests.

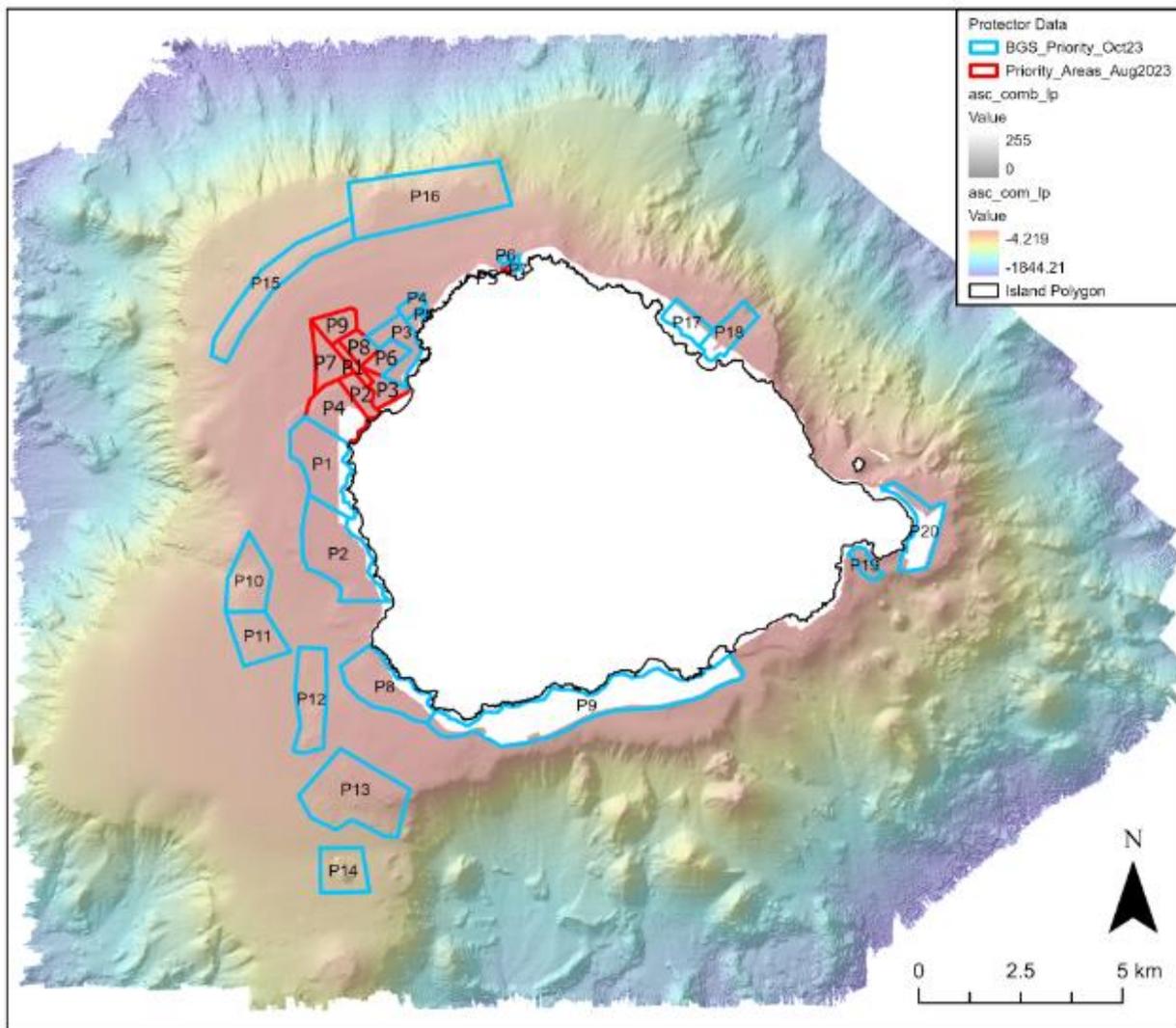


Image 1: Protector data extent and proposed survey priority extents – note these areas have been requested by both ourselves, UKHO (to gain higher hydrographic standards) and AIG. The main priority will be to fill areas with no data – primarily inshore.

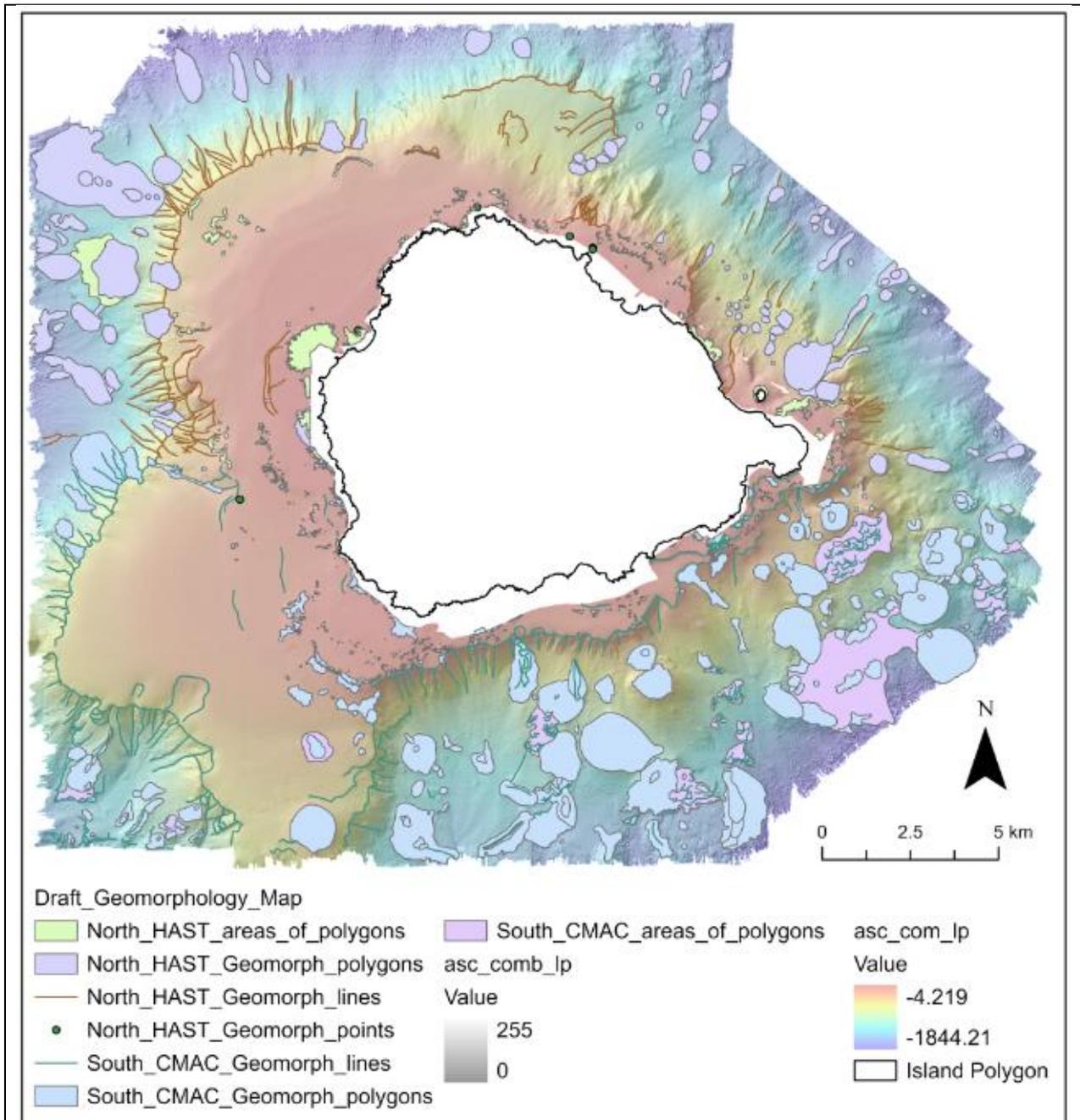


Image 2: Preliminary geomorphology map – covering full extent of Protector data (an addition to agreed scope. Substrate and Habitat maps will only be possible in nearshore areas due to data.

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 N/A

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?

Spend is currently on track, however all fieldwork is happening in the second half of year and we will be dependent on timely invoicing from project partners and other significant expenses, such as, shipping costs. We are also aiming to undertake the survey as effectively as possible and have significant uncertainty that we have attempted to de-risk (see above).

We have already submitted a budget reduction due to the unforeseen availability of HMS Protector data (collected in 2021 after original proposal submitted). The project will continually be in change as we start the field season but will continually assess budgets and update NIRAS as required/as soon as we can.

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**