

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	DPLUS177
Project title	Humpback Whales of the Pitcairn Islands
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	Pitcairn Islands
Lead partner	King's College London, UK
Partner(s)	Government of Pitcairn Island
Project leader	Terence Dawson
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	30 Oct 2023 HYR2
Project website/blog/social media	https://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/humpback-whales-of-the-pitcairn-islands

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).

Following our first fieldwork and community engagement campaign on Pitcairn Island from July to September 2023, we can report on the following activities and outputs to date:

Project Outputs 1,2 and 3: Over the course of 9 weeks on Pitcairn Island between July-September 2023, members of the scientific team (Prof. Terry Dawson, Dr Tilen Genov and Miss Katherine McCoy), supported by the local community, were able to collect 396 hours of hydrophone recordings across 20 separate days. In addition to this, 40.5 hours of sighting effort was carried out and recorded from observation points on land and from boat. Of a total 33 recorded humpback whale sightings, ID photographs of tail flukes, dorsal fins and surface behaviours were collected on 14 separate days both from land and boat. From the photographs taken, 14 different individuals have been identified so far from a combination of fluke and dorsal fin manual matching. These 14 IDs include 3 mother-calf pairs; all 3 appeared to be young calves likely born on/around Pitcairn Island this breeding season. The first mother-calf pair identified were sighted across the season on 6 different occasions. Mother-calf pairs were seen to be evasive when observed from a boat, so observations were kept to within 45-minute windows to avoid distressing the individuals. Good quality fluke photos taken will be uploaded to the HappyWhale photo repository website for further identification and any matching with known whales from other regions where possible. It is likely that many of the whales identified in Pitcairn will not have been previously identified, but the HappyWhale team will be able to provide more insight. Sightings included a variety of behaviours and displays including breaching, fin slapping, lobtailing and general milling/travelling with breaching being very common in calves. The whales appeared to favour certain points around the island at certain times of day, although this did not always allow for accurate prediction of where they would be. With an overall sighting effort time of 40.5 hours and a total of 33 sightings, the sighting per unit effort was 1.23 whales per hour.

Project Output 4: Between 16th and 22nd September 2023, Dr Emily Hardman held initial on-island consultations with the Pitcairn Islands Travel Coordinator and the On-island Service Provider to discuss the development of marine nature-based tourism in the Pitcairn Islands. The current materials that are

shared with visitors were discussed and opportunities identified to improve these in order to enhance their awareness of the humpback whales and marine environment in general. The information gained during this consultation will be used to update and improve the presentations given to tourists and passengers on cruise ships and Explorers Voyages. A poster highlighting the Marine Protected Area (MPA) and its importance for species such as the humpback whales was designed, printed and put up in the Silver Supporter to raise awareness with visitors travelling to the Pitcairn Islands on the ship. Emily also engaged with the organisation Protect Blue, who are developing a community-led branding and communications strategy for the MPA. Underwater photos and videos captured by Protect Blue will be made available for use in awareness-raising activities and for the Government of Pitcairn Islands to showcase the unique marine environment of the Pitcairn Islands on an international scale via media and their website. Socio-economic questionnaires were undertaken with 18 households (86% of households on the island) to understand how the local community benefits from the MPA, how many people are currently involved in nature-based tourism activities and to investigate interest in participation in future nature-based tourism activities; the results are currently being analysed. The questionnaire aimed at visitors was sent out to all individuals who have visited the Pitcairn Islands since the border reopened in March 2022 by the Travel Coordinator via MailChimp. A stakeholder workshop was also held to investigate opportunities for marine nature-based tourism. The workshop was attended by 13 stakeholders from the local community. The workshop participants highlighted current nature-based tourism activities and the benefits they bring to the local community and then discussed the potential for development of new activities. Activities were prioritised and detailed plans developed for three new nature-based tourism activities which included identifying any specific training needs. The information gained from this workshop and the socio-economic questionnaires will be used to inform development of the Strategy and Action Plan for nature-based tourism in the MPA.

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.

Due to unusual weather constraints, including one of the worst storms the island has experienced for 23 years, we were only able to collect data from the research boat on six different days over a two-month period. Unfortunately, we were not able to collect any biopsy samples or drone-based blow samples, due to relatively low numbers of individuals and adverse weather conditions. Anecdotally, the local community reported that whale numbers in 2023 were much lower than in previous years with a distinct temporal shift in occurrences of whales around the island. In previous years, the whales had begun visiting the island around June/July with a peak in numbers during September. This year, however, there were far fewer individuals than normally observed by the local community and from discussions, their peak season appears to have shifted to late September-October for 2023. It is hypothesised that the lower numbers this year could be a result of extreme weather events impacted by El Niño. Further analysis of the climate data and wider literature will be undertaken to explore this hypothesis. Whilst the above issue has impacted upon the amount and type of data collected this season, we will endeavour to adapt our fieldwork activities in 2024 to make-up any scientific data deficit.

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/No
Formal Change Request submitted:	Yes/No
Received confirmation of change acceptance	Yes/No N/A
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: ██████████

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**