



**BIODIVERSITY
CHALLENGE FUNDS**



Biodiversity Challenge Funds Projects Darwin Initiative, Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund, and Darwin Plus

Half Year Report

It is expected that this report will be a **maximum of 2-3 pages** in length.

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 2024

Please note all projects that were active before 1 October 2024 are required to complete a Half Year Report.

Submit to: BCF-Reports@niras.com including your project ref in the subject line.

Project reference	DPLUS213
Project title	Building baseline knowledge of mesophotic ecosystems in Ascension Island MPA
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	Ascension Island
Lead Organisation	Plymouth Marine Laboratory
Partner(s)	University of Plymouth, Ascension Island Government
Project leader	<i>Professor Kerry Howell</i>
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	<i>HYR1</i>
Project website/blog/social media	<i>N/A</i>

1. Outline progress over the last 6 months (April – September) against the agreed project implementation timetable (if your project started less than 6 months ago, please report on the period since start up to end of 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.

Despite the delay in the project start (see reasoning in response to Q2), significant progress has been made regarding planning the fieldwork and developing the training protocols for AIGCFD staff and UKOT knowledge exchange fellows. Listed below are the project's workplan outputs that were scheduled to start in Y1Q1 or 2, grouped by their progress status. Where outputs are delayed, the original and new timelines are outlined.

Completed

- 1.1: Develop training protocols and resources for fieldwork and data analysis
- 2.1: Design survey strategy to maximise knowledge acquired during baseline surveys

In progress

- 1.2: Identify in-person fieldwork trainees (AIGCFD team members and knowledge exchange fellows)

- 5.1: Design community engagement strategy based around sharing imagery and video from surveys
- 6.1: Introduce project to knowledge exchange fellows
- 6.2: Through discussion, identify how best to develop the project further so that it can be successfully ported to other OTs

Delayed due to shifting fieldwork/project officer recruitment delay

- 1.3: Deliver training courses to on-island participants and knowledge exchange fellows
 - o Moved from Y1Q1 to Y1Q3 – can only take place during fieldwork
- 2.2 & 3.1: Undertake baseline biological and oceanographic surveys of mesophotic habitats around Ascension Island
 - o Moved from Y1Q1 to Y1Q3 – can only take place during fieldwork
- 2.3 & 3.2: Characterise and map the species and communities comprising mesophotic habitats and the dominant oceanographic regime around Ascension Island
 - o Moved from Y1Q2 to Y1Q3 – can only begin after during fieldwork
- 5.2: Develop outreach resources (e.g. marine species fact sheets) using newly-collected imagery
 - o Moved from Y1Q1 to Y1Q3 – can only begin after fieldwork
- 5.4: Develop citizen-science mini-project with MPA Youth Committee to involve on-island community in analysis and sorting of image and video data
 - o Moved from Y1Q2 to Y1Q3 – can only begin after fieldwork

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.

The project started late due to a late funding decision by Defra, and a change in project lead organisation (the project leader moved from University of Plymouth to Plymouth Marine Laboratory). As a result, it took longer than expected to organise contracts with partners and this delayed hiring staff. Combined with challenges regarding boat and staff availability on Ascension Island, we were unable to complete the first fieldwork in the originally proposed timeframe (Y1Q1). Instead, our first fieldwork will take place in Y1Q3, but this has resulted in shifting our second fieldwork session into Y2. As such, we have submitted a budget change request to reallocate some fieldwork-associated costs and staff time from Y1 to Y2.

Although the timeframe is somewhat impacted by these knock-on delays (see response to Q1), as the original timeframe comprised all fieldwork early in the project, and none of the delayed outputs about the project end date, we are confident that our project outputs will remain the same, and that the M&E indicators for these outputs are still valid.

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: CR24-070	

4a. Please confirm your actual spend in this financial year to date (i.e. from 1 April 2024 – 30 September 2024)

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 2025)?

Yes ☒ No ☐

4c. If you expect and underspend, then you should 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 to your project 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?

Our underspend has already been approved via a change request form. Apologies if this means we should not have reported it here.

6. Please use this section to respond to any feedback provided when your project was confirmed, or from your most recent annual report. If your project was subject to an Overseas Security and Justice Assistance assessment please use this space to comment on any changes to international human rights risks, and to address any additional mitigations outlined in your offer letters. Please provide the comment and then your response. If you have already provided a response, please confirm when.

Audit costs: A revised budget including audit costs was approved by Defra.

Broader overall impact: The original broader overall impact states “AIGCFD will have the capability to manage and monitor important mesophotic habitats within the Ascension MPA”. We agree that based on the importance of mesophotic ecosystems, the project contributes to the preservation of biodiversity across multiple trophic levels. By safeguarding these vital ecosystems, which serve as foundational habitats for lower trophic levels and support more visible marine communities, this project will enhance the resilience of the entire marine ecosystem. The project will enable long-term conservation strategies that not only protect mesophotic environments but also promote the overall health and sustainability of marine ecosystems within the Ascension MPA.

Survey design: Given the challenges associated with working from small boats in remote locations, it is not possible to say exactly how much data will be collected. However, preliminary trials in other locations allowed for the collection of approximately 80 camera dives across two sites in two weeks. Therefore, we anticipate undertaking >100 dives around the island, starting off the more sheltered NW coast and progressing to the exposed SE side when weather permits. These dives will target specific depth contours within the mesophotic. Based on an

<p>approximate figure of 12 images per depth contour (i.e., dive), we will analyse a minimum of 1,200 images from around Ascension Island. Dives have been planned so as to co-locate with oceanographic mooring setups allowing for pairing of the biological and oceanographic data (e.g., temperature variability). All available data collected during the two planned expeditions will be used to inform mapping and modelling efforts, alongside any additional data collected by the AIGCFD within the timeframe of the project.</p> <p>M&E: Whilst M&S is spread across partners, KH as project lead will provide the oversight.</p>

Checklist for submission

For New Projects (i.e. starting after 1st April 2024)	
Have you responded to any additional feedback (other than caveats) received in the letter you received to say your application was successful which requested response at HYR (including safeguarding points)? You should respond in section 6, annexes other requested materials as appropriate.	
If not already submitted, have you attached your risk register ?	
For Existing Projects (i.e. started before 1st April 2024)	
Have you responded to feedback from your latest Annual Report Review ? You should respond in section 6, annexes other requested materials as appropriate.	
For All Projects	
Include your project reference in the subject line of submission email.	
Submit to BCFs-Report@niras.com .	
Have you clearly highlighted any confidential information within the report that you do not wish to be shared on our website?	
Have you reported against the most up to date information for your project ?	
Please ensure claim forms and other communications for your project are not included with this report.	