

# Information Note

## Key Lessons from Belize Mid Term Reviews

*Endangered Yellow Headed  
Parrots, Credit: TIDE*

### Key Lessons

Darwin Mid Term Reviews (MTRs) are carried out on around 10% of Darwin projects each year. MTRs are formative evaluations intended to provide an independent assessment of project progress against its aims. They also offer an opportunity to capture and share key lessons of value to other Darwin projects, and to provide targeted support where required.

In 2016 MTR visits were conducted on two Darwin projects in Belize:

- Project 22-013 - **Conserving pine woodland biodiversity in Belize through community fire management**
- Project 22-014 - **Maximising Benefits of Marine Reserves and Fisheries Management in Belize**

This Information Note documents the key lessons of relevance from these evaluations to the wider Darwin community.

The Darwin Initiative supports developing countries to conserve biodiversity and reduce poverty. Funded by the UK Government, the Darwin Initiative provides grants for projects working in developing countries and UK Overseas Territories (OTs).

Projects support:

- the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)
- the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-Sharing (ABS)
- the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA)
- the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)

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*Colour coded fishing vessels as part of the Managed Access scheme, Credit: Julio Maaz*

## The Projects

**Project 22-013**, led by the University of Edinburgh, focuses on the pine savanna woodlands of Toledo district in the South of Belize. The lowland pine savannas of Belize are a critical and endangered ecoregion and a regional priority for biodiversity conservation. Intense fires in these pine savannas are becoming more frequent as a result of both anthropogenic factors and climatic changes, degrading the ecosystem from woodland into one of mainly grassland with few pines. The Government of Belize has identified uncontrolled fire as the single greatest threat to Belize's terrestrial protected areas and has identified building community capacity for fire prevention and control as a key climate change adaptation strategy.

This project seeks to conserve biodiversity in pine woodlands by increasing capacity of protected area managers and communities to control and reduce the frequency of intense, late dry-season fires, whilst also developing alternative livelihoods to reduce anthropogenic threats.

Belize is well known for its Barrier Reef Reserve System, but currently only 3% of Belize's marine territory is legally protected from fishing (designated as "no-take"). This area is too small to ensure long term sustainability, and overfishing of certain species that are functionally critical to the health of coral reef ecosystems is a problem.

**Project 22-014**, led by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), is working with the fishing community in Belize to address these problems, and reduce the threat to local livelihood sustainability.

Building on interest expressed by both the conservation and fishing communities in developing a rights-based management approach to sustainable use of marine resources, the aim of the project is to improve biodiversity protection and sustainable livelihoods across the Belize barrier reef through:

- 1) implementation of a rights-based "managed access" programme that uses licensing to facilitate sustainable fishing (rather than the current open-access system); and
- 2) the designation of a number of marine areas as "no-take" zones that function to replenish commercial species and overall biodiversity in surrounding areas.

Project activities are principally focused in two marine reserves, and data gathered from these project sites is being used to help guide the expansion of Belize's no-take zones to the national target of 10% of territorial waters by the end of 2018.



*Fire management training, Credit: TIDE*





*Palmetto in Payne's Creek National Park, Credit: Victoria Pinion*

## The Mid Term Reviews

The aims of the MTRs were to:

- i. Review project progress against its stated objectives
- ii. Ensure that project activities are being delivered efficiently and effectively
- iii. Where appropriate influence the project's design as it is rolled out
- iv. Comment on the contribution the project is making to the programme's objectives
- v. Identify any learning points

Multiple methods were used to gather and triangulate evidence, informed by the OECD DAC criteria for evaluating development assistance. Methods focused on gathering data on the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability, and impact of the project, as well as its contribution to the programme level objectives of the Darwin Initiative.

The MTR indicated that Project 22-013 is making good progress towards building community capacity for fire management, and looks likely to have a positive impact on both biodiversity and livelihoods as a result. This is being achieved in the face of some challenges:

- Some of the project's technical approaches need further strategic development and focus, in particular, incentivising community wildlife management through securing community access rights and developing small forest enterprises
- Objective measurement of progress is constrained by the project's monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system. For example, its original Outcome statement was not technically feasible within the length of the project: the project Outputs cannot achieve the stated Outcome without additional work beyond the project timeframe. A number of the project Indicators

are not robust, making progress reporting unclear and burdensome on the project

Project 22-014 showed evidence of good progress towards both biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation. It is contributing to a national paradigm shift from open access to managed access, rights-based, fisheries. Its direct contributions include:

- Improved management of 828 km<sup>2</sup> of marine reserves
- Improved livelihoods for 1,115 fishers and their families who are licensed to fish those waters

Indirectly, the project is supporting a nationwide transition towards sustainable fisheries, which will improve ecosystem health and livelihoods more widely. However, stakeholders note that this needs to be supported by adequate enforcement. The project is responding to this by supporting the Belize Fisheries Department to implement a SMART (spatial monitoring and reporting tool) approach to increase the effectiveness of patrols in areas where there is illegal activity.

Again, the project is facing some difficulties in terms of M&E and reporting against Indicators, with inadequate baselines, and some Outcome Indicators being inappropriate for demonstrating progress at that level.

Both projects demonstrate how individual Darwin interventions contribute to programme level Impact. They show how relatively modest investments can catalyse and support national level objectives on both biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation, as well as supporting achievements towards several of the Global Goals for Sustainable Development.





*Fishers displaying their boat and fishing licenses, Credit: Victoria Pinion*

## Key Lessons

The MTR data analysis and findings have emphasised a number of lessons of relevance to the Darwin community.

**Engagement with Government partners can enhance the likelihood of achieving success.** Strong, trusted and active engagement of national project partners is a foundation for good outcomes in a number of ways. Collaboration at the outset in the scoping and design of projects ensures the project is relevant and that its Outputs will be needed. Engagement during the project can ensure that Outputs and assumptions are achievable realistic.

For example, in Project 22-014, the positive ongoing relationship with the Belize Fisheries Department has enabled the project to tailor its Outputs to real needs, widening impact beyond the areas the project is working in. For Project 22-013, the MTR noted positive engagement with District Forest Officers. In addition it identified important opportunities to increase engagement with the Forestry Department at the national level, to improve the likelihood of success in securing access rights for communities.

**Developing tools and protocols that are of use to national organisations is good for long term sustainability of interventions.** Where project Outputs have a clear use for Governments or other national institutions it ensures the Outputs have a future ‘home’ and usefulness beyond the project. Linking Outputs to national policy or legislative needs can be especially useful.

For example, the spatial fisheries enforcement tool developed under Project 22-014 has given the Belize Fisheries Department a way to more effectively deploy limited resources for enforcement of legislation – this tool is already in use and can be used beyond the lifetime of the project.

Under Project 22-013, the protocols for monitoring the extent and condition of pine and palm, and for measuring the abundance and distribution of a number of mammals and birds including the Endangered Yellow Headed Parrot have been developed, and published through project partner the Environmental Research





Glover's Reef Research Station,  
Credit: Victoria Pinion

Institute, the University of Belize. These monitoring protocols form part of the National Biodiversity Monitoring Programme. They support national standardisation and will help Belize to meet its reporting requirements to the CBD.

**Capacity for M&E is needed in order to plan, report and demonstrate progress.** M&E frameworks are a tool for improving project outcomes, but are often neither adequately prioritised nor used for planning. Project 22-013 effectively placed a gap between Outputs and Outcome in its M&E framework, setting up an Outcome statement that was that was, in effect, a long term Impact impossible to achieve within the project's timeframe or scope. Project 22-014 didn't properly report against Outcome and Output indicators and was unclear about baselines. At best this makes it difficult to report to Darwin or to judge if the project is on track for success, and at worst a poor M&E framework can make a good project appear to fail.

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Projects can and should revisit their M&E frameworks (including theory of change, logframes, indicators, means of verification and assumptions) regularly, as they are a key management and planning tool. Circumstances can change from the time of project design, and lessons from implementation should be used for **adaptive management** to enhance project achievement and, ultimately, realisation of the project's overall Outcome.

Resources to assist project with **creating an M&E plan, logframe preparation**, and defining **SMART indicators**, can be found on the Darwin website.

**Failure to identify, or monitor the validity of, key assumptions can break the link between intervention and Outcome achievement.** Assumptions need to avoid broad generics and be realistic if they are to be helpful. Project 22-014 notes an assumption of “The Fisheries Department will continue to support the Managed Access programme”: this programme is fully endorsed by the Department, but there is also a reported lack of resources for enforcement which is threatening future participation by communities, and the overall success of the project. Similarly, Project 22-013 makes an Outcome level assumption about tree seed demand which is not sufficiently analysed or addressed by the project, placing livelihood gains at risk.





*Training in traditional cuxtal weaving as part of livelihood development activities under project 22-013, Credit: Victoria Pinion*

## Key lessons for project design

### **Ensure planning is clear and logical.**

Planning should flow logically from clearly articulated M&E frameworks. Annual planning should revisit project logframes – this will help to maintain purpose and focus, allow project adaptation as necessary, and ultimately may make a project more likely to achieve its Outcome. Clear and detailed planning also helps to demonstrate effective project implementation, especially where there are multiple implementing partners.

### **Prioritise effort and expertise on M&E frameworks.**

Your M&E framework is a tool that will help you plan and adapt for success, so getting it right makes sense. If carefully established, it will make your focus stronger, reporting easier and demonstrate achievements clearly.

### **Involve partners in scoping and design to ensure the project is on target.**

Collaboration at the outset with national partners will mean that the project is needed and relevant, and complements other initiatives which may already be ongoing.

### **Where your assumptions relate to Government, be specific about the risks and plan to keep the right institutions involved throughout.**

Making sure the links between Outputs and national level institutions are clear and actively managed can significantly enhance long-term sustainability.