



Darwin Initiative, Darwin Plus and Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund Covid-19 Rapid Response Round - Final Report

*Due within two months of the end date of the Rapid Response Round project
(maximum 6 pages)*

Project reference	CV19RR17
If linked with an ongoing project, please include that project reference here (e.g. IWT001)	24-012 (finished March 2021)
Project title	Strengthening local conservation leadership in response to COVID-19 in Timor-Leste
Country/ies	Timor-Leste
Lead organisation	Blue Ventures Conservation
Partner institution(s)	National university: Universidade Nasionál Timór Lorosa'e UNTL - Department of Fisheries and Marine Science Department National conservation NGO: Konservasaun Flora no Fauna (KFF)
Start/end date of project	1st January - 31st May 2021
Which fund was this project relevant to?	Darwin Initiative / Darwin Plus / Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund
Grant value (£)	£55,942.00
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Report author(s) and date	Asiem Sanyal, 30th July 2021

1. Project Summary

This project has partly coincided with the last three months of our three-year Darwin-funded project focused on incentivising community-led marine biodiversity conservation on Atauro Island, Timor-Leste. COVID-19 has devastated Timor-Leste's emerging tourism industry - an important new coastal livelihood around locally managed marine areas (LMMAs) - and disrupted seafood markets, leading to concerns that the pandemic may intensify fishing pressure, undermine LMMA governance, and drive poaching within marine reserves. This new project was co-designed with communities managing Timor-Leste's LMMAs, to mitigate disruption and threats to conservation and food security as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through technical assistance, community outreach and peer learning exchanges between LMMAs, the project set out to provide support and training to community members and Timorese conservationists. By strengthening local marine monitoring and management capabilities, the project sought to bolster the LMMA network at a time of heightened threat to conservation and disruption to coastal livelihoods.

This project focused on communities both on the island of Atauro and mainland Timor-Leste (figure 1).

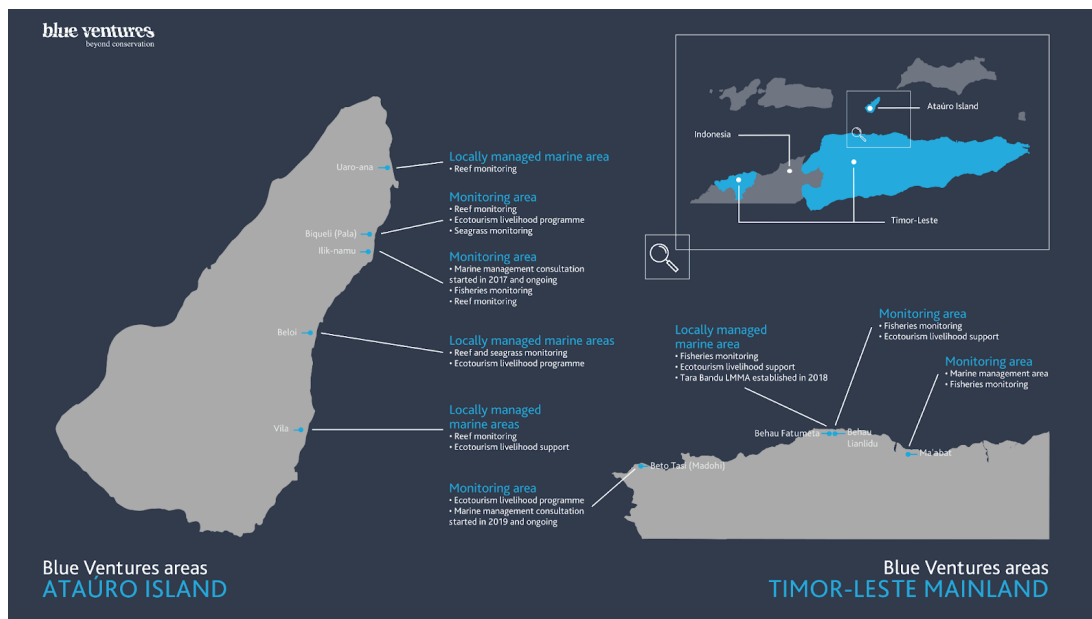


Figure 1: Map of project implementation sites in Timor-Leste

2. Project Achievements

The project sought to provide intensive training and support to communities managing current and prospective LMMAs in Timor-Leste, through the establishment of peer networks, provision of training in LMMA governance, participatory marine mapping and habitat monitoring, fisheries management, and community outreach, with an emphasis on engaging women.

The activities conducted and significant outcomes are detailed below:

1. LMMA governance and management support

Despite various hurdles in facilitating and organising an exchange for the community representatives from different coastal communities in Timor-Leste, due to COVID-19 restrictions, [a three-day peer-to-peer learning exchange](#) was conducted in the community of Beto-Tasi, Madohi, Dili, for 30 representatives from nine communities, in February 2021. The representatives stayed in homestays in Beto-Tasi, which were set up in 2020 as part of Blue Ventures' homestay programme in Timor-Leste (using co-funding to our previous Darwin grant). This contributed to the income of families reliant on homestays and other conservation tourism revenues that have been lost as a result of travel restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, restrictions on the size of gatherings were lifted in-country during this period, which allowed us to conduct the learning exchange as planned, albeit in a safe and controlled manner.

The exchange focused on LMMAs, but given that such a large gathering was unprecedented in the history of our work in Timor-Leste, we utilised the opportunity to also discuss associated topics such as the impact of COVID-19 and sustainable eco-tourism activities. We aim to eventually establish a broad-scale learning network of coastal communities through exchanges such as this. Blue Ventures' work in other countries has shown that learning exchange networks can act as catalysts for developing best practices in sustainable fisheries management, and drive the creation of collaborative civil society networks. This can in turn influence fisheries policy, considering the needs of traditional fishers and amplifying the voices of historically underrepresented groups.

LMMAs in Timor-Leste are established through *Tara Bandu* or customary law, which is recognised at both the community and the national level. Given the focus of the exchange (see *Covid-19 Rapid Response Round Final Report Template 2021*

supporting document 1, Photos from Beto-Tasi exchange), invitees included community members such as village chiefs, spiritual village elders, *Tara Bandu* coordinators, community-based fisheries and habitat monitoring group members, and representatives from the homestay families in Beto-Tasi. Efforts were made to ensure equal gender representation at the exchange. As we invited LMMA coordinators to attend (all men), we encouraged female community members to participate as well. We invited community monitoring group (CSM) members (women) to speak at the event. Homestay representatives from Beto-Tasi (the majority of whom are women) were also invited. In total, 14 women and 16 men attended. The learning exchange included the following components:

1. Discussions on a community savings fund to channel income from ecotourism activities towards marine conservation and management, and how this could become a sustainable model suited to community needs.
2. Discussions on the idea of a network of 'community representatives' or focal points from each community Blue Ventures partners with.
3. Focus group discussion (FGD) on what constitutes 'good governance' of LMMAs, and how compliance to community-decided rules could be strongly enforced (see supporting document 2, Focus Group Presentation). Representatives from the fisheries and seagrass monitoring groups discussed their monitoring protocols, and a representative from partner organisation [Konservasaun Flora No Fauna](#) (KFF) elaborated on the importance of mangrove ecosystems in Timor-Leste.
4. Presentation ([through infographics](#)) of the results of surveys conducted with community members to ascertain the impact of COVID-19 on small-scale fisheries in Timor-Leste.
5. A beach clean-up, to draw attention to the prevalence of marine debris. Attendees also got the chance to try our 360° virtual reality (VR) goggles, to explore the reefs in Atauro, and thereby get a better understanding of the unique marine life in their own country.
6. Training on data literacy, where attendees learnt to interpret the fisheries and habitat monitoring data that various community groups had collected. The aim of this training session was to increase community awareness of the marine ecosystem, to help them better manage their LMMAs and sustainably utilise their marine resources.

Due to travel and gathering restrictions, which changed frequently during the project period (see supporting document 3, Timor-Leste COVID-19 Government Restrictions), the team was unable to travel to Behau Fatumeta to meet with LMMA and community representatives in person. However, these management meetings still occurred via regular phone check-ins twice every month, providing technical support. The LMMA coordinator from Behau Fatumeta also attended the learning exchange, where he spoke to the other community representatives about lessons learnt in managing the *Tara Bandu* protected area in Behau Fatumeta during the pandemic.

Restrictions became particularly stringent from March 2021 onwards, due to detected cases of community transmission in the capital city, Dili. A 'sanitary fence' or complete lockdown was established around the perimeter of the city and two other areas, which meant that the team was unable to visit the communities to conduct some of the intended activities (for example, training in data management and interpretation to three women-led fisheries monitoring groups). Also, the community in Behau Fatumeta decided not to re-close their *Tara Bandu* LMMA No Take Zone (NTZ) after the allocated six months (on the 15th of March 2021), until it becomes safe to organise large gatherings of people for the closing. At the time of writing this report, the community in Behau Fatumeta indicated that they would like to ensure that community members are fully vaccinated before organising/ facilitating any large-scale community gatherings. We have postponed any visit to the community until we receive their consent to do so. However, we have continued to have telephone conversations with the LMMA coordinator from Behau Fatumeta, providing ongoing inputs as required.

2. Community participation in marine mapping and monitoring for management

Following an information sharing session on the 27th of January 2021, seven Timorese (four female, three male) were selected to undergo Advanced Open Water SCUBA training, through a rigorous selection process. Candidates were selected on the basis of their desire and

motivation to undertake marine monitoring. Three of these candidates were from partner organisation KFF, under the MoU signed with them in January 2021. Four Timorese organisational staff were also selected to receive differential training in SCUBA diving and equipment maintenance, in order to provide support to the seven selected candidates during data collection efforts. An MoU was signed with a local Dili-based dive operator, [Dreamers Dive Academy](#), to facilitate the training (see supporting document 4, Open Water SCUBA training certificates). Four candidates, including one organisational staff member, completed their Open Water course (the prerequisite to the Advanced Open Water course) on the 4th of March 2021, but due to increasing restrictions, the advanced training is on hold until the lockdown restrictions ease. A Blue Ventures staff member commenced his Divemaster training during this period. Blue Ventures supported candidates to acquire passports (for international travel in the event of a diving emergency that required a hyperbaric chamber), Divers Alert Network (DAN) insurance and undergo medical examinations to ensure the dive training was carried out in the safest possible manner.

Reef Check EcoDiver training, including coral monitoring training (on fish and invertebrates and impacts), was provided to 10 people (including two Blue Ventures staff). This was done in a staggered fashion to avoid overwhelming the selected candidates, particularly as training materials were only available in English (but were eventually translated into Tetun) and internet issues prevented a smooth delivery of training. Some candidates required additional time to comprehend advanced topics, such as coral reef biology (terminologies for which were not readily available in Tetun). As a result, we postponed the exams, to allow more time for the candidates to prepare. Initial training was complete by the end of March, and follow-up and refresher training sessions continued. The first exam, on benthic/ substrate identification, was conducted on the 27th of May 2021; since all candidates did not clear this exam, a repeat was conducted in June. Following benthic identification exams, fish identification and invertebrates and impacts exams were undertaken in June and July (except for a couple where a repeat was needed or the participant could not attend).

Working with project partner the Universidade Nacional Timór Lorosa'e (UNTL), the Department of Fisheries and Marine Science selected 20 university students (six women and 14 men) to be trained in and deliver a United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)/The Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) dugong questionnaire (see supporting document 5, Dugong Questionnaire Training attendance sheet). The questionnaire can help ascertain dugong presence (and by proxy, seagrass presence) in selected communities on the mainland. Due to COVID-19 restrictions and uncertainty regarding lockdown extensions, we were unable to facilitate in-person training for the selected students, and the large group size made virtual training suboptimal. Therefore, the students were split into two sub-groups, and following an introductory session on seagrasses and Blue Ventures' work in Timor-Leste on the 14th of April, initial training was provided on the 6th of May, owing to other disruptions such as Cyclone Seroja, which wrought havoc and destruction on the communities of Timor-Leste. Training continued throughout May and was completed on the 18th of June. Students have still not been able to visit communities to carry out the questionnaire-based surveys, as we are awaiting confirmation of their COVID-19 vaccination.

3. Strengthened Community Outreach

As part of the three-day peer-to-peer learning exchange at Beto-Tasi, a one-day data training session was conducted for the attendees to facilitate an enhanced comprehension of data collected by various monitoring groups (see supporting document 1, Photos from Beto-Tasi Exchange, Day 3). The 30 attendees (17 from existing and prospective LMMAs) participated in an interactive game to understand more about fisheries and closures, and the importance of marine management measures arising from community decisions. Following what was an enthusiastic participation in the game, community representatives voiced their support for more effective community-led measures to enforce marine management. Some communities also expressed a desire to work with Blue Ventures to develop LMMAs in their area, which we will be following up on with further community consultations.

Due to the COVID-19 travel restrictions, the data management training session for the women-led fisheries monitoring group members from the different communities, originally planned for mid-March, was postponed. Since this session will bring together various groups from different communities, it will be conducted in Dili.

This project extended the ambit of our work to a larger spatial scale – supporting additional communities that were intending to initiate or had already established LMMAs on the Timor-Leste mainland (Behau Fatumeta, Behau Lian-lidu, Beto Tasi and Ma'abat), following recent learning exchanges to Atauro during our initial Darwin project. Additionally, this project sought to facilitate the creation of learning networks to inform best practices around LMMA management, drawing on the experiences of pre-established LMMAs. As work on the three-year Darwin project continued on Atauro Island, word spread to communities on the mainland, who approached us for technical assistance and guidance in establishing LMMAs in their respective areas. The COVID-19 Rapid Response Fund served as a bridge across the channel separating Atauro island from the mainland, allowing us to upscale our work and positively impact further mainland communities. By strengthening local marine monitoring and management capabilities, the project bolstered Timor-Leste's LMMA network at a time of heightened threat to conservation and disruption to coastal livelihoods.

Increased participatory monitoring and management capabilities within the existing and prospective LMMAs strengthened community conservation and local governance as the cornerstone of maintaining fisheries sustainability and food security. Benefits extended to an estimated 1,018 households (5,400 people) in coastal communities, living in the coastal villages within and adjacent to the LMMAs. Increased technical capabilities also reduced reliance on outside expertise, and strengthened the autonomy and resilience of Timor-Leste's emerging LMMA movement.

3. Lessons learnt

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged us to rethink our strategies and adapt our approaches to incentivise community-led marine biodiversity conservation on Atauro island and mainland Timor-Leste. However, it has reaffirmed our 'communities first' approach.

An initial State of Emergency was declared in the country on the 27th of March 2020, resulting in the closure of international borders and strict restrictions imposed on gatherings and travel throughout the country. Subsequent restrictions have varied in severity, including a complete lockdown in selected areas (including Dili where our office is based) from the 8th of March to the 2nd of April. Borders have largely remained closed. On Sunday the 4th of April, flash floods due to Cyclone Seroja hit Timor-Leste, resulting in 9,000 people being moved to evacuation centres. Staff were evacuated and relocated with several possessions and electronic equipment damaged or destroyed. The city was covered in layers of mud and many roads, medical facilities and other services were damaged. In light of the impact of Cyclone Seroja, the Government suspended the confinement and declared a [State of Calamity](#) in Dili.

Our team thought of innovative ways and means to allow us to deliver activities. Virtual communications proved quite effective in-country, despite initial challenges due to connectivity issues and some instances where face-to-face was the only effective method of delivery. The team needed to act adaptively, while maintaining individual and community safety. We also identified a significant lack of context-specific scientific educational materials needed to undertake habitat surveys available in the local language, Tetun. Our team will continue to address this beyond the scope of the project.

Despite these adaptive approaches, some activities could not be finalised, even with the extension to May 2021, hence the subsequent extension request to later in the year. Whilst we plan as best we can to combat the impacts of COVID-19 on our work and the communities we serve, the government restrictions, longer term and multi-faceted implications of the pandemic have been hard to predict.

Community consultations carried out during the pandemic identified a need for strengthened local capacity and autonomy in LMMA management, monitoring and governance. Prior to the pandemic, declining catches, rapid population growth and a lack of livelihood alternatives had pushed Timor-Leste's traditional fishers into deepening poverty, forcing communities to adopt increasingly unsustainable fishing practices to support dwindling catches, and perpetuating the low socio-economic development and high rural poverty seen in coastal zones. Globally, overfishing is the biggest driver of biodiversity loss in our oceans (Zoological Society of London/ZSL) Living Planet Report, 2020). While these capacity needs pre-dated the pandemic, they became more acute as a result of the disruption to fisheries markets and termination of tourism income and associated LMMA access fees, with widespread concerns of erosion of local conservation efforts from growing fishing pressure and poaching. We identified these problems through consultations carried out in communities by our team in Timor-Leste, which we shared through the Blue Ventures COVID-19 resource portal documenting COVID-19 impacts; these issues were corroborated by community representatives during the three-day exchange meeting, and highlight the importance of exploring the route of LMMAs in ensuring food security in crises such as the pandemic.

4. Other comments and feedback

COVID-19 notwithstanding, our long-term goals will be to support the communities on Atauro and mainland Timor-Leste to adopt a sustainable marine management plan through traditional *Tara Bandu* law. The COVID-19 crisis has served to underline the importance of collaborative and sustainable fisheries management to tackle food security issues.

We will also continue to promote inclusion in decision-making in marine management, with emphasis on ensuring that Timorese women and a new generation of young Timorese conservationists have an equal say in the decision-making process.

Our experience shows that learning exchange networks can act as catalysts for developing best practices in sustainable fisheries management, and drive the creation of collaborative civil society networks which can influence fisheries policy, considering the needs of traditional fishers and amplifying the voices of historically underrepresented groups.

We have secured USAID funding via their 'Tourism for All' project to further develop and support community-led ecotourism initiatives in coastal communities in Timor-Leste, and from Australian Volunteers' International Impact Fund to accelerate community-led monitoring and sustainable management of marine resources in Timor-Leste.