



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	CV19RR22
If linked with an ongoing project, please include that project reference here (e.g. IWT001)	26-009
Project title	Sustaining and enhancing Anlung Pring Ecotourism through Covid-19 and beyond
Country/ies	Cambodia
Lead organisation	Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust
Partner institution(s)	NatureLife Cambodia
Start/end date of project	01/01/2021 to 31/03/2021
Which fund was this project relevant to?	Darwin Initiative
Grant value (£)	38,611
Project Leader name	Saber Masoomi
Report author(s) and date	Saber Masoomi, Bou Vorsak, 31/05/2021

1. Project Summary

As a response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the government of Cambodia blocked all non-essential international travel. Compounding the challenges presented by Covid-19 international and temporary national lockdowns, in 2019-2020 Cambodia faced its most severe drought in over four decades, dramatically decreasing rice yields (FAO). These challenges drove people back towards the unsustainable use of natural resources to fill a short-term food and livelihood deficit.

In Anlung Pring (AP) wetland, the Darwin Initiative previously supported WWT and our partners to establish a successful integrated community-based conservation project, which includes Community-based Ecotourism (CBET), wetland handicraft production, natural resource management and transitions towards sustainable agriculture. The primary community conservation association at AP is funded by the CBET, which normally sees 80% of its income coming from international tourists. Covid-19 restrictions have seen a total collapse of visitors, and core operating costs are being covered by partners, which cannot be sustained indefinitely.

This project has helped to maintain and build resilience within community conservation institutions, install improved Covid-19 safety measures for local schools and town facilities, and provide vital supplies of food during an incredibly challenging period for local people.

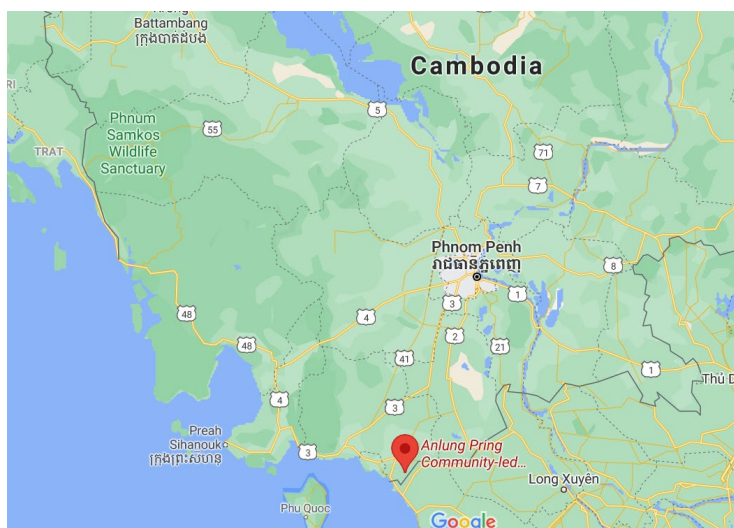


Figure 1 Anlung Pring Wetland's position in Cambodia

2. Project Achievements

Expected Outcome: Anlung Pring Community-based Ecotourism initiative generates resilient income from a wide variety of sources, with local community members benefiting from the project's Covid-support schemes rather than resorting to unsustainable practices.

Component 1: To ensure the well-being and stability of wetland communities and conservation associations, the project will provide immediate crisis support through:

Activity 1.1: Establishing 5 community-based savings groups managed by rural women within the community-based ecotourism scheme, allowing local people to contract emergency low-interest loans without resorting to high-interest micro-finance institutions. Interest generated will provide revenue to cover core costs for community conservation associations.

Awareness-raising sessions about the saving group initiative were conducted in target villages. The saving groups were offered to 100 local community members (61 are women), including members of the community-based ecotourism scheme, from three villages. In total, five savings groups (on average 20 members per group) were created, with management structures including a group chair, vice chair, and treasurer. The project has released an endowment fund of \$ [REDACTED] for each group to use as capital to process borrowing.

Consultation meetings have been organized among savings group members to develop the bylaws and other regulations of these saving groups to ensure sustainability, transparency, accountability, and prevent conflict. Ledger and cash-keeping boxes were also provided to each group to ensure safety.

Activity 1.2: Conducting educational events for CBET members and other interested parties to share Covid-19 preventive measures.

One thousand copies of Covid-19 awareness-raising posters were printed and distributed among the local communities before the lockdown imposed by the Cambodian Government. Once the new lockdown started in Feb 2021, an audio message to educate communities about the Covid-19 safety measurements was produced. This message was broadcasted for 900 residents of four target villages around AP. During the broadcasting missions, the communities were provided with masks, COVID-19 awareness posters, and soap.

Activity 1.3: Providing training on financial management to 50 households who are the most exposed groups, especially those currently tied into recently contracted microfinance loans, and those in marginalised groups with less access to other forms of finance.

Two financial training sessions were organised for 51 local community members (31 women) who are under microfinance debt as a result of running the small business. In these sessions,

the communities learned about small business selection and planning, selecting the product and planning for marketing, cash flow management, income and expenditure recording.

Activity 1.4: Providing sanitation equipment to the six schools surrounding AP.

Six schools located around AP were provided with the sanitation equipment as following:

No	Item	Number	No	Item	Number
1.	Mobile hand-washing system	5	6.	Alcohol	40 litres
2.	Hand washing soap	100 bottles	7.	Alcohol spray	30
3.	Hand towel	60	8.	Water tank	20
4.	Thermometer	32	9.	Hand washing basin	10
5.	Mask	1300			

Activity 1.5: Creating a short-term rice bank offering subsidised food at the CBET centre, targeting at least 100 households most impacted by recent challenges.

A total of 162 poorest households (those whose members have disability or chronic disease members, or those with food shortage over 6 months a year) were selected. Below items were distributed to each household:

- Rice: 25kg
- Noodle: 1 box
- Eggs: 12
- Fish sauce: 1 bottle

Component 2: To support community associations to establish medium/long-term diverse and resilient income streams, the project will build local capacity through:

Activity 2.1: Revising AP CBET’s Business Plan, reviewing opportunities presented by the local tourism market and the potential to develop more sophisticated wetland products.

AP CBET team were provided with an opportunity to visit and learn from successful private tourism service providers’ operations in the neighbouring areas. This provided them with some improved understanding of business management, principles of hospitality, improving the attractiveness of the site, and food and beverage offerings.

It was followed by a series of internal meetings within the CBET team and later between CBET and WWT’s business advisor, which resulted in a draft concept note. This concept note is under discussion to be upgraded to a Business Plan (70% progress).

As the travel ban affected the income from tourism, the CBET team’s wages were covered by the project. Also, to improve the services of CBET and increase the visitor experience, three binoculars were purchased.

Activity 2.2: Providing a professional level training course to the handicraft team to improve the design and quality of their Lepironia grass products.

Arrangements were made for the AP weaving group to visit similar activities in the Tonle Sap area as well as marketplaces in Phnom Penh. This visit was intended to help the weavers to improve their artistic imaginations as well as market expectations. However, unfortunately, due to the outbreak of Covid-19, the visit did not take place. Instead, arrangements were made with a local handicraft business owner to provide an in-house training course to the weavers. The budget for this activity was allocated to the production of an introductory documentary about Lepironia handicraft production.

Activity 2.3: Marketing the handicraft in Phnom Penh, including an exhibition.

AP CBET team planned to sell handicrafts in 3 marketing events in Phnom Penh, including British Embassy’s event to screen David Attenborough’s documentary, Phnom Penh’s rural products monthly event, and an independent marketplace in a café. However, due to the restrictions

imposed by the Cambodian Government to prevent the outbreak of Covid-19, the events were cancelled. Instead, WWT is working with individual sellers, to market the products on their Facebook channels. This change was communicated with LTS, and a formal Change Request was accepted on 11th March 2021.

Activity 2.4: Developing greater international/online sales channels, complementing a successful recent trial selling Lepironia bags at WWT shops in the UK.

Agreement are now in place for a bulk purchase of handicrafts by WWT-UK's retail unit for over 2,000 handicraft bags. A local product international marketing and branding cluster is being shaped in collaboration with four other NGOs. Negotiations are being carried out with a non-for-profit Start Up accelerator to facilitate the product marketing initiative. A professional photographer was recruited to produce studio-quality photographs from the handicrafts, which will be used for marketing and promotional purposes. Forty professional shots were produced and will be converted to product brochures.

Activity 2.5: Investing in a CBET Trust fund, generating an annual interest rate (currently 8% offered by most banks). The independent chairman of the CBET board can withdraw interest from this account every three months on receipt of a clear activity plan and budget. At least three members of the Committee must sign the bank slip to be authorised to receive the fund.

By investing \$, a Fund was established for the CBET to help support their core wages and operations. The account is jointly managed by WWT and CBET members to ensure the transparency of the transactions. A financial reporting system was identified to monitor the Fund.

Activity 2.6: Developing and publishing promotional materials in Khmer language (poster and pamphlet, 1,000 copies each) to promote CBET and handicrafts in the Cambodian market.

To increase the visibility of AP tourism, a contract made with a popular environmental campaign (Think Plastic) to develop and broadcast 2 promotional videos about introducing AP's ecotourism. The videos are produced in Khmer and discussed on the influencers' blogs, with the final videos scheduled to be broadcasted after the re-opening of tourism services nationwide, which are closed due to the spread of Covid-19.

Another short video was produced to introduce the process of making Lepironia handicrafts by the local communities. The main target group for this video is WWT's members in the UK as well as other international audiences and new markets who are interested in Lepironia handicrafts.

Activity 2.7: Re-designing the AP CBET website to include handicrafts and support Khmer language.

Website content and map were developed in accordance with the proposed Business Plan. An internal website developer was assigned to lead the development of new websites. Also, a professional photographer was hired to produce high-quality photos from AP for the website. The design has started and will be finalised by the end of June (60% progress).

Activity 2.8: Providing sanitation equipment to the ecotourism service providers.

The below equipment and materials were provided to the ecotourism service providers, 2 Commune halls in AP, and the AP wetland management office:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Infrared thermometers: 4 | 4. Alcohol spray:16 |
| 2. Set of hand-wash basins: 5 | 5. Soap: 300 |
| 3. Alcohol: 60 lit | 6. Cloth Mask: 500 |
| | 7. Fire extinguisher: 5 |

Achievement Summary

Within this short three month project period, WWT and NatureLife have installed sanitation equipment at local schools, town halls and the Community-based Ecotourism (CBET) Centre, and promoted practices to help prevent the spread of Covid-19 and understand the early symptoms of the disease.

Through the promotion of the site to local visitors, and increased exposure around the local handicraft scheme on social media, including through Khmer influencers, the CBET attracted 313 visitors, which was almost equal to the number of visitors in 2020. This is a strong result, but local visitors pay a much-reduced entrance fee to the site and are always less likely to engage with the value-added community livelihood activities, so income to the project has still been very low. Deals for increased sales of local handicrafts to the international market have been secured and orders are in the process of being fulfilled.

New savings groups have helped 100 households around AP to increase their financial security and access to funds. In addition, 51 community members including 31 women were empowered to better manage their finances and deal with the challenges related to their microfinance debts. A short-term food-bank has greatly helped the poorest in the local community to get through this period.

A summary report against the expected short-term changes is shown in the table below.

Planned	Achieved
100 local women will be enabled to contract short-term loans via community-based savings groups.	100 households participated in the saving groups.
1000 local people will hear awareness messages on the importance of maintaining a healthy wetland for current and future livelihoods and food security during crises.	1000 copies of Covid-19 awareness-raising posters were distributed among the household. 900 community members received messages related to the connection of wetlands to their health.
50 households will have improved financial crisis management capacities, with support to women prioritised.	51 community members received financial management training
300 students will have safer conditions in which to learn general schoolwork and environmental education during the Covid-19 pandemic.	1,300 students in 6 schools received healthcare materials and equipment.
100 poorest households will receive food relief packages from the CBET group.	162 households received aid.
10 handicraft makers (women) linked to the CBET will receive training and support to adapt products to take advantage of wider local and international market opportunities.	Over 20 weavers participated in the training course. 10 weavers participated in the production of Lepironia handicraft video.
Quarterly orders of handicraft group products will increase by 300% with sales resulting from a marketing exhibition in Phnom Penh and new local/international sales channels.	A contract has been signed with the WWT Retail team which will increase sales by over 300%, by the orders are only due to be fulfilled over the next six months. Local sales were lower than expected due to not being able to host a physical exhibition, but we anticipate sales will start to increase through our social media sales.

The project had originally proposed three overarching Objectives; CBET to be generating income from three new sources, savings groups established with loans being contracted, and local schools and communities operating in environmentally sensitive ways in line with Covid guidance.

As described above, good progress is being made towards all three Objectives with a Trust Fund established, handicraft contracts in place, and an increase in domestic tourists. The community-

based savings groups are also operational and guidance and awareness has been conducted at scale. Given the lockdown in Cambodia in Feb and March 2021, we are pleased that the project has delivered solid foundations towards these objectives and we will continue to measure progress.

The outbreak of Covid-19 in Cambodia in February has caused complications for the project. It made it difficult to organise the planned meetings, and the handicraft exhibitions in Phnom Penh and study tour to similar schemes in the Tonle Sap were cancelled, and replaced with social media campaigns. To respond to the challenge, arrangements were made with local authorities, and WWT and NL's representatives took more active roles to deliver the activities. WWT have long and enduring relationship with each other and external project partners. These have been invaluable through the challenges presented by the project, and our knowledge of the local community has helped to identify those most in need of direct support. Our Social Safeguard policy and grievance mechanism has been promoted through community information points and audio messages. No grievances were raised during this short project, but the project partners remain on site with other projects and will continue to monitor potential longer-term implications.

3. Lessons learnt

The short-term issues facing Anlung Pring at the moment are likely to become more regular and persistent into the future. The drought facing the region is largely a geopolitical issue surrounding increasing damming projects and the control of water further up the Mekong River, and climate change is predicted to shorten the wet season in Cambodia into the future. A concurrent Darwin Main Project is helping to address this challenge through understanding the vulnerability of natural habitats and livelihoods to these threats, and helping communities to transition to livelihoods that are more resilient. However, this period has highlighted the importance of also developing clear short-term survival plans for the community institutions with a direct stake in the long-term conservation success of Anlung Pring. Local communities understand many of the required responses to these challenges, but do not have access to the resources required to initiate them, and many locals are a single bad harvest away from needing to emigrate out of the area in the hope of finding work in the cities. WWT and NatureLife are looking at ways to link up communities to more short-term response opportunities in the future whilst continuing to work towards improved long-term resilience planning. This short-term planning was not prioritised enough previously, and threatens our long-term community-based conservation planning. We are very thankful for this grant in helping to plug this gap, and have learnt an important lesson by needing it.

It has also been interesting to see how local people have responded to such an unprecedented challenge. Reliance on community institutions has increased, highlighting the vital role that CBNRM groups play in the local area.

4. Other comments and feedback

It has been challenging to spend the total grant within such a short project period due to an outbreak of Covid in Cambodia and a strict lockdown imposed for a large proportion of this time. This was of course an anticipated risk, but if the project period had been longer (say 6 months) this would have allowed more of a contingency. This would have also provided more time for planning after learning of our successful application.

We are incredibly thankful to the Darwin Initiative for creating this opportunity. It has allowed us to provide support for the most vulnerable in the local community around Anlung Pring. It has also re-energised the ecotourism programme that would otherwise have struggled to keep operating, and may eventually have had to have closed, at least for the coming year, after which momentum would have been difficult to regenerate.