



DARWIN INITIATIVE



Pre-Project Funding Report

This report should be completed and submitted with a Stage 1 Darwin Application

Project Title	Towards a National Biodiversity Strategy in Congo
Country(ies)	Congo (Brazzaville)
Project Ref No. (if known)	551
UK Organisation	Reading University
Name of those who travelled	Ralf Becker (Associate Research Fellow, Reading University)
Grant Value	£2,624.00
Start and Finishing Dates	01 May 2005 to 31 March 2005
Report Date	19 August 2005

1. Please provide a concise overview of the activities undertaken during the pre-project development visit. Please highlight those that were not planned.

Scoping visit, February 2005 (funded by Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew):

Initial contact with Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Economy (**MEFE**), National Herbarium, Brazzaville (**NHB**) and University of Marien Ngouabi (**UMN**). Preliminary evaluation of collection; concluded to be highly degraded with no research activities; complete absence of any entomological collection. Provision of basic equipment to prevent degeneration of collection (disinfectant, insecticide) and donation of reference book (Flora of Tropical West Africa). Attendance at 2nd Central Africa Heads of State Summit on Conservation and Sustainable Development of Forests. Two 10 day field trips to Platou Bateke. Presentation of trip activities at Kew, resulting in donation of mounting paper, glue, and £150 used to buy two laptops from Computer Aid. With Royal Botanical Gardens Kew we have secured £13,000 (Mellon Foundation).

Pre-proposal visit, July 2005 (funded by Darwin):

PLANNED: Several meetings to present the proposed project to lead scientists at **NHB** and **UMN** and to key **MEFE** ministers. This included the Darwin mission statement, expected role of Congo partners, contributions from UK and other partners, mode of funding, timeline and expected outputs. Signed letters of support from and intention to participate were obtained from key individuals (see attached) at: **MEFE**, Centre of Vegetation Studies (which includes **NHB**) and **UMN**. Set-up of first dissecting microscope (donated by Reading University) and installation of 2 laptops (donated by Kew). **UNPLANNED:** Following evening collections of plant specimens along the River Congo, we ran a brief workshop on how to database (Brahms) and mount specimens to demonstrate the type of training activities in the proposed project; the brief survey included at least one new plant species (in review). Based on a weekend survey of Djoumouna Forest (results to be published) and discussions at **MEFE**, the conservation of the forest is being reviewed for upgrading to a protected area. Additional talks resulted in agreement to help organise a workshop on CBD and CITIES for Central Africa.

Post-visit activities:

Identification of expertise from overseas partners and definition of project roles: including for botany Dr Cheek (Head of Humid Tropical Africa Section, Kew), and entomology Dr Eardley (Chairman of African Pollinator Initiative). Development of supporting applications to Mellon Foundation and the German Research Council. CBD and CITIES workshop discussions with Defra initiated. Reading University Press Release covering the visit.

2. Were any difficulties or setbacks encountered? If so, how did they impact on the intended achievements for the visit, and on the intended Darwin project proposal.

Several NGO's currently operate in Congo, however, many individuals in the government, **NHB** and **UMN** perceive that they are not be fully engaging local people and building capacity despite substantial funding. Consequently there is a degree of suspicion about the motives of ex-Congo organisations operating in Congo. There is an inability to implement the CBD through lack of resources and thus develop a National Biodiversity Strategy (NBS). However, all potential partners

were fully supportive once the aims and outcomes of the proposed project were clearly explained. We view the expectations of the local partners to be realistic given the framework of the proposed project.

3. Briefly explain how the pre-project funding has helped to confirm or change the planned project intervention – what difference did getting the grant make?

The funded visit to Congo allowed direct interaction with all the key politicians and scientists within **MEFE** and academic institutions. The opportunity to make presentations and discuss local partner concerns was essential to ensuring a clear commitment to the project. Discussions focussed on how the project would contribute to a NBS and how to identify biodiversity hotspots. An assessment of the current state of collections and staff skills was only possible by visiting **NHB** and **UMN** and meeting staff. A better understanding of the barriers (namely well-resourced overseas intervention without significant capacity building) to establishing an effective project were discussed.

4. Briefly describe the outcomes and conclusions arising from discussions with the host institution(s). What is the value of the project to the host institution(s) and what will their intended contributions be. Have any other partnerships evolved as a result of the pre-project grant?

Discussion with all institutions introduced the aims of the project and the mechanism through which they could be achieved and how it relates to the NBS. The **MEFE** ministers acknowledged the project to be of National importance and gave full support, thereby providing the necessary political framework to allow effective project administration including engagement of the CBD focal point, access to protected areas, work permits, and access to GIS resources (Landsat and Astra images). Participation in the 2nd Central Africa Heads of State Summit allowed a case to be made for **NHB** as a biodiversity resource; this convinced ministers to release funds to upgrade **NHB** (basic building repairs, air-conditioning units and internet link). This in conjunction with the donation of equipment by us (microscope, 2 laptops, paper and glue), resulted in upgrading **NHB** from entirely inactive to a level of base functioning in 5 months. Evaluation of current roles of NGO's operating in Congo indicated that some are seen not be fully engaging nationals or contributing sufficiently to building capacity. Our commitment to overcome this was warmly received and fully supported. Discussions with scientists allowed us to make an assessment of equipment and training needs. Explaining the project objectives and how they related to the existing scientific community, resulted in the full support (signed letters) from all partners and provision of facilities, staff time and GIS data. Identifying some of the key knowledge and skill gaps has allowed the selection of UK and other overseas experts to provide key inputs. Discussions with **NHB** and **UMN** removed an existing barrier between the institutions.

5. Conclusion and lessons learned from the Pre-Project Grant

Briefly highlight the main conclusions (positive and negative) gained from the pre-project grant. Please also include any suggestions you may have for improving the impact of this funding scheme.

There is very little infrastructure currently available in Congo Brazzaville with regards to a functional biodiversity collection. Similarly there are only a few skilled scientists (largely trained in Europe) with the ability to develop essential projects and train further staff. However, there is a core of highly motivated, but wholly under-resourced, individuals which given the right support and guidance could develop a regionally significant biodiversity resource and contribute to developing a NBS. Initial suspicion of the benefits to local partners of externally funded projects was partially overcome following clear presentations of the Darwin mission and proposal objectives. For our proposed project to succeed, we will need to ensure the full involvement of trained and untrained local people in all activities. Skill training can be provided by UK experts in most areas but will also require the involvement of other specialists from outside the UK such as National Herbariums in Europe which have previous experience of working on the Congo and also the African Pollinator Initiative which has previously run workshops throughout Africa to train nationals in insect taxonomy and collection management.

Signed: Dr Simon G. Potts

Date: 19/08/2005

Name / Title: Senior Research Fellow