

**Biodiversity Challenge Funds Projects
Darwin Initiative, Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund, and Darwin Plus
Half Year Report**

Note: 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 2023

Project reference	28-006
Project title	Protecting Mongolia's Gobi Desert for wild camels & herder communities
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	Mongolia
Lead partner	Zoological Society of London, Outer Circle, NW1 4RY, UK
Partner(s)	Ministry of Environment and Tourism Mongolia (MET); Great Gobi 'A' Strictly Protected Area (GGASPA) Administration; Collaborative Management Council (CMC); Schools of GGASPA BZ soums; Soum BZ Councils/Citizen Representative Khurals (CRK); National University of Mongolia (NUM); UNDP/GEF ENSURE project
Project leader	Dr. Tungalag Ulambayar, ZSL Mongolia Country Director [REDACTED]
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	31/10/2023 & HYR3
Project website/blog/social media	www.zsl.org/mongolia ; https://www.facebook.com/ZSL.org

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

Impact: Globally important wildlife, including the wild camels, thrive in the Mongolian Altai-Gobi with the welfare and socio-cultural traditions of herder communities secured through sustainable use of the fragile desert ecosystem.

Outcome: Conservation of wild camel and desert ecosystem enhanced in Great Gobi 'A' Strictly Protected Area (GGASPA) through strengthened management and stakeholder collaboration, with communities empowered to improve rangeland management and herder well-being.

OUTPUT 1: GGASPA **monitoring programme** is informing effective GGASPA and CMC management, and future-proofed by building the capacity of Mongolia's future conservationists.

RESULT: The GGASPA monitoring programme improved with baseline data and progress reports of the surveys on camera trapping, SMART patrolling and rangeland health. Survey results delivered to the PA Administration and CMC for their planning.

Activity 1.1 COMPLETED Y1.

Activity 1.2 ONGOING A 5-day intensive training program was organized in May with collaboration of the National Working Group on SMART for 46 participants (43 male and 3 female) representing the WCS, ZSL, SLT, TNC, and WWF in Mongolia. Also, ZSL Mongolia conducted a refreshment course for 14 rangers and 3 specialists (17 male) of the GGASPA Administration in Sep. This training adhered to the A/219 method, approved by the MET. Activity 1.10 contributes to Indicator 1.1 as below.

Activity 1.3 ONGOING The NUM team documented plant species, canopy cover, and conducted plant biomass sampling at 30 randomly selected locations within the GGASPA BZ in Sep. These data are currently being integrated to refine and advance the existing models. Soil samples were collected from the designated points to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of their physical and chemical properties. Soil analyses conducted in the soil laboratory at NUM for ensuring the relevant and scientifically sound method.

Activity 1.4 ONGOING The GGASPA dataset were uploaded to the MET server, accessible at www.metconnect.smartconservationtools.org/server in Sep and handed over to the PA Administration for minor maintenance and further processing, and informing its conservation decisions. The NUM team organized an on-site workshop for the PA team and shared primary research findings in Y1. The workshop also included training sessions on rangeland health survey techniques and carrying capacity estimation

methods. These training sessions were aimed at equipping the rangers who will be responsible for conducting surveys in the forthcoming years. The NUM team is developing guidebooks that will elucidate the survey methods and provide insight into the common plant species found in desert steppe rangelands based on the rangers' requests and herders in the PA BZ.

Activity 1.5 ONGOING A joint seasonal patrol was conducted with the PA rangers and an inspection specialist using SMART in Jun. This patrol covered a distance of 910 km, tracing the latitude of the PA to the primary water sources of the region. Notably, no illicit activities were detected during the entire patrol. The patrol included the vital tasks of photomonitoring 14 animals, documenting 10 animal carcasses, and 4 water points, and recording essential data at 120 points at the winter places (HH move to the GGASPA buffer zone for the winter) along the route. In Sep, an additional initiative unfolded alongside SMART training. This 3-day patrol encompassed the territory of 5 specific areas, covering a total distance of 4,076 km across 4 distinct routes. During this extensive patrol, the team meticulously documented violations, monitored wild animals, and observed wells. All pertinent data collected was efficiently recorded and stored in the SMART database, contributing to the comprehensive preservation and management of the PA.

Activity 1.6 ONGOING The ZSL Mongolia team conducted fieldwork for the maintenance of automatic cameras across water points with PA rangers from 16-23 Sep. Initially, the project installed 40 cameras at water points. Unfortunately, due to incidents such as theft of the SD cards, and wildlife interference, there are now only 20 automatic cameras that are recharged and fully operational. It shows there is a need for more promotion among herders and border guards about importance of camera-trapping surveys. In addition, lockable case might need to protect the cameras. A BA student mentioned in Activity 1.8/Indicator 4 is processing 62'000 images collected from these cameras.

Activity 1.7 ONGOING The results from monitoring are used for the PA Administration's yearly action plan and a joint review through the PA Management Plan planned in second half of the Y3.

Activity 1.8 ONGOING The NUM MSc and BA students are working on rangeland surveys and wildlife camera trap studies.

Activity 1.9 ONGOING The CMC received a brief on monitoring results of water points, camera trapping and rangeland survey during the CMC meeting in Apr. Project consultants of the Mongolian State University of Science and Technology participated in the meeting as the main speaker to provide scientific information to the CMC members regarding rangeland management and future trends in the GGASPA BZ's socio-economy and environment.

Activity 1.10 COMPLETED Y2.

OUTPUT 2: Scalable habitat management and waterhole restoration model areas are demonstrating effective conservation interventions to restore the GGASPA desert ecosystem, to support the recovery of Wild Camels Species and other BD.

RESULT: Priority habitats, critical waterholes and oases in the GGASPA were defined jointly with the main partners and marked on the topographic map. According to the map, four waterholes created by installing solar-powered pumps in the GGASPA core and BZ. 13 species have been captured by camera trapping at the restored water points such as wild camel, wild ass, gobi bear, snow leopard, lynx, black-tailed gazelle, grey wolf etc.,

Activity 2.1 COMPLETED IN Y2

Activity 2.2 COMPLETED in Y2

Activity 2.3 ONGOING The restoration experiment at the oasis - Baruun Sharga commenced in Y2, which involved fencing degraded patches and dispersing seeds to the fenced plots to see natural regeneration ability. Restoration experiments extended to other two places in Bayantooroi and Buurn Khyar in Jun. A total of 360 trees and shrubs were planted. In Sep, the outcomes of this pilot were as follows: a 20-40% survival rate for poplar trees in Bayantooroi and Buurn Khyar, a 50% survival rate for Nitre-bush (*Nitraria*), a 30-75% survival rate for saxaul (*Haloxylon*), and a 5% survival rate for Russian box thorn (*Lycium*). None of the trees and shrubs planted in the oasis of Baruun Sharga demonstrated viability. However, significant improvements can be achieved in rehabilitating the oases critical to the well-being of the Great Gobi's wildlife population.

Activity 2.4 ONGOING The habitat recovery experiments were conducted jointly with the PA Administration. During the fieldwork, a ZSL consultant organized a practical training related to the cultivation and assessment of endangered trees and shrubs for the PA team, including 19 rangers and 5 specialists (24 male). Thus, they gained skills to measure change in each habitat intervention site independently.

Activity 2.5 ONGOING The final integration will be when results of the surveys on rangeland, rehabilitation, SMART and camera-trapping are finalized.

OUTPUT 3. Collaborative and inclusive governance institutions are in place and making coordinated, landscape-level management decisions, employing adaptive management approaches informed by robust ecosystem monitoring.

RESULT: The GGASPA CMC was established with 15 members that represent all relevant parties to the GGASPA MP. The CMC met twice a year and discuss on implementation of its yearly action plan and the integrated plan for 3 years. The CMC Chairman for the following year elects at the end of the year meeting.

Activity 3.1 and Activity 3.2 These two activities are nearly complete since its establishment, the CMC met 4 times during the project implementation. The annual year-end meeting entails each BZ district progress briefing, a review of the 'Three-year BZ Management Plan' and electing the CMC Chairman for the following year.

Activity 3.3 ONGOING The baseline social survey involving 69 HHs from the target soums in the PA was completed in Y1. Also, a system dynamic model for social, economic, and environmental indexes of the 5 BZ soums developed for medium and long-term planning in Y2. The end-year social survey is planned in Y3 (spring of 2024).

OUTPUT 4. Ground-up **awareness-raising** about GG uniqueness by environmentally conscious PA communities that are empowered with the skills and knowledge to improve livestock management and comply with the Responsible Rangeland Management Regulation (RRMR).

RESULT: In the past 6 months, there have been significant developments in activities 4.2, 4.3, and 4.6 of the project, particularly since the involvement of ZSL Mongolia in the national campaign 'My Green Mongolia' (<http://my-green-mongolia.mn/>) by signing the MoU. Furthermore, the Hanns Seidel Foundation Mongolia has contributed to activity 4.6 by supporting the 'First Annual Forum of VSLA/CBO Herders in the Great Gobi'.

Activity 4.2 ONGOING A public awareness campaign designed by each eco-club has been developed based on the trainings organized by the project in Y1 and Y2. Each eco-club (in total 7) has its own plan linked with the integrated CMC plan and PA MP. The GiZ/SPACE project has played a crucial role in contributing both financially and physically on designing a public awareness package and campaign.

Activity 4.3 ONGOING A sub-campaign across the BZ under the national campaign 'My Green Mongolia' started in the school year of 2023-2024. Project staff and partners attended training 'How to use drama methods for public awareness campaign' in June and training for trainers '10 steps to organize nature conservation campaign' in Sep. 'Nomadic trunk', the awareness tool was used by 7 schools and reached over 120 adults and 739 pupils of 4 soums and 1 village in Apr-Jun and Sep. The project supported the Annual Eco-Club Forum in Sep that included 134 participants. Two instructors of the GiZ/SPACE worked across the BZ in 7-18 Oct. They gave lectures to almost 1000 citizens of the BZ including pupils of 7 schools on topics *Our Earth, Ecological Footprint, Sustainable Development, and Eco-Friendly Mongolian Lifestyle*. All members of eco-clubs (200 children in grades 6-12) travelled to the following knowledge stations: The "World our underfoot", "Leave it alive", and "Seeds' journey".

Activity 4.4 ONGOING: The project has been supporting BZ planning process at CMC level including rangeland management at its regular meeting. Training to guide the strategy for RRMR and Soum Pasture MP was organized in Jun for each soum authority. Currently, all 5 soums have a plan to support each soum agriculture and livestock management approved by the soum CRK.

Activity 4.5 ONGOING The project organized a series of training for local authorities and target HHs. These include (i) Lecture on the Rangeland and Livestock in the GG; Lecture on the Socio-Economy and Environmental Trend of the GGASPA until 2040 for over 100 participants in April; (ii) Training on habitat rehabilitation and planting trees in soum centers for 37 (man 29, woman 8) participants in Jun; (iii) Training on rangeland management and RRMR for 165 participants in Jun.

Activity 4.6 COMPLETED as the project is supporting the first forum of the VSLAs in the GGASPA BZ jointly with the Hanns Seidel Foundation Mongolia that going to be held in Bayantooroi village (1000 km away from the capital city) in 28-29 October. During the forum the herders exchanged their knowledge and best practices for rangeland and livestock management. The forum also included a section addressing the issue of cross-breeding of wild camels with domestic camels that is a crucial subject among wild camel researchers.

OUTPUT 5. Remote rural herders **have improved wellbeing and financial stability** built through a successful and sustainable community banking model that supports sustainable resource use efforts e.g. through **rangeland management actions and Eco Clubs**

RESULT: The 7 herder groups under the VSLA governing structure established with 121 members (74 men, 47 women) of 84 HHs across 8 bagh/5 soums in the BZ. **Activity 5.1 ONGOING:** The project supports each CRK to develop a RRMR jointly with the GEF funded MET/UNDP project - ENSURE (www.ensure.mn). The NUM team is mentioned in activity 1.3 conducting an assessment on rangeland health in the BZ to inform CRKs.

Activity 5.2 The project supported the creation of 7 VSLA groups with 121 (74 men, 47 women) members of 84 HHs across 8 bagh/5 soums in the BZ during the past 2.5 years. These groups have a VSLA governing structure as per the approved constitutions in place. The members have access to the loan fund when needed without collaterals with a modest interest rate. They use the social fund to finance

<p>environmental protection and other group collective activities such as restore well, stream rehabilitation and sacred place conservation etc.,</p> <p>Activity 5.3 ONGOING: Small grants to support initiatives of the VSLA groups for rangeland conservation announced in Sep. The project appointed a selection committee and reviewed all submitted proposals in accordance with the agreed criteria.</p> <p>Activity 5.4 COMPLETED in Y2.</p>	
<p>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.</p> <p>No major issues encountered during the reporting period.</p>	
<p>3. Have any of these issues been discussed with NIRAS and if so, have changes been made to the original agreement? No</p>	
Discussed with NIRAS:	Yes/No
Formal Change Request submitted:	Yes/No
Received confirmation of change acceptance	Yes/No
Change request reference if known: None	
<p>4a. Please confirm your actual spend in this financial year to date (i.e. from 1 April 2023 – 30 September 2023)</p> <p>Actual spend: ██████████</p> <p>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 2024)?</p> <p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Estimated underspend:</p>	
<p>4c. If yes, then you need to 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.</p> <p>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 if necessary. Please DO NOT send these in the same email as your report.</p> <p>NB: if you expect an underspend, do not claim anything more than you expect to spend this financial year.</p>	
<p>5. Are there any other issues you wish to raise relating to the project or to BCF management, monitoring, or financial procedures?</p>	
None.	

If you are a new project and you received feedback comments that requested a response, or if your Annual Report Review asked you to provide a response with your next half year report, please attach your response to this document.

All new projects (excluding Darwin Plus Fellowships and IWT Challenge Fund Evidence projects) should submit their Risk Register with this report if they have not already done so.

Please note: Any planned modifications to your project schedule/workplan can be discussed in this report but should also be raised with NIRAS through a Change Request. **Please DO NOT send these in the same email.**

Please send your **completed report by email** to BCF-Reports@niras.com. The report should be between 2-3 pages maximum. **Please state your project reference number, followed by the specific fund in the header of your email message e.g. Subject: 29-001 Darwin Initiative Half Year Report**