

Darwin Initiative Main Annual Report

Submission Deadline: 30th April 2022

a. Darwin Initiative Project Information

Project reference	28-016
Project title	From National Contest to National Network: Friends of Felids
Country/ies	Costa Rica
Lead partner	University of Costa Rica
Project partner(s)	Gente y Fauna, Michelle Soto, Soul Communication, SPECIES, DINADECO
Darwin grant value	£ 244,330.00
Start/end dates of project	01/1/2022 - 31/12/2023
Reporting period (e.g. Apr 2021 – Mar 2022) and number (e.g. Annual Report 1, 2, 3)	January – March 2022, Annual Report 1
Project Leader name	Ronit Amit
Project website/blog/social media	Website: http://amigosdefelinos.com/concurso Social Media: @genteyfauna, @amigosdefelinos
Report author(s) and date	Ronit Amit & Natalia Valverde-Zúñiga, 30th Apr 2022

1. Project summary

We aim to promote human-wildlife coexistence with a contest that leads to a national network of model communities throughout Costa Rica. The contest shows how attractive it is to “make your business roar” with a green label scheme that links conservation efforts to actual local benefits, while urging society to recognize the role of local communities in conservation. The incentive is designed to decrease retaliation killing of jaguars and pumas in Costa Rica, specifically in “conflict hotspot” communities. There, wildlife may be a burden that adds to harsh social and economic contexts, and entrepreneurship under Friends of Felids reframe their relationship from a nuisance to a friendship. This initiative is the next step in the development and pilot testing of our green label to scalate the impact on a national level after three model communities are leading the scheme, located in Upala at the northwest of the country. They established the civil Association Amigos de Felinos that protects and monitors jaguars and pumas, and uses camera-trap images as inspiration for products and services that fund families and the conservation effort.

2. Project stakeholders/ partners

Our team is a collaboration that combines the academy with private and governmental collaborations. Our administration at the Center for Tropical Biodiversity and Ecology (CIBET) allows a board of highly recognized colleagues to oversee the project. Our researchers are

interdisciplinary scientists that merge biological and social expertise and come from non-governmental backgrounds. Gente&Fauna has more than 10 years working on human-jaguar interactions, our communications Team includes awarded journalists and publicists. Collaboration with local stakeholders keeps active with members of the Association Amigos de Felinos involved in planning. The Office of Communications (ODI) at the University of Costa Rica has become key to lead the campaign for the Contest.

For this period, we recruited 22 new volunteers, reaching almost 50 now, for our Team Jaguar Volunteering. They include diverse backgrounds, ages, locations and disciplines and are assisting in all tasks. We received several applications for international fellowships to join fieldwork, and three were selected from Spain, Mexico and England. Two more new strategic alliances resulted from the recruitment, including a professional in sustainability and other in data management. Furthermore, for the purpose of expert review of our data collection instruments we collaborated with international Human Dimensions expert Jenny Glickman, government representative Shirley Ramírez at the Ministry of Environment and Alejandra Abarca at the Directorship for Community Development. We are also in contact with the University of Florida and the Society for the Preservation of Endangered Carnivores and their International Ecological Study (SPECIES) to begin negotiations with US zoos to sell Friends of Felids products. Parallel to the project, the Association Amigos de Felinos is receiving in May a donation in equipment and training by WWF, directed to the existing three communities in Upala.

One new collaboration arose from professor Sebastián Saborío at the School of Sociology at the University of Costa Rica, that proposed his course of Sociology Workshop this year to develop research projects in the pilot communities in Upala. We are directing their effort to explore in depth the concept and practice of “participation”, as one of the major issues that can inform our initiative.

The release, this April, of our communication campaign will summon diverse allies to support the contest in dissemination of advances and active support to contestants. Our national list includes sectors as diverse as Livestock, Tourism, Social, Conservation, Academy and Government institutions and individuals. Later we will include international partners.

3. Project progress

3.1 Progress in carrying out project Activities

Activities have been carried out with no significant delay as planned. Delays occurred in the administration and finances; however, our personnel are very committed and maintained activities no matter what (late contracts, disbursements, etc.).

We are very happy with the design of the communication strategy, which was completed on time. It is well crafted and scientifically sound. The only change from initial planning was that we separated the actual marketing out of this strategy because it was overlapping with activity 3.5. related to customer acquisition and alliances for commercialization. The strategy defined audiences clearly, selected the media channels and types of products, set the calendar for the phases, planned for press management and event protocols. We now have a unified discourse and visuals with key messaging under the slogan “make your busyness roar”, based in our improved understanding on getting the attention of contestants first from the perspective of the direct benefits they could receive. That attraction phase is crucial before the effort to complete the application process is presented. For the phase of “call to action” we guide participants, and for the phase of “peer and allies’ pressure” we will address allies to motivate contestants for the closure of the application period. We did moved the dates to open the contest and the press conference due to production and logistic delays, but we are advancing well.

In parallel, our technical personnel elaborated the instruments to collect data and regulate the contest. Validation required integration of ecological expertise, socio-economic and ethical considerations, plus compliance with regulations and legality. For this period, the drafts were very advanced thanks to expert review and cognitive testing; we had also to solve several

technological decisions related to the online platform and the webpage functionality. During April we extended the validation with the pilot testing to arrive to final versions of the Guidelines for the contest, the Contest Application Form, Questionnaire for members of participant communities, and Informed Consent Protocols.

Follow up to the current scheme of pilot communities under the Association Amigos de Felinos has been time consuming with ups and downs. We are reminded continuously that we work with very disempowered populations, whose context systemically lowers their motivation and erases much of our previous efforts. Our personnel devote a lot of energy to contact person by person the members with remote communications, and during the field activities we reach as many people as possible. The Directive Board have major interpersonal and individual issues, from in-depth disagreements to many health conditions of relevance. We are balancing the pressure for improvements with human connections to respect the harsh context. Members reiterate their commitment and request acknowledgement of their conditions.

Therefore, we report a decrease in the performance on wildlife monitoring, that reached a point where the majority of members of the local monitoring team were inactive and not complying with their commitments with a variety of excuses. Many cameras in the photo-trapping arrangement were not active, stolen or failed, and data collected was not treated properly under the same system participants were working properly in the past. In January we attempted to fix these issues in the field and let locals again with all the tools and guidelines, however, they were not responsive. In a session at the community hall, we all decided to suspend the camera monitoring until reorganization. Only two camera stations were kept, others were collected for cleaning. The local team has been carrying out surveillance rounds and explorations of new sites to set a better camera arrangement. They are expectant because WWF-Guatemala contacted us to donate 20 cameras, batteries, memory cards and training sessions, and we are taking advantage of that opportunity to let the locals relax and then have a fresh restart.

We report a similar setback for the local entrepreneurship team. For those participants, we saw the same slow beginning of the year for 2020 and 2021 about getting into production. The reduced sales capacity they have on their own, and the slow commercialization by allies after the previous project, led to impatience and demotivation of many members. Our personnel guided the entrepreneurs to update their group membership now that sanitary restrictions were relaxed, therefore they merged, created, and consolidated into the small working groups. We also recommended they assessed the technics employed and their inventories, and later to decide on a list of materials and tools to invest the funds we had as prize for them with Darwin funding. Shopping and delivery of these items was logistically overwhelming, and we did it with the help of our extraordinary secretaries and the volunteer team. From the perspective of the University, what we did had no precedent; and from the perspective of Gente&Fauna, as NGO, what we have done in previous projects easily, got extremely complex. By the end of March, we delivered the items and boost local producers' motivations by setting one month-time to deliver new products before the opening of the contest, so many entrepreneurs got into action. Remote assistance was provided by volunteer designers and artists when available.

The Association Amigos de Felinos has been delayed in having their administrative affairs in order. In February we had a remote capacity building session led by the lawyer and attorney Yasmin Granados, our long-term legal advisor, with the members of the Directive Board. One young local member has accountability studies and has helped with inscriptions on the Treasury Department system. The opening of a bank account in colones and other in dollars required up to four visits to the bank (located one hour away from the towns, and resulting costly) due to lack of experience and technological limitations of the Board. With the assistance of our advisors, the Association managed to hold their first Extraordinary Assembly to discuss the Agreement with the University of Costa Rica for this project. That agreement is under final review, and we expect to have it signed by mid-May.

Finally, activities to monitor human-wildlife interactions relied on partial photo-trapping results due to the limited data collection time, and also relied on reports of interactions. Felids maintain their presence in the surrounding of these lands where coexistence is an ecological fact (we are still processing data from previous projects). We are also recording good coexistence practices and also the threats detected by the local monitoring team.

3.2 Progress towards project Outputs

At this early stage of the project and with partial evidence from our indicators (Annex 1), Output 1 has only progress on logistic and content preparations as planned. Output 2 has lower progress than expected due to the issues described in activities, however wildlife is under surveillance in the pilot communities even with their limitations; they are model communities under their challenging social contexts. Similarly, Output 3 has lower progress than expected as a consequence of the limited activities; we are sure by the next period we will see a change to boost production as demand for the products increases thanks to the Contest opening. Output 4 has also most progress related to logistic and data collection preparations as planned,

3.3 Progress towards the project Outcome

Progress to date is about expectations for the contest to get the best design possible, communicatively, and technically. The next period is transforming the plan into reality, with production in April and the press release at the end of that month. I hope the reviewers of this report get as excited as we are for this period.

3.4 Monitoring of assumptions

Outcome assumptions:

- a. The contest offers attractive prizes for communities to participate, considering the health crisis.
- b. Relevant communities feel empowered and supported for applying.
- c. Existent community development associations (ADIs in Spanish) are searching opportunities for community development or have allies that present the opportunities to them.

Comments:

We consider most assumptions on our Logframe still hold true, however is early on our project and we do not have explicit evidence for all of them. We have exchanged communications with allies and DINADECO representatives, and they have confirmed their support to the project and even got involved reviewing some of the data collection instruments.

Output 1 assumptions:

- a. Application forms are validated (measurement validity and reliability) with at least one cognitive and one pilot test.
- b. Objective evidence is available for quantification and detection of patterns.
- c. Current capacity to assess wildlife interactions is low, wildlife as a resource has no explicit management planning.

Comments:

The application form was validated through cognitive tests, and expert review from representatives of two government institutions: DINADECO and the National Commission for Biodiversity Management (CONAGEBIO). Other assumptions' meeting or managing depends on the implementation of activities further on the timetable.

Meeting or managing of assumptions for **Outputs 2 and 3** depend on the implementation of activities further on the timetable (see Logframe in Annex 2).

Output 4 assumptions:

- b. Coverage of the project reaches large audiences at the national and regional level.
- c. Political powers keep allowing democratic participation, autonomy of academy and community initiatives to disseminate results (no interference).

d. Standards of scientific quality are maintained or increased for interdisciplinary studies.

Comments:

The communication strategy of the project (Annex 4) details the campaign audience and proposed coverage. The strategy aims to reach national coverage by complementarily use the communication platforms of the University's Office of Communication and Information (ODI-UCR, e.g. newspaper, webpage, social media, radio) and Amigos de Felinos media (amigosdefelinos.com/concurso, social media @AmigosdeFelinos), with additional push from ads on local radio stations.

3.5 Impact: achievement of positive impact on biodiversity and poverty alleviation

For the three months our project has been active, the effort was allocated to strategic planning and logistic preparation. Current impact relates to our follow up of the Association Amigos de Felinos that keeps the whole scheme going with production and wildlife surveillance. We will report on this subject on future opportunities.

4. Project support to the Conventions, Treaties or Agreements

Our initiative is part of the National Strategy for Biodiversity to report to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), we maintain communications with the authorities in charge at the Ministry of Environment. To date we have no direct link to report to those other international commitments, but we know we are being observed by the highest levels. Several of the measures for scoring the contest incorporate indicators of relevance.

Our partner Michelle Soto, as an awarded journalist, makes press coverage (national and regional) about CBD, UNFCCC, CITES, CMS and Ramsar. She works for Ojo al Clima and for Periodistas por el Planeta (<https://ojoalclima.com/author/michelle-soto/>).

We have not attempted further contact with UK focal points, since we did not receive any response last year for our Darwin application.

5. Project support to poverty reduction

The Amigos de Felinos scheme is designed to balance the cost imposed to local communities coexisting with felids with the benefits of felid conservation hold dear by a broad Society. The green label distinguishes the local conservation effort to add value to products and services that must reach a green market to share the costs.

For the three months our project has been active, the effort was allocated to strategic planning and logistic preparation. For the period we have worked on the motivations of current members to maintain the scheme active in expectation for the market niche to be radically open with the exposure generated with the communication campaign when the contest opens at the end of April.

6. Consideration of gender equality issues

As planned, the Guidelines and Application Form of the contest considers and promotes gender equality and minorities participation in specific sections for participants to report and address these issues. We require gender parity from contestants and the scoring value actions toward inclusion of minorities.

7. Monitoring and evaluation

For the three months our project has been active, the effort was allocated to strategic planning and logistic preparation. Planning for M&E has started, and we will probably report some modifications soon. We have not had yet many opportunities to test our M&E system, and during this period, while mostly setting the stage for operations ahead, we frequently turn to our indicators and re-evaluate them to detect any necessary adjustments on time.

We have one designated M&E officer supervising the activities, data collection and measures related to the project indicators, however all project team and partners contribute to the M&E work according to their focus area: communication, marketing, field operations, etc.

Evidence our indicators are working as needed can be the example of oversight of the current scheme in the pilot communities. The internal processes of reviewing and re-evaluating allowed detection of a decrease on the performance of the wildlife monitoring and local production, therefore we proceed with an intervention to reduce the impact for the local members, as well as to redirect local efforts where most needed (motivation and getting into action for specific tasks; details in section 3 and Annex 1).

Another important intervention related to M&E is the test and validation of all our instruments (questionnaire, application form, scoring form and guidelines), which at the moment has been accomplished as proposed.

Databases are shared among the staff members to keep track of the activities and outputs. Regarding the partner organizations, they are required to submit periodical reports on their assigned outputs, including the respective indicators and means of verification, that are then reviewed by the M&E officer and the project coordinator, this was the case for the Communication Strategy (Annex 4).

8. Lessons learnt

We are learning about administrative procedures that are probing extremely challenging and inefficient. Budgeting has shown issues throughout and we are solving most. Changes that we will report soon in a Request Changes Form relates to counterpart funding (less than expected), other to fees (for international consultants), and one more on legal considerations for the needs of this project (transfer of funds to a third party-Agreement with the Association Amigos de Felinos). We requested and got approved a partial exoneration of overhead cost with the purpose to correct underbudgeting due to the mentioned issues. Timing for procedures is another lesson that is tricky for our very tight timeline for operations.

9. Actions taken in response to previous reviews (if applicable)

Non applicable.

10. Other comments on progress not covered elsewhere

We have detected as two new risks for the project (1) how we underestimated the administrative work load on the part of our project coordinator, and (2) the global context will affect our budget and even maybe the acquisition of equipment due to inflation, fluctuation in exchange rates and supply chain issues. On the other side, our design remains the same as to this report.

11. Sustainability and legacy

For the three months our project has been active, the effort was allocated to strategic planning and logistic preparation. For the period we started to increase expectations, but the strongest address for sustainability and legacy will be during the active campaign from late April to September.

Comments by colleagues, allies and even administrators relates to how unique this project is! We take this as a compliment since we believe we are leading a new way of doing wildlife conservation differently in Costa Rica.

12. Darwin identity

For the three months our project has been active, the effort was allocated to strategic planning and logistic preparation. Effort to publicize Darwin Initiative were reduced for this period and will explode late April and on with the communication campaign. All campaign materials include Darwin Initiative and UKAid logos.

Internally, journalists from the Vice Rectory of Research at the University of Costa Rica were quick to interview Dr. Amit to showcase the achievement to obtain Darwin Initiative funds. She received a lot of praise for that for the colleagues at the School of Biology. The note can be accessed here, and there is English translation available:

<https://vinv.ucr.ac.cr/es/noticias/incentivan-comunidades-conservar-felinos-silvestres>

We use Darwin Initiative's logo in our staff email signatures to highlight the current project and tag Darwin Initiative accounts in our social media posts. Gente y Fauna and also Amigos de felinos have Facebook, Instagram and YouTube accounts and we have linked back to Darwin Initiative channels.

In Costa Rica US-based grants and funding opportunities are the more commonly known, to date Darwin Initiative is not a well-known funding opportunity. A few academic researchers are aware of the financing, and previous grantees have developed projects in the country, but with no local institution as Lead Organisation, until now. We proudly carry this responsibility, and plan to share every step of our experience with our peers through our social media and reports.

13. Impact of COVID-19 on project delivery

We planned this project with the COVID-19 context in mind, and apply the lessons learnt during our previous project (successfully ended in Ago 2021). The COVID-19 vaccination rate in Costa Rica is high (close to 80% of the population fully vaccinated) and the pandemic is considered under control, with all major sanitary restrictions lifted. The University of Costa Rica updated their protocols, which we follow.

During this year the impacts detected were minimum and fall within the expected, for example a few people missing the local workshops due to illness, staff members doing quarantine before field expeditions, but we do not expect longer-term delays due to COVID-19.

All our staff, partners and students have to compliance with the COVID-19 vaccination scheme as part of the University of Costa Rica regulations. Additionally, as part of the adaptations we have implemented since the previous project, we ask our staff to minimize exposure (quarantine) during the week prior to any field expeditions, and restrict stops to the necessary fuel refills and grocery shopping while traveling

At the communities, the use of face mask is mandatory for all project related activities, and we ask all participants to wash their hands before the start of any activity. We supply soap and hand sanitizer for the durations of the activity.

We plan to keep many of the adaptations implemented even once the pandemic passes, especially those that increase the efficiency of activities for our staff, like work from home, and virtual meetings. For the local communities the accessibility to certain resources like good internet connection or electronic devices is more variable and restricted. Thus, for activities with the local communities we cannot rely on remote or virtual methods but use them as a complement to in person trainings and workshops so they can feel the project closer.

14. Safeguarding

Please tick this box if any safeguarding or human rights violations have occurred during this financial year.

If you have ticked the box, please ensure these are reported to ODA.safeguarding@defra.gov.uk as indicated in the T&Cs.

Safeguarding does not present changes from our application. Policies are maintained and operational. New volunteers and allies are up to date with our normative. Contest guidelines, forms, and informed consent consider safeguarding.

No issues have raised.

15. Project expenditure

Table 1: Project expenditure during the reporting period (1 April 2021 – 31 March 2022)

Project spend (indicative) since last Annual Report	2021/22 Grant (£)	2021/22 Total Darwin Costs (£)	Variance %	Comments (please explain significant variances)
Staff costs (see below)	████	████	████	Draft
Consultancy costs	██	██	██	
Overhead Costs	████	████	████	Draft, under-spending
Travel and subsistence	██	██	██	Draft
Operating Costs	████	████	████	Draft, under-spending
Capital items (see below)	██	██	██	
Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E)	██	██	██	
Others (see below)	██	██	██	
TOTAL	████	████	████	Draft, under-spending

Our financial report is almost ready to correct these figures. The was underspending related to administrative adjustments. We are reviewing own internal procedures to correct the proper management; we expect experience will allow us to improve. Exchange rate and inflation are causing some significant problems, and we are adapting to the global uncertainty.

16. OPTIONAL: Outstanding achievements of your project during the reporting period (300-400 words maximum). This section may be used for publicity purposes

I agree for the Darwin Initiative Secretariat to publish the content of this section (please leave this line in to indicate your agreement to use any material you provide here).

Non applicable for this period.

i. Checklist for submission

	Check
Different reporting templates have different questions, and it is important you use the correct one. Have you checked you have used the correct template (checking fund, type of report (i.e. Annual or Final), and year) and deleted the blue guidance text before submission?	Y
Is the report less than 10MB? If so, please email to Darwin-Projects@ltsi.co.uk putting the project number in the Subject line.	Y
Is your report more than 10MB? If so, please discuss with Darwin-Projects@ltsi.co.uk about the best way to deliver the report, putting the project number in the Subject line.	N
Have you included means of verification? You should not submit every project document, but the main outputs and a selection of the others would strengthen the report.	Y
Do you have hard copies of material you need to submit with the report? If so, please make this clear in the covering email and ensure all material is marked with the project number. However, we would expect that most material will now be electronic.	N
Have you involved your partners in preparation of the report and named the main contributors	Y
Have you completed the Project Expenditure table fully?	Y
Do not include claim forms or other communications with this report.	