

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	DAREX008
Project title	Championing change: Living in harmony with wildlife in lowland Nepal
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	Nepal
Lead partner	Zoological Society of London
Partner(s)	DNPWC, ENRUDEC, NTNC, Ujjyalo Nepal
Project leader	Katherine Secoy
Report date and number (e.g., HYR1)	October 2023 HYR1
Project website/blog/social media	N/A

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).

Although we are not looking for specific reporting against your indicators, please use this opportunity to consider the appropriateness of your M&E systems (are your indicators still relevant, can you report against any Standard Indicators, do your assumptions still hold true?). The guidance can be found on the resources page of the relevant fund website.

This project focuses on the western Terai/Shivalik landscape and southern lowlands of Nepal, aiming to scale-up proven approaches for addressing the increasing rate of wildlife movement outside the protected areas in this landscape, which is resulting in increasing Human-Wildlife Conflict (HWC) between wildlife and communities living outside of Shuklaphanta, Bardiya, and Banke National Parks. HWC interventions to be introduced throughout the project lifecycle include utilising ‘Human-Wildlife Coexistence (HWCx) champions’ to support up-scaling of HWCx; investments to mitigate HWC and the effects of linear infrastructure (e.g., roads, irrigation canals) and habitat fragmentation, alongside livelihood investments to support communities to coexist with wildlife.

Since the project is in its initial stage of implementation, throughout this first half-year period ZSL has primarily focussed on completing the relevant inception activities with partner NGOs in country, government institutions, and park-level stakeholders, to set up the project and secure the base which project activities can operate from, at central government and site-based levels. Inception activities completed this reporting period include engaging with partner NGOs to ensure agreement on workplans, budgets, and contracts, and for setting relevant targets/deliverables for project activities; engagement with Social Welfare Council (SWC) of the Government of Nepal to secure a Project Agreement for this work, without which the project cannot operate, and completing initial inception consultations at central and site levels. More detail on each of these inception activities is noted below:

Project Inception

The project inception is to be completed in three tiers (at central level, park level and community level). The main objective of holding inception in 3 tiers is to maintain a uniform understanding and transparency among the stakeholders and beneficiaries about the project goals, objectives, and the

activities that the project sets out to achieve. Within this half-year time frame, two inception meetings were completed, with central level inception and park level inception meetings completed in April and September 2023 respectively.

Central-level Inception:

The project sharing meeting was held with the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) representatives as the central level inception on 21st of April 2023. The meeting was presided by Deputy Director General Mr Ajay Karki, and in total 10 participants were present from Government Ministries, ZSL and other relevant stakeholders (minutes for the meeting are attached as a separate Annex- currently available in Nepalese). The project goals, objectives, activities and budget were shared with DNPWC during this meeting, and those present agreed to decisions made by DNPWC in the response of ownership to the project, which included:

1. A meeting between DNPWC and the Project Management Unit (PMU) team at the field level will occur before project interventions for sharing of the project concept, implementation plan and objectives for the uniform understanding.
2. DNPWC will work collaboratively with ZSL to complete the planned revisions of the DNPWC protected area management strategy and other policy documents, as per the agreed scope of this project.

The closure of this meeting confirmed the completion of project inception activities at a central level.

Park-level Inception:

Park level inception meetings were held sequentially in all the three working Protected Area (PAs) (Banke (BaNP), Bardiya (BNP) and Shuklaphanta (ShNP) National Parks) in September 2023. Inception at ShNP was held on 8th Sept. 2023, likewise, in BaNP on 10th Sept. 2023 and in BNP on 11th Sept. 2023. The participants of the inception meeting included park authorities and relevant staff, representatives from buffer zone management committee (BZMC), army personnel, related local conservation units, and representatives from partner NGO's. In total, 63 stakeholders participated across all three meetings, (PA wise disaggregation is attached in the annex) out of which 5 attendees were female. The small number of female participants during the inception meetings at park-level were due to the low number of female staff working in each of the parks. During these park-level inception meetings, the stakeholders in attendance were presented with the overview of the project, the project's main objectives, and the project implementation plan. Minor concerns raised by the park authorities and related stakeholders, such as the split of activities within each of the sites, or responsibilities between stakeholders for providing support to project activities, were discussed, and addressed during each of these consultation meetings, to ensure clear alignment on the implementation of activities going forward. All three inception meetings at a park-level were completed within the timeframe originally noted at the proposal stage (between July-September). A final summary report of the park-level inceptions meetings can be found as a separate attachment.

Community-level Inception:

Community-level inception meetings were not complete this half-year period, however, all the necessary preparatory work for holding community consultations in each project site has been completed. These meetings will focus on ensuring every related stakeholder is informed on the overall objectives of the project, how it will be implemented, and has room to provide feedback on the proposals to the implementing agencies. Stakeholders attending the meetings will mainly consist of buffer zone management council members (BZMCs), buffer zone user committee members (BZUCs), buffer zone community forest members (BZCFs), community based anti-poaching unit members, ward chairs, and local conservation unit members. As the park level inception is already carried out, community level inception including all potential beneficiaries will be accomplished in the (next) third quarter of YR1, with the detailed report available next reporting period. The delay in completing community-level inception meetings can be accounted for by the delays in securing the Project Agreement from SWC (more info in section below), and due to the delays in confirming site-based partners for community work in Nepal as stipulated by the SWC (also noted in section below), which has had a knock-on effort in delaying the start of activities with communities.

Other inception activities:

Other project inception activities completed this reporting period include:

- Submission of a change request to NIRAS to add two new implementing partners - Ujyalo Nepal & Environment and Rural Development Centre (ENRUDEC), to the project to adhere to SWC requirements stipulating the need to work with site-based NGO partners for

community-focussed activities in buffer zone of Bardiya and Banke National Parks. This change request was approved by NIRAS in August 2023, adding Ujyalo and ENRUDEC onto the project.

- Following approval to work with Ujyalo and ENRUDEC, ZSL has agreed YR1 workplans, budgets, and targets with each partner, in addition to with NTNC, the other subgrantee of ZSL, for activities to be implemented under this project. These details have been integrated into contracts with partners. ZSL has continued its engagement with SWC to seek approval and confirmation on a Project Agreement for this work, without which, the project cannot operate. Agreement with SWC has been an on-going process, with many review meetings having been completed in this Half-Year period, and the confirmation of the Project Agreement is due from SWC imminently.
- ZSL and partners have hired all project staff necessarily for the implementation of the project (and as listed in the budget). Ms Sushmita Karki and Mr Pradip Sedhain have joined ZSL as M&E Expert and Field Programme Officer respectively. Following the hiring of the project M&E expert, work is underway to plan and coordinate the completion of the project's baseline survey. ZSL are currently reviewing the mechanisms for completing the baseline survey, with terms of reference being drawn up for the relevant parties responsible for completing the survey. First drafts of the survey questionnaire are also underway. As the preparation of the baseline is ongoing, the survey will be conducted by Q3 and will be reported in the next reporting period.

Output-level updates

Activities at an output/ indicator level are limited, owing to the delays in getting approval from SWC on the Project Agreement, which has had a knock-on effort in starting project activities at a site-level (details noted in sections below). However, during this reporting period some progress has been made against the project indicators, which are as follows:

Output 1: Foundations set for upscaling HWCx: Human-Wildlife Coexistence (HWCx) champions are created from existing successful "HWC reduction community units", bringing strengthened skills for replication in other PAs to reduce the rate of serious encounters between wildlife and people, and futureproofed by incorporating HWC safeguards, learning and response mechanisms into Nepal's existing and inclusive PA and buffer zone (BZ) management system.

Indicator 1.1 and sub indicator 1.1.1: The assessment of PA-BZ requirements (in terms of capacity to handle and mitigate HWC in line with improving HWC database handling and modes of communicating incidents of HWC) has already begun in all the three PA's (ShNP, BNP, BaNP), with initial reports for each PA having been prepared by an external expert. The first draft reports of the assessment for each PA have been submitted (assessment report is attached in annex) and the final report will be submitted after incorporating information from the series of consultations with community stakeholders in each of the PAs. The draft report includes an overview of the status of PAs in terms of capacity, along with the recommendations for improving this further, and an overview of methods for improving how HWC data is collected and stored, and how to improve how information is shared in each PA after HWC incidents occur.

Otherwise, all other project indicators still hold true, and there are no changes to report in the indicators as agreed at proposal stage. ZSL anticipates that impact-level change delivered via this project will be apparent by the end of year 2.

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.

Challenges:

The major challenge the project has encountered thus far is getting the project approved by the Nepalese SWC which has extended beyond the planned project inception phase. This has caused knock-on impacts to starting site-based activities, as without this approval on a Project Agreement, ZSL is unable to initiate these activities. The delay in SWC approval on a Project Agreement has been caused by frequent changes in the board members of SWC, which has meant that a significant amount of time for the approval process has been required as each new board

member reviews the project. Considering this unexpected change in the government structure in the country, ZSL has only been able to initiate a few activities, over and above the inception phase in the first two quarters of this year, meaning ZSL has not been able to complete many planned YR1 activities at this stage.

SWC's provisions also dictated that during this half-year period, ZSL had to revise project workplans, budgets, and partners to bring onboard two new partners (Ujyalo and ENRUDEC), in line with the provision from SWC that stipulated that community-focussed work in Banke and Bardiya National Parks must be led by site-based NGO partners and following a change request submitted to NIRAS. Completing due diligence, onboarding partners onto the project, and finalising budgets, workplans, and contractual documents, all had to be completed after the start of the project on April 1st, which has had an impact upon ZSL's ability to complete YR1 activities in this first half-year period.

We have been informed, by the SWC that the Project has now been approved by the Minister and the Project Agreement should be with us in the next couple of weeks once the paperwork is completed by them.

3. Have any of these issues been discussed with NIRAS and if so, have changes been made to the original agreement?

Discussed with NIRAS: Yes

Formal Change Request submitted: Yes

Received confirmation of change acceptance Yes

Change request reference if known: Not known

4a. Please confirm your actual spend in this financial year to date (i.e., from 1 April 2023 – 30 September 2023)

Actual spend: [REDACTED]

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)?

Yes No Estimated underspend: [REDACTED]

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.

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.

NB: if you expect an underspend, do not claim anything more than you expect to spend this financial year.

Due to the delays in getting SWC approval on a Project Agreement, ZSL has been prevented from fully initiating, or asking partners to fully initiate, YR1 activities that were planned by this stage. Consequently, we are very conscious that we are currently forecasting a significant underspend.

These delays have meant that we have been unable to justify charging staff time to the project, as activities have not progressed to the extent as originally planned for Q1 and Q2 of YR1. Consequently, there are likely to be staff underspends at the end of year 1.

To mitigate this underspend, ZSL will be looking to seek approval via a formal Change Request, to be submitted imminently when we have the Project Agreement, which will in summary, seek to:

- Reduce the total YR1 staff budget and increasing the total YR2 staff budget to enable us to allocate more resource to make up for the delay and not impact year 2 activities.
- Bring forward capital and operational spends currently planned for year 2 into year 1 to ensure that we spend out our year 1 allocation. Our aim will be to ensure that we do not change our overall year 1 and year 2 budget allocations but rather change the timings of the various spends between years (NB we are not seeking to change the overall category allocations).

5. Are there any other issues you wish to raise relating to the project or to BCF management, monitoring, or financial procedures?

No significant issues were identified at the time of reporting period.

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**