Illegal Wildlife Trade (IWT) Challenge Fund Evidence: Final Report

To be completed with reference to the "Project Reporting Information Note": (https://iwt.challengefund.org.uk/resources/information-notes/).

It is expected that this report will be a **maximum of 20 pages** in length, excluding annexes.

Submission Deadline: no later than 3 months after agreed end date.

Submit to: BCF-Reports@niras.com including your project ref in the subject line.

IWT Challenge Fund Project Information

Project reference	IWTEV012
Project title	Understanding the drivers of illegal exotic pet ownership in India
Country(ies)	India
Lead Organisation	Wildlife Conservation Society-India
Project partner(s)	Wildlife Conservation Society
IWTCF grant value	£ 99,946
Start/end dates of project	01 April 2023 – 31 March 2025
Project Leader's name	Kritika Balaji
Project website/blog/social media	N/A
Report author(s) and date	Kritika Balaji; Dr Vidya Athreya 30th June, 2025

1. Project summary

Illegal Wildlife Trade (IWT) for exotic pets contributes to global and local population declines of species such as Alexandrine parakeets, African grey parrots, scarlet macaws, and radiated tortoises. It also poses ecological risks through the introduction of potentially invasive species, like red-eared sliders in India.

India is rapidly emerging as a major market for exotic pets, with growing demand for species such as African grey parrots and Indian star tortoises in urban markets. Despite protections and regulations under the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972 and CITES, trafficking persists—driven by consumer demand and facilitated by porous borders and online marketplaces.

Current responses rely heavily on enforcement and overlooking the demand side of the trade. Our project was designed to address this gap by building an evidence base around the consumer drivers of exotic pet ownership in India. We focused on key groups of Psittaciformes, Testudines, and Squamates in urban (Tier I) centres of demand including Mumbai, Bengaluru, Kolkata, Delhi, Hyderabad, and Chennai. We aimed to understand which species are most in-demand, who the consumers are, and what motivates their purchasing decisions—insights critical for designing effective demand reduction interventions.

A key challenge was participant reluctance in owner interviews, particularly due to new government regulations introduced in early 2024 requiring exotic pet owners to register their animals on a government portal. This increased legal procedure made individuals more cautious and less willing to participate in

surveys and interviews. To adapt, we expanded our study to additional Tier II cities, relied more on expert interviews and online data, and leveraged trusted networks to engage participants while maintaining ethical standards.

While the project did not directly target poverty reduction, it underscored how enforcement disproportionately affects economically vulnerable communities involved in wildlife collection. These findings may inform future livelihood support interventions.

The study generated critical insights into the motivations and social dynamics behind exotic pet ownership in India. These findings form the foundation of a gender-sensitive, evidence-based behaviour change campaign, for which we have applied for a MAIN grant.

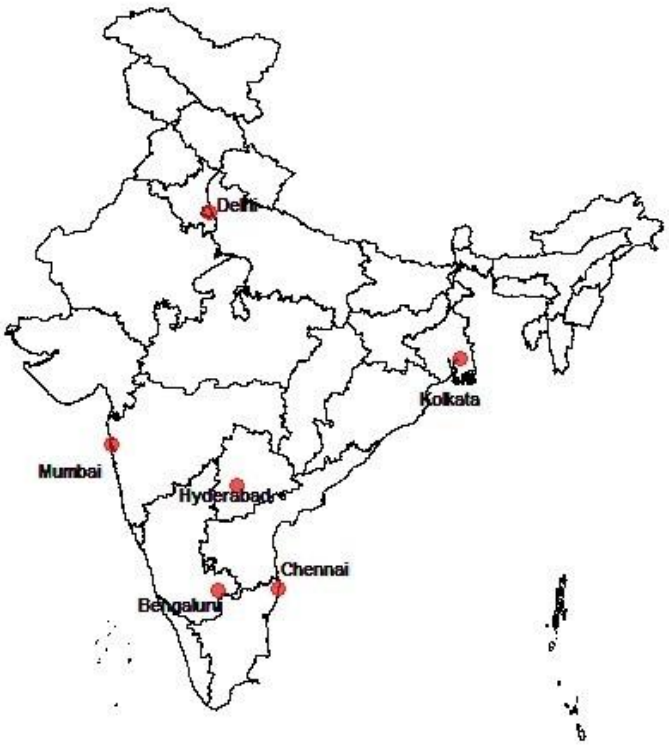

Figure 1: Map of project sites in India, primarily urban cities, which are centres for exotic pet trade and ownership

2. Project Partnerships

This project was designed and implemented through a strong partnership between WCS and WCS-India, with WCS-India's Counter Wildlife Trafficking (CWT) Programme responsible for project implementation and monitoring, and WCS's Regional CWT Greater Mekong and South Asia staff providing technical support. While the final report was primarily drafted by WCS-India, valuable inputs and feedback were given by WCS CWT Regional Coordinator-Greater Mekong and South Asia.

Key stakeholders—including exotic animal veterinarians, wildlife rescuers, rescue centre staff, law enforcement officials, conservation biologists, and trade experts—were actively involved throughout the project. We engaged them through in-person and virtual meetings, incorporating their insights at multiple stages to refine and strengthen our intervention strategies. In March 2025, we convened the first-ever discussion space-*Exotic Pet Trade in India: A Forum on Challenges, Impacts and Conservation Priorities*-in Bangalore, bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders from conservation organisations, animal welfare groups, veterinary sciences, and the legal community. The forum served as a platform to share project findings, examine the drivers and challenges of both legal and illegal exotic

pet trade, and co-develop strategic responses. This event strengthened cross-sectoral collaboration and laid the foundation for more coordinated and effective efforts going forward.

Engagement with exotic pet owners and breeders—key consumer groups—was integral to the behaviour change strategy. Interviews, informal engagement, and surveys with these stakeholders helped refine our tools and understand motivations and demand drivers, directly shaping the design of questionnaires and outreach materials.

We collaborated closely with the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) from the outset, leveraging their expertise to inform the development of consumer profiles (Output 2) and behaviour change strategies (Output 4). BIT supported survey and interview design through consultations in late 2023 and early 2024. A milestone was a two-day capacity-building workshop held by the BIT team for WCS-India staff in February 2024 in Bangalore, co-financed by a project supported by the Federal Ministry for Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety, Germany (BMUV). This workshop significantly enhanced WCS-India's ability to independently explore, design, and implement behaviourally informed interventions. In March 2025, two virtual working sessions were held with BIT and WCS-India staff jointly examining formative research findings from data collection and brainstorming behaviour change approaches (Output 4).

We maintained engagement with the British High Commission in Bangalore and New Delhi, sharing progress updates and exploring further collaboration.

Notable outcomes of this project include enhanced stakeholder coordination, strengthened internal capacity in behavioural science, and the collaborative development of evidence-based interventions targeting exotic pet ownership. WCS and WCS-India remain committed to continuing their collaboration on illegal wildlife trade issues beyond the project's duration. Established relationships with partners such as the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), along with ongoing engagement with government and enforcement agencies, have created a strong foundation for sustained impact and future joint initiatives.

3. Project Achievements

3.1 Outputs

Output 1: Detailed baseline of online and physical trade in target species in pet trade in India.

The project successfully achieved Output 1 by establishing a detailed and evidence-based baseline on the online and offline trade in Psittaciformes, Squamates, Testudines, and other key taxa within India's exotic pet trade. At the start of the project, no consolidated or systematic baseline existed to describe the scale, nature, or species composition of exotic pet trade in India, both online and market-based.

This project filled the gap by developing a baseline using a multi-method approach that combined market surveys (three in Crawford Market, Mumbai; three in Galiff Street, Kolkata, two in Jama Masjid and Delhi), online trade monitoring (survey period of June 2023 till June 2024 on YouTube and Facebook), 25 expert (15M, 10F) interviews (Indicator 1.1), and seizure data analysis (2014 – 2024). This multi-source approach allowed triangulation of findings and improved confidence in observed trade patterns. A full summary of findings is presented in a preliminary Baseline Report (Annex 5.1), that offers a detailed picture of popular species pet species in trade, trade routes observed, modus operandi used, and mediums of trade. Data collection and analysis took place with support from another project funded by the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL).

Over unique 230 species were documented in the exotic pet trade across data sources, including a mix of non-native species and native parrots, turtles, and tortoises. The baseline revealed clear distinctions in how species are traded: non-native species dominate both online and offline markets and are more openly sold, while trade in native and protected species tends to be more discreet. Most traded species fall under CITES Appendix II, alongside popular unlisted species such as sugar gliders and bearded dragons. However, our research validated initial hypotheses about the popularity of taxa likely harvested

from the wild - African grey parrots (CITES Appendix I) were the most prominent on online platforms, while Indian star tortoises (CITES Appendix I) appeared more frequently in physical markets, often traded discreetly due to legal prohibitions.

Additionally, increasing seizures of non-native primates at ports and markets point to a growing interest in these species among certain consumer groups, suggesting an emerging trend that warrants closer monitoring. It is noteworthy that frequently seized species including non-native gibbons and birds of paradise and native Indian tent turtles were not observed in markets or online surveys. This suggests the existence of closed, direct-to-consumer trade channels. Interviews with enforcement officials and other experts supported this, highlighting a shift toward direct demand-based interactions, often mediated through encrypted or closed platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram.

Non-native species dominate both settings and are more openly sold, while native and protected species appear in more discreet forms of trade. YouTube and Facebook were prominent platforms for the promotion and direct trade of exotic pet species, with a notable emphasis on non-native taxa. This trend may reflect regulatory restrictions on the trade of native species. On YouTube, 44 channels featuring advertisements for CITES-listed species were documented, with parrots and macaws being the most prominently represented. Birds appeared far more frequently than reptiles. In addition, numerous publicly accessible Facebook groups facilitated direct buyer-seller interactions. Across both platforms, a total of 103 species were recorded in online trade during the survey period (Indicator 1.2), underscoring the scale and accessibility of online exotic pet commerce. In contrast, physical markets displayed a more limited and cautious form of trade. Surveys in Crawford Market (Mumbai), Galiff Street (Kolkata), and a preliminary scoping in Delhi found that most species openly sold were unlisted under CITES —such as lorikeets, conures, and lovebirds—likely captive-bred within India. However, discreet sale of protected species such as Indian star tortoises (CITES I) and Alexandrine parakeets (CITES II) were observed in Mumbai and Delhi markets respectively. Iguanids of various life stages and colour morphs were also popularly sold in markets. Galiff Street displayed limited visibility of protected species, potentially reflecting stricter enforcement. In total, 39 species (Indicator 1.3) were documented across markets during the survey period.

Distinguishing between captive-bred and wild-caught individuals in both online and physical marketplaces is a limitation of the current baseline. Addressing this gap would require more detailed supply chain investigations and forensic verification. which were beyond the scope of this project. It was also difficult to verify similar looking species among taxa, given considerations of colour morphs and mutations. Verification of species involved in seizures also posed challenges, as seizures were often reported using high-level taxonomic groupings (e.g., “tortoises,” “primates,” or “parrots”) rather than precise species names. This limited the accuracy of cross-verification and species-level analysis.

Output 2: Consumer profiles for target species including their motivations for purchase and triggers for behaviour change.

The project successfully achieved Output 2 by generating the first empirically grounded consumer profiles of exotic pet owners (Annex 5.4) in India. At the start of the project, there was no structured data available on consumers purchasing exotic pets, their motivations, or how their behaviours might be influenced. Through 37 direct interviews (Indicator 2.1) with exotic pet owners and breeders, and an online survey of 212 respondents (Indicator 2.2), the project filled this gap, generating insights to inform targeted demand reduction strategies (Annex 5.2).

In early 2024, we developed a semi-structured interview questionnaire to understand exotic pet owner motivations, psychographics, decision-making processes, and potential triggers for behaviour change. The questionnaire was refined based on feedback from BIT in June 2024. Interviews were conducted with 37 respondents (34M, 3F) from Mumbai, Bangalore, Kolkata, and Madurai. Insights from these interviews informed the design of an online consumer survey, which was further reviewed by BIT in

December 2024. The final survey included behaviourally informed messaging options to test what might influence consumer choices. Though survey launch was delayed to Y2Q3, 165 responses (84M, 78F, 6UN) were selected to be suitable and analysed.

Participation in the online consumer survey was lower than anticipated. Despite targeted outreach and promotional efforts, the survey received 212 responses, of which only 165 were complete and suitable for analysis—short of the target of 500. This may be attributed to developments in 2023 and 2024, including growing media coverage on illegal exotic pet trade, highlighting harmful aspects, and government regulations requiring registration of non-native species—both of which raised public awareness and caution around exotic pet ownership. Nonetheless, the dataset provides a valuable and unprecedented foundation for understanding consumer motivations and behaviours in India's exotic pet trade. The richness of individual responses, alongside interview and expert data ensures the findings remain robust and actionable.

Output 3: Baseline of public sentiment toward exotic pets to inform strategy and assist with future demand reduction interventions.

This output was achieved. To establish a baseline of public sentiment around exotic pets, a social media analysis was conducted across YouTube and Facebook. A keyword-based search identified 199 YouTube videos (Indicator 3.1) published between June 2022 and June 2024 that featured CITES-listed exotic pet species. Comments were extracted and sentiment analysis was conducted using Copilot and ChatGPT, followed by manual verification. Comments were classified as Positive, Negative, or Neutral, based on predefined thematic categories. Positive comments included expressions of interest in owning exotic pets, enthusiasm for video content, advice-seeking around care, and general praise for content creators. Negative comments typically raised concerns about legality, animal welfare, or the ethics of trade practices, with some directly criticising the creator. Neutral comments were unrelated to exotic pets or lacked discernible sentiment.

The majority of videos—and corresponding viewer engagement—focused on non-native birds, especially parrots. Across taxa, sentiment was overwhelmingly positive. Two broad creator types were identified: "pet-sale" channels that operated as catalogues—listing prices, delivery options, and phone numbers—and lifestyle "influencer" channels, where exotic species were showcased as part of daily vlogs. The latter often attracted highly emotive, admiring comments that celebrated the individual, suggesting a strong role in shaping public perception and demand, especially among audiences who may not have intentionally searched for wildlife content. From comments and video content across both creator types, price emerged as a key factor influencing interest in exotic pets, with many users enquiring about rates and transport options. Video creators also often highlighted price, reinforcing its importance in decision-making.

Complementary monitoring of five Facebook groups, across over 600 posts (Indicator 3.2), revealed active trade in exotic birds, especially Appendix II species like conures and macaws. Listings were transactional, with buyers typically directed to private messaging platforms based on inquiry. Native species were rarely observed. Due to Facebook's guidelines prohibiting web-scraping, comment extraction was not possible; instead, high-priority comments, frequently listed species, and notable interactions were manually documented and analysed.

A full report of findings is presented in Annex 5.3 (Indicator 3.3).

These insights have been directly incorporated into the behaviour change strategy, particularly in highlighting the social dynamics surrounding the exotic pet trade—both in promotional content formats and in demand-driving narratives. Given the central role of social media in facilitating and normalising this trade, understanding the appeal of specific species, the influence of content creators, and the recurring emphasis on price has been critical in shaping the design of targeted messaging and audience segmentation within forthcoming demand reduction interventions.

Output 4: Behaviour change strategies for priority consumer profiles of target species.

This output was achieved. Prior to this project, no strategy existed to systematically address the behavioural drivers of exotic pet demand across different consumer profiles in India. This initiative developed the first set of evidence-informed behaviour change strategies tailored to three key consumer segments—novice, journeyman, and hobbyist—grounded in data from formative research and behavioural science principles. We prioritised strategies that reducing demand for illegal and high-risk exotic species, particularly African grey parrots and Indian star tortoises, which are likely sourced from the wild for trade.

The strategy was developed in collaboration with the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), with two dedicated virtual working sessions held in March 2025 (Indicator 4.1) to review formative research and co-design targeted intervention approaches. The final strategy document, included in Annex 5.4 (Indicator 4.2), outlines messaging themes, delivery channels, and proposed content formats grounded in behavioural science.

3.2

3.3 Outcome

Outcome: Increased evidence-base available for the development and implementation of a behaviour change campaign to reduce demand for target species as exotic pets.

This outcome was achieved. The project successfully generated a robust body of evidence to inform the design of behaviour change interventions targeting exotic pet demand in India. Each output contributed to the outcome through structured research, analysis, and stakeholder engagement aligned with the agreed logframe indicators.

- *Indicator 0.1 – Baseline data on the size of the market for target species is collected by Y2Q3:*
  We completed a multi-source trade landscape assessment (Annex 5.1), combining seizure data, social media monitoring, stakeholder consultations, and secondary literature. High-risk species within the key groups of Psittaciformes and Testudines were prioritised—most notably African grey parrots and Indian star tortoises—based on demand and conservation concern.

- *Indicator 0.2 – Consumer groups for target species are identified and profiles developed by Y2Q3:*
  We identified three key consumer groups (Annex 5.2)—novice, journeyman, and hobbyist—based on pet-keeping motivations, experience, and access to exotic pet species. Profiles were informed by in-depth interviews and surveys, with behavioural analysis support from BIT. The research also included a baseline of public sentiment using content analysis YouTube videos and Facebook posts to assess how ownership is portrayed, consumed, and normalised.

- *Indicator 0.3 – Finalised behaviour change strategy for key consumers of target species is developed by Y2Q4:*
  We developed a a targeted behaviour change strategy (Annex 5.4) in collaboration with BIT, through iterative review of project findings and two co-design sessions held in March 2025. The strategy outlines tailored messaging and delivery mechanisms for each consumer segment, with priority placed on novice pet owners due to their likelihood of adopting alternative behaviours and influence on emerging consumer demand. The strategy also includes suggested intermediaries (veterinarians and influencers), and proposed campaign framing approaches aligned with behavioural science principles.

No major deviations from the outcome were encountered, and challenges related to surveys and Facebook data access were managed without impacting achievement of the indicators.

Key insights from all these areas of work were also shared and discussed among stakeholders during a national level forum (Annex 5.5) hosted by WCS-India in March 2025, fostering dialogue and consensus among participants on pathways to reduce demand for exotic pets through collaborative, evidence-based interventions.

3.4 Monitoring of assumptions

Assumption 1: Impacts from ongoing Covid-19 pandemic do not disrupt project activities.
Comment: This assumption held true. Covid-19 restrictions remained lifted throughout the project period in India. Resurgences of cases were localised and did not result in large-scale lockdowns or travel bans. Project activities—such as market surveys, stakeholder interviews, and an in-person event—proceeded without major disruption. No mitigation actions were required.

Assumption 2: Project species continue to be popular as pets.
Comment: This assumption held true. Evidence from physical market surveys, expert interviews, and social media monitoring confirmed the continued popularity of key project species (particularly African grey parrots and Indian star tortoises). Social media monitoring reinforced this trend in the case of parrorts. Additionally, seizure reports across multiple states involving these Psittaciformes and Testudies indicate sustained and potentially growing demand. Seizures and interviews also point to emerging interest in niche species (primates and arachnids), suggesting that the trend may be broadening.

Assumption 3: Sale of wildlife continues in markets and online platforms despite enforcement efforts.
Comment: The assumption remains valid but changes in sales reflects a displacement of trade rather than its reduction. Sales were observed to continue on social media platforms and in certain physical markets, albeit in increasingly covert forms. Physical market surveys in locations such as Galiff Street (Kolkata) recorded fewer protected species in open stalls as compared to previous years—likely due to stepped-up enforcement. Interviews with experts indicate that traders maybe preferring operate through private messages on closed communication platforms such as Telegram and WhatsApp.

Assumption 4: Proposed Amendment to current wildlife laws does not impact the nature of wildlife sales.
Comment: Held for the project timeframe; long-term effects remain to be seen. In December 2022 an Amendment to Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972 (WLPA_ was passed, coming into effect as law since April 2023. The Amendment brought into effect significant changes to the WLPA, importantly the inclusion of CITES regulations and CITES listed species through chapter VB. This was made with the aim of enabling better government monitoring of breeding and trade in CITES listed species and brings CITES listed species under the jurisdiction of State Forest Departments, giving them the authority to seize and prosecute illegal trade incidents. Relevant Rules on breeding and trade of CITES listed species have been notified since early 2024, providing guidelines for registration of exotic pets the identified authority.

While the legal framework has now been formalised, there is little evidence of a deterrent effect on the demand or availability of exotic pets during the project period. Seizures involving CITES-listed species have continued and, in some cases, increased. The shifting modus operandi of traffickers, including changing trade routes and increased use of closed online groups, indicates that the trade not only persists but may be adapting and expanding in more covert forms. Although it remains unclear whether the Amendment has significantly altered the nature of wildlife sales, expert interviews and stakeholder engagement suggest growing awareness among both buyers and sellers regarding the legal status of exotic species. Owners are increasingly conscious of the need for documentation and the implications of non-compliance, though actual registration uptake is difficult to assess at this stage. Continued observation will be required to assess the longer-term impact of these legal reforms on trade dynamics.

Assumption 5: Seizures of non-charismatic wildlife like turtles and lizards are reported by media organizations.
Comment: Held true. Media reporting of seizures of what are often viewed as non-charismatic wildlife continued through the project period.

Assumption 6: Consumers answer survey questions honestly and authentically so that consumer groups can be identified.
Comment: Held true. Most consumers provided usable and consistent responses during structured interviews and surveys. Careful instrument design and pilot testing helped improve response accuracy. Although some respondents were cautious around legality of trade, triangulation with expert interviews and social media data helped validate findings.

3.5 Impact

The intended impact of this project was to improve the conservation outlook for exotic pet species through the development of an evidence-based, behaviourally informed strategy to reduce their demand.

The direct impact on reducing illegal wildlife trade of an Evidence project is relatively limited by default, as Evidence projects are meant to collect data to inform future interventions. However, over the course of this project, we have made significant contributions to this higher-level goal. A key outcome has been the establishment of a comprehensive evidence base of the illegal exotic pet trade in India—an area previously under-researched. This includes baseline data on market dynamics, consumer profiles, and public sentiment. The identification of priority consumer segments and the co-development of tailored behaviour change strategies with BIT marks important contributions to advancing targeted demand reduction approaches.

By gathering evidence on the prevalence of species such as African grey parrots and Indian star tortoises along with other endangered wildlife—we have strengthened global understanding of the conservation risks posed by exotic pet demand from India. Our findings have also revealed animal welfare, zoonotic, and regulatory concerns, including gaps in public knowledge and accessibility regarding legal frameworks and care requirements. These insights can inform the development of ethical ownership standards and complement enforcement and regulatory responses under the amended WLPA.

While this project did not directly implement livelihood components, it can provide evidence to support initiatives led by other organisations that offer alternative income options to communities involved in wildlife trade. By reducing consumer demand, the strategy developed through this project can help reduce the economic incentive for supply-side actors and minimise the risk of exploitation.

More broadly, the project contributes to IWT Challenge Fund impact goals by generating new insights, introducing behaviour change approaches to the Indian conservation landscape, and fostering multi-sectoral collaboration. Findings from the project were also shared at our Forum in March 2025, ensuring that knowledge generated reaches stakeholders, including enforcement officials and civil society actors, positioned to act on it.

4. Contribution to IWT Challenge Fund Programme Objectives

4.1 Thematic focus

The project contributes to the theme of reducing demand for IWT products by building the evidence base required to inform future targeted demand reduction interventions focused on exotic pet species in India. As an Evidence Project, the core contribution lies in generating critical baseline data on the species and scale of exotic pet trade, developing nuanced consumer profiles, and crafting a data-informed behaviour change strategy. Through market surveys, expert interviews, and media monitoring, we documented the diversity and sourcing of native and non-native species in trade—providing the first consolidated baseline on exotic pet demand in India. Consumer profiles were developed for three key segments, disaggregated by gender, and tailored communication approaches were designed for each. Sentiment analysis of social media comments further revealed public attitudes, knowledge gaps, and normative influences related to exotic pet ownership. The project culminated in a gender-sensitive behaviour change strategy that proposes specific interventions aligned with the motivations and behavioural drivers of each consumer group, prioritising novice consumers for future action. By providing a foundation of data and strategic direction, the project offers a scalable model for future efforts to reduce demand for exotic pets and supports the broader goal of improved conservation outcomes for species impacted by the illegal wildlife trade.

Insights from the project were shared with stakeholders through a dedicated forum and are already informing related initiatives in the region.

4.2 Impact on species in focus

At the outset, the project identified Psittaciformes, Testudines, and Squamates as the key taxonomic groups of concern in the exotic pet trade in India. This focus was validated through comprehensive assessments conducted over the course of the project. Analysis of physical markets, online platforms, seizure data, and owner and expert consultations confirmed that these groups are indeed among the most highly traded. Within these groups, commonly kept species such as African grey parrots, Indian star tortoises, and green iguanas were repeatedly identified as popular among consumers. In addition, lesser-known species such as Indian tent turtles, fly river turtles, alligator snapping turtles, and birds of paradise were also observed in trade, indicating the breadth of species impacted.

An emerging concern identified through this project was the increasing presence of primates in the exotic pet trade, likely driven by a niche segment of hobbyist consumers. Seizures and reports involving gibbons and guenons, while not originally part of the project's target taxa, point to a potential shift in consumer preferences and growing risks to non-human primates.

4.3 Project support for multidimensional poverty reduction

Although the project did not generate direct income-based benefits, it contributes to poverty reduction by producing public goods that inform more effective, preventive approaches to conservation of exotic pet species in India. By establishing a foundational evidence base on the exotic pet trade in India—including species in trade, consumer motivations, and strategies for behaviour change — the project supports the design of future interventions aimed at reducing illegal wildlife trade and associated vulnerabilities for marginalised communities.

In the longer term, the project is expected to contribute to poverty reduction indirectly by increasing public awareness about the value of wildlife through future campaigns. This shift in perception can enhance public support for conservation, reduce demand for illegal pets, and improve governance over wildlife resources. The project also contributes to public health by surfacing zoonotic disease risks linked to exotic pet ownership. Interviews with veterinarians, wildlife experts, and pet owners revealed low awareness of health risks posed by live animal trade and keeping, highlighting a gap with implications for both human and animal health. Addressing this risk through targeted communication in future campaigns could help prevent outbreaks with severe socio-economic consequences, particularly for vulnerable populations. Illegal pet trade networks often draw in individuals from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds to source or transport wildlife, exposing them to legal risk and exploitation. Reducing demand through behaviour change strategies may, over time, reduce such entrapment, especially when aligned with livelihood support interventions.

Learnings from this project are feeding into a regional initiative funded by INL that includes Least Developed Countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh, thereby extending its relevance beyond India. This supports regional capacity-building and enhances the knowledge base needed to shape equitable, evidence-led conservation and public health strategies.

4.4 Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI)

GESI Scale	Description	Put X where you think your project is on the scale
Not yet sensitive	The GESI context may have been considered but the project isn't quite meeting the requirements of a 'sensitive' approach	
Sensitive	The GESI context has been considered and project activities take this into account in their design and implementation. The project addresses basic needs and vulnerabilities of women and marginalised groups and the project will not contribute to or create further inequalities.	**X**
Empowering	The project has all the characteristics of a 'sensitive' approach whilst also increasing equal access to assets,	

GESI Scale	Description	Put X where you think your project is on the scale
	resources and capabilities for women and marginalised groups	
Transformative	The project has all the characteristics of an 'empowering' approach whilst also addressing unequal power relationships and seeking institutional and societal change	

This project aimed to document gender roles and differences among consumers—and, where possible, sellers—of exotic pets to ensure that recommended demand reduction interventions are gender-sensitive and mitigate gender-biased impacts. While a GESI context was not explicitly incorporated during the project design phase, the implementation process was approached with awareness of gender-based inequalities and a commitment to ensuring meaningful participation across genders, in recognition of the diverse social, economic, and cultural dynamics that influence consumer behaviours and conservation outcomes.

Interviews and surveys were designed to ensure that various gender identities are represented in the data used to inform the development of demand reduction strategies. Expert consultations (Indicator 1.1) engaged different stakeholders, including 10 women and 15 men, to ensure that the knowledge base reflected gendered perspectives. During consumer research (Indicators 2.1 and 2.2), including pet owner interviews (3 men and 34 women) and surveys (78 women and 84 men), gender was recorded to assess differences in pet ownership and motivations. Despite our efforts to engage women during interviews, the number of men participating was higher than women, because most exotic pet owners are men.

Findings confirmed expert insights that exotic pet ownership is predominantly male-dominated, particularly among journeymen and hobbyist owners. Among novice pet keepers, ownership of turtles and tortoises—often linked to superstitious beliefs—showed a more balanced gender distribution. However, ownership of other reptiles remains largely male. Birds, on the other hand, were popular among both men and women, with family dynamics playing a significant role in the demand for small to medium-sized parrots such as conures and African greys.

We analysed gender-disaggregated data to understand household decision-making dynamics around pet ownership. The analysis showed that while men often made the decision to acquire exotic pets, women were typically responsible for their care. We also explored prevailing attitudes and beliefs around exotic pet ownership and identified notable variations across gender and socio-economic status. Women frequently described ownership in terms of emotional fulfilment or caregiving, while men more often cited the appeal of rarity, status, or financial benefit from exotic pet species. These distinctions informed how responsibilities and motivations were represented in the strategy.

While this project primarily focused on the demand side of the trade, we also identified the need for further investigation into gender dynamics in the sourcing end of the supply chain. We recorded gender-disaggregated data wherever feasible during market assessments and online monitoring (Indicator 1.2 and 1.3). Results indicate that the majority of sellers and traders in online and offline markets are men. There is seemingly increasing involvement of women in transporting non-native through airports, as indicated through multiple seizures in 2024 and verified through interviews. This also holds true for transport of native parrots through trains to reach marketplaces. These findings present a clear opportunity for follow-on research and future interventions

We prioritised social inclusion by engaging a wide range of stakeholders throughout project implementation—including rescuers, veterinarians, enforcement officials, and pet owners—to ensure that a plurality of perspectives on exotic pet ownership were captured. This diversity enriched our understanding of the complex drivers and consequences of the trade. Findings were co-interpreted with key stakeholders during targeted consultations, allowing us to validate emerging insights and collaboratively shape the next steps. This approach ensured that the final behaviour change strategy is

grounded in real-world realities and reflects the social and institutional contexts surrounding exotic pet ownership in the country.

5. Monitoring and evaluation

This projects M&E system was designed to be adaptive and responsive, supporting regular reflection on progress against outputs and outcomes. The M&E plan was reviewed by WCS-India quarterly, aligned with activity planning cycles to ensure close tracking of progress and quality. After the completion of each major activity, debriefing meetings were held among the implementation team to assess achievement of targets, identify challenges, and capture lessons learned. WCS and WCS-India also reviewed progress on a bi-annual basis through health checks and during development of update reports. While there were no major changes to the project's core design or logframe, some indicators were refined based on feasibility following initial implementation, with adjustments approved by the IWT Challenge Fund team in January 2024. The target for Indicator 2.2 was not achieved, as outlined in Section 3.1, however this did not impact the veracity of findings.

The project has also laid a foundation for monitoring and evaluating future interventions. Public sentiment captured through social media and online platforms provide a documented benchmark to measure the impact of future campaigns. The baseline of species traded and consumers driving trade has supported the design of a Main Project proposal, along with contributing to a broader regional initiative on illegal exotic pet trade across South Asia supported by INL. Evidence on the range and volumes of native and non-native species in illegal exotic pet trade in India will improve global understanding on the threat posed to them by this demand. Understanding of wildlife health and welfare conditions, through interviews with experts and pet owners, may inform recommendations on compassionate, sanitary, and ethical standards for legal exotic pet ownership.

No formal external evaluation was conducted during the project period, as this was a short-term Evidence Project. Stakeholders and collaborators were periodically engaged to review findings and provide feedback, which helped validate conclusions. Internal reflections and collaborations also provided valuable insights into the utility of methods used, stakeholder engagement approaches, and data quality, and were instrumental in refining the direction of the project.

6. Lessons learnt

Lesson & Insight	Comment / Recommendation
1. Evidence collection is iterative and time-intensive Adaptive planning enabled the team to manage delays effectively. However, timelines initially underestimated the effort needed to identify and engage exotic pet owners.	Gathering evidence on sensitive topics like exotic pet ownership requires flexibility and trust-building. Future projects should allocate more time for primary data collection and anticipate access-related challenges.
2. Training and capacity building are essential for new thematic areas The team made strong progress in building capacity on behaviour change approaches, thanks to support from BIT and self-directed learning efforts.	Projects introducing new concepts (e.g., behaviour change) should include a dedicated learning period early on. Introductory workshops or expert-led training sessions can significantly boost implementation quality.
3. Sensitive topics pose access and ethical challenges Direct engagement with exotic pet owners, especially those dealing in rare or protected species, was limited by safety and ethical concerns.	Caution is warranted when engaging with potentially illegal activity. Future efforts may explore partnerships market research groups or indirect data collection approaches to improve access.
4. Stakeholder engagement strengthened outputs	Continued, structured engagement throughout the project fosters ownership and ensures recommendations are grounded in real-world

Regular check-ins and co-interpretation of findings with stakeholders improved the relevance and uptake of project outputs.	perspectives. This participatory model is a strength worth replicating.
5. Coordinating implementation and donor reporting required careful alignment While regular M&E supported problem-solving, there were some mismatches between reporting timelines and activity completion.	Early planning to synchronise donor reporting requirements with project milestones helps reduce stress and supports better communication of progress.

7. Actions taken in response to Annual Report reviews

We responded to the comment "*There is no specific activity and timeline for the production of a baseline report(s), yet this is a key product. Please set this out in the description of outputs in the next report."* in our Half-Year report, by highlighting the analysis toward the development of a baseline report

We acknowledge that while the baseline report developed under this project is comprehensive, it may not be exhaustive given the vast geographic scope of India and the diversity of species traded across both visible and covert markets. Nevertheless, this report represents a critical first step in documenting the scale and nature of exotic pet trade where previously no such consolidated evidence base existed. We view it as a living resource and intend to refine and build upon it through future work.

8. Risk Management

In Year 2, a major unforeseen risk emerged due to the temporary halt of funding and activities for U.S. Government–funded projects, which affected WCS-India's Counter Wildlife Trafficking (CWT) program. This posed a serious risk to staffing continuity and the broader ecosystem of work that this Evidence Project relied upon for collaborative activities. We were able to adapt by strategically leveraging available resources from this IWT Challenge Fund–supported project and another BMUV supported project. As communicated with the BCF team, we redistributed the salary coverage under this project to ensure that staff contributing to project activities were adequately supported. This entailed increasing the percentage cover for existing staff under the IWT CF project and including coverage for team members who had previously been contributing to project outcomes through support from USG federal funding. By doing so, we ensured uninterrupted delivery of planned activities and retained critical institutional knowledge and capacity.

We are grateful to the IWT Challenge Fund for its flexible support during this period, which allowed us to manage this risk effectively without having to lose our staff or compromise on project activities.

9. Scalability and Durability

Throughout implementation, we made conscious efforts to ensure that our results would have lasting relevance and could be scaled beyond the project period. Multiple stakeholders—enforcement agencies, veterinarians, behaviour change specialists, and exotic pet owners—have been engaged through expert consultations, interviews, and co-development workshops. These points not only served to gather insight but also acted as entry points for awareness-raising on the motivations and consequences of exotic pet ownership, paving the way for broader adoption of project findings.

Evidence from consultations and validation exercises with stakeholders indicates a strong agreement for continued collaboration. For instance, veterinarians and other civil society organisations expressed interest in collaboration to apply the behaviour change insights generated through this project to future demand reduction campaigns. The media analysis and marketplace mapping have been well received, with enforcement personnel noting the value of understanding social media platforms as emerging trade channels. Our findings have also resonated with civil society organisations working in adjacent spaces, who recognise the potential of the project's messaging strategy to shape pet-keeping norms more broadly. Overall, this project and the Forum event in March 2025 has been impactful in mobilizing a network of engaged stakeholders, including NGOs, rescuers, veterinarians, and officials, that can serve as multipliers for future outreach. Additionally, through project activities, a cohort of staff and consultants

have gained skills in social science research, behaviour change, and digital monitoring—creating a trained base for continuity.

The project also strategically aligned with recent policy developments, including the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change's notification requiring exotic pet owners to register their animals. This legal change has raised public interest and concern around exotic pet ownership, providing a natural entry point for future communication and engagement. Our outputs are positioned to support the implementation of such mandates by offering context-specific recommendations through a future demand reduction campaign, should funding be secured.

Currently, the reports and outputs included in the Annexes are currently for internal use only. However, we aim to make them publicly available in the coming months and intend to develop peer-reviewed publications based on the project's key insights. The findings and research from this project are also informing an ongoing regional project funded by the U.S. Department of State's INL, enabling deeper exploration of trade and demand drivers and allowing us to expand the evidence base and applicability of strategies across species and geographies.

10. IWT Challenge Fund Identity

As an Evidence Project, our primary focus was on data collection and analysis, which limited direct opportunities to publicly showcase the IWT Challenge Fund outside of formal outputs. However, in all dissemination of findings and lessons—including with NGOs, researchers, subject experts, government partners, and other stakeholders—we have consistently credited the IWT Challenge Fund and acknowledged the UK Government as the project's donor. This included clear attribution in our project brochure, during our Forum on Exotic Pet Trade held in March 2025, and in an external webinar hosted for CISCO employees (conducted at the request of their Green Team and unrelated to the project).

We are currently in the process of making our reports publicly accessible and are developing a range of outputs including popular articles, academic publications, and practitioner-focused case studies. All forthcoming materials will prominently acknowledge the support of the IWT Challenge Fund and the UK Government.

11. Safeguarding

12. Finance and administration

12.1 Project expenditure

Project spend (indicative) since last Annual Report	2024/25 Grant (£)	2024/25 Total actual IWTCF Costs (£)	Variance %	Comments (please explain significant variances)
Staff costs (see below)				
Consultancy costs				
Overhead Costs				
Travel and subsistence				
Operating Costs				
Capital items (see below)				
Others (see below)				
TOTAL	£56,430.00	£ 56540.05		

Staff employed (Name and position)	Cost (£)
Kritika [redacted]	
Nivedita [redacted]	
Phalguni [redacted]	
Asish [redacted]	
Aditi [redacted]	
Bhavya [redacted]	
Rishik [redacted]	
NG [redacted]	
Rebecca [redacted]	
Shaibal [redacted]	
Shruti [redacted]	
Trishanti [redacted]	
Uditya [redacted]	
Dipti Humraskar-Project Lead, [redacted]	
Kshitija [redacted]	
Ratul [redacted]	
Thimma [redacted]	
Subhash [redacted]	
Aditi [redacted]	
Aristo [redacted]	
Insurance [redacted]	
TOTAL	[redacted]

Capital items – description	Capital items – cost (£)

NA	
TOTAL	

Other items – description	Other items – cost (£)
NA	
TOTAL	

12.2 Additional funds or in-kind contributions secured

Matched funding leveraged by the partners to deliver the project	Total (£)
AYERS	
TOTAL	

Total additional finance mobilised for new activities occurring outside of the project, building on evidence, best practices and the project	Total (£)
TBD	
TOTAL	

12.3 Value for Money

This project provided strong value for money, ensuring that resources were allocated and utilised in a manner that maximised impact relative to cost, while maintaining high standards of quality and accountability. Internal staff with overlapping expertise were engaged across multiple activities to reduce external consultant costs. We also made use of free or low-cost digital tools such as kobo toolbox for data collection, ensuring responsible use of funds without compromising quality.
Travel for stakeholder engagement and interviews was strategically planned—when possible, these activities were aligned with other WCS-India Counter Wildlife Trafficking (CWT) projects, allowing travel costs to be shared and minimised. savings from travel costs were reallocated to host a collaborative Forum event in March 2025. Though not originally budgeted for, the Forum brought together key stakeholders—researchers, NGOs, and veterinarians—to share findings and insights. This created an additional platform for knowledge exchange and stakeholder buy-in, demonstrating excellent value for money in an Evidence project.

The project also adapted well to external challenges—such as regulatory changes and funding shortfalls—by shifting timelines and adjusting financial costs. The use of IWT CF funds to support staff during the US funding freeze, as detailed to the BCF team, also ensured project team continuity and knowledge retention, further strengthening value for money.

13. Other comments on progress not covered elsewhere

14. OPTIONAL: Outstanding achievements of your project (300-400 words maximum). This section may be used for publicity purposes

I agree for the Biodiversity Challenge Funds to edit and use the following for various promotional purposes (please leave this line in to indicate your agreement to use any material you provide here).

File Type (Image / Video / Graphic)	File Name or File Location	Caption, country and credit	Online accounts to be tagged (leave blank if none)	Consent of subjects received (delete as necessary)
				Yes / No

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?	Yes
Is the report less than 10MB? If so, please email to BCF-Reports@niras.com putting the project number in the subject line.	Yes
Is your report more than 10MB? If so, please consider the best way to submit. One zipped file, or a download option, is recommended. We can work with most online options and will be in touch if we have a problem accessing material. If unsure, please discuss with BCF-Reports@niras.com about the best way to deliver the report, putting the project number in the Subject line.	No
If you are submitting photos for publicity purposes, **do these meet the outlined requirements (see section 14)?**	NA
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.	Yes
Have you provided an updated risk register? If you have an existing risk register you should provide an updated version alongside your report. If your project was funded prior to this being a requirement, you are encouraged to develop a risk register.	NA
Have you involved your partners in preparation of the report and named the main contributors?	Yes
Have you completed the Project Expenditure table fully?	Yes
Do not include claim forms or other communications with this report.	