

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	IWT110
Project title	Combating illegal trade of bears and diversifying livelihoods in Laos
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	Laos
Lead partner	Free the Bears
Partner(s)	Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office (PAFO), Luang Prabang
Project leader	Brian Crudge
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	HYR2
Project website/blog/social media	https://freethebears.org/ https://www.facebook.com/freethebearsfund https://twitter.com/freethebears https://www.youtube.com/freethebears

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).

Reporting Period: 01 April – 30 September 2023.

Activities under Output 1 (Increased capacity to house confiscated bears at the Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary), have progressed well: Activity 1.1 complete in Y1; Activity 1.2 Fabrication of temporary holding pens is on track, with 8 temporary holding pens complete by Y2Q2 (target of +5 by Y1Q4). Weldmesh panels for a further nine modular temporary holding pens have been complete with the expectation of meeting the target of +15 by Y2Q4. Activity 1.3 Animal keeper recruitment and training is ongoing with +2 by Y1Q4 achieved, +1 by Y2Q2 and set to reach the target of +2 by Y2Q4. Gender balance of animal keepers is improving, with ten males and 5 females. Two Team Leaders have been selected from among the keepers: one male and one female.

Some activities contributing to Output 2 (Increase in confiscation rates for bears and other protected wildlife throughout Laos.) are behind schedule. Activity 2.1 complete in Y1. Activity 2.2 Build capacity of government agencies in short-term handling and care of wildlife will be carried out from Y2Q3 onwards. Bear-safe transportation crates (Activity 2.3) have been fabricated and will be distributed during completion of Activity 2.2. This activity is behind schedule but the delay will not impact the budget or likelihood of achieving the project outcome.

Activity 2.4 Assist government agencies in the transportation and placement of confiscated bears and other protected species, has continued throughout the reporting period. On 8th May

2023, a member of the Environmental Police contacted Free the Bears to report that a bear cub had been seen running through some land near a market in Luang Prabang town. This turned out to be a 2-month-old Asiatic black bear which evidently escaped from a trader. The bear cub was quickly captured by Free the Bears staff and immediately transferred to Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary. A video of this dramatic rescue was shared on Free the Bears' social media: <https://youtu.be/ygkhR2YpFhk?si=arfolqpDkeQT9MZA>

On 18 May, Free the Bears worked with PAFO in Luang Namtha Province to take possession of a 16-year-old Asiatic black bear (LR121). On 22 July, another 3-month-old cub (LR122) arrived in Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary from Vientiane Prefecture. On 3rd August, Free the Bears again worked with Luang Namtha PAFO to take possession of a 2-year-old Asiatic black bear (LR123). Finally, on 26th September, a 3-year-old Asiatic black bear (LR124) was voluntarily handed over to Free the Bears after the owner in Vientiane made contact through Facebook. The bear was reportedly bought (illegally) as a cub in Sayaboury Province. Others arrivals during the reporting period were: LA145 Impresses tortoise confiscated by Luang Prabang Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office; LA146 Stump-tailed macaque; LA147 Pig-tailed macaque; LA148 Impressed tortoise.

Activity 2.5 Advocate for bear farm closures and demonstrate increased capacity to house confiscated bears with a site visit to wildlife sanctuary for key government stakeholders, Y2Q2, has not yet been completed as originally planned due to other work commitments. Currently Bear House 8 and 9 are under construction. Once these are complete in 2024, a stakeholder site-visit will be planned. However, several noteworthy visits did occur during this reporting period: In May 2023, the Diplomatic tour was hosted by the UK Embassy in Vientiane and included a visit to Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary. The group was made up of 16 people (plus two staff from Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Vientiane who will join) and included six Ambassadors (UK, EU, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines) and staff from eight different embassies, plus the UN Resident Coordinator and an expert from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. The tour was hosted by John Pearson, then British Ambassador to Laos, and emphasised the support provided by the IWTCF grant. Towards the end of his diplomatic mission in Laos, Ambassador Pearson, further highlighted this support in local news media: <https://laotiantimes.com/2023/06/12/from-diplomacy-to-sustainability-british-ambassador-john-pearsons-remarkable-tenure-in-laos/?fbclid=IwAR09cPhHpjtb15mdmU2EPDVwTHja3d0aBPZLncmYteTipDD15Asg8ZYw9us>

Between the 15-26th May 2023, The Institute of Legal support and technical assistance (ILSTA) and the Lao Customs Department jointly organized training in wildlife crime investigation techniques which included a visit to the Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary. The training was attended by 36 law enforcement officers, from northern provinces, including Environmental Police, Customs, DOFI, POFI and prosecutors.

All activities contributing to Outcome 3 are complete or on-track for completion within the proposed timeframe.

Drafting of Laos' new Wildlife Law continues, with input from the 15.7 Wildlife Trade Working Group members. The CITES Secretariat and development partners highlight that there are some significant gaps and inconsistencies in the Decree (See: CITES SC77 Doc. 33.10) and it is unclear if the decree, once finalised, will be an improvement in terms of regulating captive breeding of wildlife. The Secretariat notes that significant training and capacity-building continue to take place involving OSPP and DOFI. However, Lao PDR has not reported on any investigations leading to arrests and court proceedings against perpetrators and only very aggregated information on seizures in the report submitted to the Secretariat. It is hoped that this scrutiny from CITES will lead to some improvements in wildlife law enforcement; however, the gaps highlighted raise some concerns that some SMART Indicators for this project may need to be reviewed i.e. 2.1 Proportion of reported bear trade cases resulting in confiscation/hand-over increases from <30% in 2019 to >50% by the end of year 2, and >60% by the end of year 3; 2.2 Proportion of reported protected wildlife trade cases resulting in

confiscation/handover increases from >30% in 2019 to >40% by the end of year 2, and >50% by the end of year 3.

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.

During this reporting period, two project personnel left Free the Bears. BCF was informed of this in a Change Request approved in September 2023. Jozef Coremans, Operations Manager, departed in July 2023. This role has been replaced by Regional Sanctuaries Support Manager, Luke Brannon, who started in July 2023. Also, Marta Faus Cortes, Senior Veterinarian on the Laos Programme, departed in April 2023. This role is currently being filled by the Regional Veterinary Programme Manager, Dr Amanda Salb, who started in September 2023.

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:

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

Actual spend: ██████████

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: £

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.

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

Responses to feedback provided on the Annual Report Review will be sent, as requested, with the next Annual Report. We thank the reviewer for the feedback.

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**