



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

Half Year Report

It is expected that this report will be a **maximum of 2-3 pages** in length.

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 2024

Please note all projects that were active before 1 October 2024 are required to complete a Half Year Report.

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

Project reference	IWT110
Project title	Combating illegal trade of bears and diversifying livelihoods in Laos
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	Laos
Lead Organisation	Free the Bears
Partner(s)	Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office (PAFO), Luang Prabang
Project leader	<i>Brian Crudge</i>
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	<i>HYR3</i>
Project website/blog/social media	<i>https://freethebears.org/ https://www.facebook.com/freethebearsfund https://twitter.com/freethebears https://www.youtube.com/freethebears</i>

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

Reporting Period: 01 April – 30 September 2024.

Activities under Output 1 (Increased capacity to house confiscated bears at the Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary), have progressed well: Activity 1.1 completed in Y1; Activity 1.2 Fabrication of temporary holding pens is on track, with +15 pens complete by Y3Q2 and sufficient panels on standby to assemble +8 more dens if required. Additionally, completion of Bear Houses 8 and 9 during this reporting period provides space to permanently house 25 adult rescued bears.

Activity 1.3 Animal keeper recruitment and training is ongoing and on track with +2 by Y1Q4 achieved, +1 by Y2Q2 and +3 by Y3Q2. Gender balance of animal keepers is improving, with 10 males and 9 females. Two Team Leaders have been selected from among the keepers: one male and one female. Among the animal keeper team at the Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary, all but one are Khmu ethnicity (a minority group in Laos).

Activities contributing to Output 2 (Increase in confiscation rates for bears and other protected wildlife throughout Laos) are progressing. Activity 2.1 completed in Y1. Activity 2.2 (Build capacity of government agencies in short-term handling and care of wildlife) target of at least 20 in year 2 and year 3 was achieved by Y2Q4. In the past six months, no further training has been conducted but several of the participants put their training to use during the confiscation of bears and other wildlife. Due to the success of this activity, further training will be conducted by Y3Q4.

In June 2024 a bear-safe transportation crate and pangolin boxes were delivered to Attapeu Province during a gibbon confiscation in the far south of Laos near the border with Cambodia (Activity 2.3). More crates will be distributed throughout Laos by Y3Q4.

Activity 2.4 Assist government agencies in the transportation and placement of confiscated bears and other protected species has continued, with a total of 8 bears (LR146-LR153) taken into care during the reporting period (5 Asiatic black bears, 3 sun bears). By the end of September, this brings the running total for the year to a record number of 28 bears rescued in Laos – equal to the number of bears rescued by Free the Bears during the first 11 years operating in Laos (2003-2013). It is suspected that sixteen bear cubs confiscated from a single location in March 2024 were sourced from northern Laos for the purpose of establishing a new bear bile extraction facility in Vientiane. The investigation into this incident is ongoing. Also taken in during this period were: Rhesus macaque x1; Pig-tailed macaque x3; Leopard cat x5; and Crested gibbon x1.

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 has taken place on 27 July 2024. The stakeholders included Mr. Khamphone MOUNLAMAY Director General of the Department of Forestry Inspection, Mr. Vithayar KODPHITOUN Deputy Director of the Department of Wildlife & Aquatic, and Mr. Humphhan NITHAKONE Deputy Director of Luang Prabang Provincial Department of Forest Inspection. They visited Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary and met with Free the Bears CEO, Matt Hunt, Regional Director, Brian Crudge, and Laos Programme Manager, Sengaloun Vongsay. During the meeting, Free the Bears stressed the need to address the issue of bear bile farming in Laos, particularly in the light of recent scrutiny from CITES. Following this meeting, the Director General instructed staff from the Department of Wildlife Inspection to visit a bear farm in Vientiane Capital to discuss potential closure.

Further advocacy will take place during an upcoming conference of the Wild Animal Rescue Network to be hosted by Free the Bears in Luang Prabang in October 2024, to be attended by representatives from the project partner organisation, Luang Prabang Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office, and Vientiane Department of Forestry Inspection.

Activities under Objective 3, Reduce poverty in local communities adjacent to Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary, are ongoing. In particular, throughout the reporting period, members of the local communities have been employed as labour for the construction of Bear Houses 8 & 9 at the sanctuary.

Endline socioeconomic surveys will take place in Y3Q3 in the participating communities to assess the livelihood impact of sanctuary development.

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.

In March 2024, sixteen Asiatic black bear cubs were confiscated by the Environmental Police in the Laos capital and then transferred to the Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary. This is believed to be the largest ever rescue of threatened bear cubs in history. A couple days later, two more bear cubs were rescued by government partners in Phongsaly Province in the northeast of the country and transferred into the care of Free the Bears.

All the cubs arrived weighing 1.3kg to 4kg and were estimated to be between 2 and 4 months of age. Cubs this small are extremely vulnerable. They required bottle feeds of special milk formula around-the-clock as well as daily weight and vet checks to monitor their progress. The sheer number of cubs put immense pressure on the organisation. Fortunately, Free the Bears was able to bring in expert cub carers from the Cambodia Bear Sanctuary, and to tap-into an existing network of experience specialist animal carers from overseas.

Having on-site accommodation was invaluable during the critical two-month post-rescue period to ensure the vulnerable infants received high quality round-the-clock care that they required. However, the influx of cubs meant that Free the Bears did not have human resources or infrastructure available in order to carry out any additional work, such as hosting on-site work placements for wildlife law enforcement agencies.

Several of the wildlife confiscations that have occurred during this reporting period have involved law enforcement agents who have participated in the Frontline First Responders training at Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary. The training not only provides the skills and equipment necessary to handle live animals, but it also builds a direct connection between Free the Bears and the agents on-the-ground. Notably, in the past couple of months we have seen an uptick in the number of confiscations in southern provinces, namely: Attapeu Province (LA160 – crested gibbon); Sekong Province (LR149 Sun bear); Champasack Province (LR153 Sun bear). The confiscations require 3-4day round trips from Luang Prabang in the north to the provinces in the south. These cases highlight the need for a Southern Staging Post in which to safely house and care for confiscated wildlife prior to or during the multi-day missions. Free the Bears is already exploring options for establishing such a facility for the near future.

These developments are not expected to have a significant impact on the budget or timeline for the project.

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

Discussed with NIRAS:	No
Formal Change Request submitted:	No
Received confirmation of change acceptance:	No

Change Request reference if known: *If you submitted a financial Change Request, you can find the reference in the email from NIRAS confirming the outcome*

4a. Please confirm your actual spend in this financial year to date (i.e. from 1 April 2024 – 30 September 2024)

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 2025)?

Yes No Estimated underspend: £

4c. If you expect and underspend, then you should 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 to your project 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?

Nothing to report.

6. Please use this section to respond to any feedback provided when your project was confirmed, or from your most recent annual report. If your project was subject to an Overseas Security and Justice Assistance assessment please use this space to comment on any changes to international human rights risks, and to address any additional mitigations outlined in your offer letters. Please provide the comment and then your response. If you have already provided a response, please confirm when.

Methods to monitor outcome indication 0.3 (Number of households deriving at least the equivalent of minimum wage from the sanctuary...) continue to evolve. During this reporting period, the majority of full-time project staff have opened bank accounts into which salary is paid directly. Having personal bank accounts improves record keeping and provides individuals with greater financial security as well as access to saving schemes. For day labourers, Family Book Numbers (often the only form of ID) are being used to internally track payments to households.

Checklist for submission

For New Projects (i.e. starting after 1st April 2024)

Have you responded to any additional feedback (other than caveats) received in the letter you received to say your application was successful which requested response at HYR (including safeguarding points)? You should respond in section 6, annexes other requested materials as appropriate.	
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If not already submitted, have you attached your risk register?	
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For Existing Projects (i.e. started before 1st April 2024)	
Have you responded to feedback from your latest Annual Report Review ? You should respond in section 6, annexes other requested materials as appropriate.	Yes
For All Projects	
Include your project reference in the subject line of submission email.	
Submit to BCFs-Report@niras.com .	
Have you clearly highlighted any confidential information within the report that you do not wish to be shared on our website?	n/a
Have you reported against the most up to date information for your project ?	Yes
Please ensure claim forms and other communications for your project are not included with this report.	