

Illegal Wildlife Trade (IWT) Challenge Fund Main & Extra: 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 project end date.

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IWT Challenge Fund Project Information

Scheme (Main or Extra)	Main
Project reference	IWT110
Project title	Combating illegal trade of bears and diversifying livelihoods in Laos
Country(ies)	Laos
Lead Organisation	Free the Bears
Project Partner(s)	Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office (PAFO), Luang Prabang
IWTCF grant value	£355,113
Start/end dates of project	01/07/2022 – 31/03/2025
Project Leader's name	Brian Crudge
Project website/blog/social media	https://freethebears.org/ https://www.facebook.com/freethebearsfund https://twitter.com/freethebears
Report author(s) and date	Brian Crudge, 30 June 2025

1. Project summary

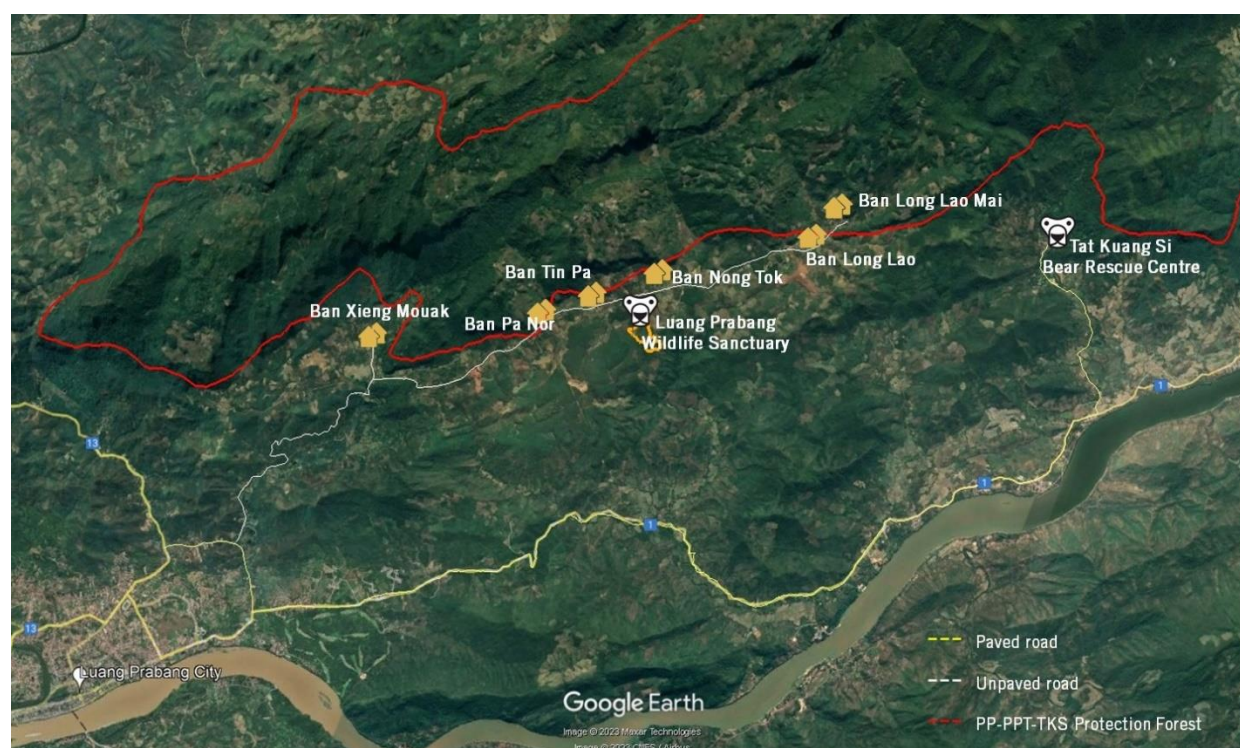
The placement of confiscated wildlife remains a major obstacle to effective law enforcement in Laos. By rapidly increasing capacity to house confiscated bears, this project will continue to enable responsible government agencies to effectively implement legal deterrents in order to end the trafficking of bears in Laos and help maintain the ecological intactness of forest ecosystems. Additionally, we aimed to demonstrate the role that well-run wildlife sanctuaries can play in poverty reduction through the creation of diverse livelihood and educational opportunities.

Laos is a major source and transit point for IWT. Asiatic black bears and sun bears are highly sought-after for use in Traditional Medicines and to replenish stocks on bile farms domestically and internationally. Both species are CITES Appendix 1. Despite legal protection, populations are declining, with illegal hunting and trade recognised as the most immediate threats. Without adequate infrastructure for placement of animals, there is low will to enforce existing laws which, as a result, fail to act as effective deterrents to IWT.

Working in partnership with the Lao government since 2003, Free the Bears established a dedicated bear rescue centre and, since 2017, has been developing Laos' first official government-owned wildlife sanctuary in order to help combat IWT. Free the Bears has helped in the placement of 163 confiscated bears, the majority (74%) of which have been seized since 2017. This has stemmed to flow of bear cubs into illegal bile farms (where captive breeding does not occur) and has prevented growth of bear bile

farming in Laos. However, development of facilities in which to place bears has struggled to keep pace with confiscation rates. Without ample sanctuary facilities available, motivation for law enforcement agencies to close illegal bear bile farms containing large numbers of live bears may be lacking and advocating for increased effort is challenging. This project sought to strengthen wildlife law enforcement and ensure effective legal deterrents in Laos by rapidly increasing capacity to provide immediate short-term housing for confiscated bears such that Lao authorities can be further encouraged and have the ability to confiscate bears from bile farms whilst continuing to prevent further bears from entering farms through effective investigation and rapid interdiction.

This project is focused on Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary, 17 km from Luang Prabang City, and the six villages closest to the sanctuary, which are all adjoining or within Protection Forest. Livelihood options are limited in this area and, as such, the sanctuary is an important and secure source of income and a resource for the communities. Development and operation of the Wildlife Sanctuary benefits the local communities through direct and indirect livelihood opportunities, supporting a holistic approach which demonstrates how wildlife conservation actions combined with sustainable wildlife tourism have the potential to contribute significantly to the development of the region. Development of the sanctuary will provide livelihood opportunities for at least the next 30 years through the provision of life-long care to bears and associated requirements for skilled labour and opportunities for tourism.



2. Project Partnerships

Free the Bears has been collaborating with government partners in Southeast Asia to provide world-class facilities for the placement of bears confiscated from illegal trade since 1997. While several models of wildlife rescue center and sanctuary management exist, all Free the Bears-supported facilities are specifically owned by local and national government partners to ensure commitment to long-term success.

Free the Bears' main project partner in Laos is the Luang Prabang Provincial Department of Agriculture and Forestry (PAFO). Under the jurisdiction of Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, PAFO is mandated to manage, protect and conserve the country's natural resources, including wildlife, within Luang Prabang Province for the present and future generations. The Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary, which is the focus of the project, is owned by PAFO and receives financial and technical support from Free the Bears. PAFO representatives sit on the Project Management Committee (PMC) of the project (Lao Bear Conservation Project Phase IV and Luang Prabang Provincial Wildlife Sanctuaries) along with representatives from the Governor's Office, Department of Foreign Affairs, Department of Forestry Inspection and the Department of Planning and Cooperation. The Project Management Committee is responsible for monitoring implementation of the projects and approving project reports. See most recent report in **Annex 5.1** PAFO Report of FTB 2024 and planning 2026.

The Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary is an important flagship project for both PAFO and MAF, being Laos' first and only government-owned multi-species wildlife rescue facility and frequently hosts capacity building workshops

and visits from high-ranking officials. For this project, PAFO is responsible for ensuring the legal transfer of confiscated wildlife from the point of interdiction to the sanctuary and, for certain suitable individuals following rehabilitation, release back to appropriate protected habitat in Laos.

For the current project, PAFO were also involved in the household surveys (Activity 3.5), facilitating approval from relevant village chiefs and conducting the surveys in 2023 and 2025. Technical specialists from the Community Engagement Division of San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance (long-term collaborators of Free the Bears), including an expert in social equity of conservation projects, contributed to the design of the household surveys and have committed to assisting with data analysing and reporting to ensure results are robust and disseminated widely.

Other stakeholders of the project include the 15.7 Working Group – a collection of representatives from organisations working on illegal wildlife trade in Laos as well as UK, EU and US embassy partners. Through this Working Group, members were invited by the Department of Forestry to review and comment on a draft revision of Laos' Wildlife and Aquatic Law in order to strengthen species protection under the law. Following this, Free the Bears and other stakeholders have been asked to assist with drafting a new zoo licencing regulation and wildlife release regulations. Among the usual Working Group participants, the October 2022 meeting was attended by Ivonne Higuero, CITES Secretary General, and Sofie Hermann Flensburg, CITES Secretariat. This was an opportunity for Free the Bears to raise the ongoing issue of illegal bear farms in Laos and advocate for CITES to apply pressure on the government of Laos to address this issue.

Throughout the project, Free the Bears has collaborated with like-minded organisations in the country such as the Elephant Conservation Center (ECC, Xayaboury) and Lao Conservation Trust for Wildlife (LCTW, Vientiane). See section 4.3 below for details of a Wildlife Medicine Module developed with the National University of Laos.

The British Embassy in Laos has been included in this project from the outset. In July 2022, Cashel Gleeson, then Chargé d'affaires of the UK Embassy in Laos, met online with Free the Bears representatives to discuss this Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund project, as well as the potential to host at stakeholder meeting in Vientiane to discuss roadblocks to bear bile farm closures in Laos. On 23rd September, British Ambassador to Laos, John Pearson, and Policy & Projects Support Officer, Payolin Razmouny, visited Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary see the facilities and get an update on the IWTCF project. In December, at the Luang Prabang Film Festival, the British Embassy and Free the Bears co-hosted a screening of the BBC docuseries 'Bears About the House', which is centred around the development of the sanctuary and wildlife conservation in Laos, which was followed by a Q&A session on IWT issues in Laos for members of the public and invited government partners. Subsequent to this event, representatives from the UK and US embassy conducted a site visit to the sanctuary in order to learn more about progress being made and challenges remaining.

In January 2023, the UK Ambassador and Deputy Head of Mission, Cashel Gleeson, were present to witness Free the Bears take possession of two Asiatic black bear cubs that had been handed over voluntarily from a private owner in Vientiane Capital. This occasion was used to raise awareness of the support provided by the UK government to this work in Laos, as well as publicise the number for the Wildlife Crime Hotline for a national audience, being shared on the embassy "UK in Laos" Facebook page

and covered by local media "UK Ambassador to Laos Witnesses Handover of Two Moon Bear Cubs - Laotian Times"

In May 2023, the Diplomatic Corps 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 joined) 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 highlighted 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

In February 2024, new British Ambassador to Laos, Mel Barlow, visited Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary to learn more about the project funded by IWTCF, as well as the breadth of activities Free the Bears is involved in and about how this work contributes to the local communities. On Twitter, the British Embassy in Laos posted about Ambassador Mel Barlow's visit to Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary.

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.

On 29 June 2023, delegates from the US Embassy in Laos visited Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary, and again in December 2023 US Acting Ambassador to Laos, Michelle Outlaw, visited the sanctuary to see the progress that has been made in increasing capacity to house confiscated wildlife.

20th December 2023, Free the Bears Chief Executive, Matt Hunt, and Laos Programme Manager, Sengaloun Vongsay, met with the new Director General, Khamphone Mounlamai, of the Department of Forestry Inspection in Vientiane to discuss the need take action to close bear bile farms, specifically a farm in Vientiane and in Luang Prabang. An invitation was extended to the Director General to visit Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary, which eventually happened July 2024 (See Activity 2.5 below).

Between October 2023 and February 2024, a total of 42 wildlife law enforcement officers (13 female, 29 male) participated in two-week Wildlife Care Course for Frontline First Responders. The training was repeated between February and March of 2025, during which a further 24 officers (6 female, 18 male) were trained. Participants were from wildlife law enforcement agencies from provinces throughout Laos. Several of the subsequent confiscations of bears and other wildlife involved participants of the training using skills and equipment provided to them as part of this initiative. Participants reported increased confidence in the skills necessary to safely confiscate and provide short-term care to live wildlife. See **Annex 5.2** Wildlife Care Course for Frontline First Responders report.

In March 2024, the Environmental Police led on an operation that resulted in the confiscation of 16 Asiatic black bear cubs from a single location, with support from Free the Bears. It is likely that the person responsible for buying these bears intended to establish a new bile farm with these bears. At the time of reporting, the investigation is ongoing.

An example of the ongoing impact of this work and continued relationship with project stakeholders can be seen in the confiscation and transfer of a bear by DOFI from Bokeo Province in June 2025:

A video of highlights from the training is available here

In 2024 and 2025, we collaborated with the Luang Prabang Department of Agriculture to deliver training workshops with community members to improve capacity to grow a diversity of crops. See section 3.2 below for further details.

Additionally, social science experts from the Community Engagement Division of San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance led on the preliminary analysis of household survey data which resulted in a poster and oral presentation by a Summer Fellow at SDZWA in 2024.

In October 2024, Free the Bears hosted the Wild Animal Rescue Network (WARN) 13th Annual Conference in Luang Prabang, Laos - bringing together 60 participants from 30 different organisations and 15 countries across East and Southeast Asia. Through grants awarded, Free the Bears was able to support registration costs for three participants from Vietnam (Save Vietnam's Wildlife) and Indonesia (Centre for Orangutan Protection) plus offer travel support and registration for a sponsored delegate from the Sumatran Rescue Alliance (Indonesia) who presented on recent collaborative efforts to re-release a snared sun bear, plus sponsored registration for a delegate from the Lao Conservation Trust for Wildlife who presented on the Laos Wildlife Health Laboratory Network initiative. Also in attendance were delegates from Luang Prabang Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office, the Department of Forestry Inspection, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The conference offered delegates the chance to hear from peers working in similar fields on topics such as re-wilding, capacity-building and partnerships, with an overall theme of "Successful Partnerships Leading to Positive Outcomes for Wildlife". In total nine presentations included a focus on activities aimed at supporting bear conservation. See **Annex 5.3** WARN 2024_Agenda & Abstracts.

3. Project Achievements

3.1 Outputs

Output 1. Increased capacity to house confiscated bears at the Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary.

1.1 300% increase in capacity to provide immediate short-term housing for confiscated bears, from 10 adult bears in 2021, to 30 by end of year 2, and to 40 by the end of year 3. As of completion of this project (Y3Q4), 26 temporary holding pens have been erected, bringing immediate capacity to at least 36 adult bears. Temporary holding pens follow a modular design consisting of weld-mesh panels. By the end of the project, we have 22 additional panels for 5 more temporary holding pens which could be erected in the event of a large rescue of adult bears. This brings total potential capacity for new rescues to 41 by the end of the project, representing a 310% increase.

During this same period, five bear houses have been built at Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary to accommodate the growing number of bears placed at the sanctuary. With six dens per house, each capable of housing 2 bears, these houses currently accommodate 57 rescued bears.

1.2 Increase animal keeper staff from 9 male, 3 female in 2020, to 9 male, 4 females by Y1Q4, 9 male, 5 females by Y2Q4, and 10 male, 6 females by Y3Q4. Targets have been surpassed, with 4 keepers hired in Year 1 of the project and five in Year 2. Gender balance of animal keepers is improving, with 14 males and 9 females at Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary as of Y3Q4 (from 25% female animal keeper staff in 2020 to almost 40% currently). Two Team Leaders have been selected from among the keepers: one male and one female. The majority of keepers are from ethnic minority groups, including 5 Hmong and 16 Khmu. Only 2 staff members are of Lao Loum ethnicity, which is the majority ethnic group in Laos.

Output 2. Increase in confiscation rates for bears and other protected wildlife throughout Laos.

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.

During this project reporting period (July 2022 to March 2025) there have been a total of 48 bears placed into care at Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary: 43 Asiatic black bears, 5 sun bears (LR112 – LR159). There has also been a total of 45 individuals (LA134 – LA178) of other species placed at the sanctuary, including 7 Sunda pangolins. See **Annex 5.4** FTB LA Arrivals Report Jul22-Mar25.

The calendar year of 2024 saw the highest ever number of bear rescues in Laos. However, it is challenging at this point to determine the number of cases reported in order to determine what proportion of the trade is interceded. Laos' revised Wildlife Law has recently been approved. However, 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 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 the issuance of a sub-decree that will strengthen wildlife law enforcement; however, the gaps highlighted demonstrate the challenges with tracking some of the SMART Indicators for this project 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.

At this stage, without knowing the number of bear trade cases or wildlife trade cases reported to government agencies we are unable to determine what proportion result in confiscation/handover. It is hoped that this can be addressed by implementing the Lao PDR National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan 2025 – 2030 (in prep) which highlights the need to develop a national system for reporting of exploited wildlife species (including NTFPs) as a part of the national biodiversity database, especially for those species known to be used in trade, to enable improved management and protection. From Lao Conservation Trust for Wildlife's 2024 Annual Report, just 9% of tip-offs reported through the national wildlife trade reporting hotline resulted in action taken; however, they also note that some cannot be reported due to insufficient information.

2.3 Bear-safe transportation crates distributed to 6 of 18 provinces/prefecture by Y1Q4. This was completed behind schedule due to postponement of Activity 2.4. However, as of Y2Q4, six crates suitable to transport confiscated bear cubs and 1 large crate for adult bears had been distributed to six provinces. By the end of the project, a total of 18 large transport crates (for adult bears), 22 custom-made pangolin rescue boxes (suitable for short-term holding and transportation of confiscated pangolins), and 21 capture nets had been delivered to 17 of 18 provinces/municipalities in Laos, namely: Vientiane Capital; Phongsaly; Oudomxay; Bokeo; Luang Namtha; Sayaboury; Huaphan; Xiengkhuang; Vientiane Province; Bolikhamxay; Khammoune; Savanakheth; Sekong; Salavan; Champasak; Attapue (See **Annex 5.5**. Handover documents for live animal handling equipment). Delivery of this equipment enables provincial authorities to enforce wildlife laws and confiscate wildlife without delay. The training and equipment provided can be seen in the confiscation and transport of an adult bear (LR163) from Bokeo Province in the northwest of Laos to Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary:

Output 3. Reduce poverty in local communities adjacent to Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary.

3.1 At least 50% of project annual budget expended within 10km of the sanctuary, and at least 80% with 20km. During Year 1 of this project (July 2022 – March 2023), 18% of total project expenditure (██████████) was within 10km of the sanctuary and 95% (██████████) was within 20km of the sanctuary. During Year 2 of this project (April 2023 – March 2024), 18% of total project expenditure was within 10km of the sanctuary and 94%, equivalent to ~ (██████████) was within 20km of the sanctuary. In Year 3 (April 2024 – March 2025) 16% (██████████) of project expenditure was within 10km of the sanctuary and 97% (██████████) was within 20km. In total, during this project, 17% (██████████) and 95% (██████████) was expended within 10 km and 20km, respectively, of Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary. A considerable portion of this was for locally-grown produce and labour from communities within the immediate vicinity of the sanctuary, contributing greatly to the local economy.

3.2 Number of full-time employment opportunities for local community members receiving payment for labour increases from 31 (85% male) in 2022 to 40 (80% male) by the end of Year 2. By this output target at the end of year 2, a minimum of 36 community members (100% male) received an average payment of (██████████) 62% higher than the national minimum wage of (██████████) per month. In the final quarter of this project, 29 community members (100% male) were receiving an average monthly payment of (██████████) approximately 70% higher than the current minimum wage of (██████████).

During the final quarter of the project all local labour were men, due to the nature of the work at the time and the traditional division of labour. However, at other times most of the labour employed are female, for example when undergrowth is being cleared to promote growth of trees.

A challenge identified during implementation of this project was that of tracking payments to individual community members, many of whom do not have personal identification numbers which would facilitate aggregation of payments to individuals. To begin to address this challenge, in 2024 we have started recording the family book number of those without fulltime contracts. In July 2024, Free the Bears facilitated all Lao employees with full-time contracts to open bank accounts in order to receive salary payments. For many, this was the first time they have held a personal bank account. Having access to a personal bank account can contribute to poverty alleviation by enabling individuals to securely save money, access credit, and manage income more effectively. It also provides a foundation for financial inclusion, which can reduce vulnerability to economic shocks and support long-term improvements in well-being, including education, healthcare, and livelihoods.

3.3 Number of local households with contracts to grow produce (fruit, veg, rice) for the sanctuary increases from 50 in 2022 to 70 by the end of year 2. This target was met ahead of schedule. Agreements were signed with an additional 30 households in Year 1, bringing the total number of households with formal agreements to 80 by the end of Year 1. However, in Year 2 of the project, households reported that they were facing difficulties meeting agreed crop yields. To address this issue, in Y2Q4, we collaborated with the Provincial Department of Agriculture to hold capacity building workshops with the community. Participating households from two villages joined workshops in Y2Q4, attended by 9 males and 8 females. In Y3Q4, further workshops were held with participants from four villages and crops selected based on local growing conditions as follows: Ban Tin Pha, cucumber, 10 females, 5 males; Ban Nong Tok, sweet potatoes, 11 females, 6 males; Ban Xieng Mouk, soy bean, 5 females, 11 males; and Ban Pa Nor, banana, 04 females, 12 males. For a total of 28 female and 25 male participants. Training was delivered by the IWT110 project partner: Mr Sanaphai KUNLAMANY, PAFO; Mr Soulivanh from crop plantation section from PAFO; and Mr Bualoy SINTHALATH From technical plantation section PAFO.

3.4 Number of local households deriving income from the production of handicrafts for sale at the sanctuary and associated locations/events increases from 12 in 2020 to 30 by the end of Year 2. We held one handicraft workshops in Year 2 of this project, with a total of 10 female beneficiaries from the 3 communities closest to the sanctuary. This is below the target due to prioritisation of crop growing workshops (3.3 above).

3.5 Number of local households assisted in transporting produce to market increases from 0 per month in 2021, to 16 per month by the end of year 1. Initially this target was challenging to monitor effectively. A

full-time dedicated driver was employed in June 2023 to provide more consistent service and better tracking of this indicator. From January 2024 to March 2025, an average of 58 individual households per month received assistance in transporting produce to market. See **Annex 5.6** Households Assisted with transport LPWS Jan 2024-Mar 2025.

3.6 Relative increase in socioeconomic conditions of participating communities from 2017 baseline, 2022 follow-up and 2025 endline household surveys. Household surveys were conducted with 397 individuals from the six participating communities during Year 1 of this project and 389 individuals in Year 3, Q4 of the project.

In Year 2 for the project, preliminary analysis was conducted in collaboration with social science experts from the Community Engagement Division of San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance. Preliminary results at the time were ambiguous in regard to the impact that the sanctuary has on the local communities.

Household status was improved by the receipt of income from the wildlife sanctuary, determined by using material assets as a proxy for household status. However, reliance on natural resources was unchanged based on receipt of benefit/income, except in that those who received benefits in the form of sale of produce were less likely to use wood as a main source of energy. We found mixed results on the influence of meeting participation on attitudes towards bear conservation.

Further preliminary analysis has been conducted in-house following completion of the endline surveys in year 3 of the project. In the surveys, levels of food insecurity were used as a proxy indicator of socio-economic status, reflecting households' access to sufficient and nutritious food. To assess the prevalence and severity of food insecurity at the household level, this survey employed the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES), developed by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) through the Voices of the Hungry project. The FIES is an experience-based metric that captures people's direct perceptions of constrained access to food due to limited resources. It consists of eight standardised questions that reflect a range of food insecurity experiences, from worrying about the ability to obtain food to going an entire day without eating. This approach enables the measurement of food insecurity on a continuum of severity and allows for internationally comparable estimates. Responses were analysed using the Rasch model, a statistical method that ensures the internal validity of the scale and supports the calculation of reliable prevalence rates at both moderate or severe, and severe levels of food insecurity.

Between 2023 and 2025, changes in the prevalence of food insecurity across the six surveyed villages reveal a mixed pattern. In 2023, the analysis was based on a sample of 349 households with complete responses, while in 2025, the final sample comprised 376 households. The overall prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity among individuals increased slightly from 30.14% ($\pm 7.7\%$) to 30.72% ($\pm 7.9\%$). Meanwhile, the prevalence of severe food insecurity declined marginally from 3.75% ($\pm 2.57\%$) to 2.03% ($\pm 2.1\%$). However, given the overlapping margins of error, these changes are not statistically significant and should be interpreted with caution.

Disaggregated by village, in Ban Long Lao 1 and Ban Long Lao 2, the proportion of individuals experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity rose from 38.93% to 52.47% and from 38.08% to 58.78%, respectively; though the margins of error (MoE) overlap, suggesting these increases should be interpreted with caution. Ban Nong Tok showed a modest increase from 34.60% to 39.80%, while Ban Tin Pha saw a slight decline from 41.56% to 36.86%. Ban Pa Nor remained relatively stable during this period, decreasing marginally from 17.05% to 16.20%. The most marked change occurred in Ban Xieng Mouak, where the prevalence of food insecurity dropped sharply from 17.22% to 4.44%; given the low MoE values, this appears to be a meaningful improvement. Overall, the results suggest increasing food insecurity in some villages, stability in others, and potential improvement in one, highlighting the need for localised responses and further investigation into underlying drivers. See **Annex 5.7** FIES Report 2023 & 2025.

More in-depth analysis of the full 2023 baseline and 2025 endline datasets with comparison to national statistics will take place in 2025 for a more nuanced understanding of short-term impact of the project on local socioeconomic conditions.

3.2 Outcome

Outcome: Improved capacity to enforce wildlife laws reduces the number of bears being traded and/or held illegally, and the care of confiscated animals provides opportunities for livelihood diversification in local communities.

Through on-site work placements with DOFI officers from throughout the country, Free the Bears has built not only capacity but a close network of law enforcement agents who appear to be more motivated to take action. Participants in the training expressed greater confidence in their abilities to confiscate live wild animals and several of the participants have demonstrated this in subsequent confiscations and transport of animals to rescue facilities such as Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary. See **Annex 5.2 Wildlife Care Course for Frontline First Responders**.

Percentage of reported bear trade cases resulting in confiscation/hand-over increases from <30% in 2020 to >50% by the end of year 2, and >60% by the end of Year 3.

As mentioned above, during this project (Jul 2022 to Mar 2025) there have been a total of 48 bears placed into care at Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary: 43 Asiatic black bears, 5 sun bears (LR112 – LR159). However, without knowing the number of bear trade cases or wildlife trade cases reported to government agencies we are unable to determine what proportion result in confiscation/handover.

0.1 Number of bears in bile farms in Laos decreases from ca. 100 in 2021, to 80 by end of year 2, and less than 50 by the end of year 3.

Throughout this project, Free the Bears has continually advocated for the closure of any facilities holding bears illegally in Laos (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). On 27 July 2024 Mr. Khamphone MOUNLAMAY, Director General of the Department of Forest, Mr. Vithayar KODPHITOUN Deputy, Director of the Department of Wildlife & Aquatic, and Mr. Humphar NITHAKONE, Deputy Director of Luang Prabang Provincial Department of Forest Inspection, 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 the Khao Liew bear farm in Vientiane Capital to discuss potential closure. This was the first established bear farm in Laos, predating the 2007 Wildlife & Aquatic Law. Following further advocacy in the subsequent month, finally, at the end of March 2025 the farm signed the three surviving bears over to the authorities and arrangements were made to transfer the bears to the sanctuary where they arrived on 2 April 2025 (LR160, LR161, LR162). This is the first bear bile farm to be closed down by the government of Laos, and is a major achievement for all involved.

During this project (Jul 2022 to Mar 2025) there have been a total of 48 bears placed into care at Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary: 43 Asiatic black bears, 5 sun bears (LR112 – LR159). In March 2024 sixteen live Asiatic black bear cubs were discovered in a property in the Laos capital of Vientiane, alongside the body of another cub that had already died. The cubs (LR112 – LR159) were transferred to Free the Bears' Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary, where the fifteen survivors continue to receive specialist care. It is believed the cubs were sourced from social media websites illegally trading wildlife and that the buyers intended to establish a new bear bile farm. Thus, this successful operation could be considered as shutting down a bear bile farm before it had the opportunity to become fully established, thus helping to prevent the growth of the bear bile farming industry in Laos.

At the time of reporting, in partnership with Laos government, Free the Bears has helped in the placement of 163 bears, the majority of which have been seized since 2017. This has effectively stemmed the flow of bear cubs into illegal bile farms (where captive breeding does not occur) and appears to have prevented growth of bear bile farming in Laos.

It is difficult to say how many bears remain in farms in Laos by the end of this project, since official reports are not readily available. Free the Bears will continue to discuss with the relevant government agencies and 15.7 Working Group partners to obtain the latest official numbers.

0.2 Number of households deriving at least the equivalent of minimum wage from the sanctuary increases from 59 in 2020, to at least 120 by the end of year 2, and 160 by the end of year 3.

In the final quarter of the project, there were 26 households (29 male individuals) receiving an average monthly payment of 4,227,791 LAK (~196 USD / ~145 GBP) for labour, approximately 70% higher than the current minimum wage of 2,500,000 LAK/month. During the same quarter, there were 28 households (31 individuals: 20 male, 11 female) receiving an average monthly payment of 215 USD/month for females, 230 USD/month for males, for full-time sanctuary staff recruited from the local communities. There are 10 other Lao individuals (male) from living elsewhere in Luang Prabang employed full-time at the sanctuary, with an average monthly salary of 507 USD. With one household overlapping labour and full-time, that's a total of 66 households earning more than minimum wage.

Additionally, in the final quarter of this project, 43 households from 4 local villages received an average of approximately 1,225,382 LAK per month for the sale of produce to Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary, as one of multiple household income streams. This is approximately 50% lower than the current minimum wage of 2,500,000 LAK per month. However, it should be noted that this period coincides with the tail-end of the dry season when production is typically at its lowest and, as noted in Output 3.3 above, additional training in crop production has been provided in order to improve yields.

3.3 Monitoring of assumptions

Assumption 0.1 International scrutiny from, for example CITES Standing Committee and the World Bank, is sufficient to ensure that national wildlife legislation pertaining to keeping bears is not weakened.

Comment: Scrutiny from CITES resulted in enactment of a complete trade suspension in November 2023. It appears that this has received some attention nationally with remedial measures resulting in partial easing of the trade ban in 2025. It remains to be seen if this sanction will positively impact implementation of national wildlife legislation in the long-term. As evidence of improved reporting, in January 2025 there are two cases that the GoL reported to CITES as examples of success with enforcement - Convictions: a) On 9 June 2024, three individuals were convicted for the illegal transport and trade of 52 pieces of elephant bones and a pair of tusks, receiving a sentence of six months' imprisonment and a fine of LAK 3,000,000 (approximately USD 135) each. Additionally, they were ordered to reimburse LAK 10,300,823 (approximately USD 465) to the State. The initial seizure occurred on 28 February 2022; b) On 16 April 2024, a case involving the illegal possession of a sun bear carcass and bear bile powder resulted in a conviction with a sentence of two years and six months' imprisonment and a fine of LAK 163,000,000 (approximately USD 7,335).

Further, in November 2024, Vientiane Capital Agriculture and Forestry Department issued a notification to the Managing Director of Xieu Fang International Trading Import and Export Co., Ltd, regarding the Termination of Business License and Temporary Closure for Bear Raising and Breeding for Scientific Research. This is a positive sign of strengthening wildlife law enforcement in Laos.

Assumption 0.2 Decentralised provincial authorities have the political will to enforce national wildlife legislation and confiscate illegally held bears, and are not impeded by COVID-related travel restriction.

Comment: Holding true. Evidenced by confiscations in, for example, Phongsaly Province in the far north. See **Annex 5.4** FTB LA Arrivals Report Jul22-Mar25. In 2024, Bolikhamxay Province pursued a case which resulted in the confiscation of two Asiatic black bears (LR156 & LR157), although it is not clear whether the case proceeded to prosecution or what, if any, penalties were imposed.

Assumption 0.3 Efforts from those working to improve wildlife law enforcement in Laos, e.g. World Bank, are sufficient to increase awareness among the judiciary as to the serious nature of wildlife crimes and prosecute as such.

Comment: As yet, remains to be seen. Few, if any, wildlife trade cases result in prosecutions at the moment. As highlighted by CITES Secretariat, 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.

Assumption 0.4 Free the Bears is successful in securing continual core funding through traditional and novel revenue streams in order to provide long-term care to confiscated wildlife, and thus a continued source of income and livelihoods for local communities.

Comment: Holding true.

Assumption 1.1 Required material and labour can be sourced locally and in a timely manner such that deadlines are met.

Comment: Holding true for materials and unskilled labour. It has been challenging to contract skilled welders. This however has not led to significant delays. Labour and material costs have increased throughout the project period due to increased demand from tourism infrastructure development in nearby Luang Prabang city. There were some challenges with sourcing suitable materials for transport crates and temporary holding pen materials; however, this was anticipated, funding for material was weighted to the first half of the FY and no significant delays were incurred.

Assumption 1.2 Construction of permanent sanctuary housing allows for smooth flow of rescued bears through temporary housing/Quarantine Station.

Comment: Funding has been secured and additional permanent housing has been continually added to the Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary throughout this project. Five bear houses have been built at Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary during this project period to accommodate the growing number of bears placed at the sanctuary. With six dens per house, each capable of housing 2 bears, these houses currently accommodate 57 rescued bears.

Assumption 2.1 National wildlife legislation pertaining to keeping bears is not weakened.

Comment: The revision of the national wildlife legislation has been completed with input from the 15.7 Working Group members. It is hoped that upcoming development of zoo licencing regulations in Laos will serve to strengthen laws pertaining to keeping bears and encourage the closure of potential loopholes and addressing potential gaps.

Assumption 2.2 Decentralised provincial authorities have the political will to enforce national wildlife legislation and confiscate illegally held bears.

Comment: Holding true in part, as evidenced by a record number of confiscated bears. However, online trade appears to be a persistent challenge that will require additional resources to address.

Assumption 3.1 The number of confiscated bears placed in the sanctuary increases, thus requiring increased labour and food supplies.

Comment: Holding true, as evidenced by the growing number of bears housed at Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary, and growing workforce. See: **Annex 5.8** FTB Welfare Audit for Bear Rescue Centres - LPWS April 2022; **Annex 5.9** FTB Welfare Audit for Bear Rescue Centres - LPWS April 2025.

Assumption 3.2 Free the Bears is successful in securing continual funding through the existing donor base and novel funding streams efforts in order to provide long-term care to confiscated wildlife, and thus a continued source of income and livelihoods for local communities.

Comment: Currently holding true as evident from internal accounts.

Assumption 3.3 Visitor numbers are sufficient to provide a market for locally made handicraft products.

Comment: Visitor numbers to Luang Prabang have recovered post-covid and are now surpassing previous numbers with 537,719 visitors in 2022, 1,029,698 in 2023, and 2,300,000 in 2024. These numbers are expected to be surpassed yet again in 2025, with 1,167,581 visitors to Luang Prabang in the first quarter of the year. However, Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary is open to a limited number of pre-booked tour and mass tourism has not reached the neighbouring villages. To avoid competing with the established handicraft market in Luang Prabang city, it was decided to utilize the traditional weaving skills of the local communities to produce animal enrichment items for animals in the sanctuary thereby ensuring a reliable source of demand locally.

3.4 Impact

Impact: Reduction in number of bears traded and held in bile farms in Laos, and demonstrable poverty reduction stemming from opportunities created through proper placement of confiscated wildlife.

During this project, a total of 48 bears have been removed from illegal circumstances and placed into care at Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary. This includes 16 bear cubs from a single facility in Vientiane that is suspected to have been a bear farm in the making. The cubs were extremely vulnerable, ranging from just a few weeks old and requiring round-the-clock feeds. Remarkably, only one cub succumbed to illness – a testament to the dedication and hard-work of the animal care team.

Undoubtedly, this IWT Challenge Fund project has contributed to tackling illegal wildlife trade in Laos. To date, Free the Bears – working in partnership with the Government of Laos – has rescued 163 bear that could have otherwise perpetuated the growth of the bear bile farming industry in Laos.

The first bear bile farm was established in Laos in 2000, in Vientiane Capital, predating the 2007 Wildlife & Aquatic Law. The number of bile farm bears peaked in ~ 2012 with a total of 120 bears. Since there is no evidence of breeding on so-called farms, it is suspected that all farms are founded and restocked with wild-caught bears. From 2003 to 2012, Free the Bears worked with the government of Laos to place 27 confiscated bears. From 2013 onwards, a further 136 bears were removed from illegal trade and placed into the care of Free the Bears - effectively stemming the flow of bears from the wild into farms. Government-owned sanctuaries managed by Free the Bears in Laos now house over 140 bears which would have otherwise remained in the illegal wildlife trade.

As mentioned above, by the end of this project, the Lao Government authorities had secured the closure of the longest-running bear farm in Laos, with the three remaining bears handed into the care of Free the Bears in early April 2025. This is the first bear bile farm to be closed down by the government of Laos and demonstrates what can be achieved with persistent and sustained effort.

Furthermore, the decision taken by Vientiane Capital Agriculture and Forestry Department to issue a notification to the Managing Director of Xieu Fang International Trading Import and Export Co., Ltd, regarding the Termination of Business License and Temporary Closure for Bear Raising and Breeding for Scientific Research is a positive sign of strengthening wildlife law enforcement in Laos.

Through this project, Free the Bears and partners can have higher-level impacts on illegal wildlife trade through advocacy and collaboration with stakeholders, particularly the 15.7 Working Group, as described in Section 2 above.

Although the human development and wellbeing impact of this project is difficult to measure at this stage, data has been collected from the participating communities with the view to determine the number of households that perceive receiving benefits from the sanctuary and measure impact in terms of material and subjective wellbeing. The project actively supports crop diversification by serving as a local demand for an array of produce.

With total project expenditure of ~2,675,000 USD within 20km of Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary (~95% of total project cost), the development and operation of the sanctuary makes a considerable contribution to the local economy. A considerable portion of this was for locally-grown produce and labour from communities within the immediate vicinity of the sanctuary, contributing greatly to local livelihoods.

Socioeconomic surveys were conducted in the six focal villages closest to Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary in 2023 (baseline) and 2025 (endline). In total, 395 and 398 households were surveyed. In-depth analysis for the full dataset will take place in 2025. Initial analysis of Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) as an experience-based measures of household food insecurity in our surveys yielded inconclusive results (see Output 3, above). For context, it is worth noting that the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on tourism numbers in Laos lasted into 2023, followed by a period of hyperinflation which unfoundedly impacted household incomes in the province. The results from the household will be compared to broader trends captured in the National Census in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of the project's short-term impact.

In the 2023 baseline and 2025 endline surveys, the portion of households from the surveyed communities reporting that they benefitted through direct employment and sale of goods or services, was 21% (85/394) and 20% (79/377), respectively. In quantifying such benefits, the aim is to demonstrate that sustainable wildlife tourism has the potential to contribute significantly to the development of the region. This will further encourage authorities to shut all bear farms and combat the unsustainable and disreputable illegal wildlife trade in Laos and the region. Importantly, operation of the sanctuary enables households to earn a living that is not reliant on unsustainable extraction of resources from the adjacent protected area, and it allows individuals to secure employment locally and maintain community and family ties – when the alternatives available may be of questionable legality, be it traveling domestically to work in Special Economic Zones, for example (see: [REDACTED]) or becoming migrant workers in Thailand or South Korea.

4. Contribution to IWT Challenge Fund Programme Objectives

4.1 Thematic focus

This project is focused on:

2. **Ensuring effective legal frameworks and deterrents**
3. **Strengthening law enforcement**

Developing adequate infrastructure for the placement of confiscated live animals empowers responsible agencies to enforce existing laws more effectively, serving as potent deterrents against the illegal wildlife trade. During this project, capacity building initiatives targeting wildlife law enforcement officers, coupled with high-level advocacy, were designed to bolster government support, and allocate resources necessary for the robust implementation of legal frameworks aimed at curbing illegal wildlife trade (IWT). Throughout the project duration, our staff facilitated the flow of information among partners, focusing specifically on the investigation and interdiction of live bear trade cases. This effort is critical in preventing the re-stocking of existing bear bile farms or the establishment of new operations.

Since the establishment of Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary in 2017, the number of bear confiscations and other wildlife trade interdictions has grown rapidly. As of December 2016, Free the Bears had supported Laos wildlife law enforcement with the placement of 43 Asiatic black bears (LR001 Kayasin – LR043 Boonchan) and 8 individual of macaques (LA001 Clyde to LA008 Gypsy), removed from illegal circumstances. But space was limited at the time until land was secured for development of the new sanctuary. Since then, between March 2017 and June 2025, Free the Bears has taken in a further 120 bears (LR044 – LR163) and 175 individuals of various other species (LA009 – LA183), and has enabled the closure of Laos' longest-running bear bile farm and prevented another from opening. It is clear that without appropriate facilities into which to place confiscated wildlife, law enforcement agencies would not have been able to enforce wildlife laws - without which there is little deterrent to engaging in illegal wildlife trade.

Through on-site work placements with DOFI officers from throughout the country, Free the Bears has built not only capacity but a close network of law enforcement agents who appear to be more motivated to take action. Participants in the training expressed greater confidence in their abilities to confiscate live wild animals and several of the participants have demonstrated this in subsequent confiscations and transport of animals to Free the Bears' Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary and to the Lao Conservation Trust for Wildlife. Examples of animals rescued with involvement of officers who had joined our DOFI training workshops include the following: June 2024 1x critically endangered crested gibbon from Attapeu (taken to LCTW), July 2024 LR151 and LR152 2x ABB rescued in Phongsaly province, Sept 2024 1x MSB LR153 Pakse province, Jan 2025 LA173 and LA174 2x leopard cat kittens (DOFI VTE working in Oudomxay province), Mar 2025 2x ABB LR156 and LR157 Bolikhamxay province, Apr 2025 3x ABB VTE bile farm, June 2025 1x ABB Bokeo province, June 2025 2x muntjac (taken to LCTW) Pakse province, June 2025 1x crested gibbon (to LCTW) Pakse province again.

4.2 Impact on species in focus

This project is focussed on Asiatic black bears (*Ursus thibetanus*) and sun bear (*Helarctos malayanus*), as well as other trade-threatened species such as Pangolin (*Manis sp*). During this project (July 2022 to March 2025) there have been a total of 48 bears placed into care at Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary: 43 Asiatic black bears, 5 sun bears (LR112 – LR159). Significantly, this has increased the population of resident sun bears from 3 females, 1 male before the project, to 6 females and 3 males by the end of the project. This growing resident population of sun bears and Asiatic black bears opens up possibilities for conservation-focused ex-situ research. See **Annex 5.10** Poster_Enhancing reproductive potential for ex situ sun bear, as an example of the type of research possible in collaboration with UK zoological institutions.

Closure of bile extraction facilities has an impact beyond to the lives of the individual bears rescued. Since there is no evidence of captive breeding at these facilities (see: Livingstone et al, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gecco.2018.e00380>), there is a high risk that they could be used to launder bear cubs taken from the wild, thereby perpetuating the illegal trade and contributing to overexploitation of the species.

In addition to bears, during the reporting period, the following 45 rescues were recorded: 9 leopard cats, 8 pig-tailed macaques, 7 Sunda pangolins, 4 impressed tortoises, 3 rhesus macaques, 2 stump-tailed macaques, 2 Assamese macaques, 2 Malayan porcupines, 2 crested gibbons, and 1 individual each of keeled box turtle, serow, elongated tortoise, Asian barred owlet, golden jackal, and Oldham's leaf turtle (LA134 – LA178). See **Annex 5.4** FTB LA Arrivals Report Jul22-Mar25.

Where possible, suitable animals are released to protected habitat in order to maintain space in the sanctuary for future rescues. Currently, seven Asiatic black bears that were confiscated since 2022, are housed in custom-built pre-release facilities at Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary as part of a pilot release programme intended to allow confiscated animals to be eventually released into protected forest where they can fulfil their ecological role, helping to maintain healthy forest ecosystems and providing an alternative to life-long care for bears rescued from IWT.

All arrivals, releases, deaths and transfers of animals are reported to and monitored by project partners, Luang Prabang Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office.

4.3 Project support for multidimensional poverty reduction

This project is focused on Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary, 17 km from Luang Prabang City, and the expected beneficiaries are the six villages closest to the sanctuary, which are all adjoining or within Protection Forest, have limited livelihood options and, as such, the sanctuary is an important and secure source of income and a resource for the communities. Development and operation of the Wildlife Sanctuary will benefit the local communities through direct and indirect livelihood opportunities and will demonstrate that sustainable wildlife tourism has the potential to contribute significantly to the development of the region. In total, during this project, 17% (~484,000 USD) and 95% (~2,675,000 USD) was expended within 10 km and 20km, respectively, of Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary. A considerable portion of this was for locally-grown produce and labour from communities within the immediate vicinity of the sanctuary, contributing greatly to the local economy.

In year 1 and year 3 of this project, five female members of the main project partners, Luang Prabang Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office, were trained to conduct robust interviews with members of households in the six focal communities. The aim of the research is to determine the number of households that perceive receiving benefits from the sanctuary and to determine the scale of the impact of this project in terms of material and subjective wellbeing, food insecurity, and awareness about the value of wildlife. Preliminary results of the household surveys are ambiguous regarding the impact that the sanctuary has on the local communities. Household status was improved by the receipt of income from the wildlife sanctuary, determined by using material assets as a proxy for household status. However, reliance on natural resources was unchanged based on receipt of benefit/income, except in that those who received benefits in the form of sale of produce were less likely to use wood as a main source of energy. We found mixed results on the influence of meeting participation on attitudes towards bear conservation. Free the Bears will collaborate with social science experts from the Community Engagement Division of long-term partners, San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance, to analyse the data to determine the impact of sanctuary development over this period and with the results published in an international peer-reviewed journal in order to strengthen the knowledge base related to this aspect of biodiversity conservation and how it contributes to poverty reduction.

The Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary is increasingly utilised as a training center to advance knowledge within Laos. In addition to the Wildlife Care Course for Frontline First Responders, during 2023, Free the Bears collaborated with the Elephant Conservation Center (ECC, Xayaboury) and Lao Conservation Trust for Wildlife (LCTW, Vientiane) to develop a 2-week long wildlife medicine module for veterinary students at the National University of Laos (NUoL). Students were divided into 3 groups with each group spending 3 days on-site at each of the three facilities (FTB, LCTW and ECC) on rotation, enabling them to experience first-hand the work of wildlife veterinarians through a mixture of lectures and practical exercises. This module - the first of its kind in Laos - was delivered from 27th March - 6th April 2023, with the Faculty staff spending one week with sanctuary staff in advance of the students arriving on-site in order to familiarize themselves with the topics to be covered. The course provided training for forty 6th year Veterinary students (16 female and 24 male). Students received technical and academic training in various subjects related to wildlife health, conservation, and animal welfare across a range of taxa found throughout Laos. Training was provided through a mixture of lectures and practical exercises taught at each sanctuary, with students spending 3 days at each location. The 2nd Wildlife Medicine module for

students from the Faculty of Veterinary Science took place in September 2024 with a total of 24 students (15 female and 9 male) immersing themselves in wildlife conservation issues across three sites (Free the Bears, Lao Conservation Trust for Wildlife and the Elephant Conservation Center) for almost two weeks.

A short video highlighting aspects of this first wildlife medicine module is available to watch on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1VI2m4D1oS8>

As mentioned in Output 3.3 above, Free the Bears collaborated with the Provincial Department of Agriculture to hold capacity building workshops with the community to improve crop production. Participating households from two villages joined workshops in Y2Q4, attended by 9 males and 8 females. In Y3Q4, further workshops were held with participants from four villages and crops selected based on local growing conditions.

As Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary becomes more established and as local capacity grows, opportunities arise for research and long-term conservation. Free the Bears has procured a -80degree freezer which will be used for biobanking samples - contributing to Laos' National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan 2025 – 2030 (in prep).

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, 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	

The Project Management Committee overseeing Free the Bears activities in Laos is comprised of various individuals from difference agencies such as: Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Ministry of Agriculture & Forestry; Department of Forestry Inspection, Luang Prabang Province Agriculture and Forestry Office, Department of Finance, etc. The Committee is currently chaired by the Vice Governor of Luang Prabang Province, Mrs Siliphone SUPHANTHONG.

Throughout this project, Free the Bears is cognizant of the need to consider the needs of at-risk individuals and marginalised groups. Free the Bears' workforce in Laos consists largely of ethnic minority individuals (Khamu and Hmong). Free the Bears is actively working towards improving gender balance within the team and, to date, has appoint one female team leader (and two male team leaders). When selecting communities members to participate in workshops, we strive for having at least 50% female participation, and discuss with community leaders to identify individuals most in need of benefitting from the project.

Currently 60 people are employed on the Laos Programme: twenty females and forty males. Two additional females form part of the team on assignments supported through the Australian Volunteers Program – Veterinary Support Officer (on a 1-year assignment until January 2026) and English Language Teacher (on a 3-month assignment June-September 2025). Three nationalities are represented (Lao, Malaysian and British – four if we include the Australian volunteers) with Lao staff comprising 58/60 (>96%) of the team (Lao staff are made up of three ethnic groups; Khamu, Hmong and

Lao loun). Among Lao staff we have three ethnic groups represented; Khmu 36/57 (63%), Hmong 12/57 (21%) and the national majority Lao Loum 9/57 (16%). Currently two expatriates work on the Laos programme – a fixed-term contract Consulting Veterinarian (Malaysian, starting July 2025) and a Technical Advisor (British).

Female staff currently make up 33% of the Laos programme staff, versus 67% male staff. This situation has remained steady over the past year, with the notable milestone of having more female keepers than males reached at the Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary over recent month. This marks the first time that any FTB-supported sanctuary has had a majority of female keepers.

The Free the Bears project board in the UK is 40% female and in Australia is 75% female. The Project Management Committee overseeing Free the Bears activities in Laos is currently chaired by the Vice Governor of Luang Prabang Province, Mrs Siliphone SUPHANTHONG. Project Partners, Luang Prabang PAFO of 163 staff (25% females), among which the Senior Management team of 97 people is ~20%.

As a global organization that works with partners and communities across a wide range of countries, Free the Bears values diversity and is committed to equality of opportunity. When hiring, Free the Bears welcomes applicants of traditionally underrepresented communities to apply regardless of ethnicity, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, national origin, socioeconomic status or disability to help us build an inclusive environment across all areas of our work.

5. Monitoring and evaluation

Annual monitoring and evaluation of this project is conducted by the Project Management Committee which is overseen by project partners, Luang Prabang Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office. PAFO representatives sit on the Project Management Committee (PMC) of Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary along with representatives from the Governor's Office, Department of Foreign Affairs, Department of Forestry Inspection and the Department of Planning and Cooperation. Free the Bears Laos Programme Manager regularly meets with representatives of the PMC to report on activities and prepare an MOU for the next phase of activities. See **Annex 5.1** PAFO Report of FTB 2024 and planning 2026.

The Project Lead is responsible for M&E of this project, with the assistance of Free the Bears Laos Programme Manager. However, greater human resources are needed to improve internal M&E systems. Progress towards delivering the outputs of this project is assessed on an ongoing basis during Free the Bears Laos Programme monthly meetings, and in monthly reports, as well as biannual internal Welfare Audits which details the percent occupancy of total housing capacity for each sanctuary.

Free the Bears maintains a secure Animal Records Database and Monthly Reports for each country programme which clearly details the size of the current animal population, including any arrivals, transfers and deaths. Department of Forestry Inspection are responsible for conducting annual audits of captive prohibition category wildlife. However, obtaining official numbers of bears kept in other facilities throughout Laos is not easily possible at regular intervals. Free the Bears will discuss this issue with project partners and other stakeholders to identify a solution.

At the outset of the project, new systems were introduced to track the proximity of expenditure to the sanctuary and surrounding communities. During Year 2 of this project, systems were put in place to better track payments to individuals benefiting directly from the sanctuary such that we can better monitor and evaluate this. Full-time employees now receive salary payments directly into their personal bank accounts. Tracking payments to individuals for labour and produce has been improved by recording family book numbers; however, there remain some challenges with this system. In the future, Free the Bears may introduce personal ID cards for individuals receiving regular payments in order to improve monitoring.

Risks to the delivery of the project were reviewed regularly using the risk register, with risks and mitigation measures updated and adapted as required. Annual and Half Year progress reports and a Final Project report complying with IWT CF requirements were submitted by Free the Bears for review. These reports provided robust reporting against the intended objectives and outputs indicators detailed in the logframe. A complete audit will be conducted after the final year of the project and submitted to IWTCF.

6. Lessons learnt

As mentioned above, tracking of all payments to each and every individual remains a challenge which could be helped by the introduction of individual IDs.

Training of wildlife law enforcement officers on-site at the Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary appears to have been a success at improving the understanding of officers, as well as in building stronger networks between law enforcement officers throughout Laos and Free the Bears Lao staff who are crucial to delivery of the training. Having on-site accommodation available (from Year 2) reduced costs and travel time for participants, allowing them to be fully immersed in the course.

As a small team with limited resources, a key challenge has been to track key indicators and to obtain key information that would improve M&E of the project, while going about the work of continually rescuing and caring for wildlife, and building permanent housing. In the future, for projects of this scale, Free the Bears could look to recruit a M&E officer to assist the project team with tracking key indicators. This individual could also work directly with project partners to improve monitoring and investigation of online wildlife trade.

In relation to M&E, in future projects, greater consideration could be given to SMART indicators from the outset, with specific consideration given to what information can be reliably sourced from external stakeholders.

This project sought to improve local livelihoods, in part by diversifying crops and producing handicrafts. The quantity of produce purchased from the local communities was limited not by lack of demand from the sanctuary but by low yields harvested. In the next phase of the project, Free the Bears will conduct a broad scoping exercise to identify alternative livelihood options that may be suitable, such as honey production or cricket farming, for example, based on local resources and capacity for delivering training and assistance to producers.

7. Actions taken in response to Annual Report reviews

Free the Bears and Luang Prabang Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office thank previous reviewers for their input in the project reporting and implementation. PAFO provided specific information requested by reviewers.

Previously the reviewer requested evidence to back up the M&E process. To address this, a copy of the final project documents 2022 – 2023, and project report 2024, which have been signed off by the Project Management Committee are attached as Annexes.

Due to the potential sensitivities around upcoming confiscations or ongoing investigations, it is not appropriate to share monthly meeting minutes as evidence to back up the M&E process.

Reviewer requested information on the gender split of the lead and partner organizations. This information is presented in section 4.4, above.

Gender balance of Project Partner leadership will be provided in the next half year report. Gender balance of Free the Bears Laos Programme is provided in section

The reviewer of the previous Annual Report for this project highlighted that the MEL could be improved for indicators 2.1, 2.2, 3.2, 3.4 and 3.5, pointing out that these indicators could be reviewed, as under Output two, there is a lack of data accessibility which makes it difficult to assess exact number of cases, thus an alternate measure should be used; and under Output three, the targets of many of these indicators seem to be slightly too ambitious for what the project can achieve in the given time. Regrettably, a change request reviewing these indicators was not submitted immediately following the review, as alternative suitable SMART indicators were not apparent, and consequently some indicators remain challenging to assess.

The previous reviewer requests that data be disaggregate by whether individuals supported by the project are indigenous/non-indigenous, where possible in addition to gender. The six target communities closest to the sanctuary consist mostly of the ethnic groups Hmong and Khmu, as opposed to the ethnic majority in Laos, the Lao Loum. Here we present on ethnicity when we have data available but participant/beneficiary ethnicity was not recorded as standard practice. This could be remedied in the future with the addition of a dedicated M&E Officer to Free the Bears Laos Programme team.

8. Risk Management

No immediate risks to the project have arisen in the past 12 months that were not previously accounted for. Therefore, no significant adaptations to the project have been required. See Annex 5.11. Risk-Framework-IWT110_Final Report 2025

An emerging challenge to the aim of ending commercial wildlife farming in Laos is that some facilities are now being registered legally as zoos. Free the Bears and other interested stakeholders will endeavour to ensure that new zoo licencing regulations that are being drafted will include provisions to limit the risk of these facilities operating in a way that could be considered less than best practice.

Future risks on the horizon could be those challenges presented by a rapidly changing tourism landscape, as well as the largely unregulated online wildlife trade.

9. Scalability and Durability

Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary is an important flagship project for both PAFO and Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, being Laos' first and only government-owned multi-species wildlife rescue facility. The sanctuary frequently hosts capacity building workshops and visits from high-ranking officials. Section 2, above, highlights some important stakeholder engagement during the project.

As noted by the CITES Secretariat in SC69 Doc.29.2.1 presented at the Sixty-ninth meeting of the Standing Committee of CITES, in reference to the work of Free the Bears in Laos, "this positive and constructive cooperation between the Government, an international NGO and the local communities provides a good example of how practical and implementable solutions could be envisaged to support the seizure and placement of live animals illegally held in captivity in the country."... "Wildlife as an environmental issue does not have much political traction in Lao PDR: Given the long list of priorities that the Government needs to deal with, wildlife appears to be a low priority. There is no return on investment for the Government. For this reason, any solution recommended should be at zero or very low cost for the Government, and accompanied by a pack of practical, easy-to-implement supporting measures. The approach used by the organization Free the Bears appears to be a good model that makes a difference on the ground."

Free the Bears continues efforts to attaining accreditation by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries for Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary which will further differentiate this model from commercial wildlife facilities in Laos and provided a platform with which to advocat for minimum standards legally required to house captive wildlife.

Tat Kuang Si Bear Rescue Centre, also managed by Free the Bears, typically welcomes now over 500,000 local and international visitors each year (in 2024, >700,000). This provides an important opportunity for raising awareness about the project and wildlife conservation issues.

In the final year of the project, Free the Bears hosted the Wild Animal Rescue Network conference in Luang Prabang. This was an important opportunity for wildlife rescue organisations in the region to meet and discuss emerging challenges and recent successes. During this conference and post-conference tour of Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary, Free the Bears highlighted the strong focus on combining wildlife law enforcement with sustainable community development.

Free the Bears is an active member of the 15.7 Working Group on illegal wildlife trade in Laos through which there is the opportunity to influence improvements to legislation and advocate for the closure of illegal bear bile farms.

IWT Challenge Fund funding has been integral to the success of Free the Bears in Laos over the past three years and has greatly contributed to Free the Bears ability to take in a record number of bears confiscated from illegal trade, including the single largest rescue of threatened bear cubs. The influence of this high-profile grant from the UK Government on the decision to ultimately close the longest-running bile farm in Laos cannot be known or quantified. Now that the IWT Challenge Fund funding for this project has come to an end, Free the Bears will continue to work with government partners in Laos to achieve its goal of ending illegal exploitation of bears. Staff and resources will continue to be employed, with funding from alternate sources. Free the Bears hopes to secure further funding from IWT Challenge Fund in the future to continue this important work. With the youngest bears in the sanctuary expected to

live for another 35-40 years, Free the Bears is committed to the long-term operation of the sanctuary and development of the local communities.

As per the project Exit Strategy, with bears living 30-40 years in captivity, provision of life-long care requires a long-term commitment that is currently beyond the technical and financial capacity of Lower Income Countries. Free the Bears has almost 25 years' experience supporting governments combat illegal bear trade issues in Cambodia (1997-present), India (2002-2019), Laos (2003-present) and Vietnam (2008-present). Throughout these programmes we have witnessed rapid initial growth in the population of confiscated or surrendered bears, requiring significant investment in building facilities and capacity. However, once the key issue has been addressed the population (and consequently level of investment) stabilises. In Laos we expect similar growth in the population and infrastructure. The proposed project will provide temporary holding to allow rapid confiscation of bears through Laos. Free the Bears commits to securing the additional funding required for permanent housing and long-term care of rescued bears. It is envisaged that high-end tourism will contribute to on-going running costs but international fundraising efforts are likely to remain integral. The Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary is the only government-owned rescue facility in Laos. The nature and scale of input required from Free the Bears will be reviewed on a regular basis until such time that financial and/or technical support is no longer required.

10. IWT Challenge Fund Identity

The IWT Challenge Fund was highlighted prominently throughout implementation of the project as a significant contributor to the larger programme of tackling illegal wildlife trade in Laos. Through this project, the contribution of the IWT Challenge Fund will be known among the 15.7 Working Group stakeholders consisting of in-country NGOs and government stakeholders.

At the launch of this project, Free the Bears worked with Defra's press office to provide content for the press release announcing this round's projects:

[Bears, chimpanzees and pangolins to be better protected after new funding boost for world's most endangered animals – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/bears-chimpanzees-and-pangolins-to-be-better-protected-after-new-funding-boost-for-worlds-most-endangered-animals)

The UK Government's contribution to this project has been recognised on local and social media as well as at public events such as screenings of the BBC's Bears About the House mini-series at the Luang Prabang Film Festival and a special event hosted by the UK Embassy in Vientiane during Year 1 of the project.

Free the Bears is active on Facebook with over 114,000 followers. The first bear rescue in 2023 was witnessed by the UK Ambassador to Laos. The Facebook post by Free the Bears updating followers on 17th January features the Ambassador, thanks IWTCF and tagged BCF. The video update shows the rescue vehicle purchased with this grant and displays the IWTCF logo prominently.

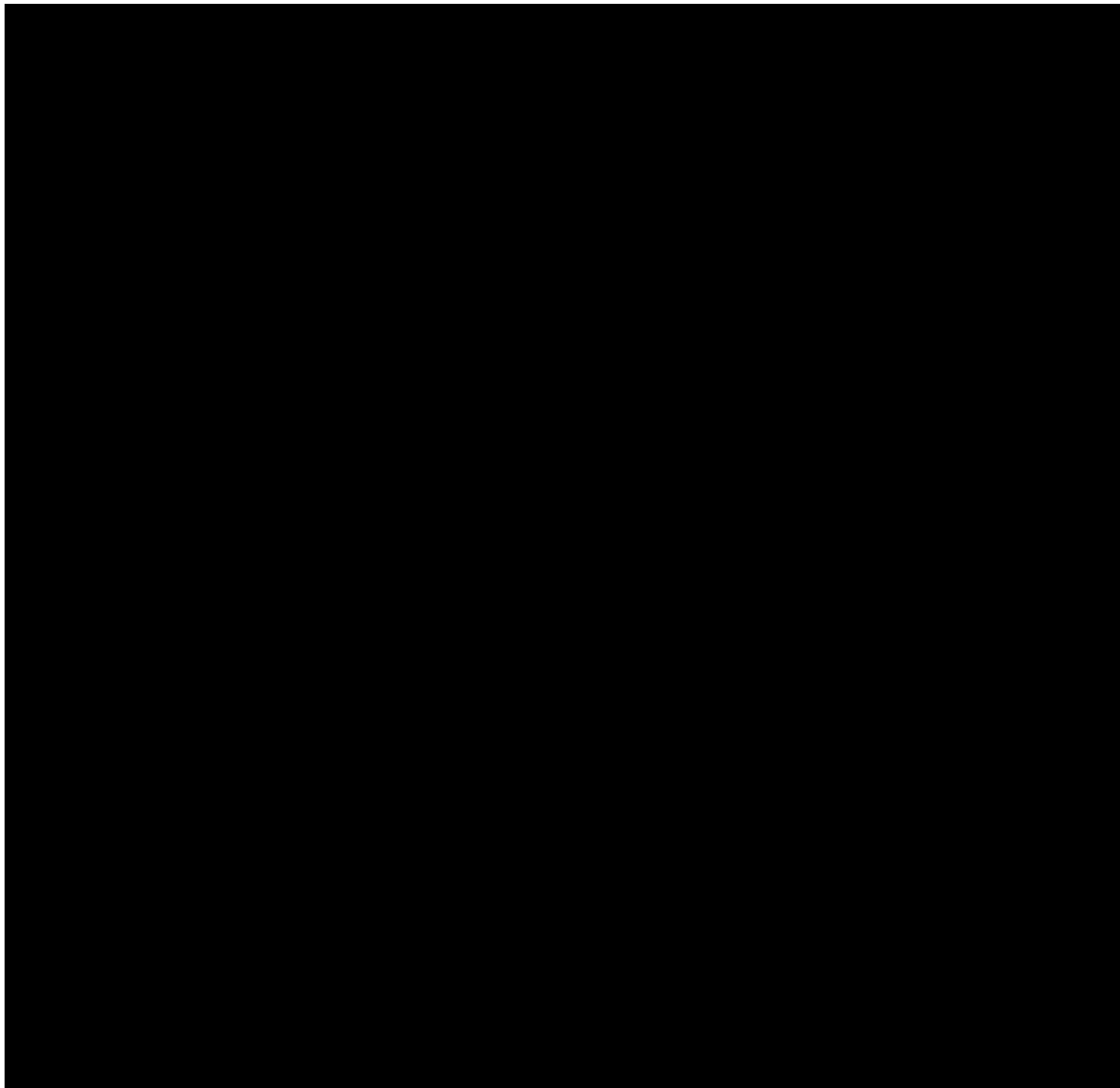
At the time of the rescue, Free the Bears coordinated with the communications office at the British Embassy in Vientiane to prepare a press release which was picked up by local news outlets: [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

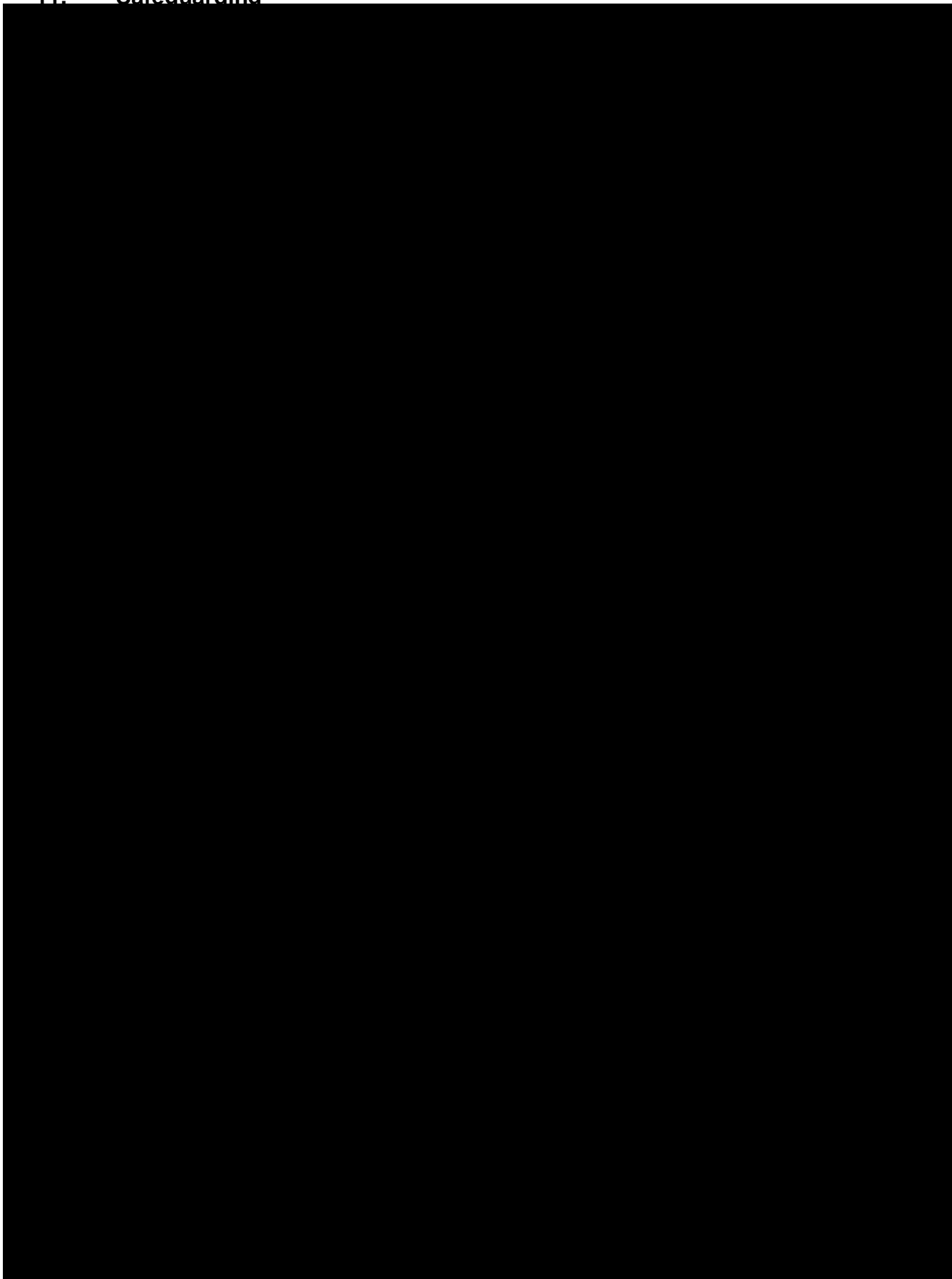
RESCUE UPDATE: SUCCESS! Our rescue team in Laos arrived to find 2 stressed orphaned moon bear cubs, a brother & sister, in tiny cages. We quickly reunited them in our larger transport crate & gave them food, water & browse to calm them. The rescue team made it safely back to the Cub Nursery of our #LuangPrabangWildlifeSanctuary last night as the sun was setting. The cubs are settling in well & this afternoon had their 1st explore of the Cub Nursery play area.

Special thanks to our Laos Government partners from the Provincial Agriculture & Forestry Office in Vientiane for facilitating yet another rescue. Special thanks also to the UK's Biodiversity Challenge Funds (the Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund) for the grant to support our work tackling the illegal wildlife trade - we were honoured to have British Ambassador John Pearson attend the official handover of the cubs.

IWT Challenge Fund/BCF was tagged on several social media posts about this project during this project, for example:



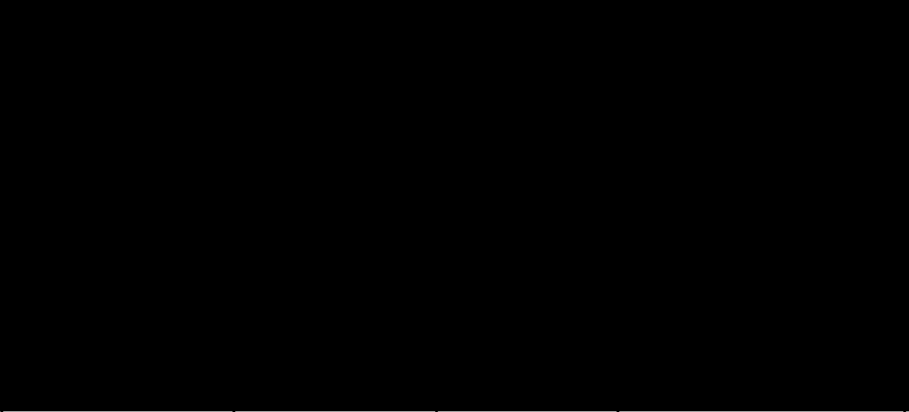
11. Safeguarding

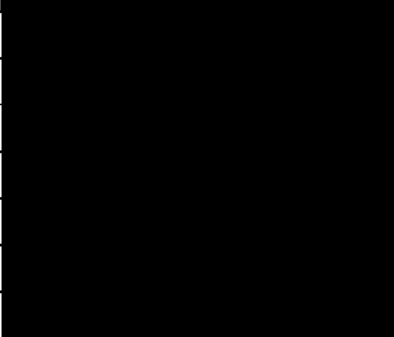


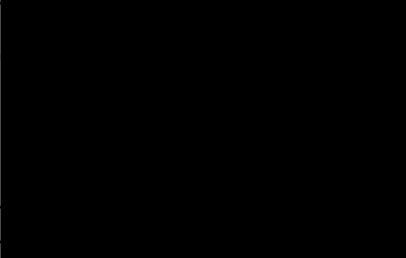


12. Finance and administration

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	131,013.00	127,158.28		

Staff employed (Name and position)	Cost (£)
Brian CRUDGE, Regional Director	
Sengaloun VONGSAY, Laos Programme Manager	
Fatong YANG, Animal Manager	
Luke BRANNON, Sanctuary Support Manager	
Mengxiong WANGNENGXIONG, Resident Vet	
Seeyang CHAYANG, Accountant	
Matt HUNT, CEO	
TOTAL	

Capital items – description	Capital items – cost (£)
Temporary Holding Pen materials, the only Capital Equipment charged to the project in the final year. Currently at LPWS under the management of Free the Bears in the government-owned facility.	
TOTAL	

Other items – description	Other items – cost (£)
Health check Medicine: supplies required by the vet team so conduct medical healthchecks of rescued wildlife at LPWS	
Animal Food - required to feed rescued wildlife at LPWS	
Temporary holding pen fabrication labour - Welding teams and labour	
TOTAL	

12.2 Additional funds or in-kind contributions secured

Matched funding leveraged by the partners to deliver the project	Total (£)
2022-23, Free the Bears donations and grants expended in Laos	
2023-24, Free the Bears donations and grants expended in Laos	
2024-25, Free the Bears donations and grants expended in Laos	
TOTAL	

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

12.3 Value for Money

This project aims to end bear bile farming in Laos, one of five bear bile farming nations worldwide, and halt illegal trafficking of bears. This represents value for money when weighed against the consequences and long-term cost of allowing the practice to continue. Bear bile farming in Southeast Asia has proven to be unsustainable, difficult to regulate, and completely reliant on continual restocking with bears captured illegally in the wild (Crudge et al., 2018; Livingstone et al., 2018). Bear bile farms represent a major threat to the conservation of bears: facilitating the laundering of bear bile and live bears; increasing ambiguity as to the origin of bear parts, and potentially increasing demand for wild bear parts. Bear farming is still in a relatively addressable stage in Laos, and at scale where bears in illegal farms can be transferred to official facilities within a realistic timeframe. History has shown that if bear bile farming is allowed to continue and grow, it may expand beyond a point where it is manageable, to the detriment of wild populations. For example, in Vietnam bear bile farming expanded rapidly, from ~500 bears in the mid-90's to a peak of ~4,300 bears ten years later, to the detriment of wild bear populations (Crudge et al., 2016; 2018). Since the introduction of legislation in 2006, the number of bears in farms has dropped to fewer than 200 currently. However, with just 350-400 bears placed in sanctuaries in Vietnam, the remaining almost 3,700 bears ultimately profited the illegal traders and perpetuated the trade.

The case can be further illustrated by the challenge of addressing commercial tiger farming in Southeast Asia. Several organisations have been seeking to address this ongoing issue for over a decade but with no sanctuaries currently available to take in a large number of tigers (if they were to be seized) there has been limited progress in terms of law enforcement or phasing out this controversial practice.

The CITES Standing Committee 69 document 29.2.1 stated that among the key findings, the CITES Secretariat highlighted the following with regards to Bear rescue centres (Article VIII, paragraphs 4 and 5 of the Convention); “The Secretariat visited two bear rescue centres operated by the non-governmental organization Free the Bears, which are located 30km south of the city of Luang Prabang. Involving local communities and creating an economic stimulus in the region via agro-development projects and eco-tourism, the two rescue centres offered a solution at zero cost for the Government of Lao PDR to close irregular bear farms and confiscate the specimens found in these farms. This positive and constructive cooperation between the Government, an international NGO and the local communities provides a good example of how practical and implementable solutions could be envisaged to support the seizure and placement of live animals illegally held in captivity in the country.”... “Wildlife as an environmental issue does not have much political traction in Lao PDR: Given the long list of priorities that the Government needs to deal with, wildlife appears to be a low priority. There is no return on investment for the Government. For this reason, any solution recommended should be at zero or very low cost for the Government, and accompanied by a pack of practical, easy-to-implement supporting measures. The approach used by the organization Free the Bears appears to be a good model that makes a difference on the ground. In order to get some political traction, the issue should be presented as a development and security matter and all intergovernmental organizations, NGOs, private sector and communities willing to support the Government should pull in the same direction.”

13. Other comments on progress not covered elsewhere

There has been an apparent increase in the volume of bears and other protected species being advertised for sale on social media within Laos. It is as yet unclear if this reflects an increase in hunting pressure or changes in trade mechanisms. In August 2024, Free the Bears arranged a week-long training workshop for select members of the team in order to begin monitoring this online trade more closely. During the DOFI officer training, participants also requested further assistance to tackle online trade. This will be a focus of future work.

The opening of a high-speed railway from China into Laos has rapidly increased the number of tourists to Luang Prabang (numbers of Chinese visitors to Laos increased from 45,259 in 2022 to 1,048,034 in 2024, with a further 36% increase in Chinese visitors during Q1 2025). It is apparent that a not insignificant portion of tourists are interested in the purchase of wildlife products in Laos and the potential profits on offer to illegal wildlife traffickers is going to be challenging to combat in the coming years.

**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).

Laos Moves Against Illegal Bear Trade with Landmark Rescues and First Bile Farm Closure

With support from the UK government through the Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund (IWTCF) awarded to the animal welfare and conservation organisation Free the Bears, Laos has taken bold steps to combat the illegal bear trade, with Free the Bears rescuing a record number of bear cubs in 2024 and, for the first time in its history, shutting down a bear bile farm in 2025. These milestones signal growing momentum in law enforcement and public engagement.

Since IWTCF began supporting Free the Bears in July 2022, the organisation has rescued 52 bears from illegal wildlife trade in Laos. In January 2023, then UK Ambassador to Laos and Deputy Head of Mission, Cashel Gleeson, witnessed the voluntary surrender of two Asiatic black bear cubs by a private owner in Vientiane. The event was widely shared on the “UK in Laos” Facebook page and promoted the Wildlife Crime Hotline to a national audience, reinforcing the UK’s role in supporting wildlife law enforcement.

In March 2024, Free the Bears, in partnership with the Environmental Police, coordinated what is believed to be the largest rescue of threatened bear cubs ever recorded. Following a public tip-off, 17 moon bear cubs were discovered in a Vientiane property. Sixteen cubs survived and were transferred to Free the Bears’ Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary, where they continue to receive specialist care.

A year later, in April 2025, Laos government officials from the Department of Forestry Inspection, in collaboration with wildlife conservation charity Free the Bears, closed down a bear bile farm in the Laos capital, Vientiane, liberating three moon bears from small cages where they had been kept to extract bile from their gall bladders for use in traditional medicines. This is the first bear bile farm to be closed down by the government of Laos.

Across Asia, an estimated 10,000 moon bears remain in illegal bile farms. But with strong local leadership, public reporting mechanisms, and sustained international partnership, Laos is now demonstrating real progress in protecting one of Asia’s most threatened species.

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)
Image	1. Laos Environmental Police officers confiscate 16 cubs and arrest 1 Laotian female, Vientiane, March 19, 2024.jpeg	Laos, Free the Bears	@freethebears	Yes
Image	2. Environmental Police with Free the Bears team, Vientiane, March 20, 2024.jpeg	Laos, Free the Bears	@freethebears	Yes
Image	3. 16 mouths to feed every 3 hours is a difficult job, Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary, Luang Prabang, March 21, 2024.jpeg	Laos, Free the Bears	@freethebears	Yes

Image	4. Free the Bears Animal Manager Lar Fatong preparing for the rescue (1).jpg	Laos, Free the Bears	@freethebears	Yes
Image	5. Free the Bears team prepare for the rescue (1).jpg	Laos, Free the Bears	@freethebears	Yes
Image	6. Free the Bears team preparing for transport to the Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary (1).jpg	Laos, Free the Bears	@freethebears	Yes
Image	7. Free the Bears team dismantling and removing cages from bile farm.png	Laos, Free the Bears	@freethebears	Yes
Image	8. Feeding time at Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary, Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary, Luang Prabang, March 21, 2024.jpeg	Laos, Free the Bears	@freethebears	Yes
Image	9. Free the Bears team dismantling and removing cages from bile farm.png	Laos, Free the Bears	@freethebears	Yes
Image	10. First touch of grass after rescue, Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary, Luang Prabang, March 21, 2024 (1).jpeg	Laos, Free the Bears	@freethebears	Yes
Image	11. Rescued, safe and able to enjoy play again, Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary, Luang Prabang, March 21, 2024 (1).jpeg	Laos, Free the Bears	@freethebears	Yes
Image	12. Wildlife Law Enforcement First Responders training, group 6, at Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary, Laos.jpeg	Laos, Free the Bears	@freethebears	Yes
Image	13. Official handover of Vientiane bile farm bears.jpg	Laos, Free the Bears	@freethebears	Yes

Annex 1 Report of progress and achievements against logframe for the life of the project

Project summary	Progress and achievements
<p>Impact</p> <p>Reduction in number of bears traded and held in bile farms in Laos, and demonstrable poverty reduction stemming from opportunities created through proper placement of confiscated wildlife.</p>	<p>The first bear bile farm was established in Laos in 2000. The number of bile farm bears peaked in ~ 2012 with a total of 120 bears. Since there is no evidence of breeding on so-called farms, it is suspected that all farms are founded and restocked with wild-caught bears. Since the establishment of Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary in 2017, Free the Bears have worked with the government of Laos to place 120 bears (LR044 – LR163) - effectively stemming the flow of bears from the wild into farms - and has enabled the closure of Laos' longest-running bear bile farm and prevented another from opening. While official numbers for bears on bile farms are difficult to obtain, government-owned sanctuaries managed by Free the Bears now house over 140 bears which would have otherwise remained in the illegal wildlife trade network.</p> <p>Through this project, Free the Bears and partners can have higher-level impacts on illegal wildlife trade through advocacy and collaboration with stakeholders, as described in Section 2 above.</p> <p>Although further analysis of collected data will be required to determine the impact of this project on human development and wellbeing, data has been collected from the participating communities with the view to determine the number of households that perceive receiving benefits from the sanctuary and measure impact in terms of material and subjective wellbeing. The project actively supports crop diversification by serving as a local demand for an array of produce.</p> <p>With expenditure of 17% (~484,000 USD) and 95% (~2,675,000 USD) over the life of this project within 10 km and 20km, respectively, of Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary, the development and operation of the sanctuary makes a considerable contribution to the local economy. Community members benefit through direct employment and sale of goods or services. The aim is to demonstrate that sustainable wildlife tourism has the potential to contribute significantly to the development of the region in order to further encourage authorities to shut all bear farms and combat the unsustainable and disreputable illegal wildlife trade in Laos and the region.</p>
<p>Outcome</p> <p>Improved capacity to enforce wildlife laws reduces the number of bears being traded and/or held illegally, and the care of confiscated animals provides opportunities for livelihood diversification in local communities.</p>	<p>Through on-site work placements with DOFI officers from throughout the country, Free the Bears has built not only capacity but a close network of law enforcement agents who appear to be more motivated to take action. Participants in the training expressed greater confidence in their abilities to confiscate live wild animals and several of the participants have demonstrated this in subsequent confiscations and transport of animals to rescue facilities such as Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary.</p>

	See Annex 5.2 Wildlife Care Course for Frontline First Responders Training Report
Outcome indicator 0.1 Percentage of reported bear trade cases resulting in confiscation/hand-over increases from <30% in 2020 to >50% by the end of year 2, and >60% by the end of Year 3.	During this project (Jul 2022 to Mar 2025) there have been a total of 48 bears placed into care at Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary: 43 Asiatic black bears, 5 sun bears (LR112 – LR159). However, without knowing the number of bear trade cases or wildlife trade cases reported to government agencies we are unable to determine what proportion result in confiscation/handover.
Outcome indicator 0.2 Number of bears in bile farms in Laos decreases from ca. 100 in 2021, to 80 by end of year 2, and less than 50 by the end of year 3.	Following continued advocacy throughout this project, the Director General of DOF instructed staff from the Department of Wildlife Inspection to visit the Khao Liew bear farm in Vientiane Capital to discuss potential closure. This was the first established bear farm in Laos, predating the 2007 Wildlife & Aquatic Law. Following further advocacy in the subsequent month, finally, at the of March 2025 the farm signed the three surviving bears over to the authorities and arrangements were made to transfer the bears to the sanctuary where they arrived on 2 April 2025 (LR160, LR161, LR162). This is the first bear bile farm to be closed down by the government of Laos, and is a major achievement for all involved.
Outcome indicator 0.3 Number of households deriving at least the equivalent of minimum wage from the sanctuary increases from 59 in 2020, to at least 120 by the end of year 2, and 160 by the end of year 3.	By the end of year 3, a total of 66 households earning more than minimum wage through direct employment at the sanctuary as full-time staff or day labourers. Additionally, in the final quarter of this project, 43 households from 4 local villages received an average of approximately 1,225,382 LAK per month for the sale of produce to Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary, as one of multiple household income streams. This is approximately 50% lower than the current minimum wage of 2,500,000 LAK per month. Additional members of the community and surrounding area receive income from the sale of goods or services; however, it was a challenge to capture all payments to each individual.
Output 1 Increased capacity to house confiscated bears at the Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary.	
Output indicator 1.1 300% increase in capacity to provide immediate short-term housing for confiscated bears, from 10 adult bears in 2021, to 30 by end of year 2, and to 40 by the end of year 3.	As of completion of this project (Y3Q4), 26 temporary holding pens have been erected, bringing immediate capacity to at least 36 adult bears. 22 additional panels for 5 more temporary holding pens are available to bring total potential capacity for new rescues to 41 by the end of the project, representing a 310% increase.
Output indicator 1.2 Increase animal keeper staff from 9 male, 3 female in 2020, to 9 male, 4 females by Y1Q4, 9 male, 5 females by Y2Q4, and 10 male, 6 females by Y3Q4.	Targets have been surpassed, with 4 keepers hired in Year 1 of the project and five in Year 2. Gender balance of animal keepers is improving, with 14 males and 9 females at Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary as of Y3Q4 (from 25% female animal keeper staff in 2020 to almost 40% currently).
Output 2. Increase in confiscation rates for bears and other protected wildlife throughout Laos.	
Output indicator 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.	During this project reporting period (July 2022 to March 2025) there have been a total of 48 bears placed into care at Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary: 43 Asiatic black bears, 5 sun bears (LR112 – LR159). However, at this stage, without knowing the number of bear trade cases or wildlife trade cases reported to

	government agencies we are unable to determine what proportion result in confiscation/handover.
Output indicator 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.	During this project reporting period (July 2022 to March 2025) there have been a total of 45 individuals (LA134 – LA178) of other species placed at the sanctuary, including 7 Sunda pangolins. However, at this stage, without knowing the number of bear trade cases or wildlife trade cases reported to government agencies we are unable to determine what proportion result in confiscation/handover.
Output indicator 2.3 Bear-safe transportation crates distributed to 6 of 18 provinces/prefecture by Y1Q4.	By the end of the project, a total of 18 large transport crates (for adult bears), 22 custom-made pangolin rescue boxes (suitable for short-term holding and transportation of confiscated pangolins), and 21 capture nets had been delivered to 17 of 18 provinces/municipalities in Laos.
Output 3. Reduce poverty in local communities adjacent to Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary.	
Output indicator 3.1 At least 50% of project annual budget expended within 10km of the sanctuary, and at least 80% with 20km.	During this project, 17% (~484,000 USD) and 95% (~2,675,000 USD) was expended within 10 km and 20km, respectively, of Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary.
Output indicator 3.2 Number of full-time employment opportunities for local community members receiving payment for labour increases from 31 (85% male) in 2022 to 40 (80% male) by the end of Year 2.	In the final quarter of this project, 29 community members (100% male) were receiving an average monthly payment of approximately 70% higher than the current minimum wage. During the final quarter of the project all local labour were men, due to the nature of the work at the time and the traditional division of labour. However, at other times most of the labour employed are female, for example when undergrowth is being cleared to promote growth of trees.
Output indicator 3.3 Number of local households with contracts to grow produce (fruit, veg, rice) for the sanctuary increases from 50 in 2022 to 70 by the end of year 2.	This target was met ahead of schedule. Agreements were signed with an additional 30 households in Year 1, bringing the total number of households with formal agreements to 80 by the end of Year 1. Training was provided by project partners in Years 2 & 3 to help community members to increase yields.
Output indicator 3.4 Number of local households deriving income from the production of handicrafts for sale at the sanctuary and associated locations/events increases from 12 in 2020 to 30 by the end of Year 2.	We held one handicraft workshops in Year 2 of this project, with a total of 10 female beneficiaries from the 3 communities closest to the sanctuary. This is below the target due to prioritisation of crop growing workshops (3.3 above).
Output indicator 3.5 Number of local households assisted in transporting produce to market increases from 0 per month in 2021, to 16 per month by the end of year 1.	By the end of this project, an average of 58 individual households per month received assistance in transporting produce to market. See Annex 5.6 Households Assisted with transport LPWS Jan 2024 -Mar 2025.
Output indicator 3.6 Relative increase in socioeconomic conditions of participating communities from 2017 baseline, 2022 follow-up and 2025 endline household surveys.	Household surveys were conducted with 397 individuals from the six participating communities during Year 1 of this project and 389 individuals in Year 3, Q4 of the project. Preliminary results are inconclusive. However, further analysis and comparison to national statistics will take place for a nuanced understanding of the local context.

Annex 2 Project's full current logframe as presented in the application form (unless changes have been agreed)

Project Summary	SMART Indicators	Means of Verification	Important Assumptions
Impact: Reduction in number of bears traded and held in bile farms in Laos, and demonstrable poverty reduction stemming from opportunities created through proper placement of confiscated wildlife.			
Outcome: Improved capacity to enforce wildlife laws reduces the number of bears being traded and/or held illegally, and the care of confiscated animals provides opportunities for livelihood diversification in local communities.	0.1 Percentage of reported bear trade cases resulting in confiscation/hand-over increases from <30% in 2020 to >50% by the end of year 2, and >60% by the end of Year 3. 0.2 Number of bears in bile farms in Laos decreases from ca. 100 in 2021, to 80 by end of year 2, and less than 50 by the end of year 3. 0.3 Number of households deriving at least the equivalent of minimum wage from the sanctuary increases from 59 in 2020, to at least 120 by the end of year 2, and 160 by the end of year 3.	0.1 Department of Forestry Inspection records and Free the Bears internal annual records of reported cases and their outcome. 0.2 Department of Forestry Inspection annual bear farm inventories, as mandated in the Lao Wildlife and Aquatic Law. 0.3 Free the Bears internal accounts	0.1 International scrutiny from, for example CITES Standing Committee and the World Bank, is sufficient to ensure that national wildlife legislation pertaining to keeping bears is not weakened. 0.2 Decentralised provincial authorities have the political will to enforce national wildlife legislation and confiscate illegally held bears, and are not impeded by COVID-related travel restriction. 0.3 Efforts from those working to improve wildlife law enforcement in Laos, e.g. World Bank, are sufficient to increase awareness among the judiciary as to the serious nature of wildlife crimes and prosecute as such. 0.4 Free the Bears is successful in securing continual core funding through traditional and novel revenue streams in order to provide long-term care to confiscated wildlife, and thus a continued source of income and livelihoods for local communities.
Outputs: 1. Increased capacity to house confiscated bears at the Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary.	1.1 300% increase in capacity to provide immediate short-term housing for confiscated bears, from 10 adult bears in 2021, to 30 by end of year 2, and to 40 by the end of year 3.	1.1 Actual number of spaces available to house bears, as documented in Free the Bears biannual Welfare Audits and monthly husbandry reports.	1.1 Required material and labour can be sourced locally and in a timely manner such that deadlines are met.

	1.2 Increase animal keeper staff from 9 male, 3 female in 2020, to 9 male, 4 females by Y1Q4, 9 male, 5 females by Y2Q4, and 10 male, 6 females by Y3Q4.	1.2 Free the Bears HR records detailing employment period and sex-disaggregated data.	1.2 Construction of permanent sanctuary housing allows for smooth flow of rescued bears through temporary housing/Quarantine Station.
2. Increase in confiscation rates for bears and other protected wildlife throughout Laos.	<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>2.3 Bear-safe transportation crates distributed to 6 of 18 provinces/prefecture by Y1Q4.</p>	<p>2.1 Free the Bears internal reports and official government records form Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of reported cases and their outcomes.</p> <p>2.2 Free the Bears internal reports and official government records form Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of reported cases and their outcomes.</p> <p>2.3 Free the Bears internal reports and signed handover documents.</p>	<p>2.1 National wildlife legislation pertaining to keeping bears is not weakened.</p> <p>2.2 Decentralised provincial authorities have the political will to enforce national wildlife legislation and confiscate illegally held bears.</p>
3. Reduce poverty in local communities adjacent to Luang Prabang Wildlife Sanctuary.	<p>3.1 At least 50% of project annual budget expended within 10km of the sanctuary, and at least 80% with 20km.</p> <p>3.2 Number of full-time employment opportunities for local community members receiving payment for labour increases from 31 (85% male) in 2022 to 40 (80% male) by the end of Year 2.</p> <p>3.3 Number of local households with contracts to grow produce (fruit, veg, rice) for the sanctuary increases from 50 in 2022 to 70 by the end of year 2.</p>	<p>3.1 Free the Bears internal accounting and records.</p> <p>3.2 Free the Bears internal HR records and employment contracts, including details of contract period and sex disaggregated data.</p> <p>3.3 Signed contracts between Free the Bears and farmers, and hard records of payment in monthly accounts.</p> <p>3.4 Signed agreements between Free the Bears and craftspeople, sales records and revenue-sharing programme data.</p>	<p>3.1 The number of confiscated bears placed in the sanctuary increases, thus requiring increased labour and food supplies.</p> <p>3.2 Free the Bears is successful in securing continual funding through the existing donor base and novel funding streams efforts in order to provide long-term care to confiscated wildlife, and thus a continued source of income and livelihoods for local communities.</p> <p>3.3 Visitor numbers are sufficient to provide a market for locally made handicraft products.</p>

	<p>3.4 Number of local households deriving income from the production of handicrafts for sale at the sanctuary and associated locations/events increases from 12 in 2020 to 30 by the end of Year 2.</p> <p>3.5 Number of local households assisted in transporting produce to market increases from 0 per month in 2021, to 16 per month by the end of year 1.</p> <p>3.6 Relative increase in socioeconomic conditions of participating communities from 2017 baseline, 2022 follow-up and 2025 endline household surveys..</p>	<p>3.5 Free the Bears Vehicle travel log records detailing assistance provided to specified households in each village.</p> <p>3.6 Baseline data from 2017, National Census statistics from 2015 and 2020, follow-up socioeconomic survey data in 2022, and endline survey data collected in 2025.</p>	
<p>Activities (each activity is numbered according to the output that it will contribute towards, for example 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 are contributing to Output 1)</p> <p>1.1 Design of temporary modular holding pens, by Y1Q3.</p> <p>1.2 Fabrication of temporary holding pens, +5 by Y1Q4, +15 by Y2Q4, +10 by Y3Q4.</p> <p>1.3 Animal keeper recruitment and training, +2 by Y1Q4, +2 by Y2Q4, +2Y3Q4</p> <p>2.1 Procurement of dedicated rescue vehicle by Y1Q2</p> <p>2.2 Build capacity of government agencies in short-term handling and care of wildlife, through month-long on-site training of at least 20 officers in Y2 and Y3.</p> <p>2.3 Fabricate bear-safe transportation crates and distribute to 6 of 18 provinces by Y1Q4.</p> <p>2.4 Assist government agencies in the transportation and placement of confiscated of bears and other protected species, throughout Y1Q2 – Y3Q4</p> <p>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</p> <p>3.1 Recruit members of the local communities as labour, 40 by Y2Q4</p> <p>3.2 Sign agreements with households to grow produce (fruit, veg, rice) for the sanctuary, +30 by Y1Q4, +20 by Y2Q4</p> <p>3.3 Handicraft workshops, twice per year, attended by at least 15 households from the local communities, with at least 50% female participants.</p> <p>3.4 Agreements made with 4 villages to assist in transporting produce to market, by Y1Q2.</p> <p>3.5 Conduct follow-up and endline socioeconomic surveys in 300 households by Y1Q2 and Y3Q3, respectively.</p>			

Annex 3 Standard Indicators

Table 1 Project Standard Indicators

Please see the Standard Indicator Guidance for more information on how to report in this section, including appropriate disaggregation. N.B. The annual total is not cumulative. For each year, only include the results achieved in that year. The total achieved should be the sum of the annual totals.

IWTCF Indicator number	Name of indicator	If this links directly to a project indicator(s), please note the indicator number here	Units	Disaggregation	Year 1 Total	Year 2 Total	Year 3 Total	Total achieved	Total planned
IWTCF-B13	0.1 Number of reported bear trade cases resulting in confiscation/hand-over increases from 06 in 2020 to 12 by the end of year 2, and 20 by the end of Year 3.		Number	Species	7 Asiatic black bears; and 1 sun bear	26 Asiatic black bears, 0 sun bears	20 Asiatic black bears, 4 sun bears	58	60
IWTCF-B09	0.2 Number of bears in bile farms in Laos decreases from ca. 100 in 2021, to 80 by end of year 2, and less than 50 by the end of year 3.		Number	Estimated number of Individuals; Illegal facility	87	80			
IWTCF-AI3	0.3 Number of households deriving at least the equivalent of minimum wage from the sanctuary increases from 59 in 2020, to at least 120 by the end of year 2, and 160 by the end of year 3.		People	Gender	0	70	66	66	120
IWTCF-A02	1.2 Increase animal keeper staff from 9 male, 3 female in 2020, to 9 male, 4 females by Y1Q4, 9 male, 5 females by Y2Q4, and 10 male, 6 females by Y3Q4.		People	Gender	10 males: 5 females	1 males and 2 females	1 males, 2 females	14 males, 9 females	10 males, 6 females
IWTCF-B13	0.1 Number of reported bear trade cases resulting in confiscation/hand-over		Number	Species	7 Asiatic black bears;	26 Asiatic black bears, 0 sun bears	20 Asiatic black bears, 4 sun bears	58	60

IWTCF Indicator number	Name of indicator	If this links directly to a project indicator(s), please note the indicator number here	Units	Disaggregation	Year 1 Total	Year 2 Total	Year 3 Total	Total achieved	Total planned
	increases from 06 in 2020 to 12 by the end of year 2, and 20 by the end of Year 3.				and 1 sun bear				
IWTCF-B13	0.1 Number of reported wildlife trade cases resulting in confiscation/hand-over increases from 06 in 2020 to 12 by the end of year 2, and 20 by the end of Year 3.		Number	Species	Ten individual	Eight individual	27 individual	45 individuals of 15 species	
IWTCF-D03	2.3 At least 20 local wildlife law enforcement agencies have improved capability and capacity as a result of training and provision of equipment.		Number of local organisations	Gender of trainees; By agency and province	0	12 female, 29 male	6 female, 18 male	18 female, 47 male = 65	20 female, 20 male
IWTCF-A03	3.3 Number of cooperatives established to grow produce for the sanctuary increase from 8 in 2022 to 13 by end of Year 1, and 17 by end of Year 2.		Number of cooperatives	Household; Produce type; Village	80 Households; 5 villages; 9 types of produce; 5 villages	0	0	80 Households; 5 villages; 9 types of produce; 5 villages	17 households
IWTCF-A01	3.4 Number of local households that receive training in handicraft production for sale at the sanctuary and associated locations/events increases from 12 in 2020 to 30 by the end of Year 2.		People	Gender of trainee	3 male, 32 female	10 females, 0 males	0	3 males, 42 females	30
IWTCF-A15	3.7 Relative decrease in unsustainable practices in participating communities from 2017 baseline, 2022 follow-up and 2025 endline household surveys.		Percentage	Households; Type of livelihood,	0	n/a			TBD

IWTCF Indicator number	Name of indicator	If this links directly to a project indicator(s), please note the indicator number here	Units	Disaggregation	Year 1 Total	Year 2 Total	Year 3 Total	Total achieved	Total planned

Table 2 Publications

Title	Type (e.g. journals, manual, CDs)	Detail (authors, year)	Gender of Lead Author	Nationality of Lead Author	Publishers (name, city)	Available from (e.g. weblink or publisher if not available online)
Strengthening Wildlife Protection in Laos	Online video	Free the Bears, 2024	Male	Belgium	YouTube	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hoNvZrlelgo
Liberation Day for 3 Moon Bears, First Ever Bile Farm Closure in Laos	Online video	Free the Bears, 2025	Male	Australian	YouTube	https://youtu.be/GypX4PeQuWw?si=3SEWWT4vz99E6NAB
Bears' Print 30th Anniversary Edition May 2025	Newsletter	Free the Bears, 2025	Male	Australian	Free the Bears	https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0015/8135/0959/files/Bears_Print_May_2025_L.pdf?v=1747884729

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?	X
Is the report less than 10MB? If so, please email to BCF-Reports@niras.com putting the project number in the Subject line.	X
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.	
If you are submitting photos for publicity purposes, do these meet the outlined requirements (see section 14)?	X
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.	X
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.	X
Have you involved your partners in preparation of the report and named the main contributors?	X
Have you completed the Project Expenditure table fully?	X
Do not include claim forms or other communications with this report.	