



**BIODIVERSITY
CHALLENGE FUNDS**



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

Half Year Report

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

If there is any confidential information within the report that you do not wish to be shared on our website, please ensure you clearly highlight this.

Submission Deadline: 31st October 2024

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

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

Project reference	IWT119
Project title	Reduced illegal wildlife trade and strengthened rural communities
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	Cambodia, Laos
Lead Organisation	Rising Phoenix Co. Ltd.
Partner(s)	Stung Treng Provincial Authority (STPA), Ad-hoc Committee for IBIS Rice and Siem Pang PATROL. Siem Pang District Administration (SPDA), Siem Pang PATROL Operational Working Group. Border Liaison Office Stung Treng Department of Environment
Project leader	Jonathan C Eames OBE
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	01 April 2024 – 30 September 2024 HYR3
Project website/blog/social media	N/A

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

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

Output 1: Expansion of IBIS Rice Programme at villages surrounding Siem Pang Wildlife Sanctuary, increasing household income.

Report on activities under Output 1 over the last six months include:

1.1 Expand the IBIS Rice scheme and sell the IBIS Rice at a minimum 10% premium price

This target has been achieved and exceeded. We now have 1,234 households, representing 6,170 rural people, growing IBIS Rice. Compared to the 2021 baseline, an additional 552 households, accounting for 2,760 rural people, joined the scheme in 2024.

From April to September 2024, the IBIS Rice expanded to four new villages in Siem Pang District, with an additional 83 households representing 415 rural people.

IBIS Rice is harvested in November and sold in December. Therefore, data on the 10% premium of price will be documented in the next annual report.

1.2 Capacity building to Village Marketing Network committees (VMN) to become Village Agents

The village marketing network system has been replaced by IBIS Rice producer groups (PGs) who will be village agents for the product. These cooperative groups, consisting of IBIS Rice-producing households, aim to promote self-reliance and economic independence.

With support from the USAID Morodok Baitang (UMB) project team, we established four IBIS Rice Producer Groups in February, March, and May 2024. The specific aims of these groups include:

1. Establishing IBIS Rice producer groups as legal entities to obtain product standard certification and secure ongoing financial support.
2. Improving the technical capacity of members to increase rice yield and quality.
3. Building partnerships with market actors to enhance sales coordination and with donors to mobilize technical and financial support.
4. Ensuring all members comply with wildlife-friendly and organic standards.
5. Strengthening the group's financial status through support from development organizations and the private sector.
6. Serving as a hub for sharing information and lessons learned among members.

From April to July 2024, 56 Producer Group committee members from 19 villages received refresher training on keeping a farm diary, sales agreements, farmer contracts, and the internal control system (ICS). By September 2024, at least seven committee members were able to independently manage the ICS with the support of Rising Phoenix staff.

In October 2024, the UMB project team conducted training on IBIS Rice PG By-laws for all committee members. The specific aims of the training included:

1. Increasing understanding among IBIS Rice PG members about the importance and implications of the by-laws.
2. Clarifying the roles and responsibilities outlined in the bylaws for all members.
3. Enhancing the ability of PG governance and operation structures to apply the bylaws effectively, leading to better functioning.
4. Identifying an immediate action plan based on the by-laws.

1.3 Rice field mapping and registration for 300 households with the Department of Land Management

During April and May, we completed mapping of 300 land parcels, totaling 827 ha, belonging to 222 households across 14 villages in Siem Pang district. The maps and database were approved by the Deputy Director of the Stung Treng Department of Land Management. The shapefiles are stored at Rising Phoenix and Samsom Mlup Prey offices for compliance monitoring and IBIS Rice production work.

1.4 Financial management literacy training to IBIS Rice participants

To occur in October and November 2024.

1.5 IBIS Rice compliance monitoring and forest cover change assessment of SPWS

From April to September 2024, the IBIS Rice compliance report documented that only one farmer violated the conservation contract, with 99% adhering to the rules. In September 2024, the forest cover change assessment report for 2022-2024 was completed. This report analyzed forest cover changes within SPWS using a 2021 baseline, assessing deforestation, reforestation, and forest degradation from January 2022 to January 2024.

Forest cover in SPWS remained at 91% in January 2022, January 2023, and January 2024. However, 383 ha of forest were lost between January 2022 and January 2023, and a further 303 ha between January 2023 and January 2024, totaling 686 ha lost during the reporting period. The net forest loss between 2021-2022 was 1,841 ha, while the net loss between 2022-2024 was 686 ha, suggesting a potential decline in the rate of forest loss.

In three focal areas:

- The Khampouk area showed an increased rate of forest loss due to conversion to rice and cashew plantations.
- The southern boundary area showed a decreased rate of forest loss, indicating the positive impact of the IBIS Rice project in reducing encroachment.
- The Sekong River corridor area experienced a higher rate of forest loss, concerning due to its rarity and high biodiversity value.

A full plan is being implemented to address these issues in cooperation with the relevant authorities. This will be provided in the annual report, which will cover a 12-month period, enabling a more detailed analysis.

1.6 Conduct Farmers' Day for sharing lesson learnt and best practice to local farmers and authorities

Farmers day events happen once the rice is harvested and sold. The next farmers day will be in January 2025.

Output 2: A diverse and gender inclusive scout teams are established and operational

Report on activities under Output 2 over the last six months include:

2.1 Notification - conduct planning and notification of scout team recruitment and desired pre-qualifications in collaboration with the Siem Pang District authority and Stung Treng Provincial Department of Environment, determine a short list of up to 60 possible recruits.

Completed IWT119 AR1

2.2 Selection Course - conduct a recruitment selection course process, including drug testing, ensuring a fair and transparent recruitment of 20 scouts from 60 applicants.

Completed IWT119 AR1

2.3 Equipment - Source and procure required equipment in accordance with policy and procedure.

Completed IWT119 AR1

2.4 Training – conduct 2-week competency-based scout training, covering Rising Phoenix policy, procedure and reporting, radio and SMART phone communications, remote first aid, navigation, field craft, surveillance patrolling, check points, de-snaring, wildlife awareness and recognition, use of camera traps and use of water craft.

Completed IWT119 AR1

2.5 Deploy – submit list of names to Stung Treng Provincial Department of Environment for official approval to work in and support activities in Siem Pang Wildlife Sanctuary and deploy scout team members on tasks in Siem Pang Wildlife Sanctuary.

Completed IWT119 AR1

2.6 Monthly reporting – produce monthly reports on activities using smart data, earth rangers and field reports.

SMART and Earth Ranger Data (April to September 2024):

- Boat patrols: Covered a distance of 3,616 km, with an approximate area coverage of 542 km².
- Foot patrols: Covered a distance of 545 km, with an approximate area coverage of 163 km².

- Motorbike patrols: Covered a distance of 8,575 km, with an approximate area coverage of 86 km².
- Vehicle patrols: Covered a distance of 891 km, with an approximate area coverage of 45 km².

Scout Activity Results (April to September 2024):

- Removed 121 snares and traps
- Removed 10 electric fishing rods
- Removed 21 fish traps (horizontal cylinder traps)
- Confiscated 6 motorbikes
- Confiscated 2 homemade guns
- Rescued and released 8 wildlife
- Confiscated and transported 2.1 m³ of timber

The number of snares set in the forest has decreased. Villagers are conserving snaring resources (wire, string, etc) for greater efficiency, aware that the scouts remove their snares daily. As a result, snares are being set across a wider, more dispersed area. Additionally, during this reporting period, the monsoon season has kept individuals from entering the forest frequently, as they are occupied with farming activities. Full analysis will be made during the IWT119 AR3 which will have a greater data comparison

Output 3: Siem Pang PATROL Programme fully operational with multi-agency, patrols and investigations, transboundary dialog and ad-hoc investigations with Lao PDR occurring along the border

Report on activities under Output 3 over the last six months include:

3.1 Development of Advance Investigation Training – working with the Siem Pang PATROL Operational Working Group (SPPOWG) and the Border Liaison Office (BLO) finalize curriculum outline and material, translate any new material from English to Khmer, and English and Khmer to Lao, select competent instructors.

Completed IWT119 HYR2 AR2

3.2 Study Tour – working with the Siem Pang PATROL Operational Working Group (SPPOWG) and the Border Liaison Office (BLO) organize the approvals, schedule and selection of personnel from Laos to attend a 5-day study tour to the Siem Pang PATROL Coordination Centre, Siem Pang Wildlife Sanctuary and Border Area.

A study tour from Cambodia by PDoE Director to Thailand was completed and reported in IWT119 HYR2 and AR2. This was changed from Laos conducting study tour to Siem Pang as during the Transboundary Advance Investigation Training, the Laos officers, worked closely with the Cambodian law enforcement and the Siem Pang PATROL Unit (SPPU), conducting the training in Cambodia. Therefore, it seemed redundant at the time to conduct a study tour for Laos officers.

Discussions held at the end of September 2024 occurred between the SPPU, PDoE Director and with the newly appointed provincial deputy governor in conducting a study tour for Laotian Officers to SPPU in early 2025. We will link this to on-going investigations.

From 7-10 April, 2024, Freeland's Director of Thailand's Surviving Together Programme led a study tour to the Siem Pang PATROL Unit. The group included two staff members, a retired Thai National Park Director, a Thai-Khmer Translator, and two Thai Government officers from the Thai Department of National Parks, one a member of the "King of Tigers" (elite national level ranger unit) intelligence unit and the other from the national level Wildlife Crime Intelligence Unit. The tour aimed to exchange information on patrolling and monitoring technology, discuss shared challenges and solutions, and explore future collaboration, training, and exchanges on the Cambodian-Thai border.

3.3 Approval – working through the Siem Pang PATROL Operational Working Group (SPPOWG) and the Border Liaison Office (BLO) Cambodia and Laos gain approval to

conduct transboundary advance investigation training for up to 10 Cambodian Government Investigation Officers and 10 Lao PDR Government Investigation Officers with at least 20% being female.

Completed IWT119 AR2

3.4 Advanced Investigation Training – implement 2-week training covering: introduction to illegal wildlife trade and transboundary crime, smuggling techniques, the border liaison mechanism, intelligence theory and the intelligence cycle, sources of information, handling informants, six phases of a major investigation, crime scene processing, interviewing techniques, prosecutorial requirements, technical equipment used in an investigation, surveillance, arrests, raids and takedowns. For up to 20 Cambodian and Laos Government Investigation Officers.

Completed IWT119 AR2

3.5 Patrol Refresher Training – Conduct refresher training for already existing Patrolling Officers under the Siem Pang PATROL programme, to update on any new tactical procedures to counter any threats utilized by poachers and violators.

Reported in the IWT119 HYR2 and AR 2

Between 10-23 of September 2023, Rising Phoenix supported 2 rangers from Stung Treng Province to attend the PROTECT Border Enforcement Ranger Training Course in Ta Phraya National Park in Thailand on the border with Cambodia. This training was an active step in Siem Pang PATROL being also operationalized along the Thai-Cambodian Border in Banteay Meanchey Province.

Rangers and RGK (10 officers) conduct refresher training at the end of each month for 2-3 days. The refresher training includes, tactics, navigation and law. The full accumulative details will be reported on in the IWT119 AR3.

Continued legal training is being provided by Say Ratanak, SPPU Senior Law Enforcement Advisor, who is a previous RGK Judicial Police Officer (JPO) and has a master's degree in Cambodian law specializing in protected-area law. On-the-job training for all rangers in the preparation of cases for court is continuous on each ongoing and new case.

3.6 Patrolling and Investigation Meetings, Monitoring and Reporting – Through the Siem Pang PATROL Coordination Centre, the Border Liaison Meetings, and the Siem Pang PATROL Operational Group meetings, feed information into agencies for investigation and monitor and report on successes and lessons learnt, utilizing operational meetings minutes and data provided.

On 24 April 2024, Rising Phoenix and the Director of the Provincial Department of Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries (PDAFF) brought the Forestry Administration on board to enhance endangered wildlife protection and tackle illegal trade outside protected areas. Two Forestry Administration officers were assigned to the Siem Pang PATROL Unit.

On 1 May 2024, following a request from PDAFF, four Royal Gendarmerie Khmer (RGK) officers were also assigned to work with the Forestry Administration and Siem Pang PATROL Unit initially for protecting a herd of banteng. PDAFF, PDoE and SPPU are planning to establish a mobile unit to interdict wildlife trade within Stung Treng province, targeting markets, shops, and vehicle transport.

On 7 July 2024, RGK assigned an additional eight officers to conduct patrolling operations with SPWS rangers in the protected area. Their focus is on high-threat crimes, such as illegal weapons possession and the interdiction of local and armed Lao poachers. RGK officers have the authority to arrest civilians, military personnel, and law enforcement officers involved in illegal activities. Two specialized teams have been established.

The new environment code, which is significantly stricter than the previous protected area law, came into effect on 28 June 2024. On 25 July, the Siem Pang PATROL Unit supported a district meeting to announce, raise awareness of, and distribute the new code. The meeting was attended by 89 participants, including representatives from all law enforcement and military departments, as well as village and commune chiefs. Following this in cooperation with the PDoE, organized village meetings within Siem Pang District to inform all villagers about the new law.

At the end of September 2024, a new Deputy Governor for border security was appointed in Stung Treng Province. He met with the Siem Pang PATROL team and the Director of PDoE to discuss the IWT 119 project and to plan the resumption of formal meetings with their Lao counterparts. These meetings are scheduled to commence in December 2024. All previous meetings with the Border Liaison Office (BLO) were reported on in the IWT119 AR2.

There has been one conviction and sentence for land encroachment in the reporting period. On 31 July, a judge sentenced an individual to five years of imprisonment for land encroachment, fined £2,839.50, and ordered the land to be reclaimed by the state.

Currently, 32 cases are before the Stung Treng provincial court, including twenty cases of land encroachment and twelve other cases. Two suspects are in jail, awaiting their court hearing date. An additional twenty plus cases are under investigation and being prepared for court submission. Five cases were heard by the court with the land to be reclaimed by the state, but no perpetrator could be found. The Investigating Judge ordered the District Police and SPWS Director to further investigate and find the perpetrators for fourteen cases.

In relation to a poached sun bear, the investigating judge required the submission of the perpetrators' names. Due to a failure by the SPWS Director, the case was reassigned to the Director of Siem Pang - Virachey National Park, who completed the documentation with the required names and resubmitted it to the court.

A suspect was arrested by the multi-agency PATROL team on possession of an illegal firearm. The suspect is currently in pre-trial detention, with a court hearing scheduled for 16 October 2024. The judge will issue a verdict within fifteen days.

3.7 PATROL Guidelines Manual – Develop and finalize a manual outlining the establishment and functioning of a PATROL programme for use by other entities and organizations.

The guidelines will be compiled and completed in Q4 2024

2. Give details of any notable problems or unexpected developments/lessons learnt that the project has encountered over the last 6 months. Explain what impact these could have on the project and whether the changes will affect the budget and timetable of project activities.

The delay in appointing officials and the reshuffling of government positions after the elections caused some setbacks related to the timetable for output 3. However, this has turned out to be advantageous. Several new officials, including the new Provincial Governor, Royal Gendarmerie Commander, and the Provincial Director of Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries, are highly connected and committed to delivering their mission. In the short time these officials have been working with the SPPU, we have already observed notable positive changes.

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

Discussed with NIRAS:

Yes/ No

Formal Change Request submitted:

Yes/ No

Received confirmation of change acceptance:

Yes/ No

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

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

Actual spend:

4b. Do you currently expect to have any significant (e.g. more than £5,000) underspend in your budget for this financial year (ending 31 March 2025)?

Yes ☐ No ☒ Estimated underspend:

4c. If you expect and underspend, then you should consider your project budget needs carefully. Please remember that any funds agreed for this financial year are only available to the project in this financial year.

If you anticipate a significant underspend because of justifiable changes within the project, please submit a re-budget Change Request as soon as possible. There is no guarantee that Defra will agree a re-budget so please ensure you have enough time to make appropriate changes to your project if necessary. **Please DO NOT send these in the same email as your report.**

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

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

No

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

Responses to IWT119 AR2R Annual Report Review

2. Comments and queries for Project Leader

Under Outcome Indicator 0.6, the project aims to prosecute more than ten local and transboundary middlemen involved in illegal wildlife trade. However, after two years of implementation, no prosecutions have been achieved despite an increase in investigations. Given the current results and the extremely bureaucratic of the court system, it is doubtful this Outcome indicator will be achieved by the project's end.

The success of this target appears to depend on several factors, including the extent of Rising Phoenix's influences on the local court system. The project might consider seeking assistance and/or collaboration from higher-level authorities in the country, such as ministry officials at the national level.

Response - Rising Phoenix firmly maintains that influencing the court is illegal and can backfire on cases, have legal ramifications, and cause mistrust among villagers. The delays have not been due to the court but rather several other factors:

1. The Wildlife Sanctuary Director has been reluctant to process cases due to concerns about repercussions and potential collusion, given his residence within the community. This issue has been addressed by working directly with the Director of PDoE to assign cases to more competent management personnel in the Stung Treng office.
2. The rangers' lack of knowledge and education in case preparation has been another factor. Therefore, we rely on an SPPU staff member with a judicial police background and legal degree to check and edit cases before submission to court, which is time-consuming.
3. Corruption within the border region has also caused delays, with crimes not being reported and offenders being let off with warnings.

These issues have been addressed by identifying other agencies to collaborate with as part of a multi-agency project. By utilizing lessons learned and adaptive management, we are now seeing signs of success, as evidenced by the number of cases being submitted to court and prosecutions occurring. As reported above in 3.6 Patrolling and Investigation Meetings, Monitoring and Reporting.

2. During the reporting period, the project faced an emerging challenge relating to illegal activities within the core zone, especially around waterholes, where violators capture wildlife. This challenge is worsened by the limited number of scouts. The project did not provide an explanation of how this challenge may affect the project's outcome and whether there is a plan to address it. Please provide an explanation of the potential impact of this challenge and outline any plans to address the challenge.

Response - This issue was swiftly addressed by appointing the Royal Gendarmerie Khmer to enhance patrols in the area and by rescheduling scouts to conduct more frequent checks and snare-clearing operations in the core zone.

3. In year 2, the project reported over 50 cases of illegal land encroachment, primarily involving new forest clearances for planting rice, cashew, cassava, and banana. For future projects, the team might consider implementing an "agroforestry model" in areas that have already been cleared. This model has proven successful in promoting local livelihoods while also conserving/restoring forest areas.

Response - Thank you for the idea, but, under both the previous protected-area law and the new environment code, this is illegal. The courts have already issued verdicts to reclaim the land for the State. Following orders from the Ministry of Environment, the PDoE has established tree nurseries to replant in these areas. As a result of several cases going to court, many individuals have voluntarily abandoned the encroached areas.

15 Safeguarding

The project claimed to have updated its safeguarding policy in the past twelve months, but no updated safeguarding policy was provided. Although quarterly meetings with villagers are held via village forums, it is unclear if any training or activities focused on safeguarding have been conducted or are planned. The project did not report any lessons learned, challenges, or concerns around safeguarding.

Response – See attached Safeguarding Policy September 2023

During August and September Rising Phoenix conducted social biodiversity impact assessment (SBIA) as part of REDD+ project development. Part of this process includes safeguarding awareness raising to villagers in Siem Pang District. Details of lessons learned, challenges and concerns will be documented in reporting once complete.

Checklist for submission

For New Projects (i.e. starting after 1st April 2024)	
Have you responded to any additional feedback (other than caveats) received in the letter you received to say your application was successful which requested response at HYR (including safeguarding points)? You should respond in section 6, annexes other requested materials as appropriate.	N/A

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