



**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: 31<sup>st</sup> October 2025**

**Please note all projects that were active before 1<sup>st</sup> October 2025 are required to complete a Half Year Report.**

**Submit to: [BCF-Reports@niras.com](mailto:BCF-Reports@niras.com) including your project ref in the subject line.**

<b>Project reference</b>	IWT122
<b>Project title</b>	Furs for Life – Preserving Culture, Protecting Nature
<b>Country(ies)/territory(ies)</b>	Zambia, South Africa
<b>Lead Organisation</b>	Panthera
<b>Partner(s)</b>	Nazareth Baptist Church eBuhleni (commonly known as the Shembe Church), Barotse Royal Establishment, African Congregational Church, Ngoni Royal Establishment
<b>Project Leader</b>	Gareth Whittington-Jones
<b>Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)</b>	HYR3
<b>Project website/blog/social media</b>	<a href="https://panthera.org/furs-life">https://panthera.org/furs-life</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 monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) 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.

Panthera's Furs for Life project is advancing as expected, and in some areas, we have already surpassed our own expectations. Our demand reduction work continues with promising progress with the Nazareth Baptist Church eBuhleni (Shembe) and the African Congregational Church (ACC) in South Africa and the Barotse Royal Establishment (BRE) and Ngoni Royal Establishment (NRE) in Zambia and has now attracted the attention of other user groups in South Africa, Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique, Kenya and Eswatini. Expansion of the project was always a strategy, and this new interest allows us to start assessing the best ways to achieve this.

The establishment of the Shembe tailoring enterprise in South Africa continued to be a challenge this half of the year, due to the continued internal politics. On a positive side the church is creating and selling their own Heritage Furs and the building is almost complete. The church sells the Heritage Furs out of "Heritage Fur" branded Gazebo's surrounded by feather and pull up banners. We created a branded "Heritage Furs" Gazebo for the leader of the church and he is using this when travelling around South Africa to other follower gatherings which serves as a type of endorsement.

We completed the training a further 14 women in Zambia whose training was delayed due to community pressure. The poachers in the area disrupted the training as it was part of an alternative livelihoods program targeting the reduction of peaching. The community leadership ironed out a way forwards for the ladies and they have now completed the tailoring training. Total women trained in tailoring is 54 exceeding the 50 target for that indicator.

We had 3 permanent retail spaces, however the one in Livingstone is currently closed due to the previous tenant leaving the country and the building is going through a change of ownership. The new owner is Lozi and is a supporter of the project and has agreed to allow us to remain once he reopens after renovations. The

We continued to have issues getting our business plan for Zambia completed as the individual who was hired to write it has stopped communicating with us. We have started to create the Zambian plan internally ourselves. This also allows us to adapt the plan as we encounter complications such as the delay in the commercialization of Heritage Furs in western Zambia. We are hopeful for a meeting with leadership at the end of November to further discuss this which is needed for sustainability. The response from eastern Zambia with the Ngoni Royal Establishment is very positive and we have a MOU signed with Heritage Fur being shipped directly into the country. This Business model will look very different as we introduce the Heritage Fur directly into the supply chain. These different models can be captured in the business plan and amended over the next few months as they evolve.

The children's books are completed and printed with "The Lucky Leopard" already being sold in major bookstores. "Libo and the Leopard" has been printed and currently being distributed for a launch at the end of November. We are also currently in the process of have the book authorised by the Education Ministry in Zambia for in country distribution. Outside of the store distribution we have printed 500 each of "The Lucky Leopard" English and Zulu translation and "Libo and the Leopard". These copies are for donations to education programs or user group sales.

We have created ordered and received our new serval Heritage Fur which was designed for Zambia as there is significant authentic serval skin use within the Ngoni and Lozi. We also received more mambatha (Shembe shoulder garment) and plain leopard print Heritage Fur for the other garments worn by the Shembe, Zulu and ACC hats.

In July 2025, the main Shembe gathering was attended for the bi-annual count of the Mgidi dancers. We encountered similar results with a 1 Heritage Fur to every 1.17 authentic leopard furs. We are hoping that as more people are exposed to the Behavioural Change materials and the Shembe sell more furs internally this figure will shift more in favour of the Heritage Furs. The next count will be in January 2025. At the Kuomboka ceremony in April 91% of the

paddlers wore Heritage Furs indicating the continued support for the Heritage Furs by the followers.

We are currently preparing for the import of the Heritage Furs into eastern Zambia to be tailored for the Ngoni. We were invited to attend two Ngoni ceremonies in Malawi for a further two Kings. We were introduced to the northern Malawi King who showed great interest in our project and wants to open conversations once we have our research permit. At the southern Malawi ceremony, we only attended as guests to collect some baseline data on skin use by conducts a user count. Within the Ngoni there was an installation of a new King in Mozambique, they reached out to the Malawian conservation authority

**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.**

We expected to make a larger impact on the Shembe user count than we have to date. Our assumption is this is due to the delay in the Shembe selling heritage Fur garments and the roll out of the behavioral change materials. Both are due to internal politics that has taken time to resolve. Another influencing factor could be that due to Heritage Fur being significantly more affordable than authentic furs the number of dancers has increased which will dilute the ratio measure impact. We also feel that dancers who have authentic furs will continue to wear them until it is time to replace them with on average is every 4-5 years and outside the time frame of this evaluation period. Even though we are confident the next Shembe user count will improve we will have to discuss reducing our prediction of 60% adoption by the Shembe dancers.

We predicted a current problem of the Shembe enterprise being negative towards other traders/competitors at the gatherings who are selling Heritage Furs. Initially the leadership stated they would engage with the traders as for us to maintain our relationship with them but more recent they have asked us to inform the traders not to sell Heritage Fur garments at the gatherings where the church was actively trading. The other traders were informed and there has been no other complaints yet to date.

We currently still do not have away forward with the commercialization of the Heritage Furs in western Zambia even after several meetings with the Kings committee. Majority of the committee and user group would like to own their own Heritage Fur but some traditionalists are concerns these garments will be used outside of the cultural ceremonies. Recently, the Queen of the South (Lozi Queen who's paddlers also wear Heritage Furs) showed interest in the sustainability of the commercialization which has opened doors for more meetings. We are in the initial stages of setting up a meeting with all the leadership at the end of November to discuss this further.

The project has been exposed to more opportunities in more user groups over the last six months through our contacts within the Ngoni Royal Establishment. We are attending a in October with Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW) Malawi to hopefully get a research permit to start investigation the potential of Heritage Furs in the country within the Ngoni. Although this is very exciting for the program, there is danger in expanding too fast, as this may result in funding challenges. Each group will have to be analysed and funds raised if we are going to expand into these groups, and at the same temporal scale as we have done with the Shembe and Lozi.

We are still working at maintaining sustainability within the tailors in Zambia as they have remained in groups, which has added expenses to the model such as rent and electricity. This is also a challenge as the Heritage Furs are not yet commercially available which will improve the tailor's income.

<b>3. Have any of these issues been discussed with NIRAS and if so, have changes been made to the original agreement?</b>	
Discussed with NIRAS:	No
Formal Change Request submitted:	No
Received confirmation of change acceptance:	No
Change Request reference if known: <i>If you submitted a financial Change Request, you can find the reference in the email from NIRAS confirming the outcome</i>	

**Guidance for Section 4:** The information you provide in this section will be used by Defra to review the financial status of projects. This review will identify projects at random for spot checks on financial management and will include requests for evidence of the actual spend information provided below. Please ensure the figures you provide are as accurate as possible and that you have the evidence to support it. You do not need to provide it now.

<p><b>4a. Please confirm your actual spend in this financial year to date (i.e. from 1 April 2025 – 30 September 2025)</b></p> <p>Actual spend: £</p>
<p><b>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 2026)?</b></p>
<p><b>4c. If you expect an underspend, then you should consider your project budget needs carefully.</b> Please remember that any funds agreed for this financial year are only available to the project in this financial year.</p> <p><b>If you anticipate a significant underspend because of justifiable changes within the project, please submit a re-budget Change Request as soon as possible, and not later than 31<sup>st</sup> December. 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. <b>Please DO NOT send these in the same email as your report.</b></b></p> <p><b>NB:</b> if you expect an underspend, do not claim anything more than you expect to spend this financial year.</p>
<p><b>5. Are there any other issues you wish to raise relating to the project or to BCFs management, monitoring, or financial procedures?</b></p> <p>Suspensions or allegations related to fraud and error concerns should be reported to <a href="mailto:fraudanderror@Defra.gov.uk">fraudanderror@Defra.gov.uk</a></p>
<p><b>6. Project risk management</b></p> <p><b>6a. If your project has an Overseas Security and Justice assessment, please provide an update on any related risks, and any special conditions in your award paperwork if relevant for your project.</b></p>

**6b. Have any concerns or allegations relating to sexual exploitation, abuse or harassment been reported in the past 6 months?**

Suspicious or allegations related to safeguarding concerns should be reported to [ODA.Safeguarding@defra.gov.uk](mailto:ODA.Safeguarding@defra.gov.uk)

**7. Please use this section to respond to any feedback provided when your project was confirmed, or from your most recent Annual Report. As a reminder, all projects that were scored as 'Not Yet Sensitive' in the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) assessment of their latest Annual Report should demonstrate how they are meeting the minimum GESI-Sensitive standard.**

Comment 1: Output 4.1 was delayed due to several reasons including the contractor supplying us with excuses as to the delays and then completely cutting off communication with us. These delays have been frustrating but if the Zambia plan was written in the first year it would already be out of date. We have started to create the plan internally which allows us to adapt to the status of no commercialization of Heritage Fur in western Zambia yet and to add the Ngoni Heritage Furs plan in. We are planning for leadership meetings before the end of the year to discuss the option of the commercialization of the furs in the west and therefore there will be further amendments to the plan.

Comment 5: "Consider adding cultural resistance and product quality risks to the project risk framework". - Noted and this has been added to the risk register as two separate risks.

Comment 6: