



**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 2025

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

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

Project reference	IWT 139
Project title	Towards Zero Poaching in the Greater Virunga Landscape (GVL)
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Uganda
Lead Organisation	WWF-UK
Partner(s)	WWF Uganda Country Office, WWF Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Greater Virunga Transboundary Collaboration (GVTC), International Gorilla Conservation Programme (IGCP), Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS); East Africa Wildlife Crime Hub - WWF Kenya
Project Leader	Cath Lawson
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	HYR2
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).

- Activity 0.0: Completed Y1.
- Activity 0.1 / 0.2 Baseline / endline data consolidation on - METT for at least 5 PAs; levels of capacity, collaboration and coordination of GVTC, RDB, UWA, ICCN; and on IWT incidences in the GVL: Baselines for Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool (METT) and levels of capacity, collaboration and coordination were established for seven protected areas in Rwanda and Uganda in Y1. Baseline assessments have not yet been possible in Virunga National Park or Sarambwe Wildlife Reserve under ICCN, due to the conflict in Eastern DRC, but efforts are underway to conduct an adapted version of these assessments through virtual means before the end of Y2 Q3. A baseline assessment of GVTC's levels of capacity, collaboration and coordination was established in this reporting period (Annex 1), using a bespoke capacity assessment tool, drawing on the Wildlife Crime Prevention Framework (WCPF), International Consortium on Combatting Wildlife Crime (ICWC) Indicator Framework for Combating Wildlife and Forest Crime, and the ICWC Guidelines for Wildlife Enforcement Networks (WENs). Baseline data on poaching and IWT incidents and seizures was identified in Y1, but subsequent analysis during activities related to Activity 1.4, revealed several data gaps, which are now being addressed in collaboration with project partners. Additional data sources, i.e. from TRAFFIC and complementary consultancies in the GVL,

are also being gathered to further strengthen data against this indicator. Endline assessments are planned for Y3.

Output 1: By end year 3, an integrated and robust monitoring and learning system incorporating an interactive dashboard is in place for monitoring IWT activities within the Greater Virunga Landscape (GVL)

- Activity 1.1 Develop MEAL plan and dashboard to support streamlined/integration of IWT data collection and reporting at regional level through GVTC Centre of Excellence: ToR (Annex 2) for this consultancy were further refined following partner feedback, which delayed the procurement process. GVTC and partners have expanded the scope of the dashboard to incorporate other key MEAL indicators relevant to the GVL landscape (e.g. those linked to a recently launched One Health project: <https://greatervirunga.org/the-groundbreaking-launch-of-the-one-health-project-to-safeguard-the-greater-virunga-landscape-in-uganda/>). From a software development perspective, this does not create significantly more work, but it enabled the leveraging of additional resources to support the required consultancy. In October 2025, the consultancy was advertised on both GVTC and WWF websites to attract a diverse pool of regional applicants. Procurement / selection processes are currently underway, with the consultant anticipated to begin work in November 2025. The developed MEAL system will be piloted by end of Y2, with full deployment expected in the first half of Y3.
- Activity 1.2-3: Now planned for Y3 Q1-2 (see Activity 1.1 for explanation). This delay does not have logframe implications and budgets will be re-forecast / a change request submitted, as required, to reflect this revised timeline.
- Activity 1.4: Develop, produce and distribute GVL Annual Conservation Status Report (ACSR) each year: [REDACTED] A writeshop was held in May 2025 to develop the ACSR report. The resulting draft report has been circulated for stakeholder review / additional input based on expertise. The report will be finalised before the end of Y2.

Output 2: By end year 2, 4 responsible bodies within the GVL have respective workforces that are appropriately equipped and trained with standardised equipment, tools and practices

- Activity 2.1 Rollout of training on SMART:
 - 2.1.1 Conduct needs assessment: Prior to training activities, a needs assessment was conducted using the SMART Competency Assessment Tool (<https://conservation-cat.com/smartcompetence/>) with nominated technical personnel responsible for SMART analysis from Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), Rwanda Development Board (RDB) and Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN) from key GVL sites and agency headquarters (Annex 3). The assessment identified strong skills in field operations such as data collection, but gaps in analysis, reporting and adaptive management. The resulting recommendations were (1) to prioritise capacity building in reporting and analysis to support better decision making, and (2) to improve system level skills such as system maintenance, and deployment. These findings informed the design of training materials for Activity 2.1.2.
 - 2.1.2 Conduct training of trainers on ranger-based monitoring analysis (SMART) - use and analysis of SMART data: A training of trainers (ToT) workshop was held in September 2025, focusing on the use and analysis of SMART and EarthRanger data to support better decision-making (Annex 4). This training happened later than originally planned because the scope of the training had to be expanded to include EarthRanger, in addition to SMART, to ensure that training activities were responsive to institutional decisions by UWA. UWA was an early adopter of SMART and has extended its use across its protected area network but more recently, UWA has made institutional commitments related to the use of EarthRanger. SMART and EarthRanger are complementary not competing tools and have recently announced a formal partnership (www.serca.org), and training approaches / materials were adapted to reflect this. The training was delivered jointly by WWF, WCS, IGCP and UWA and attended by 27 [REDACTED] participants, including technical personnel from UWA (9), RDB (5), ICCN (5), and GVTC (1). GVTC, as the umbrella transboundary co-ordination mechanism, led the invitation process for the training and requested GVL Protected Area Authorities (PAAs) to nominate participants. These invitations (Annex 5)

strongly encouraged female participation, however the number of females in the relevant technical roles proved to be low.

- 2.1.3 Support trainers to conduct site level trainings for rangers in pilot PAs to reach 1,000 rangers (Bwindi, Queen Elizabeth NP and Volcanoes): Site-based training by trainers who participated in Activity 2.1.2 will be undertaken in Y2 Q3/4. A process for technical backstopping has been drafted (Annex 6) to support the trained trainers in building capacity at site-level, ultimately seeking to build capacity in all seven Protected Areas in the GVL.
- 2.1.4 Conduct pre and post training surveys (for Training of Trainers and site level ranger training): Pre and post assessments (Annex 7) were conducted as part of the training of trainers workshop (Activity 2.1.2; Annex 4). Encouragingly, all evaluation areas showed notable learning gains between the pre and post assessment.
- Activity 2.2 Produce best practice guidelines on key trainings and subject matter: Due to Activity 2.1.2 happening later than anticipated, development of the best practice guidelines, which are informed by the training of trainers workshop, has also been delayed but are in draft. These will be finalised in Y2 Q3/4.
- Activity 2.3: Procure and distribute essential tools and equipment to enhance workforce performance in the GVL (smartphones, tents, rain jackets): Equipment was procured in Y1 and distribution has been ongoing in Y2. In total, five national parks will receive equipment: Semuliki, Bwindi Impenetrable, and Mgahinga Gorilla National Parks in Uganda; Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda; and Virunga National Park in the DRC. Equipment has already been distributed to Semuliki National Park (Annex 8) and distribution for the remaining protected areas is planned for Y2 Q3.

Output 3: By end Year 3, a Regional Task Force to improve transboundary coordination on IWT is established and functioning effectively in line with the International Consortium on Combatting Wildlife Crime (ICWC) Guidelines for Wildlife Enforcement Networks

- Activity 3.1 Conduct meetings with relevant organisations in each partner state to identify individuals / officers to formally constitute a regional IWT task force:



- Activity 3.2 Establish IWT Task Force, support bi-annual meetings and action planning of the regional task force: The first meeting of the regional IWT task force was planned for October 2025, but delays in constituting the task force have delayed this activity. A series of bilateral meetings will be held in Y2 Q3 to build understanding and to refine design of the task force with prospective regional IWT task force members, enabling the regional IWT task force to be fully constituted by end of 2025. The first two meetings of the regional IWT task force will be held in Y2 Q4, beginning with an induction meeting, to be held virtually, shortly followed by a physical meeting guided by a comprehensive agenda that will be developed once the taskforce is fully constituted.
- Activity 3.3-6: These activities are contingent on the regional IWT task force being established, so will commence in Y2 Q4. The delays outlined above do not have logframe implications and budgets will be re-forecast / a change request submitted, as required, to reflect this revised timeline.

Other activities:

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- In early October, project partners in Rwanda hosted a visit from the Rt Hon Baroness Chapman of Darlington, Minister of State for International Development and Africa, accompanied by the British High Commissioner and Director of Development from the British High Commission in Kigali. Project progress as well as the opportunities and challenges of transboundary collaboration were discussed.

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.

Eastern DRC conflict: As part of the conflict situation in Eastern DRC, armed groups continue to operate in and around Virunga National Park, DRC creating a highly volatile and dangerous environment for park rangers and other conservation personnel. This ongoing insecurity has resulted in repeated attacks on park staff, loss of life, and severe restrictions on movement within and across national borders. As flagged in AYR1, this conflict has impacted effective transboundary coordination and collaboration, particularly at protected area level. The restricted mobility of DRC-based personnel, combined with information flows becoming inconsistent, negatively impacts the region's collective capacity to detect, disrupt, and prosecute transboundary wildlife trafficking networks.

Despite these challenges, GVTC remains in place as a trilateral platform demonstrating the three states' commitment to collaboration for the GVL. GVTC continues to work with national counterparts from the three countries on project activities, including active engagement with ICCN headquarters in Kinshasa, and the project steering committee meets regularly to consider adaptive responses to any resulting challenges. For example, given security concerns and the tension between Rwanda and DRC, regional meetings/workshops have been held either virtually or in Uganda to promote participation by all countries. Participation of DRC stakeholders in Activity 2.1.2 demonstrates that positive progress can be made amidst this challenging context.

Data sharing agreement: Establishing a data sharing MoU and protocol under GVTC was identified as a key mitigation strategy to address the risk that Protected Area Authorities and other government bodies are reluctant to share data due to political sensitivities. GVTC continues to progress this work but, given the regional context outlined above, completion of an MoU / protocol is taking longer than expected. As an adaptive response, the project will draw on existing commitments to data sharing (for example, all GVL countries have already signed up to TWIX [Trade in Wildlife Information eXchange], an online platform for law enforcement agencies to share information and combat illegal wildlife trafficking) whilst continuing to build trust and confidence for data sharing, and establishing formal data sharing agreements, under the umbrella of GVTC. The project risk framework has been updated to reflect this.

Gender representation: Project staff have been proactive in influencing and advocating for better representation of women, however representation in some project activities has remained low. Globally, the representation of women in protected area staff is around only 3%-11% (Universal Ranger Support Alliance, 2021), and changing the gender balance of the workforce in the GVL's protected areas is outside the scope of this project. Despite these challenges, project staff will continue proactive efforts to achieve better representation of women in decision-making around IWT across the landscape, for example through representation on GVTC stakeholder groups.

Staff changes: Changes in staff, both within WWF-UK and WWF-Uganda, have impacted the rate of project implementation. Where these changes relate to key staff and / or have budget implications, the required change requests have been submitted. Changes in staff roles are

beyond the control of the project but, where possible, interim solutions have been put in place to minimise impact on delivery and budget spend, and handovers have been completed to ensure a smooth transition.

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

Discussed with NIRAS:	No
Formal Change Request submitted:	[REDACTED]
Received confirmation of change acceptance:	[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
Change Request reference if known: N/A	

4a. Please confirm your actual spend in this financial year to date (i.e. from 1 April 2025 – 30 September 2025)

Actual spend: £ [REDACTED]

4b. Do you currently expect to have any significant (e.g. more than £5,000) underspend in your budget for this financial year (ending 31 March 2026)?

[REDACTED]

4c. If you expect an 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, and not later than 31st 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.

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 BCFs management, monitoring, or financial procedures?

Suspensions or allegations related to fraud and error concerns should be reported to fraudanderror@Defra.gov.uk

N/A

6. Project risk management

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.

N/A
<p>6b. Have any concerns or allegations relating to sexual exploitation, abuse or harassment been reported in the past 6 months?</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p> <p>[Redacted]</p> <p>Suspensions or allegations related to safeguarding concerns should be reported to ODA.Safeguarding@defra.gov.uk</p>
N/A
<p>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.</p> <p>AYR1 Feedback: It is noted the project do not appear to have responded to the additional feedback points included in their Stage 2 feedback letter. The project should address these within their next Half Year Report:</p> <p>[Redacted]</p>

Checklist for submission

Have you responded to feedback from your latest Annual Report Review? You should respond in section 6, and annexe other requested materials as appropriate.	X
Have you reported against the most up to date information for your project?	X
Have you clearly highlighted any confidential information within the report that you do not wish to be shared on our website?	X
Include your project reference in the subject line of submission email.	X
Submit to BCF-Reports@niras.com	X
Please ensure claim forms and other communications for your project are not included with this report.	X