

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

Note: 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 2022

Project reference	DPLUS121
Project title	Strengthening Biosecurity to Protect Turks & Caicos' Iguana Islands
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	TCI (Turks and Caicos Islands)
Lead partner	RSPB
Partner(s)	Turks and Caicos National Trust (TCNT); Department of Environment and Coastal Resources (DECR); San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance (SDZWA); Department of Agriculture (DoA); Environmental Health Department (EHD); Pine Cay Homeowners Association (PCHA); Waterloo Investment Holdings Ltd (WIHL)
Project leader	Sarah Havery
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	HYR3
Project website/blog/social media	https://www.nationaltrust.tc/2020/09/23/saving-the-iguana-project

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

Output 1. Improved site management

Pine Cay: The agreed Pine Cay Rat Control Plan is being implemented and ongoing monitoring indicates it is successfully bringing down the number of rats (as determined by the number of bait stations showing physical signs of rat presence). Two full quarterly baiting rounds of over 400 stations have now been carried out. No sign of cats has been recorded.

Work is continuing with the new island management team and existing staff and householders to raise their awareness of the importance of biosecurity measures. Unfortunately, the need to repair damage from Hurricane Fiona in September 2022 set back recruitment of a centrally managed biosecurity officer into the island operational team by 90 days. Therefore, it has been agreed with the island management team to extend the current RSPB Biosecurity Officer by another year (now part-funded by Darwin) to ensure the work is maintained and to facilitate a phased training and hand-over once the post has been filled.

Little Water Cay (LWC): An agreed Rat Monitoring and Control Plan is being implemented by TCNT staff with support from the Biosecurity Advisor. No cats have been recorded. A risk-based approach to baiting has been developed in conjunction with international experts. A baiting round is only implemented if the presence of rats as determined by signs in bait stations exceeds a threshold. It has not yet done so.

Half Moon Bay (HMB): Conservation management is increasingly being implemented at HMB with DECR and TCNT working closely together on managing this protected area. Construction of a small wooden hut is almost complete. It will act as a base for four TCNT staff, to be recruited shortly, who will be based there on rotation when the new season starts in November. Over the past three months, DECR Beach Patrol Officers have stepped up their efforts to engage with tour operators on-site. Key messages include the implementation of the Iguana Code of Conduct which will improve biosecurity awareness.

Volunteers and staff under the supervision of the Biosecurity Advisor have cleared over 30 acres of invasive Australian pine (*Casuarina*) at the west end of HMB (about 55% of the area). Communication efforts with stakeholders (i.e., tour companies) to support this appears to have been successful and there is now broad understanding of the problems that *Casuarina* creates and thus support for this management.

Big Ambergris Cay (BAC): The BAC Biosecurity Monitoring Plan is being implemented. No rats or cats have been detected. A possible sighting of a rat on BAC was responded to with an incursion response which was a useful learning exercise.

Whilst rigorous biosecurity measures are in place on-island there has not been progress with the barge companies and departure point (South Dock annex on Providenciales). The owners cite "lack of time" in not engaging. BAC's owners have purchased a barge for use in supplying the island and we are seeking to talk with them about employing biosecurity measures on-board.

An application from a resident to bring a dog to the island was responded to by the partnership and the request turned down. The partnership is working with the site's owners to develop an appropriate policy on the issue, i.e., that only genuinely approved service dogs will be allowed. Talks with the site's owners to implement further measures (stronger biosecurity checks, speed limits) are ongoing.

No sign of cats has been found on any island. A Cat Incursion Response Plan with international expert input is being developed for the three-cay complex (Pine, Water, Little Water).

Output 2. Improved biosecurity capacity within TCI partners

Following acceptance by Cabinet of the Biosecurity Policy the Plant and Animal Health Ordinances have been amended to reflect greater emphasis on biosecurity and allow DoA staff to implement them. The issue now is to find resource (see section below).

Green iguanas: The partnership has produced a position paper on standards and practises for euthanising green iguanas to ensure all partners stay within laws and meet best (humane) best practise.

The green iguana reporting hotline continues to receive reports of animals (two in 2022 so far) and the database of sightings is being maintained. The sightings are being responded to by project and DECR staff and/or volunteers. Awareness across the population is good and adverts and articles continue to be run and/or published to further raise awareness. However, staffing issues within TCNT have reduced the amount of awareness raising through their channels.

Approaches have been made to several large relevant on-island organisations, such as the electricity utility company, and whilst meetings with middle managers and even more senior (directors, CEOs) are easy to achieve it has so far been impossible to convert this into anything more substantive and into active participation.

Partner capacity: Through the partnership, plans are being drawn up for installation of biosecurity facilities and equipment at both the major international air and maritime entry points to TCI. These would allow Department of Agriculture staff to carry out biosecurity duties. Funding options are being explored. In addition, training and awareness opportunities for DoA staff are being developed with DEFRA's GB Non-Native Species Secretariat's biosecurity project.

Staffing: Simon Busuttil, employed by RSPB as the Biosecurity Advisor for this project, moved role in July 2022 to a more holistic position of TCI Operations Manager. This is a positive step for the project, as the Operations Manager role provides more wide-ranging support to build the capacity of the National Trust (plus will manage the Darwin-funded project '*East Caicos Wilderness Area: Protecting the Caribbean's largest uninhabited island*'). The 6-month remaining in salary for the Biosecurity Advisor position under DPLUS121 has been allocated to extending the locally recruited Pine Cay Biosecurity Officer, Nichoy Bent, as outlined above. The advantages of this set-up are having two personnel available to complete certain tasks more quickly and safely (e.g., biosecurity rounds on offshore Cays), a broader range of skills available to the project, and developing the capacity within country through the employment and training of a resident (whereas the current Biosecurity Advisor will only be in the Country for the length of his contract).

Output 3 Improved understanding of ecological impacts

San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance staff visited and carried out all planned monitoring of iguanas. The blood samples which have been long held up, due to issues as a result of changes to the US permitting system for importing biological samples, has now been resolved and the samples are now being analysed.

Following discussion and the taking of external advice it is now proposed that the translocation of rock iguanas to Grouper Cay will take place towards the end of the project subject to the lack of presence of cats being confirmed.

Output 4 Increased awareness of biodiversity, biosecurity and the impacts of invasive species resulting in improved/better managed tour & barge operator practices

Four workshops with tour companies have been carried out and one of the major companies (Caicos Dream Tours) has adopted the Iguana Code of Conduct for display on its boats and when booking tickets. Social media responses to dead iguanas being found at Half Moon Bay (almost certainly dead because of human feeding) were co-ordinated with partners and supporters in the tour sector.

Stakeholder engagement around *Casuarina* control at Half Moon Bay appears to have been successful. Social media, workshops and face-to-face meetings on site have taken place. After a single incident of opposition there has been just one further negative (and ill-informed) piece on social media which garnered no support.

Output 5 Effective Project Management

A meeting of the Iguana Islands Steering Committee (the project steering group) is now due, the last having taken place just before the period covered by this report in March 2022 (face-to-face on-island). Regular meetings have taken place between partners on a variety of sub-issues.

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.

Two factors are relevant. Neither is critical to the project's success nor will significantly affect budget. Timetable will be slowed but not critically.

1. Tourist numbers have grown massively since Covid which means that many commercial operations and some other bodies such as Associations are not committing the time required as they are "too busy". The low season is also shorter than it was as tourists keep coming
2. High staff turnover in our key partner TCNT has reduced their ability to contribute positively particularly to raising awareness through events and social media and biosecurity management of Little Water Cay.

The staffing changes as outlined above will help to mitigate the risk to the project of the reduced TCNT capacity.

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

Discussed with NIRAS-LTS: No

Formal Change Request submitted: No

Received confirmation of change acceptance No

Change request reference if known:

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

Yes No Estimated underspend: £

4b. If yes, then you need to 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 if necessary. Please DO NOT send these in the same email as your report.

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

A change request is being drafted for some budget changes (in relation to staffing changes) this financial year and will be submitted as soon as possible.

The devaluation of the UK pound against the US Dollar (the local currency in TCI) is having an impact. This is in addition to the impacts of inflation (e.g., of boat-hire costs). This is not critical to the success of the project.

Please note: Any planned modifications to your project schedule/workplan can be discussed in this report but **should also be raised with NIRAS-LTS International through a Change Request. **Please DO NOT send these in the same email.****

Please send your **completed report by email to BCF-Reports@niras.com**. The report should be between 2-3 pages maximum. **Please state your project reference number, followed by the specific fund in the header of your email message e.g. Subject: 29-001 Darwin Initiative Half Year Report**