

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	DPLUS159
Project title	Growing hope – a blueprint for saving Ascension’s endemic plants
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	Ascension Island
Lead Organisation	Ascension Island Government Conservation and Fisheries Directorate (AIGCFD)
Partner(s)	Ascension Island Government Conservation and Fisheries Directorate (AIGCFD)
Project leader	Tiffany Simpson
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	HYR2 21/10/2024
Project website/blog/social media	

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).

A major development which has affected the delivery schedule is the submission and acceptance of a change request to extend the project (CR24-066), with the end date shifted from December 31st 2024 to March 31st 2025. This has been a great help, as it now means that the remaining activities can be fitted (if not comfortably then at least practically) into a deliverable schedule.

Please also note that the nature of this project makes it difficult to provide many interim indicators of success, as most of the outputs are related to data collection, analysis and interpretation. To provide evidence of any of this requires a report to be written, and this is not due until the end of the project. I tried to offer some interim graphs, maps and sent copies of data sets in the last annual report, but the reviewer felt that the approach “gives only a very partial picture of the project’s progress”. However, everything should be in place by the next (and final) report!

Progress has been listed under the appropriate activities: -

1.1 Analyse endemic plant census data collected by AIGCFD between 2012 and 2022

Although this activity was due to finish much earlier in the project, various issues have delayed the completion, as described in previous reports. The revised plan was to complete the task during the final, desk-based phase of DPLUS159, when all the field data was due to be analysed and written-up. This makes much more sense in terms of time efficiency. The writing-up phase commenced in August and is due to continue until December. As the project officer is juggling the analysis of several data sets in parallel, none have yet been completed in full, but progress is on schedule.

Completion: due in December 2023, but this aim was long since abandoned and work will now be incorporated into the final plan, delivered by March 2025.

1.2 Evaluate the success of endemic plant restoration efforts undertaken by AIGCFD since 2008

This activity is inextricably linked to 1.1 because the 'evidence' for both comes from the same plant census data, and the process of analysis and interpretation is exactly the same.

Completion: See 1.1.

2.1 Establish temperature, humidity and light monitoring devices at 24 locations

Due to limitations of staff capacity and equipment, it was not possible to set-up climate monitoring at 24 locations simultaneously. We monitored the first 21 sites across the south and east sides of Green Mountain between April and December 2023. From April 2024 onward, a further 19 sites have been studied on the north side of Green Mountain (including some of the original sites, also maintained to provide continuity and compare differences between years). The sites are visited weekly, and monitoring will last until the end of 2024.

Completion: Due by September 2024. Although our programme will continue until December 2024, we had exceeded what we agreed by the expected date, if in a slightly different form.

2.2 Download and collate 14 months of temperature, humidity and light data from the 24 locations

Due to the staged design of the trial outlined under 2.1, the total time monitored for most sites is only around 9 rather than 14 months. However, the extra value that would have been obtained from the additional time is fairly small, and due to the very large spatial heterogeneity of conditions (caused by differences in habitat structure, wind and light shelter), it is much more valuable to have information from many sites than long recording periods at fewer sites. In this respect, we have considerably exceeded what was promised (35 sites in total), and have recorded more variables (also rainfall, fog and soil moisture).

Completion: Due by project end, in March 2025.

3.1 Conduct restoration trials to establish thirty individuals of *Anogramma ascensionis* and *Sporobolus caespitosus* at each of two locations

At the time of the last Annual Report, the two sites were almost but not fully prepared for receiving plants, and we were thus slightly behind schedule. Site preparation has now been completed, with the sites weeded, installed with fog catchers and irrigation systems, and weed barriers put in place to reduce the chances of reinvasion. Thirty *Sporobolus caespitosus* have been planted at each site (Fig. 1). According to the proposed schedule, we were also due to have planted ten *Anogramma ascensionis* by this stage. However, this has proved more problematic, due to a disease outbreak in the nursery which killed most of the plants. We have been working to identify the source of the problem, eliminate infected material and re-start production. However, with little more than 20 plants on island at the lowest point, this is likely to be a slow process. The disaster has at least highlighted some systemic issues which need to be addressed in order to reduce the chances of such a problem recurring (measures will be incorporated into the final plan). Full implementation of the restoration trial has therefore been delayed. We hope to have at least a few *Anogramma* planted by the project end, but not the full quota, and are taking steps to ensure that the trial is continued beyond the project life (as was always envisaged).

Completion: Site preparation and *Sporobolus* planting was due by March 2023. It was achieved by May 2023. The full *Anogramma* planting was due by the project end, in March 2025.



Figure 1 Planting of *Sporobolus caespitosus* at pre-prepared field sites, May 2024

3.2 By Y2Q4 optimum control methods identified for eight key invasive species, using a combination of literature searches and replicated field trials.

This activity has been the subject of a change request, in which we argued primarily for reducing the number of target species in these trials to four, and also for focusing more closely on testing herbicide delivery methods rather than different types of herbicide. The change request has not yet been resolved, so it is not possible to evaluate the level of completion. However, the initial treatments on the four re-focused species has been completed. A monitoring period is now required to examine whether the plants have been killed or whether they re-sprout. As we could expect regeneration to take six months, evaluation and compilation of a report will only be possible close to the end of the project.

Completion: Due by project end, in March 2025.

4.1 Produce draft Endemic Plant Restoration Plan incorporating results of the project analyses

The Endemic Restoration Plan is also subject to a change request that has yet to be resolved. The plan is dependent on the analysis which is currently being conducted (see Activity 1.1). Writing is scheduled to start in December 2024, with the first draft produced in mid-January 2025. Actions are thus on schedule at this point.

Completion: Scheduled for the project end, March 2025.

4.2 Share and discuss draft Restoration Plan with Steering Group and incorporate their suggested changes

We propose to run an on-line workshop with various international science and conservation contributors in February 2025. Thus far, we have started discussing assistance with running the workshop with JNCC and are in the process of notifying potential contributors to reserve space in their diaries (the exact date has not been finalised yet). Attendees will potentially come from within AIGCFD, Ascension Island council, Kew Gardens, Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, St Helena Research Institute, St Helena Environment and Natural Resources Department, University of British Columbia and CABI (subject to availability).

Completion: Due by end of February 2025 to allow findings to be incorporated into the final plan.

4.3 Undertake public consultation on the draft Restoration Plan through public meetings and press articles on Ascension and distribution via social media.

A public talk on Ascension Island will be made in February 2025 (shortly before or after the workshop) and will form the basis of local consultation. Other channels of communication will also be used to invite broader discussion and publicity (articles and social media), but it will be easier to decide on the best approach once the report is developed to an adequate stage.

Completion: Due by end of February 2025 to allow findings to be incorporated into the final plan.

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.

It seems unnecessary to discuss the delays which have resulted in the project being behind schedule. These have been addressed in previous reports and change requests and do not particularly apply to the current six-month period, except in that we have been working within the constraints that they have imposed.

Some further issues have arisen due to equipment breakages, particularly the Green Mountain weather station (set-up under Activity 3.1), which has malfunctioned and new parts are being ordered. Also, equipment that was ordered from overseas has proved sub-standard when it arrived on Ascension, i.e. two sets of growth lamps, required to establish *Anogramma* growth units, and also weed membranes for creating barriers around the restoration sites (both for Activity 3.1). Due to the delays of several months it takes to re-ship equipment to Ascension, this has inevitably slowed progress.

The soil contamination which killed 85% of the cultivated *Anogramma* population in March/April 2024 has been the most serious set-back, and presented a real threat to the survival of the species. The problem was likely caused by a *Fusarium* fungus introduced to the shade house and plant labs through infected compost. The agent has not been verified but we are conducting some genetic tests that may shed light on the matter. We are now autoclaving all soil for lab-grown plants, and are attempting to re-populate the lab set-up with material from Kew Gardens, as this is the only source that can now be guaranteed free from infection. This material should be obtained in November 2024. It will take at least a further year for stocks to be fully rebuilt and we cannot risk planting too many in experimental restoration situations in the short term. This means that it is very unlikely we will meet the target of 60 individuals planted by the project end, but hopefully we should be able to conduct trials with a few plants, which will be built-on after the project ends. As it will take several years for the full benefits of the trial to be realised, we had originally intended only to set it up within the DPLUS 159 time frame, and are committed to ongoing support for the foreseeable future.

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, except the <i>Anogramma</i> issue, and in this case there is little we can do to modify the project
Formal Change Request submitted:	Yes
Received confirmation of change acceptance:	Yes (1 financial request) No (2 non-financial requests)

Change Request reference if known: CR24-066 (financial, accepted)

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

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 current issues of concern.

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.

In the previous annual review there were five queries listed that required responses.

For two of these, the recommended action was to "Discuss with BCF Admin". For both of these points, a change request has been submitted. Neither has been fully resolved as the response to the change requests was only received as this report was being written, and in both cases more information was requested before the matters could be resolved. The required information will be provided as soon as possible.

The remaining three queries all arose from, it seems, a slight misunderstanding of the report content. However, as the recommended action was to address the issues in the Final Report, further explanation will be deferred until then. In all cases, the queries should be redundant by that stage. The concerns were over a perceived lack of progress, but once the final plan is produced all the evidence of completion will be linked to it.

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.	
--	--

If not already submitted, have you attached your risk register ?	
---	--

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.	
--	--

For All Projects

Include your project reference in the subject line of submission email.	
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?	
Have you reported against the most up to date information for your project ?	
Please ensure claim forms and other communications for your project are not included with this report.	