

**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 2023

Project reference	DPLUS176
Project title	Turning the tide on plastic pollution in St Helena and Ascension
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	Ascension and St Helena
Lead partner	Zoological Society of London (ZSL)
Partner(s)	Ascension Island Government (AIG), St Helena National Trust (SHNT), St Helena Government (SHG), University of Exeter, Cape Town University, Nelson Mandela University, BLUE Marine Foundation.
Project leader	Shauna Young, ZSL
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	HYR2
Project website/blog/social media	South Atlantic Plastic Project ZSL

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).

Activities 1.1 and 1.2 - Completed during project yr1, please see HYR1 and YR1 annual report for more detail.

Activities 1.3 and 1.4 - As part of the systems diagnosis, the team has held 1:1 meetings, workshops and focus group discussions with 123 individuals across both islands, to understand behaviours and attitudes towards single-use plastic (SUP) and potential opportunities/barriers to driving change. A diverse range of people have been engaged, including those who may typically be excluded such as elderly community members living far from the town centre. Insights have been coded to surface key themes. On St Helena, key themes included: a dislike or distrust in drinking **tap water** (42%); challenges around the **separation of waste**; high levels of **SUP usage** (40% buy plastic water bottles and 20% buy grocery bags); lack of **available and affordable alternatives** to single-use plastic. On Ascension Island, key themes included: **inappropriate waste disposal** (lack of **separation of waste, flushing** plastic waste and **littering**); dislike and distrust of drinking reverse osmosis **tap water** and **high levels of single-use plastic usage** associated with shipping, eating and drinking. In collaboration with the Equality and Human Rights Commission on St Helena, our project grievance mechanisms have been co-developed ahead of the next phase of work: co-designing interventions with community groups, and running pilots on island.

Activities 1.5 and 1.6 - We have summarised the barriers and opportunities for change into a simple table format, which the core team have been workshoping together ahead of validation sessions with the community groups where interventions will be selected. In parallel, we have been working with a systems mapping consultant on developing visual maps to illustrate the systems diagnosis, however following in-depth team discussions we are now reviewing the format of this output, to ensure it best serves the audiences on both islands, as well as the project objectives. This piece is on-going and we will provide an update on the decision around the final output in our next report.

Activities 2.1 - 2.3 - As per our YR1 annual report, a refillable water bottle campaign in schools was paused in response to our learnings around public perceptions of tap water. However, schools have instead been engaged through the launch of SHNT's comic book, 'The Invisible Threats to Whale Sharks', which has now been circulated to multiple schools across the South Atlantic, as well as the Governor of Saint Helena and Island Ministers. In June, 630 copies were delivered to the 4 schools in St Helena to celebrate World Ocean Day. In August, 130 copies arrived on Ascension for dissemination within Two Boats School during the school term, and it was also shared with St Mary's School in Tristan da Cunha to celebrate MPA Day. This inspired the creation of 'Floopy makes

friends around Tristan da Cunha', which St Mary's School has developed to demonstrate the impacts of plastic pollution on their local marine life. We will continue to share the comic book with schools on other UKOTs via contacts within our plastic pollution network, as well as the UKOTCF and INTO.

Activities 2.4 - 2.6 - As per our YR1 annual report, we increased timelines for community engagement to ensure this project is truly inclusive and equitable in its approach. This has been a priority for the team to complete, before moving onto activities 2.4 -2.6. With increased knowledge of both islands, the project team reviewed our monitoring approach, and agreed the most reliable indicator to monitor a change in plastic consumption on both islands would be to monitor SUP importation rather than SUP abundance in waste management systems. With this in mind, SHNT has collected SUP import data from the top five importers/retailers on St Helena and initial data show that plastic water bottles are amongst the most common imported items (n=393,935). However this has been challenging due to shipping delays and time associated with gathering relevant data. On Ascension, SUP data has been requested from four retailers, two have provided information, one is compiling figures to share and the last has yet to respond to the request but is being followed up with by the project officer.

Project partner, AIG, are now actively delivering their Darwin Local (DPL0010) to improve environmental quality in coastal ecosystems on Ascension Island, responding to threats identified from data collected during shoreline monitoring within this project. Eight new cigarette bins, 80L rucksacks, cutting tools and PPE arrived on the island in June 2023. The cigarette bins have been deployed at seven key coastal areas. A behaviour change campaign is being designed to encourage their use, including communications outputs such as a public notice in the Islander (the only newspaper service on Ascension released weekly) and social media posts. The existing shoreline monitoring strategy on Ascension will be used to measure effectiveness of the intervention in reducing cigarette butt litter around monitored beach huts.

In June 2023, AIG partnered with Wolf Creek Federal Services (contractors on US Space Force Base) to understand the usage and impact of 21 drinking fountains installed between June 2020 - May 2023 on the US Base. Results indicated the equivalent of 300 x 500ml SUP bottles are being dispensed by the fountain network daily. Plastic water bottle imports also reduced, with 588 cases of Dasani 500ml, 590 cases of Crystal and 10 cases of Gallon imported so far in 2023, in comparison to 4144 cases of Dasani 500ml, 140 cases of Dasani 1L, 1704 cases of Crystal and 106 cases of Gallon imported during the same time frame in 2022. The latter has been attributed to both a) a reduction of ~200 contractors in April 2023, and b) the introduction of the water fountain network.

Activity 2.7 - In response to project progress, the team has adapted and expanded the original M&E framework.

Activity 2.8 - In St Helena, the policy-making bodies have fully supported the project and are open to creating public policies for SUP reduction. To date, the Legislative Council and Senior Leadership Group are engaged and ready to talk further. As discussed in our annual report, this decision must be driven by community needs, and must therefore follow the community engagement phase. On Ascension, we have designed a survey which includes a question on public interest/support for a SUP ban. We will feed these results into a recommendations report along with other project data, e.g. SUP imports and litter, to AIG's policy officer by February 2024.

Activities 3.1, 3.3, and 3.4 - Shoreline monitoring has continued regularly on both islands at the same sites using approaches outlined in our YR1 annual report. On St Helena, 71 surveys were performed in Sandy Bay Beach (n=11) and Rupert's Beach (n=60). 16,547 items were collected during the surveys, of which 89% were plastic (n=14,777). Data is indicating locally generated litter at Ruperts beach in the north, whereas international waste is abundant at Sandy Bay in the south. In addition, three dive clean-ups were held between April and June, 20 volunteers collected 6891 items, of which 29.9% was plastic. On Ascension, 20 belt transects and six beach hut surveys have taken place since April, with 3,002 items recorded, of which 65.87% (n=1978) were plastic. During Tobias' visit to St Helena shoreline monitoring methodologies were reviewed to highlight how data collected will enable comparison between both islands. Following this, in September, a comprehensive review of shoreline monitoring methods and data flow took place and were agreed upon.

Activity 3.2 - Completed during project yr1, please see HYR1 and YR1 annual report for more detail.

Activity 3.5 and 3.6 - We have now finalised our approach for evaluating the prevalence and composition of microplastics in gastrointestinal tracts of local fish species, including Butterflyfish and Atlantic chub mackerel in St Helena, and Oysters, Grouper and Black Triggerfish on Ascension. The team has been obtaining the necessary permits, ethics approvals, materials, and logistical agreements to conduct the research with our project partner in South Africa. Seabird stomach samples are ready to be transported for analysis in South Africa in October 2023.

Between March and June 2023, AIG investigated potential interactions between a) nesting green turtles and surface-level anthropogenic debris, and b) emerging hatchlings and anthropogenic debris in the sand column of nesting beaches. Preliminary results found that 0.88% of freshly laid nests contained an item of anthropogenic debris that a nesting turtle could have interacted with when camouflaging, and 6.82% of excavated nests contained an item of anthropogenic debris that a hatchling could have interacted with when emerging. This study will be repeated during the 2023/24 nesting season alongside AIG's green turtle productivity monitoring. On St Helena, SHNT has secured funding from Darwin Local (DPL00033), for monitoring the Masked Booby and Band-rumped Storm Petrel. At our request, the team has obtained permission from the St Helena Research Council to recover any dead birds and share with our project team for stomach analysis.

In August, the core project management team hosted a shoreline and wildlife monitoring approaches review with input from ZSL's technical specialists. Key takeaways from this workshop included a) a decision to repeat both the turtle and brown booby studies for another season in Ascension Island, and b) a decision not to repeat whale shark feeding zones water sampling next season. The latter conclusion was based on the knowledge that we now have evidence that microplastics are indeed present as expected, and it would now require significant research to understand the negative impacts this has on whale sharks (e.g. tissue sampling) which is outside the scope of this project. Furthermore, whale sharks are migratory species and microplastics are a transboundary issue, which may not necessarily be directly related to St Helena - which is not a priority for this project. Consequently, it was agreed that monitoring the presence of macroplastics in whale shark feeding zones would be more beneficial to this project, and this approach will be active during the next season (early 2024).

Activity 3.7 - As part of ongoing shoreline monitoring, island-leads have continued to identify the origins of SUP bottles/lids to determine source countries and routes of shoreline litter. To date, 1,898 plastic bottles and lids have been collected (96 plastic bottles and 833 lids in St Helena; 810 plastic bottles and 159 lids in Ascension). 18 manufacturing countries have been identified cumulatively, the most common being China (92% Ascension; 40% St Helena). Island-leads have also been mapping the sale of water bottles on each island, noting the brands, in order to establish locally littered items vs. those washing up from elsewhere. These data will also be included in our engagement with the UN Global Plastics Treaty process.

Activity 3.8 - The team has decided not to progress this activity for the following reasons: on Ascension, as beach huts have different ownerships and booking systems, there is a challenge around accountability for implementing clean-ups using proposed guidelines. Additionally there was no capacity within AIG to enforce the guidelines at AIG owned beach huts. On St Helena, the team has wanted to avoid data disturbance and maintain sampling standardisation, so has avoided encouraging public beach cleans. On occasion, through a capacity building initiative between marine teams, SHG marine staff have supported SHNT with monitoring efforts. In these instances, they are briefed on the approach and necessary health & safety measures.

Activity 3.9 - Our wildlife monitoring methodologies (see activity 3.6) will feed into this later in the timeline.

Activity 4.1, 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4 - In April we hosted our first UKOTs plastic pollution network meeting. 70 invitations were sent to contacts across the UKOTs and Crown Dependencies, resulting in 32 attendees representing Ascension, Anguilla, Bermuda, Cayman Islands, Montserrat, Pitcairn, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (SGSSI), and St Helena, as well as UK-based representatives of CEFAS, MMO, Universities and NGOs. The meeting included presentations from Ascension, Bermuda, Pitcairn, SGSSI, St Helena and the UK. We held breakout sessions to discuss our priority topic areas for future meetings and how we can achieve an inclusive and diverse network. The next meeting will take place in October, with a thematic focus on local and international SUP policy.

General - This project year has also marked ZSL's engagement with the UN Global Plastics Treaty. Shauna Young (ZSL) attended INC2 in Paris, May 2023, to understand what role this project team may be able to play in strengthening the outcome of negotiations. It became clear that the impacts of plastic pollution on both biodiversity and local communities - including those within the UKOTs - are not being prioritised within the process. ZSL has partnered with Fauna & Flora to work on these areas, and are collaborating with this project team to ensure the needs of the UKOTs are represented by the treaty.

In July, Tobias Capel (Ascension island-lead) completed a successful capacity building and knowledge exchange trip to St Helena for one week, to work alongside Maria Freitas and Matthew Owen at SHNT. The highlights of the trip included conducting shoreline monitoring together, exploring nuanced differences between approaches and fresh insights to learn from. Full details have been captured in an expedition report.

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 project team has experienced multiple staff changes over the last six months, with Dee Baum (AIG's Director of Conservation and Fisheries), Michelle Fletcher (SHNT's Marine Conservation Manager) and Fiona Llewellyn (ZSL's Marine Programmes Manager) leaving their positions to take up posts elsewhere. Shauna Young (ZSL Senior Marine Projects Manager) and Tiffany Simpson (Newly appointed Director of Conservation and Fisheries) have assumed Fiona and Dee's project roles, and recruitment is underway for Michelle's replacement. Despite these changes, we are pleased to report minimal disruption to the project.

As discussed in our YR1 annual report, we have purposely invested more time in developing relationships within the community and engaging underrepresented groups than our initial timeline allowed for. In some cases, other project activities have been slightly delayed in order to complete our equitable community engagement approach.

In regards to stomach sampling, the team has faced logistical challenges in shipping bird stomach samples from Ascension to South Africa. It has taken significant time to establish suitable transport and the permits required.

As mentioned in our YR1 annual report, weekly zoom calls are highly beneficial to project progress however WIFI has posed a challenge for our in-territory partners, in particular SHNT. To address this challenge, ZSL diverted £3000 from our annual travel budget towards SHNT, for purchasing data as needed. In addition, SHNT has also used a small underspend in staff salaries, due to Michelle's resignation, for this purpose.

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 - ZSL notified NIRAS re: Shauna Young stepping up to Project Lead.

Formal Change Request submitted: Yes

Received confirmation of change acceptance Yes

Change request reference if known:

4a. Please confirm your actual spend in this financial year to date (i.e. from 1 April 2023 – 30 September 2023)

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 2024)?

No

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

No

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**