



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	DPLUS209
Project title	Tracking terns for conservation in BIOT
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	BIOT
Lead Organisation	Heriot-Watt University
Partner(s)	BIOT Administration
Project Leader	Stephen Votier
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	HYR2
Project website/blog/social media	iNaturalist site for collating seabird diet information: https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/terns-on-diego-garcia

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.

Data Collection on Tern Biology

During this reporting period, we initiated data collection on the breeding phenology of terns on Diego Garcia. The first field season focused on developing practical and replicable protocols that could be integrated into the standard monitoring activities of the Environment Officers (EOs) based on the island. While the EOs engaged positively with this process, it became clear that sustaining these protocols without our continued presence was challenging. In response, we reassessed our approach and adapted the methods to be more automated, deploying timelapse cameras to collect consistent data on breeding activity with minimal ongoing human input. This adaptation enhances the sustainability and reliability of long-term monitoring efforts.

Tracking Tern Movements

Preparations are underway for a field campaign scheduled for November 2025, which will involve the deployment of tracking tags on terns to investigate their movement ecology, one of the project's core objectives. We have procured custom-designed tags (delivered by Pathtrack)

and secured collaboration with a specialist experienced in gauze-and-glue attachment methods suitable for smaller seabird species. In line with our proposal, the Principal Investigator (PI) will oversee the assessment of tag attachment efficacy, potential welfare impacts, and the functionality of remote data downloads. The timing of this fieldwork has been adjusted based on the breeding data collected earlier in the project, ensuring alignment with the terns' phenological cycle and optimising data collection opportunities.

Community Engagement and MEL Reflection

Engagement with the BIOT community remains a key focus of the project. The upcoming field season will include structured discussions with the EOs and the BIOT Administration to evaluate how different members of the island community are engaging with the research and to gather feedback. Previous work indicated strong engagement from UK and US Armed Forces personnel, with lower participation from private contractors. To address this, we are refining our monitoring approach to better capture which outreach methods are most effective for engaging different community groups. Each field visit has incorporated a variety of outreach events in diverse settings, guided by GESI (Gender Equality and Social Inclusion) principles, to ensure equitable access and participation.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL)

Our MEL framework continues to be appropriate and relevant, though we are refining and adding indicators related to community engagement to better capture qualitative feedback and participation diversity. The shift toward automated data collection also supports more consistent and reliable ecological monitoring with lower resource requirements by volunteers.

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.

During this reporting period, we identified challenges in maintaining consistent field monitoring and volunteer engagement in the absence of sustained team presence on Diego Garcia. Routine monitoring by Environment Officers (EOs) proved difficult to sustain alongside their other responsibilities. In response, we have refined several of our data collection methods to make them more efficient and less reliant on continuous fieldwork.

Specifically, the introduction of camera traps for monitoring breeding activity and the incorporation of guano sampling for dietary analysis have reduced the time demands on volunteers and EOs. These adaptations will allow us to involve a wider range of short-term volunteers during future field visits.

Engagement with seabird photography for diet assessment has been lower than anticipated. To address this, we are developing a targeted engagement campaign for our next field season to encourage participation and improve sample collection. Additionally, we have amended our methodology to include guano sampling as a complementary approach to dietary monitoring. The inclusion of guano sample analysis will extend the project timetable by several months, as laboratory analysis is now required. We are currently assessing whether this adjustment will have any financial implications, though initial estimates suggest these are likely to be minor and manageable within the existing budget.

The analysis of camera trap data is not expected to alter the overall project schedule, as the time saved from manual data collection offsets the additional processing requirements. Similarly, the budget has remained stable, as funds initially allocated for an SLR camera have been reallocated to support the camera trap equipment.

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/ No
Formal Change Request submitted:	Yes/ No
Received confirmation of change acceptance:	Yes/ 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.

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)?

Yes No Estimated underspend: £

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?

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

None

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

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

Yes No

If yes, please provide further information, ensuring no sensitive data is included within responses.

Suspicions or allegations related to safeguarding concerns should be reported to ODA.Safeguarding@defra.gov.uk

NA

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.

We have worked to design and implement a project which is GESI sensitive, inclusive to women and marginalised groups, and does not contribute to further inequality.

The community on Diego Garcia is somewhat diverse, comprising multiple nationalities and cultural sub-groups. Additionally, as there are no permanent residents, turnover of both military and civilian contractor personnel is high, with new individuals occupying each role every 3 to 12 months. Effective engagement therefore requires sustained outreach and relationship-building to better understand the unique barriers and motivators influencing participation across these communities. We have endeavoured to build working relationships with key stakeholders, and conduct outreach events in a variety of locations in order to engage with the broadest possible audience. Details of the considerations and actions relevant to this project are summarised below:

Rights: Legal and customary

National Laws

The British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) is governed under the Constitution Order of 2004. Individuals residing or working on Diego Garcia are subject to BIOT law, which is introduced via an informational video upon arrival. As this information is only provided in English, accessibility may be limited for those whose first language is not English.

Customary rules and 'lived' norms

Because BIOT is primarily a military/contractor environment (not a permanently resident civilian polity), much of daily life is shaped by military regulations, contractor employment rules, and organisational hierarchies rather than local customary law. Nevertheless, workplace norms, language practices and power dynamics (military vs civilian; contractor sub-groups) influence who can access information, complain, or participate in consultations. It is therefore important that our project engages relevant stakeholders early. We have the support of the BIOT Commissioner's office and have a good working relationship with the legal and HR representatives on the base to ensure that we are operating with accepted standards. We are also working to develop relationships with key contractor employers through in-person meetings and co-organised public-engagement events.

Enforcement, access to justice and everyday application

Day-to-day law-enforcement and order on Diego Garcia are carried out under BIOT/UK arrangements (including Royal Overseas Police Officers and military authorities); access to regular civil justice, independent local courts and publicly available legal aid are limited compared with mainland UK. That means formal legal remedies are often harder to access in practice, especially for non-English speakers or short-term contract staff. It is therefore important that we effectively communicate with participants about the legal restrictions around interacting with and researching native wildlife.

1. Gender Equality

The UK is a signatory to several international conventions related to gender equality, such as CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women).

Application to BIOT: While the UK ratified CEDAW, it has not extended all provisions to BIOT. Heriot-Watt University (based in the UK) takes a one university approach offering equivalence in academic standards and operations no matter an individuals' gender. In ecology and conservation gender inequality is most pronounced higher up the pay scale, by appointing a female PDRA we hope this helps, in a very small way to balance this. As the primary representative of the project on-island, we hope having a female PDRA also makes the project more accessible for women who like to be involved.

Over the past year the project PDRA has invested time building working relationships with the two female Environment Officers and male Strategic Environmental Officer, involving them in the development of the monitoring methodology and trying to create a plan which works with their schedules, availability and resources. Additionally, she has cultivated and maintained a working relationships with female community leaders in the primarily Mauritian and Filipino contractor community, and female representatives of the UK Armed Forces stationed in BIOT.

2. Human Rights

The UK is party to The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (not a treaty, but foundational), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

Application to BIOT: The United Kingdom acknowledges that United Nations Treaty standards apply to British Overseas Territories by participating in the monitoring process for the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) before the Human Rights Committee with specific reports on dependent territories. However, they specifically exclude BIOT from that procedure, as they did not extend the ICCPR to cover BIOT when the Covenant was ratified in 1976.

3. Rights of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities

The Chagossian or Ilois people (indigenous community) were forcibly removed from the Chagos Archipelago by the British Government between 1968 and 1973. The UK has not ratified the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples. However, the UK has supported the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), but this is not binding.

Application in BIOT: BIOT has had no permanent civilian population since the expulsion of Chagossian community by the British Government.

4. Environment

The UK has ratified The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and other multilateral environmental agreements (e.g. CITES, Ramsar).

Application to BIOT: BIOT law includes a number of regulations related to the environment. For example, the killing of crabs, and collection of shells, molluscs and corals is prohibited. Knowledge of the rules about seabirds appears to be less well widespread, so we will endeavour to improve this during public outreach events. We will also produce key information about environmental protection of birds in Tagalog (the dominant language among contractors) and language-free pictorial guides to make this knowledge more accessible to all.

Practice: Attitudes, customs, and beliefs

Environmental protection and engagement may not be a top priority for the military community stationed on Diego Garcia. According to analysis by Neta Crawford, co-founder of the Costs of War project at Brown University the US' armed forces and Department of Defense (DoD) agencies are the world's largest institutional greenhouse gas emitter, accounting for at least 1% of total US emissions annually. However, there is a history of top-down military support for environmental protection. The U.S. DoD has increased efforts to responsibly manage natural resources on its lands within the United States [Cranston, Curtis, *The U.S. Military's Environmental Protection Efforts: Unexpected Eco-Friendly Solutions to Land Management Problems* (March 28, 2019). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4872890> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4872890>] and previous public-engagement projects on Diego

Garcia (turtles: <https://www.marine.science/project/sea-turtle-research/> and manta rays: <https://www.mantatrust.org/chagos>) have recorded high levels of volunteer participation indicating that individuals are invested in their local environment.

As initial engagement with seabird research has been low, we have worked with the Commanding Officer of the U.S. Navy Forces to partner on a volunteer reward scheme “Defending Paradise” to encourage military engagement in conservation efforts. As a result six members of the U.S. forces joined guided walks (including two women), and four submitted images to our tern diet study. We have also engaged with the small contingent of British Armed Forces on Diego Garcia and received voluntary support from two individuals to deploy camera traps.

Environment: Stressors and vulnerability

Compared to many regions, Diego Garcia faces relatively few direct environmental stressors. All residents have access to reliable electricity, potable running water, and a range of communal facilities such as a gym, shop, library, and church.

Roles and responsibilities: Division of time, space, and labour

On Diego Garcia, there are no married couples or children, which reduces childcare responsibilities. However, many residents provide financial support to families in their countries of origin. Separation from loved ones can cause stress and anxiety, often requiring significant time and financial resources for communication. This project will remain entirely voluntary, ensuring no additional burdens are placed on any group.

Civilian contractors typically work long hours with limited leisure time. To accommodate this, outreach events will be scheduled in consultation with community leaders to identify the most convenient times and locations for participation and to tie in with existing events to minimise a loss of leisure time.

Representation: Participation, inclusion, and power

As the island of Diego Garcia is solely utilised as a military base with a well-defined hierarchical structure, this has an influence on social structure and the availability of individuals able to participate in this project. We must therefore actively work to ensure that inclusion is not limited by gender or rank, and that members of all communities have the opportunity to engage with seabird research. To foster inclusive participation, it is important to continue to secure the support of both military and civilian leadership. Engagement will be pursued with community leaders across all sectors of the island population to encourage broad involvement. Outreach activities will be held in diverse social settings to maximize accessibility and ensure participants feel comfortable. Registration for guided events will allow individuals to sign up with peers of their choosing, with multiple time slots offered to accommodate preferences. Each event or guided walk will also include female representation within the project team to promote gender balance and inclusivity.

Resources: Access and control of assets and services

All resources required for guided walks will be provided, ensuring no financial burden on volunteers. Transportation on the island is free and accessible, with shuttle buses running frequently between inhabited areas. Many residents also use bicycles, though these require personal investment in purchase and maintenance. Overall, mobility across the island is supported by reliable and cost-free options, minimizing barriers to participation.

The contractor community receive relatively lower wages, which may affect their ability to invest in telecommunications (mobile phones, data and minutes top-up, SIM cards, laptops etc). Our project can alleviate some of this inequality in resources by offering SIM card top ups and data packages to volunteers, enabling them to upload images to our database without incurring a financial cost.

Checklist for submission

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