



**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	<i>DPLUS213</i>
Project title	Building baseline knowledge of mesophotic ecosystems in Ascension Island MPA
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	Ascension Island
Lead Organisation	Plymouth Marine Laboratory
Partner(s)	Plymouth Marine Laboratory, University of Plymouth, Ascension Island Government Conservation and Fisheries Department
Project Leader	<i>Kerry Howell</i>
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	<i>HYR2</i>
Project website/blog/social media	<i>N/A</i>

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.

<p>During this reporting period, project activities have focused on data analysis, community engagement planning, and preparations for the second field campaign (scheduled for November 2025). Progress against outputs is as follows:</p> <p>Output 1 (Capacity building): Training materials and draft protocols developed in Year 1 have been reviewed and refined. The two newly recruited Project Officers are now in post, increasing AIGCFD's capacity to prepare for independent mesophotic surveys. Interim on-island data processing has continued, with support from PML and UoP.</p> <p>Output 2 (Baseline biodiversity surveys): Analysis of imagery from the November 2024 field campaign has advanced. Preliminary species identifications and draft habitat maps have been updated and refined, building toward more detailed habitat classifications. These datasets are also informing the planning of survey sites for the November 2025 field campaign.</p> <p>Output 3 (Oceanographic surveys): Processing of the oceanographic mooring datasets collected in January 2025 is ongoing. Early results highlight strong tidal forcing and thermocline excursions (>4 °C variation within minutes). These findings are now being integrated with biological datasets to prepare for modelling work later in Year 2.</p> <p>Output 5 (Community engagement): Outreach for the project has been progressing well with MPA Youth committee factsheets created for key species seen on Ascension Island mesophotic footage and over 40 people engaged with the video clips being shown at the annual marine festival.</p> <p>Output 6 (Knowledge exchange): Arrangements for the participation of Knowledge Exchange Fellows (KEFs) from St Helena and Bermuda in the second field campaign have been confirmed, with travel bookings completed. Initial discussions on adapting survey methodologies to different OT contexts are continuing remotely, with workshops scheduled during the on-island visits to further explore potential porting of the project to other territories.</p>	
<p>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.</p>	
<p>The main challenge during this reporting period has been the pace of image annotation and analysis. The annotation platform being used requires a stable, internet connection, which is not currently available in the AIG office. Starlink connectivity is being introduced on the island, but it is not yet operational within the AIGCFD office building. As a result, annotation work has proceeded more slowly than expected.</p> <p>To manage this, an additional set of images from the video data were processed by UoP to ensure data are available for the final habitat mapping and modelling exercises. Although this has introduced some delay to the image processing workflow, it has not impacted the overall project timetable. Habitat classifications and imagery remain on track to feed into the November 2025 field campaign and subsequent Year 2 analyses.</p>	
<p>3. Have any of these issues been discussed with NIRAS and if so, have changes been made to the original agreement?</p>	
Discussed with NIRAS:	No
Formal Change Request submitted:	No
Received confirmation of change acceptance:	No
<p>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></p>	

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?

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

No

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.

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

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.

Maintaining progress in Year 2: We recognise the importance of sustained progress given the compressed schedule. Since April, we have kept to timetable, with image and oceanographic analyses advancing and preparations for the November 2025 field campaign on track.

Increasing partner communication: We have increased the frequency of partner meetings, combining monthly online calls with more regular email updates, to closely monitor progress.

Community engagement strategy: The strategy has been finalised and is now being implemented. Activities were carried out during the Marine Festival (September 2025), school outreach, and the re-establishment of the MPA Youth Committee. A dedicated session with the Youth Committee is planned for November.

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?	
Include your project reference in the subject line of submission email.	X
Submit to BCF-Reports@niras.com	
Please ensure claim forms and other communications for your project are not included with this report.	