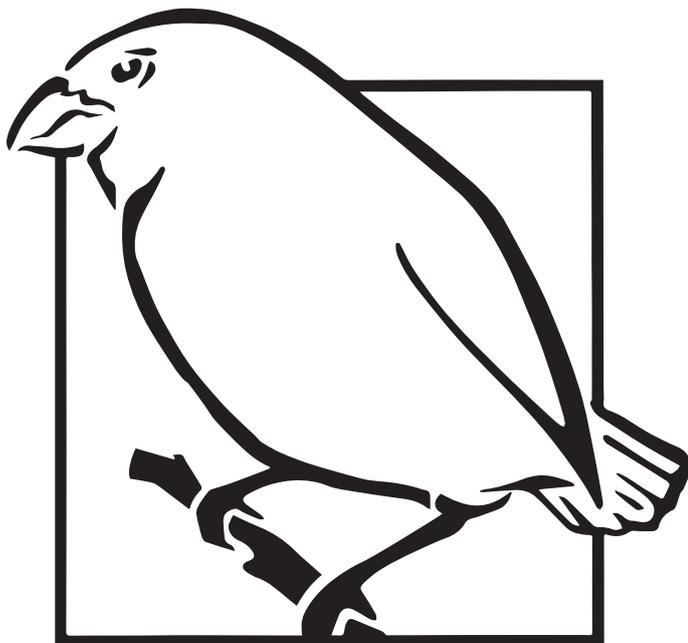


Newsletter

May 2018



Three generations attending Hsi the garden, Credit: Paul Bates



DARWIN INITIATIVE

The Darwin Initiative supports developing countries to conserve biodiversity and reduce poverty. Funded by the UK Government, the Darwin Initiative provides grants for projects working in developing countries and UK Overseas Territories (OTs).

Projects support:

- the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)
- the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-Sharing (ABS)
- the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA)
- the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)

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Destination Ayeyarwady Environmental learning schools, Credit: Paul Bates

Addressing CBD objectives – a view from the Ayeyarwady River, Myanmar (Burma)

The locals call them 'labai' and the visitors 'the Irrawaddy River dolphin'. For the Myanmar (Burmese) fishing communities these almost mystical cetaceans are their friends – aquatic sheep dogs who for generations have helped the fishermen and women find, corral, and catch the river fish (for an excellent video of this see [here](#)).

It was this wonderful wildlife that our Darwin project set out to help conserve in 2014. How did we do? Did we meet the objectives of the CBD? One year since the completion of the 1st Phase of the project is perhaps a good time to reassess. For us the answer is definitely 'yes', but we did not do it alone, with many other programmes and organisations contributing. There is still much to be done, but the project has made a significant impact in at least seven different ways.

First, in terms of conserving biological diversity, after years of decline, dolphin numbers finally appear to be on the rise with a **reported 10% increase in 2017**. Despite this, they remain Critically Endangered, with only 76 individuals; just as 'one swallow does not make a summer', one successful year for the dolphin does not make a trend. But it is a possible indication of better things to come.

Second, the Myanmar (Burmese) government has recognised the iconic importance of the river dolphin. In January 2018 they announced they will expand the Irrawaddy Dolphin Protection Area a further 118 km to the north – more than doubling its length to 190 km.

Third, in terms of the equitable sharing of benefits of conserving wildlife, the project's community programme has been an amazing success and in November 2017

won a national award 'Best Community Involvement in Tourism', Myanmar. Known as 'Destination Ayeyarwady', it has three clear aims:

- Conserving the Irrawaddy River dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*) and other wildlife on the Ayeyarwady River;
- Conserving the traditional culture of cooperative fishing with dolphins with cast nets;
- Providing additional income for fishing communities who have traditionally fished co-operatively with the dolphins.

All money from the community programme stays in the village and is divided between the service provider, community projects, and wildlife conservation.

Fourth, the success of the 1st Phase of 'Destination Ayeyarwady' has triggered a wonderful follow-up response, with over \$16,200 (in money and in kind) being **raised in donations** for a 2nd Phase. We thank **GeoDiscover**, Yangon for their great help with this fundraising. The 2nd Phase has seen the construction of a new building at Hsith village, which will not only be used as an Eco-lodge for visiting tourists to stay overnight (improving the visitor experience and boosting income to the village) but also as a rural **Environmental Learning Centre**. It will help expand the training in issues such as waste management, especially plastics. This was begun under the Darwin project but will be further developed through new programmes, bringing in school children, students, and villagers from throughout Singu District and beyond. It should be noted that many of the Myanmar (Burma) and UK staff who were closely involved in the 1st Phase of the Darwin project are still working on the 2nd Phase – most are giving their time, without pay, because of their pride, dedication, and commitment.



Destination Ayeyarwady Hsithé Visitor Centre, Credit: Paul Bates

Fifth, His Excellency the Minister of Hotels and Tourism has become a strong supporter of the project, encouraging site visits not only from staff in his own ministry but also those in state ministries including Chin State and Mandalay Division. He sees the project as a role model for Myanmar (Burma) in community-led tourism. Great interest is also being shown by other Myanmar (Burma) conservation and ecotourism organisations which are keen to replicate many of the ideas.

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Sixth, as a result of the Minister's interest, we have been able to further encourage the Ministry to promote ecotourism to Myanmar, both as a way of supporting rural communities and to help preserve the environment. One important output of this is the **new ecotourism website**,

which the Harrison Institute wrote in conjunction with the MTF (Myanmar Tourism Federation) and which highlights opportunities for bird watching, trekking, cycling, sailing, as well as visiting 'Destination Ayeyarwady', of course!

Seventh, and finally, a number of the original Darwin project staff are now also part of a new EU funded Erasmus+ project, which is promoting the teaching of 'Environmental protection' within the Myanmar (Burma) university sector. They are using their practical experience to advise on a **new curriculum and training programmes**.

Perhaps the catch phrase for the Darwin Initiative should be 'from small acorns mighty oak trees grow'. Is 'Destination Ayeyarwady' a mighty oak? Not yet, but the roots are looking good and the branches are starting to spread nicely. On behalf of everyone involved, I extend a big thank you to the Darwin Initiative for your support. We will keep watering and nourishing this particular tree and have high hopes.

You can find out more on the **Harrison Institute** and dedicated **project** webpages. For more information on project 21-012 click **here** or contact Project Leader Paul Bates, **pjjbates2@hotmail.com**