

[News story: Plants at the heart of the latest call for Darwin Initiative bids](#)

The UK government is today (22 May) celebrating [United Nations International Day of Biological Diversity](#) by making funding available to protect wildlife across the globe.

The theme for this year is 'our biodiversity, our food, our health'. It comes as the [Darwin Initiative](#) re-opens for new projects to apply for funding in the latest round.

Since 1992, the fund has been putting an emphasis on nature and health, and providing security of food supply to rural communities in some of the most remote parts of the globe – supporting the Sustainable Development Goals on protecting and enhancing nature.

The [Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund](#), which now accepts bids from projects aimed at combating the illegal trade in plants in addition to animal-focused projects, is also looking to back new schemes. This fund has received the support of [£6 million of UK Aid over the next five years](#) to make sure that more vital projects can go ahead.

Recent reports on international nature have put the issue of species loss high on the nation's agenda. The [UN's Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services](#) report showed nearly a million species are in danger of extinction and the Darwin Initiative is part of the UK government's response to this emerging issue.

The latest round of funding comes during the government's [Year of Green Action](#), a year-long drive to help people to connect with, protect and enhance nature.

Environment Minister Thérèse Coffey said:

UN International Day for Biological Diversity celebrates the wonderful diversity of nature and wildlife around our planet.

Nature delivers many environmental benefits including clean air and water, sustainable food supplies, and recovery and resilience to natural disasters.

The Darwin Initiative delivers support for international nature conservation projects and many economic activities depend on nature, including agriculture, forestry, fisheries and tourism.

At the start of May, [32 new projects shared £8.2million in the 25th round of funding from the Darwin Initiative](#).

There has been continuous progress made by ongoing schemes backed by the Darwin Initiative, with two highlights in Guinea and the Philippines.

Tropical Important Plant Areas in Guinea

Following three years of research, [European and Guinean scientists, NGOs and staff of the Guinean Ministry of Environment, Waters and Forests, have evidenced 22 Tropical Important Plant Areas in Guinea](#). These are the first Tropical Important Plant Areas (TIPAs) that have been identified in Africa.

This designation of the 22 TIPAs, which cover 3.5% of Guinea's surface area and include more than 60% of 273 threatened species identified in the country, mean those plants will now stand a far greater chance of protection.

[Darwin Initiative support of nearly £300,000 over three years](#) has helped to make sure this work takes place.

Dr Martin Cheek, Senior Research Leader at the [Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew](#), said:

This official status is vital in Guinea. Habitat loss has been devastating with calculations that 96% of the country's original forest has already been cleared, and that which remains is under severe pressure. It looks like as many as 35 species have gone extinct in Guinea, from trees to minute herbs, daisies, peas and clematis, all due to human pressures. Twenty-five of these are globally unique to Guinea. So these are likely global extinctions.

Fisheries protection in the Philippines

The [Darwin Initiative has supported two projects with a total of nearly £800,000](#) both aimed at better protecting important coastal habitats in the Philippines and making sure that local communities have access to sustainable fisheries.

Marine protected areas (MPAs) are a key tool for sustaining marine biodiversity and fish stocks. Twenty-five per cent of the world's MPAs are in the Philippines, 95% of which are community based.

However, the average size of the critical no-take "replenishment" zones within these MPAs is only 12 hectares, which is inadequate to fulfil conservation objectives, and only 12% were rated as sustained at the last assessment, owing to an overdependence on philanthropic funding.

Small and unsustainable MPAs are driven by a lack of adequate business models underpinning these conservation measures. As a result, marginalised fishing communities faced with the need to feed their families today cannot afford to set aside large enough areas in the hope that they will generate increased fish catches in the future. Additionally, MPAs have traditionally focused on coral reefs and have failed to incorporate other critical habitats.

ZSL's (Zoological Society of London) Net-Works initiative has been pioneering the iMPA – which describes the “ideal MPA”, but also interpreted as innovative, inclusive, improved. These are bigger in size, better managed and enforced and sustainably financed using the Net-Works business model.

Dr Nick Hill, Senior Technical Specialist at [ZSL](#), said:

Darwin Initiative funding for the first two iMPAs has gained the support of local government. These two MPAs are nearly 50 times the average size of MPAs in the Philippines, with no-take replenishment zones 16 times bigger.

This is a key milestone for ZSL's project and proves that in the Philippines larger community-based MPAs make a meaningful contribution towards the Philippines' nationally-mandated target of protecting 15% of municipal waters.

Projects supported by the Darwin Initiative are illustrative of a 'win-win' approach, encouraging sustainable livelihoods whilst conserving some of the world's iconic and endangered species and landscapes, which benefits us all.