

The Rufford Foundation Final Report

Congratulations on the completion of your project that was supported by The Rufford Foundation.

We ask all grant recipients to complete a Final Report Form that helps us to gauge the success of our grant giving. The Final Report must be sent in **word format** and not PDF format or any other format. We understand that projects often do not follow the predicted course but knowledge of your experiences is valuable to us and others who may be undertaking similar work. Please be as honest as you can in answering the questions – remember that negative experiences are just as valuable as positive ones if they help others to learn from them.

Please complete the form in English and be as clear and concise as you can. Please note that the information may be edited for clarity. We will ask for further information if required. If you have any other materials produced by the project, particularly a few relevant photographs, please send these to us separately.

Please submit your final report to jane@rufford.org.

Thank you for your help.

Josh Cole, Grants Director

Grant Recipient Details	
Your name	Vedharajan Balaji
Project title	Dugong Habitat Survey and Awareness in northern Palk Bay
RSG reference	15083-2
Reporting period	
Amount of grant	£5800
Your email address	omcarfoundation@gmail.com
Date of this report	20 th April 2015

1. Please indicate the level of achievement of the project's original objectives and include any relevant comments on factors affecting this.

Objective	Not achieved	Partially achieved	Fully achieved	Comments
Acoustic survey of seagrass beds				With our own technical experience and survey equipment, the survey was successfully conducted which is an extension of our earlier seagrass survey.
Identification of probable dugong feeding grounds				Dugongs are rare in Palk Bay. We could find healthy seagrass beds in seaward edge, where fishery activities relatively less. Fisher interviews in our other project indicated that dugongs do appear in seaward seagrass areas, which also has dugong's favourite seagrass species. We predict this would be the suitable sites to be protected for saving dugongs instead of large areas. However we did not see even a single dugong during survey, so this objective moved back to partially achieved one.
Display of our thematic seagrass GIS maps in local fishery department office and community halls				The maps displayed in local community halls and a copy given to local government departments. An article was also published in a leading local news paper in October 2014
Creating awareness among 2500 youths/students using our survey results, underwater photos/videos				We could reach only 1845 students/month and not 2500 students as planned. This due to examinations, monsoon and holidays.
Organising field trip/in situ education at				We could organize up to 230 students which was higher than planned 60 students. This is due

OMCAR Palk Bay Centre for 60 students and stakeholders				to the interest of local schools to send their students to our centre as a part of their curriculum in environmental education field trip.
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2. Please explain any unforeseen difficulties that arose during the project and how these were tackled (if relevant).

Organising school level awareness events were more difficult due to two reasons.

- Our staff also engaged in two other awareness topics such as sustainable livelihood and mangrove conservation for our other projects, in addition to seagrass – dugong awareness of this project. So it was difficult for us to deal with three topics to large number of students within an education period.
- Schools have sometimes unwilling to organise school level awareness events due to examinations, internal issues, holidays and monsoon. We had to adjust our schedules several times in a month between schools in order to keep going as planned.

We could reach 1845 students within 10 months to talk about dugong – seagrass conservation with printed booklets, photocopies, short underwater video with photos from local seagrass beds in addition to thematic maps of this project.

However the scenario was completely different for our field trip for which we received about 250 students instead 60 students as planned, which is not because of our team. The reason is that the schools have their own curriculum to organise students to a field trip for which they showed interest to send it to our OMCAR Palk Bay Environmental Education Centre.

3. Briefly describe the three most important outcomes of your project.

1. For the first time in India, a detailed thematic GIS map of seagrass beds produced by our organisation in Palk Bay. We have to thank National Geographic, Light House Foundation, Ministry of Science and technology and Rufford Small Grants who has been supporting us.
2. Our organisation has built its own logistics and technical knowledge within our small team to become fully fledged independent marine conservation and survey organisation through this project, which is a follow up of our previous year work. Our thematic seagrass GIS maps are displayed in local government offices and

community halls showing 12,200 ha of seagrass beds in Thanjavur district for the first time.

3. Our communication with schools during this project, lead to continuous bookings of local schools to our Palk Bay Environmental Education Centre, where students enjoy following in one day field trips. Yes, we slowly upgraded our centre which is now giving following free education for rural schools.
 - Display of marine survey equipments and their role to support marine conservation in omcar foundation.
 - Display of local marine shells, fishes and invertebrates to prove rich biodiversity of Palk Bay.
 - Demonstration of scuba diving, mangrove nursery raising and seagrass research methods.
 - Surround sounded fully equipped movie theatre – showing local videos and photos of local seagrass beds, mangroves, fishing methods and economic importance.

4. Briefly describe the involvement of local communities and how they have benefitted from the project (if relevant).

To be honest, thematic GIS maps may be giving first time visuals of seagrass beds, but not any direct, immediate benefits to the local communities through this project. However, community (youths!) mobilisation, rapport and positive belief and value on local ecosystems that are strongly achieved through field trips, school education events and display of project maps at community halls using the project output (GIS map of seagrass bed). Our grassroots conservation is slow but we have long term goals that can be achieved only through years of exposure to local community.

“What exactly omcar like to achieve such projects from RSG and others is to establish participatory seagrass protected sites in selected sites that will be mutually agreed within the community for sustainable fishery and conservation of endangered species”.

We strongly believe that the two projects from RSG are important milestones that have tangible outputs for positive impacts in near future (i.e., participatory marine protected areas).

5. Are there any plans to continue this work?

Yes. We already studying fish assemblages in same project area to understand how seagrass beds support local fishery in order to link and justify the establishment of participatory seagrass protected area.

In 2015, we will complete seagrass fishes and its economic value research. In 2016, a resolution will be raised at IUCN World Conservation Congress at Hawaii to declare seagrass beds of Palk Bay as protected sites for dugongs. From 2015 – 2018, a species atlas of Palk Bay Flora and Fauna will be prepared and shared through a dedicative website as "SavePalkBay". In 2020, our centre will be organising 15,000 school awareness events and 170 field trips exclusively related to seagrass beds and mangroves of Palk Bay.

6. How do you plan to share the results of your work with others?

1. The work already shared with wide local community by publishing a popular article in local newspaper (see link).
2. As a member of IUCN, OMCAR Foundation will participate in IUCN Regional Conservation Forum in August 2015 and World Conservation Forum in 2016 during which the study results will be shared with international viewers through posters, presentations and pamphlets.
3. The study results will be used as a key finding to justify the resolution for Palk Bay protected site in IUCN World Conservation Congress 2016.
4. We will continuously organise education events every year, at our centre to explain about seagrass conservation to fisher youths with local education department.

7. Timescale: Over what period was The Rufford Foundation grant used? How does this compare to the anticipated or actual length of the project?

The fund for dugong survey field work was used in the first 4 months of the project (after this period monsoon weather started which was not suitable for field survey). The awareness funds have been used until April 2015, as it is a set of regular school events.

8. Budget: Please provide a breakdown of budgeted versus actual expenditure and the reasons for any differences. All figures should be in £ sterling, indicating the local exchange rate used.

Item	Budgeted Amount	Actual Amount	Difference	Comments
Fuel and operational cost for Survey Boat to survey 95 sq km area	1500	1500	0	Additional support helped to balance the fund within budgeted amount.
Local transport for research equipments and materials	500	600	100	We had to conduct the survey due to technical issues in survey equipment

Food and accommodation during dugong habitat survey	200	350	150	We had to conduct the survey due to technical issues in survey equipment
Field Survey Consumables	400	300	-100	The consumables were comfortably fitted into 300
One day marine awareness field trip for 50 students	750	750	0	
Organising school level dugong-seagrass awareness education for 2500 students (250 students/month)	1500	1700	200	Pre arrangements and coordination task needed more time and expenses than planned.
Materials for marine conservation drawing competitions with food for students in schools	750	750	0	
Visual documentation and media publicity	200	200	0	
Total	5800	6050	250	

9. Looking ahead, what do you feel are the important next steps?

During the project period, in June 2014, our organisation received "Tamil Nadu State Environment Award" for environment awareness, and I was selected in Pushing Boundaries International Challenge to attend IUCN Congress at Australia in November 2014, where I delivered speech to youth around the globe to inspire them in nature conservation. ([Please download this presentation from here](#)). As a founder and director of this organisation, I have no other option to work in Palk Bay. The energy I invested in the last 15 years in northern Palk Bay is now recognized by governments.

Our team like to bring all these grassroot conservation achievements into next level.

- By using this technical experience in acoustic seagrass survey and logistics created in the last three years, we would like to extend our seagrass acoustic survey further southside, to complete entire seagrass beds of Palk Bay, India.
- With all the advanced communication and education set up at our Palk Bay Environmental Education Centre, we want to continue monthly field trips and school events which resulted good activities and outputs with the support of RSG.

- No documentaries or picture books for children available about local mangroves and seagrass beds. We like to work further to produce a short documentary and picture book of Palk Bay coastal ecosystem with international expertise and collaborations in order to have a high standard awareness tools in local language.
- My (our team) dream is to establish a safe no fishing zone (will be called as participatory conservation sites), where seahorses, pipe fishes and sea cucumbers of Palk Bay can naturally breed with the support of local community, while ensuring increase in local fish catch. So our next step would be to negotiate local community and government for positive, participatory marine conservation site, for which we need education and awareness tools in addition to baseline scientific information about seagrass beds further.

10. Did you use The Rufford Foundation logo in any materials produced in relation to this project? Did the RSGF receive any publicity during the course of your work?

Yes, all our education events displayed posters and pamphlets in which we used Rufford Foundation logo. We also have it in our website.

11. Any other comments?

I sincerely thank the Trustees, Director and staff of Rufford Small Grants Programme on behalf of OMCAR Foundation team. I feel it is important for both Rufford team and OMCAR to meet directly, where exactly the project fund has been spent. So, cordially invite any one of the representative from Rufford Small Grants to visit our centre, where safe, comfortable accommodation, delicious Indian food is always available.

Other than funding, what we really need is a direct observation and constructive suggestions from internationally experienced conservationists for us in order to streamline our efforts global view in local conservation settings.

I really appreciate the quickest replies and acknowledgements of periodical updates that I received from Dr Jane Raymond.

We received a state government award and international competition for participating in IUCN world conservation congress. Both were based on the wide reach of youths for marine awareness. So, I would like to share the credits of those awards with Rufford Small Grants whose contribution really initiated more other good ideas and upgrade of our centre into full fledged marine education centre. (I mentioned Rufford Small Grants with other supporting agencies) during my presentation at session 8 of IUCN World Conservation Congress, November 2014, held at Sydney, Australia.

Field conservation activities are not always yielding 100% positive outputs, thanks to Rufford for understanding this.

Fact is our education events, and our Pak Bay Centre is now become famous, receiving continuous bookings from rural schools for field trips, which is nice and expensive as we do all our services for 100% free to local community including food, booklets, transport, exhibitions of underwater habitats and animals.

We are also interested to organise Rufford Small Grants receiver meet at our centre in near future. We are good at organising food, local transport and logistics needed. Nearby airport is about 100 km. It may not be in huge city, but it is in a really nice place where environmental conservation ideas and experience can be shared. We need some other person/team/organisations interested in it for communicating participants.