

The Dhole Project: Donor Report

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Dholes or Asiatic wild dogs are large carnivores that live in social packs of up to 30 animals. They are found across forests of Asia, but the largest population is likely restricted to Indian forests. They share space with tigers and leopards in forests of mainland India and southeast Asia, and with wolves and snow leopards in trans-Himalayas and central Asia. Unfortunately, dholes have gone extinct from ~75% of their former geographic range and there may be just around 1000-1500 adult, mature individuals left in the wild. Because of this, they are listed as Endangered in the IUCN Red List. The dearth of information on dhole ecology stands as a major hurdle towards their conservation.

My PhD project attempts to better understand one of India's most charismatic carnivores. The aim is to explore some basic aspects of dhole ecology, such as, how many dholes are there? How much space do dhole packs need to survive? How are members of a pack related to each other? What landscapes have the potential to host dhole populations for the future?, among others. This can be instrumental in filling some serious gaps in our understanding of dhole ecology. I relied on crowd funding to garner support for the initial phase of this project, with a target of \$2000, using the RocketHub web portal for my campaign. The funds (in full or in part) were intended for costs involved in buying field equipment, carrying out field surveys, paying local field assistant salaries, local travel in India, and potentially for other expenses such as processing of dhole scats for DNA analyses.

This report provides a summary of the fundraiser campaign, status and progress of the project, and planned activities for the next year.

Campaign Strategies

Background and Incentives

I first set up my website (www.arjunsrivathsa.org) to ensure potential donors of my credibility. I also had a fully unrestricted Facebook profile and an active Twitter account. Although crowd-funding is purported to work better if the focus is on an individual rather than a project, I found it easier to create an entity titled 'The Dhole Project' (TDP), and appeal for donations to the project rather than to myself. I designed a logo and used it to represent my project.

My target audience was primarily students and alumni of University of Florida (for spreading the word and small donations), friends and family on social media, US citizens who may be interested in supporting conservation, and a wide network of citizens (enthusiasts, peers, scientists, and wildlife photographers) in India.



Campaign Content & Progress

I posted regular updates about the progress of the campaign using the tag #DonateForDholes. As part of the campaign, I created a two-minute promotional video on YouTube that I put up on the RocketHub page. In the first week, I shared the video on social media multiple times to keep the campaign active on peers' activity feeds. The content also included appeals on Facebook and Twitter with links to the RocketHub page, as well as to my personal website, which had additional details about the project. In the second week, I targeted all the wildlife, and specifically wild canid groups and pages on Facebook (WWF, GreenPeace, Wild dog Foundation, Sanctuary Asia, Saevus, etc.).

I began interacting with scientists on Twitter, focusing on those individuals who had a large number of followers. I also made attempts at reaching out to some select celebrities, although this did not elicit a response from them. In the third week, I actively shared images of dholes, shot by professional photographers, adding short blurbs on dhole ecology. At the end of the third week, I created a dhole-themed science-toon series on my Facebook page Pocket Science India ([Weblink](#)), which effectively dealt with the 'dip' in funds/traffic the previous week.

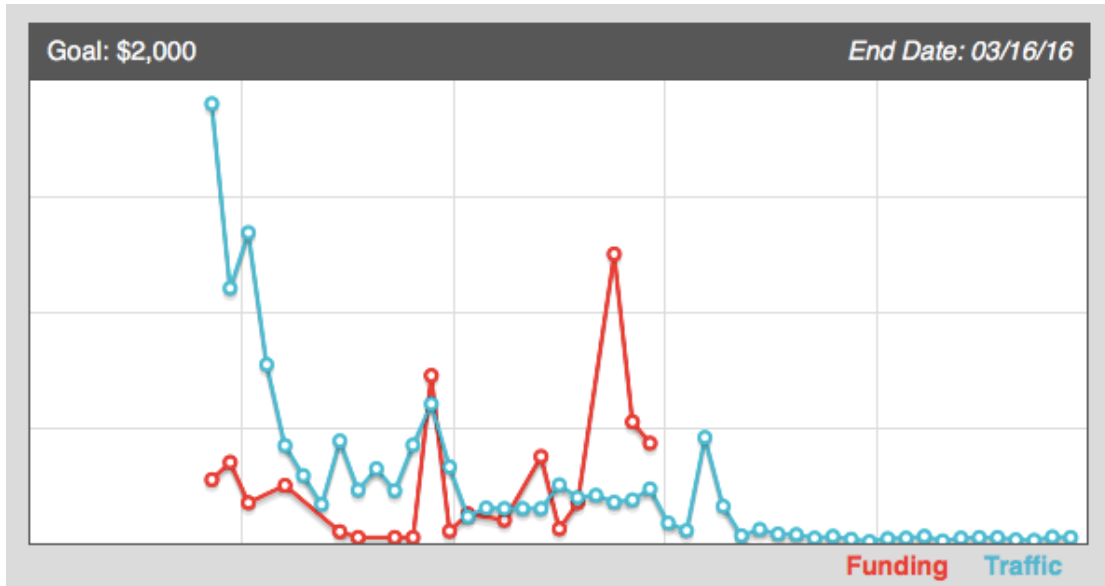


Media coverage

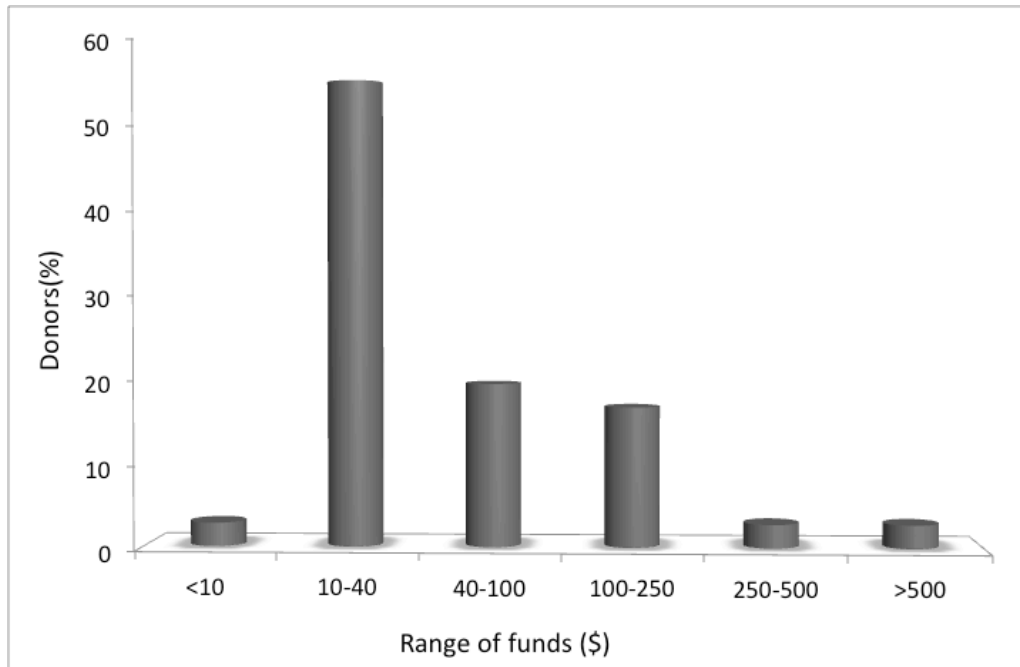
Leading from the posts shared by my friends and acquaintances on Facebook, I was contacted by Mid-Day, a newspaper publication based in Mumbai, India. I did an interview with the reporter, Mr. Dipanjan Sinha, and the project was featured in a newspaper article. The article was published as part of the Mid-Day's World Wildlife Day series, and this led to a spike in the traffic to my website and the project page. I also did another interview with LiveMint (India), with the environmentalist and conservation journalist Ms. Bahar Dutt. This second interview essays the insights from carrying out a fund-raiser for wildlife research in India (which is likely the first of its kind).

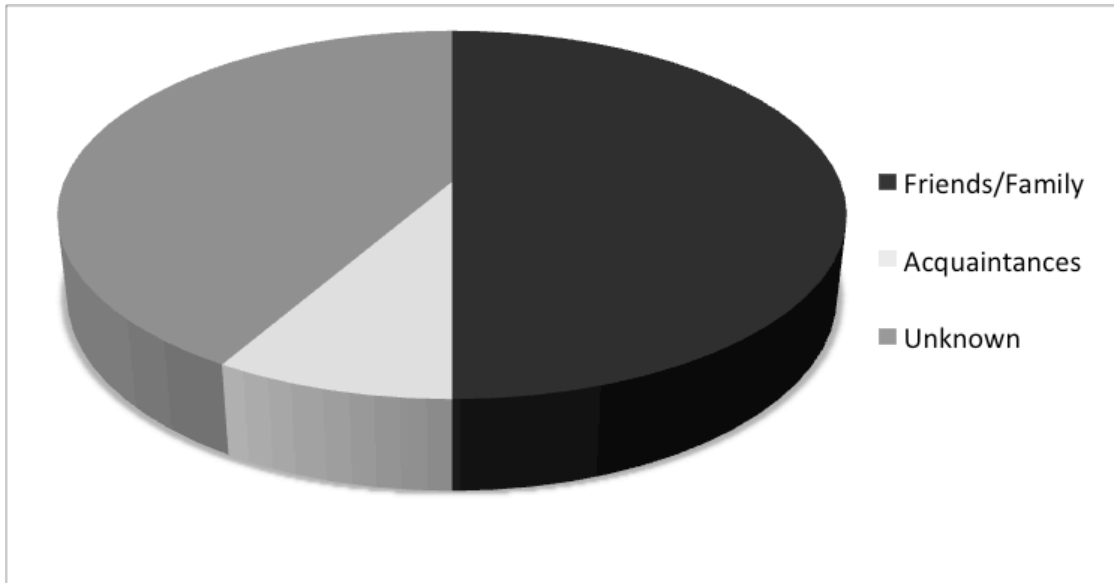
Results

The campaign was active for 27 days (19th February to 16th March 2016) on RocketHub. I had a total of 36 donors who contributed to the project. The website traffic almost consistently remained higher than the number of donors or the amount donated to the project. As predicted, the donations were high in the beginning, showed a significant dip towards the middle, and then spiked towards the end of the campaign.

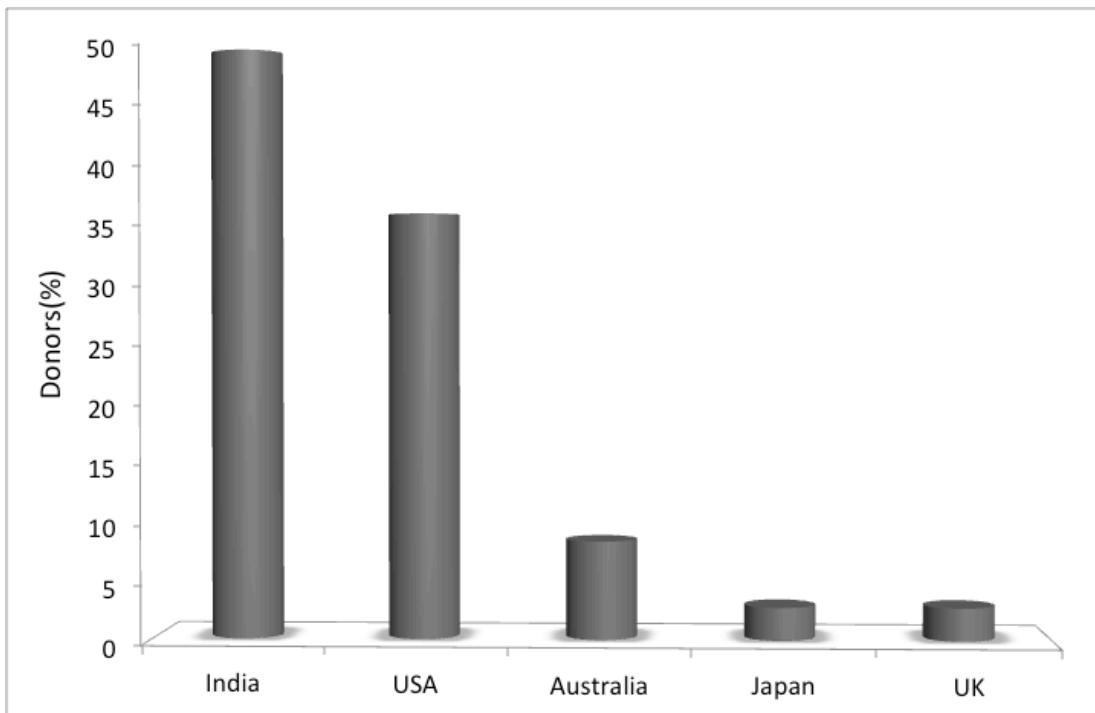


The average amount donated was \$55 (range \$5-\$500). Since most of my campaigning focused on social media, my friends and family constituted the majority, accounting for 50% of all donors. I was able to reach my goal of \$2000 in 25 days.





I had anticipated funds for the project from citizens of India and USA. Surprisingly, the donors for the project also hailed from Australia, Japan and the UK, although most of the donors were still from India and USA.



Lessons and Insights

Communication, engagement, and outreach

While the role of big grants and funding agencies cannot be undermined, crowd funding provides an alternate platform that can play a supplementary role in funding research studies. It cannot, of course, replace large grants, because the corresponding returns for effort invested in the two cases are not comparable. But what a crowd funding campaign does offer is a brilliant opportunity to make research/conservation issues accessible to the public. The current campaign involved efforts towards breaking down the science, communicating it with people, inspiring them, getting them excited about my area of study, and encouraging them to contribute to the project.

The feedback for the project was extremely heartening. The project attracted donors and supporters from all over the world (Japan, Australia, US, UK, India). Many professional wildlife photographers readily shared their dhole images for the campaign. A lot of friends and acquaintances actively campaigned for it on social media. The cartoon series I made had more than a hundred shares on Facebook. This likely facilitated better awareness about dholes in general, and not necessarily about just this project.

Besides the monetary contributions, I received some very encouraging words from people. Many were keen to know more about the project, and some wanted to participate. Some others spoke about how they didn't know what dholes were, or, that they didn't know the species was in such a dire state. Overall, this was a great outreach exercise to bring dholes into the limelight.

Outcomes

The Dhole Project will be executed as a collaborative research project with Wildlife Conservation Society in India (WCS-India Program). My aim was to invest the funds raised through this campaign for preliminary work in India during summer (May-July) of 2016. During my stay in India, I was able to (i) complete proposals seeking research permits from the forest department, (ii) meet and interact with forest department officials from the State of Kerala- which is one of the study sites for this project, (iii) process dhole-related data from previous surveys [2013-2015] I had conducted with WCS-India, (iv) carry out preliminary analysis to ascertain changes in dhole distribution at a landscape-scale between 2007 to 2015, and (v) present findings from a decade of research on dhole ecology at the Conservation Asia 2016 conference in Singapore. Owing to the generous support from WCS-India, I was able to offset costs for many planned activities this summer. A list of expenditures from the crowd-funded amount is provided below:

Description	Amount (USD)
Total funding target	2000
RocketHub fees	80
Total available for TDP	1920
Flight tickets Bangalore-Kerala-Bangalore	90
Intern Salary for one month	112
Total Expenses Incurred	202
Balance	1718

In the next few months, starting from September 2016, I will be hiring two-four interns who will be working under my supervision to process additional dhole-related data. This will be subsequently analyzed when I return to India next summer. The balance amount from this campaign will be used for paying the interns' salary and also for the fieldwork, starting next summer (May/June 2017).

Future directions

Conservation philanthropy is still not a big thing in India. Certainly, there are people who support many charitable causes and quite generously at that. But this is not on par with the developed nations where wildlife research and conservation attracts a lot more attention and monetary support. With that background, this project was a case in point. But as a scientist, I discovered that crowd funding for research is an excellent platform for bridging the gap between science and the non-academic public. I remain deeply indebted to donors like you, who helped the first leg of this project. With your continued support, I also look forward to exploring other avenues that could augment such crowd-funding efforts and thereby expand the frontiers of public engagement in conservation science.