

SAIGA NEWS

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Providing a six-language forum for exchange of ideas
and information about saiga conservation and ecology



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FORUM

Editorial note: As we reported in SN, 20, the Russian Federation has made the decision to include the saiga into their Red Book of Endangered Species. This decision has generated controversy. The Mammals section of the Bureau of the Committee for rare and endangered animals, plants and fungi discussed whether only the population in the North-West pre-Caspian area should be included, but a majority vote recommended that the saiga should be included as a species inhabiting the territory of the Russian Federation. An extensive discussion is taking place on the site regulation.gov.ru, before the final decision is made. Today we publish an article by Vyacheslav Gagarin on this topic, as well as some responses by Russian experts.

It is too early to give up on the saiga

Vyacheslav Gagarin

Independent expert on captive breeding of wild animals, lab_z@mail.ru

According to the optimistic estimates of some experts, saiga numbers are stable in the north-west pre-Caspian area, while the pessimistic estimates of other, equally experienced, experts suggest that they are steadily decreasing. Experts agree only on one issue; there has been no increase in the saiga population, and it is not foreseen in the near future. My attitude to the debate on whether saigas should be included in the Red Book is that this is the surest way to bury it not only as a hunting resource but as a species as well. Everybody knows what the Russian Federation's Red Book is; a hospice for species whose numbers are low or reducing. As soon as any species is included into this list, one can surely bid farewell to it. Ask yourselves how many species in the Red Book have started to increase in numbers? How many of them have been removed from the Red Book after they were

restored? Everybody knows the answer. In Russia, funding for the conservation of Red Book species is by an order of magnitude lower than funding for conservation of hunting resources and frequently it is completely lacking. In addition, in this country no one is responsible for the conservation and restoration of Red Book species, or at least there is no awareness of the results of any such activity.

Who speaks loudly in favour of the saiga being included in the Red Book? First of all, they are nature conservation organisations such as WWF and IFAW, despite their realisation that this would negatively affect the species' conservation status. Government nature conservation agencies are also keen to see the saiga in the Red Book, which would be very opportune, allowing them to say 'We have done our utmost' and wash their hands.

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Law № 150-F3 was enacted in 2013, and a list of high-value biological resources was produced as a result, including species in the Red Book and/or protected by international treaties. The saiga is included in this list. The Criminal Code of the Russian Federation includes Articles 258.1 and 226.1 on the illegal procurement and trade in species on this list. Because the saiga is protected by CITES, it is protected by law on an equal basis with Red Book species. So it is too early to send the saiga to the 'Red Book hospice' – it is in need of aggressive therapy!

The urgent measures which are needed are well known to game

managers. First of all, it is necessary to understand that the saiga's salvation is in hands of the Republic of Kalmykia. The government of the Republic should not perceive the saiga as a headache or a policy tool, but an excellent chance for economic growth and a transition to sustainable nature management. This requires the integration of saiga protection with social and economic development. The saiga is one of the best-researched game species, so when there is political will and sufficient stable financing, saiga restoration simply becomes a matter of time.

Responses

Alexey Vaisman

Deputy Director, Centre of Hunting Control, Russia

I agree with V. Gagarin's every word about the Red Book. As a member of the Red Book Section for mammals and of the Bureau of the Commission for rare species, I am very well aware of the general worthlessness of the Red Book as a tool for conservation. However, I voted in favor of including this species in the Red Book. Currently, only a specific species-focused federal programme can save the species. That it should be federal is especially important given that the government of

the Republic of Kalmykia, where the saiga is considered to be 'a Kalmyk natural heritage', will not do anything itself. Article 258.1 of the *Criminal Code* provides for very severe punishment for illegally killing or trading saigas. Yet saigas are heavily hunted, and all the fences in Kalmykia are covered with horn buying ads. Has anybody been caught and convicted? Practically no one! The price of a pair of horns is comparable to the average wage in Kalmykia's agricultural sector. Which shepherd on a motorcycle could resist catching "a wage" running past him?

Thus, in order to save the saiga, we need a federal programme and big money, controlled from the centre. This requires the saiga to obtain federal status, via the Red Book.

.....
Maria Vorontsova,
Director, Russian Programme,
International Foundation for Nature
Protection, IFAW

The Red Book of the Russian Federation is the main official vehicle for identifying rare and endangered species and populations. It is necessary in order to keep track of the status of these species and their habitats, and to plan their conservation. Today, very little is being done to protect wildlife in Russia, a heavy wave of poaching is swamping the country, yet administrative reform has disorganized the system of wildlife conservation. Nevertheless, it is due to the Red Book that Russia succeeded in attracting the attention of both the public and decision-makers, and consequently the funds for conservation which saved species such as the tiger, grey whale, black stork, goitred gazelle from complete extirpation. The Red Book serves as a reflection of the real state of affairs, not human preferences. After the saiga is included in the Red Book, it will stop being the

object of argument in Russia that it has been for the last few years; on the contrary, it will unite environmental structures at different levels - from federal to regional and municipal. This will allow law enforcement agencies and public bodies to engage in implementing protection measures. Just placing the saiga in the Red Book will cause federal government authorities to develop a comprehensive conservation programme for the species, attracting considerable funds under strict control. And then the authorities of the Republic of Kalmykia will not perceive the saiga as a 'headache' or a political and economic tool. I agree with V. Gagarin's opinion that in the future, when the saiga recovers (with our joint support), it will represent an excellent opportunity for economic growth and sustainable development in rural areas.

.....
Sergey Gashev
Head of the Department of Zoologi
and Evolutionary Ecologi of Animals,
Tyumen State University

On the one hand, V Gagarin quite correctly raises the point that it is not enough to include a species in the Red Book; specific measures for its conservation need to be articulated. Often (and for many species!) these are

FORUM (cont)

limited to forbidding hunting and conserving its habitats. That's, of course, not enough! Restoration is also needed, particularly for the saiga. The Red Book is a federal document which allows, both at the local and federal levels, the design and implementation of special conservation measures (and here the saiga is an absolute equal of the Siberian tiger or Amur leopard), including financing.

What specific actions does V Gagarin propose that would be impossible to implement after the saiga is in the Red Book, or that can be only be executed by hunters? Following this logic, protection of any rare species which is not considered game is doomed. So why is the Red Book ineffective? V. Gagarin gives only one answer – less funding is allocated for

species in the Red Book than for game species. This is exactly what we should strive against if we can substantiate it. In the well-known phrase by M. Zhvanetsky, 'What you keep, watch and ward over, belongs to you'...

.....
Vladimir Krever,
Director, Biodiversity Conservation Programme, WWF-Russia

The saiga has been sufficiently studied and the causes of its catastrophic decline are known: increased poaching, habitat loss and environmental degradation. One reason why V Gagarin suggests the saiga should not be included in the Red Book is that there is more funding available for game management than for Red Book



species. Why, then is the saiga in such a deplorable state? We find the answer in the article; there is no political will and the financing is insufficient.

The author sees the state budget as the source of financing. And therefore political will is needed. But it would be easier to prove the necessity of emergency measures if a species were in the Red Book.

These days Russian leadership at the highest level demonstrates its interest in conservation.

Currently, this attention is given to such emblematic species as tiger, leopard, polar bear, snow leopard, white crane and others, but rare species will also be given appropriate attention.

We consider the Red Book as an efficient mechanism for conservation. However, reform is needed to enforce implementation of conservation measures for species in the Red Book. The first steps have been taken this year, allowing ranking of species by the extent and urgency of the conservation measures they need. Entering the saiga into the Red Book will serve as grounds for the approval and execution of a strategy and action plan for their

conservation, including financing, under the Ministry of Nature Protection, as mandated in law.

Criminal responsibility for smuggling (Article 2261 of the Russian Federation Criminal Code) and illegal hunting and trade of high-value wild animals (Article 2591) is intended to serve as an additional lever to restrict poaching. However, this cannot be effective without action by inspection staff in all agencies. Including the saiga in the Red Book will lead to an increase in the financial value used to calculate damage caused by illegal hunting and habitat destruction, which will increase the fine paid by those apprehended for these crimes. This will make a poacher reconsider how much would it cost him to kill a saiga.

The main thing which should be noted is that currently the question at issue is not who controls this resource; hunters or nature conservationists. It is how we can conserve the saiga as part of the fauna of our country, and return it again into the category of sustainably used natural resources. I would remind readers that the conservation of rare species is a duty of game hunters. Then what we are talking about?

Updates

Update from the international team investigating the saiga mass die-off

Carlyn Samuel, Saiga Conservation Alliance, mail@saiga-conservation.com



In continued analyses of samples from the catastrophic mass die-off of saiga antelopes from May 2015, laboratories have identified the bacterium *Pasteurella multocida* as the causative agent of haemorrhagic septicaemia, which led to the death of the animals. With recent histopathology confirming this diagnosis. Attempts to identify other infectious agents such as viruses, using latest diagnostic methods, have failed to find anything significant and confirmed consistent *Pasteurella* infection in all cases examined. Hence it seems unlikely that an underlying infection predisposed the population to catastrophic haemorrhagic septicaemia.

The surprising finding, from an extensive review of the literature which the team has carried out, is that while haemorrhagic septicaemia caused by a specific type of *Pasteurella* bacterium has been previously described to cause mortality in wild and domestic animals in grassland ecosystems, the level of mortality in the affected animal groups was never close to 100%, as observed for saiga. This makes last year's die-off a unique and unprecedented biological event. Therefore intensive research work is being conducted to understand possible triggers and co-factors, including environmental stressors, which would explain such an extraordinary event.

The mass die-off in Kazakhstan has highlighted the importance of protecting the remaining critically endangered animals from other ongoing and severe threats. After having lost almost 90% of the animals, the situation of the Betpak-Dala saiga population is critical. E.J. Milner-Gulland from the Saiga Conservation Alliance points out: 'Continuing severe poaching is causing further losses, especially of males, which are shot for their horns, a highly priced agent in traditional Chinese medicine, which is used in several Asian countries.' Just recently the Committee of Forestry and Wildlife of

the government of Kazakhstan has reported an increased number of poaching cases in 2015 (107 cases compared to 79 in 2014).

Researchers are currently trying to find out what prepared the ground for *Pasteurella*, which normally lives harmlessly in the respiratory tract of saigas, to become virulent in May 2015 and cause a die-off of such enormous extent. Since the die-off locations are spread across a wide area with varied vegetation, and the animals died almost synchronously, intoxication by substances in the environment or toxic plants was considered unlikely from the very beginning. Recent results of ongoing laboratory analyses show no signs of the animals being affected by intoxication e.g. algal or fungal toxins, heavy metals or heptyl rocket fuel. Instead, all the pathology is

directly attributable to the rapid septicaemia and bacterial endotoxic shock. Furthermore, no traces of any environmental toxins have been found in samples of soil and water from the die-off sites.

Consequently, research efforts from a follow-up expedition in May this year are focusing on factors which may have provided conditions for the bacteria to become prevalent in the population and virulent for saiga. Among these factors are weather, soil and nutrient conditions, vegetation, effect of flooding on soil minerals and bacterial levels on pasture, and other factors, which might be similar throughout the various die-off sites. It is especially important to understand the difference between the die-off sites of 2015 and calving areas in previous years, when no animals died.



© Andrey Gilyov

Updates (cont)

These efforts are all part of an international research project, led by the Royal Veterinary College of the University of London, and involving from Kazakhstan the Research Institute for Biological Safety Problems (RIPBS) and the Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan (ACBK), and internationally Oxford University, Bristol University, Swedish Agricultural University at Umea, and the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation. The emergency funding for this work comes from the UK Government's Natural Environment Research Council. Further support is provided by Saiga Conservation Alliance, Wildlife Conservation Network, the People's Trust for Endangered Species, and Fauna & Flora International. ACBK is contributing in the framework of the Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative, supported by Frankfurt Zoological Society, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and Fauna & Flora International.

Continued anti-poaching work will be the key to saving the Betpak-Dala saiga population, which needs time to recover from the devastating die-off. In an inter-ministerial and inter-agency approach, the government of Kazakhstan has developed a list of actions for saiga conservation, which will be partially implemented this year. Both RIPBS and ACBK have been part of these efforts, thereby establishing a link between the international research work and the



implementation of conservation actions by national government.

Measures for preventing such die-off events in the future have also been discussed. But Prof. Richard Kock from the Royal Veterinary College says: "There is no practical prophylaxis possible against haemorrhagic septicaemia in saiga given the species' behaviour and the lack of a delivery mechanism for a vaccine. The likely stress caused by attempting to vaccinate them, either through aerial spraying of aerosolized vaccine or other means, may be as likely to lead to mortality as the disease itself. Once environmental triggers and co-factors are determined, the potential for intervention can be reassessed."

In the meantime, it is crucial that ongoing research efforts into the disease outbreak are matched by

enhanced protection of remaining populations.

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A workshop to discussing the issues of saiga conservation in Kazakhstan

Alyona Krivosheyeva, Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan, alyona.chukhatina@acbk.kz

The Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan held an international workshop in Astana on 5-6th April 2016, to discuss saiga conservation in Kazakhstan, supported by the Committee for Forestry and Wildlife, Ministry of Agriculture, as part of the Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative. The workshop was attended by saiga experts from Kazakhstan and other countries; the Committee for Forestry and Wildlife, Okhotzooptom, Centre for the Study of Dogs, Committee for State Revenue, Ministry of Finance,, Research Institute for Biological Safety Problems, Altyn Dala State Nature Reserve, Irgiz Turgay State Nature Reserve, Frankfurt Zoological Society, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Flora and Fauna International and the Royal Veterinary College.

Participants heard reports about saiga protection and monitoring in Kazakhstan; conservation challenges; using dogs to control the illegal trade in saiga horns; anti-poaching actions in Zimbabwe; using the SMART programme for effective patrolling; and results of field and laboratory studies as part of the investigation into the mass die-off of the Betpak-Dala saiga population in 2015.



Workshop participants. Working in groups.
© ACBK

Working groups discussed the current situation for saiga conservation in Kazakhstan, highlighting strengths and weaknesses. Suggestions were put forward to improve saiga conservation actions and enhance anti-poaching. Discussions included both high-level decision-makers and local conservation officials. Saiga disease was given special consideration; discussions included carrying out continuous monitoring of saiga population health, including routine blood sampling, and actions to be performed at the first signs of disease. A resolution was adopted based on the discussion, divided into 8 large sections consisting of 56 activities. In particular, the following important issues were included in the resolution:

Updates (cont)

- development of a training programme to improve the professional skills of wildlife protection officers;

- assistance in organising training courses in CITES procedures and in the design of guidance for customs and border protection services;

- improvement of the programme using dogs to identify saiga derivatives, both at state borders and inside the country;

- introduction of initiatives to develop alternative sources of income for local people;

- further development of a programme aimed at raising the awareness of local people and educating schoolchildren in villages (using up-to-date information sources);

- finalising of the Standard Operating Procedures to ensure a quick response to disease outbreaks in saiga populations and their approval by an authorised body;

- carrying out systematic epidemiological monitoring during the calving period and when capturing saiga (when taking blood samples).

Fauna and Flora International joins the Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative

Liesje Birchenough, FFI, [liesje. birchenough@fauna-flora.org](mailto:liesje.birchenough@fauna-flora.org)

Given the scale and nature of the threat to the saiga, with the 2015 mass mortality event and ongoing poaching, the participants at the saiga conservation planning workshop held in Astana in April this year agreed to take a more integrated and holistic approach to address conservation of the species at the meta-population level across Kazakhstan. We urgently need to build build the resilience of all three Kazakh saiga populations and strong collaboration across all saiga landscapes is necessary to do this. The Frankfurt Zoological Society, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Association for Conservation of Biodiversity in Kazakhstan, and the Kazakhstan

Government already work together on the Altyn Dala (Golden Steppe) Conservation Initiative (ADCI) which focuses on the conservation of the Betpak Dala landscape in Central Kazakhstan. This initiative is delivered through ACBK and has been the most successful conservation intervention for increasing the number of saiga, until the mass die off event in 2015. The ADCI has many parallels to Fauna & Flora International's (FFI) Ustyurt initiative with similar challenges, approaches and partners. We have been exploring options for closer collaboration between the two initiatives to ensure that our activities are more effective and mutually beneficial across landscapes. As a result, during an

ADCI steering group meeting, FFI was invited to become a core partner of the ADCI and the Ustyurt landscape was made an additional focal area. It was also agreed to expand the focus of the Initiative to include the Ural landscape, thereby extending

the 'Golden Steppe' Initiative to the three Kazakh saiga landscapes (120 million hectares) and their saiga populations. All the ADCI partners hope that this collaboration will enable better and more effective saiga conservation in Kazakhstan.

The «Saigachy» reserve in Uzbekistan has been reorganize

Alexander Esipov, Saiga Conservation Alliance, esipov@xnet.uz

On July 22, 2016, the Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan adopted a proposal from the State Committee for Nature Protection of Uzbekistan (Goskompriroda) to institute the Saigachy landscape reserve. This decision is the culmination of the work of many individual experts, organizations and agencies to improve the area and status of the reserve, including Goskompriroda, the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan, the GEF/UNDP project "Mainstreaming Biodiversity in the oil and gas sector of Uzbekistan", the Saiga Conservation Alliance, Fauna and Flora International and the Whitley Fund for Nature. It opens a new stage in the development of this protected area, designed to preserve the unique landscape and biodiversity of the northern part of the Karakalpak Ustyurt and, above all, to restore the saiga population. Creating a landscape reserve also opens up new possibilities for the integration of local people and land users into nature conservation and sustainable use of natural resources.

The Saigachy reserve is based on the existing Saigachiy sanctuary, which was a classic example of a «paper park». The reserve never had its own land or staff, its designation was extended several times, but proved ineffective in fulfilling its primary objective - the protection of saiga calving grounds. The reorganisation allows for staffing of the reserve, mainly with state inspectors for nature protection, but public inspectors can also be employed.

The area has changed shape and moved to the north-west, approaching close to the state border with Kazakhstan and the



© Alexander Esipov



specialists; and ecological education. Research activities will be based on the long-term surveys carried out by Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan as well as scientific institutions and universities, local and international scientists.

The boundaries of the Saigachy reserve and its buffer zone, as well as other objects, will be marked on the ground by notices, posts and other signs. In the buffer zone, the following infrastructure will be put in place, in coordination with the reserve's

administration: toll roads; repairs of communications equipment; construction of buildings and facilities for tourists; geological exploration; grazing. The following activities are limited in the buffer zone: mining; construction of gas pipelines and other industrial infrastructure; construction of new roads. The following activities are prohibited: hunting and trapping; the use of pesticides.

Thus, Uzbekistan has successfully completed the transformation of the 'Saigachy' reserve into a landscape reserve, designed to be an active mechanism for the protection of the Ustyurt plateau's unique natural ecosystems and its key species – the saiga antelope. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this event, which is critical for survival of saigas which are currently close to extinction in Uzbekistan.



Updates (cont)

Improving the efficiency of protected area management and anti-poaching

Alyona Krivosheyeva, Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan, alyona.krivosheyeva@acbk.kz

Among the priority tasks of the Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative (ADCI) implemented by ACBK and partners is the efficient management of protected areas in the ADCI network so they can achieve their goals. Five year Protected Area Management Plans are an essential tool for effective management.

The Altyn Dala Reserve, which aims to protect the calving and migration areas of the Betpak Dala saiga population, has no official management plan, so we held a seminar to develop one in the Reserve's headquarters in Amangeldy village, Kostanay province, on 3-4 August 2016. The event was initiated by ACBK and supported by the Committee for Forestry and Wildlife of the Ministry of Agriculture in cooperation with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. About 30 people attended, including officials from the Committee for Forestry and Wildlife and specialists responsible for management planning in three protected areas – Altyn Dala Reserve, Irgiz Turgay State Nature Reserve and Korgylzhan Reserve.

The participants discussed the theory of management planning, studying the key characteristics of each of the protected areas, analyzing the main



threats, determining the principal tasks, forming the long-term goals and so on. At the same time they scrutinized the existing Management Plan for the Altyn Dala Reserve, which has yet to be approved. ACBK also organized training courses for state inspectors and scientific researchers on using GPS navigators, collecting monitoring information and entering the data into a recently improved database.

In 2016 ACBK and the Saiga Conservation Alliance implemented a joint project to financially support anti-poaching activities in the Altyn Dala and Irgiz Turgay State Nature Reserves, so as to improve conditions for state rangers at reserves and their anti-poaching effectiveness. The project purchased 92 items of equipment, including cameras, desktops, laptops, binoculars, GPS,

tents and sleeping bags, 43 of which were given to the Altyn Dala Reserve, and 49 to the Irgiz Turgay Reserve. The equipment will be monitored to ensure effective use. The funding for this project came from the Wildlife Conservation Network under the SCA's appeal to support saiga conservation after the 2015 mass die-off.



The transfer of field equipment to staff of the Irgiz Turgay State Nature Reserve. © ACBK

Unimpeded saiga migration must continue on the Ustyurt Plateau!

Alexander Putilin. Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan, aleksandr.putilin@acbk.kz

In the autumn of 2011 Kazakhstan began building a fence about 1.7 m high, consisting of 8 rows of barbed wire, along the country's border with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The construction work was finished by the end of 2012. For about 150 km this border fence runs across the habitat of the Ustyurt saiga population – a population causing the deepest concern due to its continuous decline. The saiga of the Ustyurt Plateau spend most of their time in Kazakhstan; however, in winter they migrate to Uzbekistan, crossing the border between the two countries. The border fence keeps the animals away from their wintering areas, which may result in a decrease in saiga habitat on the Ustyurt Plateau. As saiga cannot get through the border fence, they have to stay in areas that do not suit them best: food shortage leads to higher mortality and, therefore, to population

decrease. In winter they starve and suffer from low temperatures, while in spring they cannot reach the good pastures situated further to the north.

This critical situation prompted the Frankfurt Zoological Society, Flora and Fauna International and the Convention on Migratory Species to prepare a report in 2013 giving suggestions for mitigating the fence's negative impact on saiga migration



Changes in the structure of the fence: a – on a 150 km long section; b – on an 11 km section. © Alexander Putilin

Updates (cont)



Figure. Border fence on the Ustyurt Plateau between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. June 2016

(<http://www.cms.int/en/publication/saiga-crossing-options>). The report’s author proposes that the lower rows of wire be removed from the fence to allow saigas to cross without difficulties.

The border protection service of the Committee for the National Safety of the Republic of Kazakhstan answered an official request from ACBK about the suggestions in the report, assuring us that the three lower strands of wire would be removed at an interval of 1 km within all saiga habitat. In order to ascertain whether the modifications had been made, a team of researchers inspected the fence, on

an expedition organised by ACBK under the Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative, in cooperation with Okhotzooptom and the border protection service, on 19-21 June 2016.

The inspection started at the western end of the Kazakh border, in Aktoobe province, and finished in the Aral Sea area. During the inspection the team established that the border protection service had completed all their undertakings and cleared 125 passages for saiga. In addition, there was an 11 km long section in

which the lower rows of wire were absent throughout (Figure).

In order to ensure free migration of the Ustyurt saiga population both countries need to take additional steps to control poaching. The control should be even stricter

during migration; forming large aggregations at this time, the animals can become an easy target for poachers. This is why it is essential to join forces to monitor migration from both sides of the border and to protect the saiga.

The Russian Mural Mission-2016 was completed!

Aigul Aitbaeva, Eugenia Samtanova, Yashkul' State Diversified Gymnasium, aigul-0889@mail.ru

On the eve of the May holidays a mural of steppe wildlife was opened ceremonially at Yashkul School, 90 km from Elista, the capital of the Republic of Kalmykia. This new approach was first used in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in 2014-15. This year, Professor Yu. N. Arylov and the Saiga Conservation Alliance helped implement the idea in Kalmykia. The school hosts the successful Zhivoye Naslediye (Living Heritage) steppe wildlife club, headed by Ye. A. Samtanova, an Honoured Teacher of the Russian Federation. The mural artist was Rory McCann, whose murals can be found in the UK, Seychelles, Australia, Oman and Japan. The idea of the project was to change people's attitude towards the saiga by creating a mural with the involvement of teachers, children and their parents. The project was supported by the Saiga Conservation Alliance, Wildlife Conservation Network (WCN) and WWF-Russia.

Since the morning of 18th April 2016, the people of Yashkul' had been waiting impatiently for the arrival of British wildlife artist Rory McCann in Kalmykia. Mr Khaglyshev, the governor of Yashkul' District, was among those who waited. Greeting Rory, he emphasised the significance of the project and noted that it would help improve people's attitude to wildlife.

At the ceremonial reception Rory was greeted by all the schoolchildren and their teachers and, in accordance with Kalmyk tradition, was presented with a white *khadak* (silk scarf). The reception grew into a

friendly conversation, at which Rory told us about himself, his family and the numerous projects he had been lucky to perform in different countries around the world. The pupils told Rory about their achievements in ecological education. The mural painting project lasted for 12 days with the active participation of pupils of different ages – primarily those who had won a Steppe Antelope drawing contest the month before the artist's arrival. At each break Rory was surrounded by crowds of children, who watched attentively how carefully and beautifully he drew the images of steppe animals and plants. Despite some language

Updates (cont)

difficulties between them, the children asked Rory many questions, trying to learn as much as possible about the flora and fauna of the countries he had visited. Other people living in Yashkul' also came to see the mural and gave Rory various presents. The Garyayev family presented Rory with a picture by Pavayev, a well-known Kalmyk painter, and the Nokhayev and Nasakayev families gave the artist a traditional Kalmyk game and a piala (bowl) decorated with a traditional Kalmyk design.

Rory gave lessons in painting to the 60 children that had participated in the drawing competition. They learnt

to draw animals and make postcards using a stencil. In a master class for the youngest students the children listened to Rory's instructions with great interest and repeated his every movement. As a result, a herd of drawings of saiga babies appeared in the classroom. Rory also attended English lessons, where he spoke to the children. Steppe Wildlife Club members invited the painter to one of their meetings, where Rory learnt about the club's activities, played the guitar and sang wonderful songs. Club members also performed a song in English. At the end of the meeting the pupils made Rory a member of their club and presented



Rory McCann and his wonderful mural depicting steppe wildlife. © Aigul' Aytabayeva



Rory with members of the Living Heritage steppe wildlife club. © Aigul' Aytabayeva

him with a badge with the club's symbol and a traditional Kalmyk chess set.

A ceremony dedicated to the completion of the mural, named The Living Heritage of the Steppe, took place on 29th April, featuring the teachers, pupils, their parents and other guests. In their speech the teachers and students emphasised that the mural symbolised the unification of people from different countries for saiga conservation, and that it would not only make people happy with its beauty and originality, but also remind them of the necessity to protect wildlife.

Two weeks flew by like one day, and no one wanted 'our' Rory, who had in this time become a close friend of the villagers, to leave. Doubtless, Rory gave a wonderful present to all the people of our republic, which will serve for many years ahead to

help the younger generation foster a positive attitude to wildlife.

In conclusion, we would like to express our enormous gratitude to Rory and all those who organised the visit of this wonderful painter to Kalmykia, as well as to the teachers and students of the school for organising and participating in in this important project. A film about the mural can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAsDNFuNtdQ>.
See also: <https://rq.ru/2016/07/12/reg-ufo/hudozhnik-iz-anglii-narisoval-fresku-s-sajgakami-v-kalmykii.html>.

Rory McCann, wildlife artist, rory.mccann84@gmail.com

For the past 4 years, I have worked as a mural artist, with a focus on using my art to inspire people to have a greater interest in wildlife. Without a doubt, the most exciting and rewarding work I have done to date has been with the Saiga

Updates (cont)



A master class for the youngest students.
© Aigul' Aytabayeva

Conservation Alliance (SCA) in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and most recently, Russia. In each of these cases, I have travelled to a part of the country where saigas are under threat. My mission as an artist has then been to paint a huge mural, involving the community in the process, with the aim of engaging everyone in the work that SCA does and the importance of preserving the local fauna and flora.

In April of this year, I boarded a plane for Astrakhan, in South-West Russia. I was met at 4am (local time) by Yuri Arylov (a university professor and associate of SCA) and his son-in-law, who drove me through the night to the village of Yashkul', which was to be my home for the next 2 weeks. Before any painting could begin, I met with various people, including my translator (Anatoly), the principal of the local school where I'd be working, and the head of the village, who was a large, cuddly man!

Later that day, I was welcomed into the local school with a mesmerising performance by the older pupils, which represented the springtime flowering of the tulip. This also gave me an opportunity to explain a bit about why I was there and about the important work of SCA. I was now ready to start painting, and it didn't take long for the children to show their curiosity and fascination. Even just priming the wall with white paint elicited lots of "oohs" and "aahs"! As each day went by, more and more pupils would come during their breaks and after school to watch and ask questions. Once I had painted several saigas onto the mural it provided a great focal point for discussions about the saiga's plight and the need for it to be conserved. When I was low on energy one of the teachers would bring me juice and chocolate saying "it is the Buddhist way". It made me think that perhaps I should look into Buddhism – the religion of chocolate!

Towards the end of my visit I was taken to a nearby nature reserve and had the wonderful pleasure of seeing saigas in the wild. We also saw Demoiselle crane, little bustard, European souslik (tiny ground squirrels), and a pair of very friendly camels, one of whom made multiple eager advances on us! I came back to the mural with renewed inspiration to represent the full beauty of the steppe habitat and wildlife. During my last few days we did a lot more

outreach including fun art workshops for the younger students and master class lessons for the older students, who were given the chance to paint onto the mural itself. My hope is that this engagement will inspire these pupils to appreciate the environment all the more and perhaps influence what they do in their career and lifestyle later in life.

So, after 2 weeks of painting, chatting, laughing, chocolate, camel encounters, saiga sightings and so much more, the mural project was complete. The school held a grand opening ceremony with pupils, staff and members of the community in attendance. Lots of gifts were exchanged and lots of fond farewells were made. I had an especially emotional farewell from the cleaning staff who gently stroked my arms



Familiarisation with Kalmyk traditions.
© Aigul' Aytabayeva

and head while softly speaking kind words. I couldn't understand a word, of course, but the sentiments were clear!

My thanks also all donor organisations and to E.J Milner-Gulland and Carlyn Samuel in person for their belief in my work, and to Yashkul School', Anatoly, and everyone in Yashkul' who made me feel so welcome.



The completed mural painting. © Aigul' Aytabayeva

Updates (cont)

Saiga Day united people from the remotest parts of Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Mongolia

Saiga Day is an international event which has been celebrated in Kazakhstan, Russia and Uzbekistan since 2011. In 2016 young conservationists from Mongolia joined Saiga Day. The holiday occurs within the calving period and is celebrated in saiga range areas. The main goal is to shape children's ecological culture and concepts, to draw adults' attention towards wildlife conservation issues and to increase knowledge of steppe ecosystems, their fragility and the necessity for everyone to take part in conservation.

Russia

Eugenia Samtanova and Aigul' Aytabayeva, Yashkul State Diversified Gymnasium, aigul-0889@mail.ru

Yashkul State Diversified Gymnasium, which pioneered the celebration of the Saiga Day in Russia, held a series of events dedicated to saiga conservation in 2016. On the eve of Saiga Day it organised the Steppe Antelope art competition, which aimed to make children understand the need to protect and conserve saigas, to increase their wildlife conservation activity and to foster care and consideration for wildlife. Sixty schoolchildren of all age groups participated in the competition. The winners were awarded certificates and were given an opportunity to take part in a mural project (see above).

The members of the 'Living Heritage' club organised a small concert for the school's pupils and guests. A group of ecology fans and a team of actors, both part of the club, presented new and interesting programmes. The pupils and teachers of Yashkul school also gave a charity concert for the villagers.



Ecological propaganda team 'Ecos' and the stage crew 'Saiga'. © Aigul Aitbaeva

All the money obtained from the performance was used to pay for medical treatment for a mother and her child from a large family living in Yashkul'.

In addition, the school hosted an event called Steppe Day, which featured young environmentalists from schools in the Khulkhuta, Molodezhny, Yashkul' and Chernye Zemli Districts, as well as researchers from Cherniye Zemli Biosphere Reserve and guests from Moscow, St Petersburg, Kazan' and Korolev. An ecological game was played. After that, Dr A. Oleksenko, biologist, artist and expert from the Wildlife

Conservation Centre, gave a master class in drawing wild animals. The students also attended a photo

exhibition on the flora and fauna of the steppe.

Uzbekistan

Natalia Shivaldova and Elena Bykova, Ecomaktab, Saiga Conservation Alliance, ebykova67@mail.ru

Early in May, 2016, the traditional Saiga Day was celebrated in Uzbekistan. However, 'traditional' does not mean 'boring'. Saiga Day was particularly busy in Karakalpakstan this time. People of all ages participated, from the youngest children to experienced *aksakals* (elders). This year employees of Uz-Kor Gas Chemical company, near Kyrk Kyz village, joined the ranks of saiga defenders. They celebrated the day by planting saxaul and working to restore land in their area. They also held a conference on saiga and biodiversity conservation on the Ustyurt Plateau. The State Committee for Nature Protection of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Ecological Movement of Uzbekistan and Saiga Conservation Alliance attended the conference, as well as people from Kyrk Kyz village, who were concerned about wildlife conservation in their area.

Prior to Saiga Day, a series of football matches took place in the village of Jaslyk, with the military and police, employees of local companies and older schoolchildren competing. The children and teachers from



Greetings before the Saiga Football Cup.
© Elena Bykova

School No. 54 won the Saiga Cup. The football cup opened a series of sporting events dedicated to saiga conservation. Adults were eager to find out who were best at weight lifting and arm wrestling. The Ecological Express, which has already become quite traditional, was held successfully in Jaslyk and Karakalpakstan. 'Changing trains' at different stations, children showed their knowledge of ecology, foreign languages, arts and sports. As usual, the audience were most interested in short performances about the ancient traditions and customs of their native land, the sporting competitions and the popular game 'The Migrating Saiga'. Children from a kindergarten in Jaslyk organised their own Saiga Day and watched

Updates (cont)



Students have learned how to make puppets and write scenarios. © Steppe wildlife club 'Hope'

The Steppe Fairytale, an animated story about a little saiga.

Almost every villager in Jaslyk came to see the evening show on Saiga Day. Childrens' concerts alternated with performances by adults and award ceremonies. As darkness fell, the audience watched the documentary 'The saigas of the Ustyurt Plateau. A right to life' produced by Uzbek documentary makers with the participation of villagers and the support of the Saiga Conservation Alliance. This film won a prize at the 20th International

Ecological Film Festival, <http://ecofest-ugra.ru/ru/o-festivale/novosti/634>.

Puppet theatres were absolutely new elements to this year's Saiga Day. Members of the 'Nadezhda' (Hope) steppe wildlife club from Nukus and 'Akbroken' (Saiga) from Jaslyk took part in a puppetry master class given by Alexandra Zaslavskaya, prepared mini-performances and learnt to make dolls and decorations for themselves. After several rehearsals the children turned into mature actors telling stories about good and evil, and love and care for animals. Students from Jaslyk took part in "Leave Your Mark", an ecological event in which they painted the wall of an eco-garden with scenes from the life of the saiga. 'Rich and diverse wildlife is the ideal we are trying to achieve!', as the children noted. It was a pleasure to see that all the events were actively supported by adults.



Kindergarten children under supervision of gas compressor station 'Tuley' and their teachers organized Saiga Day festival. © Alexander Esipov

Kazakhstan

Mukhit Suttibayev, ACBK, mukhit.suttibayev@acbk.kz

In late May-early April Kazakhstan also celebrated Saiga Day. This joyful holiday, which has already become a tradition in the country, was held within the Akboken network of Saiga Friends clubs, which includes five schools in Shalkar District, Aktobe province, instituted by ACBK in cooperation with Fauna and Flora International, as well as at a steppe club in the village of Nursay, Kaztal District, East Kazakhstan province, which was founded in 2014 with the support of the Saiga Conservation Alliance.

Saiga Day lasted all day in Aktobe province. Students of all ages participated in exciting and informative activities, which included contests, games, a concert and a film about saigas. Towards the end of the event the most active students, who demonstrated the deepest knowledge of wildlife, were awarded diplomas, letters of gratitude and prizes.

Saiga Day continued in Central Kazakhstan, at the visitor centre of Korgalzhyn State Nature Reserve. ACBK organised an event in cooperation with the Saiga Conservation Alliance for the children of a school camp in Druzhba



While watching a saiga cartoon. © ACBK

village and a school in Korgalzhyn village. It was the first time that an event dedicated to the saiga had been organised in the range of the Betpakdala saiga population. Although it was the summer holidays, over 100 younger students from both schools participated. The children played games, watched cartoons about saiga, demonstrated their abilities in a drawing competition and shared their knowledge about wildlife in a quiz. The most enthusiastic students were given letters of gratitude, diplomas, comics about saiga and T-shirts.

We are very thankful to the teachers, who are working actively to provide ecological education for the children and are enthusiastically supporting nature protection initiatives.

Updates (cont)

Mongolia

Buyanaa Chimeddorj, WWF-Mongolia, chimeddorj@wwf.mn



Young participants in 'One Day as a ranger'. © WWF-Mongolia

The Altai-Sayan ecoregion hosts the endemic endangered Mongolian saiga, whose conservation is widely supported by children. Some local people dislike the saiga because they feel it competes with domestic livestock for pasture. Therefore, children are one of the most important target audiences to send messages to communities. A new initiative entitled 'One Day as a Ranger', supported by WWF-Singapore and the Silent Foundation, is supporting saiga rangers and children's eco-club members to come together for saiga conservation.

This initiative was part of 'Mongolian Saiga Day', which lasted for a week from 15th to 22nd of April 2016 in the saiga range soums (districts) of Gobi-Altai and Khovd aimags (provinces). Wide-ranging activities were conducted during this week, which at least 1000 children were part of, including a drawing competition and Q & A sessions on 'Who know the

most about Saiga?'. A roundtable discussion organized by the children's clubs raised important challenges including the threats to saiga and how students can contribute to its conservation. Some eco-clubs also organized tree planting events involving locals and other stakeholders. A Facebook group was created to enable children to discuss activities and exchange information.

'One Day as a Ranger' started with a trip to get acquainted with the saiga's habitat, including children, rangers, a meteorologist and herders. The meteorologist gave information on the climate of the area and how vulnerable saigas can be to climate change. The rangers were the main heroes of the day in their efforts to make children feel what it's like to be a ranger; they gave a great talk how to monitor saigas, observe how livestock change their habitats and use GPS. The son of Batzaya, a saiga



A ranger teaching children to use GPS. © WWF-Mongolia

ranger from Tugrug soum of Gobi-Altai aimag, shared his experience of saiga monitoring, patrolling and population assessment with his father during the school holidays.

It is worth noting that WWF-Mongolia highly appreciates the contribution

of children's eco-clubs to the conservation of the endangered Mongolian saiga. Thanks to the combined efforts of many stakeholders, the saiga population has increased from 5,000 to about 14,000 and extended its habitat by 13% over the last decade.

Educational kids camps: a growing movement for engaging children in conservation

Kazakhstan: The first educational camp for Saiga Friends clubs
Alyona Krivosheyeva, Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan, alyona.krivosheyeva@acbk.kz

Steppe ecology clubs have been springing up actively within schools in different regions of Kazakhstan over the last few years, with the goal of providing ecological education to local children, with a focus on saiga conservation. The Ustyurt saiga population is currently the smallest and most threatened, which is why it is important to make local people aware of the problem of poaching and to show them the necessity of protecting saiga. Therefore, we decided to organise a field summer camp for children living in villages on the Ustyurt Plateau.

Fifteen children aged between 11 and 14 from the Saiga Friends steppe clubs in the town of Shalkar and the villages of Akkaytym, Baykadam and Bozoy, Shalkar District, were invited to the field camp, organised by ACBK

with the support of Fauna & Flora International (FFI). Between 27 June and 1 July the students stayed in an area near Lake Malaydar within the Irgiz Turgay State Nature Reserve. The children learnt about the plants and animals of the region. The camp organisers also worked to develop an ecological culture in children and unite members of the Saiga Friends clubs to carry out further joint activity. The camp enabled the leaders of ecological clubs on the Ustyurt Plateau to gather, discuss future directions and develop a work programme, as well as sharing their experiences and celebrating their achievements. The children were very quick to get to know each other, exchange opinions and make friends.



The children after the award ceremony. © ACBK

Updates (cont)



Watching birds at the Irgiz Turgay Reserve.
© ACBK

The camp programme included games, training courses and discussions, films and practicals. On the first day the children learnt about the Irgyz Turgai reserve, its wildlife and historical and cultural events in the region. On another day they learnt about how to make a herbarium and about the reserve's insects. They dedicated a full day to bird watching. The lakes close to the camp were a perfect place for this. The children observed how different bird species behaved in the wild, and filled in forms to record the species they saw. By the end of the day they had recorded 232 individuals of 16 bird species, 2 of which (imperial

eagle and Dalmatian pelican) were in the Red Book. However, the most exciting encounter was as the children were travelling back to the camp. Three saiga females with two youngsters crossed the road right in front of their car! The students, who had never seen saigas before, were astonished and delighted; they had seen the steppe antelopes about which they had heard so much, and the conservation of which they had discussed! Also, during one excursion the children visited



Young participants at the field summer camp.
Funny flash mob. © ACBK

the Jamanshyn meteorite crater. A popular hypothesis is that the crater was formed through a meteorite (or, perhaps an asteroid or comet) falling,



Around the campfire in the evening. © ACBK

which was 200-400 m in diameter and which evaporated at the moment of the explosion. Right after the collision the crater was 500 m deep.

All the field camp participants were presented with T-shirts, caps, educational materials and other commemorative gifts. However, the most important thing was that the camp's atmosphere, communication, practical lessons and wildlife watching left an indelible impression upon them. We believe that this wildlife experience will help the children feel responsible for conserving the nature of their native land in future.

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Uzbekistan: A training ground for young conservationists

Natalia Shivaldova, Ekomaktab NGO, nshivaldova@mail.ru

In the last few weeks of the summer holidays children from steppe clubs across Karakalpakstan had the chance to share ideas and get motivation for the next academic year at the Saiga kids camp in a picturesque valley not far from the Chatkal Nature Reserve. The sweet-smelling mountain herbs, the fresh mountain air and the crystal clear mountain streams, as well as the great diversity of animals and plants and the wonderful mountain lake made the children fall yet deeper in love with nature and discover many new things.



A mountain hike. © Natalia Shivaldova

The programme was highly diverse. This year, apart from excursions, lessons and outdoor activities, it included three courses to choose from. The course on ecological design conducted by Tatyana Gritsina taught children to see even the simplest thing as a piece of art; the boys and girls used ordinary pebbles from mountain streams to create interesting art works and made wonderful images from coloured river sand. Their creations were displayed in an exhibition at the camp. The course on 'ecological theatre' allowed children to show their artistic talents by staging a puppetry performance. Alexandra Zaslavskaya first helped the students to write a scenario. Each child



The opening of the saiga camp. © Alexander Esipov

Updates (cont)

offered their own version of a story, which were integrated to form the general storyline. The plot was based upon the new Saigachy Reserve in Karakalpakstan, which had been opened on 22 June 2016 (see above). Protecting saigas from poaching was also an important subject. The story featured a number of interesting characters and miraculous metamorphoses, a great amount of magic and a struggle between good and evil – in which friendship and good creatures were always the winners... The ecological theatre course also included master classes in puppet making. The performance of the play was just more proof for us teachers that the genre of ecological puppet theatre has great educational power.

Young ecological journalists, participants in the third course, carefully observed the activities going on in all the other courses. The

budding journalists were first taught the basics of the profession; how to write stories, interview people and make video and photo reports. After that, they started their journalistic activities, collecting materials for wall newspapers.

The teachers participated actively in all the events, acquiring new skills and methods for ecological education, which will help them organise events during the upcoming academic year, such as the Day of Migratory Species, Protected Areas Day and Saiga Day. The celebration of Neptune Day at the kids camp was an unforgettable event for the children, providing a good example of how to organise an ecological festival. The theme was the tragedy of the Aral Sea. Assisted by Neptune, the king of water, and other fairytale characters, the students found a way to save the lake. Every day in the camp was associated with a definite



The celebration of Neptune Day. © Olya Espova

theme: Biodiversity Day, Nature Conservationist Day, Clean Air and Good Health Day, Water Day and Friendship Day.

The organisers did their best to let the children feel free and easy and to make the activities interesting and exciting. Ecological games, such as 'Ecosystem', 'Predators and their Prey' proved effective. New ideas and skills, which the organisers had learnt during a teacher training programme at San Diego Zoo and Safari Park, proved effective. Our colleagues from San Diego Zoo also helped us develop and test a teacher's guide and pupil's booklet "Saiga: Spirit of the Steppe", the Russian versions of which are at <http://www.saigaresourcecentre.com> or available from SCA on request.

The ten-day Saiga kids camp flew by. The children and their teachers returned to their villages with a lot of new information and full of happy

and memorable impressions and, most importantly, an ardent desire to make a contribution to saiga conservation.

This is the second year that the kids camp has taken place in Uzbekistan. We have accumulated some experience, developed educational approaches and formed a creative team of enthusiasts united in the pursuit of a common goal. The ecological camp was organised with input from organisations including the 'Barkamol Avlod' Children's Centre for Regional Studies and Ecology (Ministry of Public Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan), 'Ekomaktab' Ecological Resource Centre and scientists from the Institute of Gene Pool of Plants and Animals of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan, with the support of Club Penguin, Disney Canada and the Saiga Conservation Alliance.



Participants of the saiga camp 'Saigachiy 2016'. © Alexander Esipov

Media reports

Twenty criminal cases initiated in Kazakhstan for illegal saiga killing

The Deputy Chairman of the Kazakhstan Ministry of Agriculture's Committee for Forest Management and Wildlife, Nariman Zhunusov, says that there has been some progress in detecting and capturing those breaking environmental laws: "In 2014, 79 criminal cases were initiated for saiga poaching; in 2015, there were 107 cases and the number of confiscated horns exceeded 3000. 20 criminal cases have been initiated and about 600 saiga horns confiscated since the beginning of 2016. Changes are also noticeable in saiga conservation, mainly due to improvement in investment in the relevant services. Thus, this year Okhotzooptom was equipped with new cross-country vehicles. Now they can fight poachers effectively without yielding either in speed or maneuverability", said Nariman Zhunusov. For more details refer to http://bnews.kz/ru/news/proisshestviya/s_nachala_goda_v_kazahstane_zavedeno_20_ugolovnih_del_za_nezakonnii_otstrel_saiji-2016_05_04-1269907.

A large consignment of saiga horns and skins is confiscated in Fergana, Uzbekistan

The attempted smuggling of a large consignment of saiga horns from Uzbekistan has been prevented, according to the State Customs Committee of the Fergana Region. An operation conducted by the customs staff with members of the National Security Service in a



Fergana warehouse resulted in the detection of 468 saiga horns, 72 horn pieces and 170 skins. These products were going to be illegally exported and belonged to a resident of the Sokh district. Their estimated value is 148 million soums (~46,879 USD). For more details refer to <https://www.gazeta.uz/2016/07/14/saygak/>

A large consignment of saiga horns is confiscated in China

After a 6 month investigation, in early September 2016 the Beijing, Sichuang and Xingjiang forest police bureaus confiscated 1502.25 kg of saiga horns and arrested 12 suspects. The estimated market value of the



confiscated horns is RMB 320 million (46,625,824 USD). The case was first brought to Xingjiang Forest Bureau's attention after a large stock of saiga horns was discovered in the cities of Urumqi and Yili in China's north-western province of Xinjiang. The authorities are still investigating. Further details are yet to be released.

Credit by CCTV, <http://v.ifeng.com/news/society/201609/01cb9225-754b-11e6-86e6-002590c2aaeb.shtml>



Articles

Effects of human disturbance on the distribution and movements of saiga antelopes in western Mongolia

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The Mongolian saiga (*Saiga tatarica mongolica*) occurs in four subpopulations in western Mongolia. The subspecies is categorized as endangered by IUCN and the main threats are overharvesting, competition with livestock for resources, and harsh winters preceded by summer droughts. However, the Mongolian saiga population has been increasing over the last few years, owing to enhanced protection and favorable climate. The most recent estimate in 2014 suggests a population of ~15,000 individuals across its entire range.

Currently a 263 km-long road from Gobi-Altay to Khovd province is in

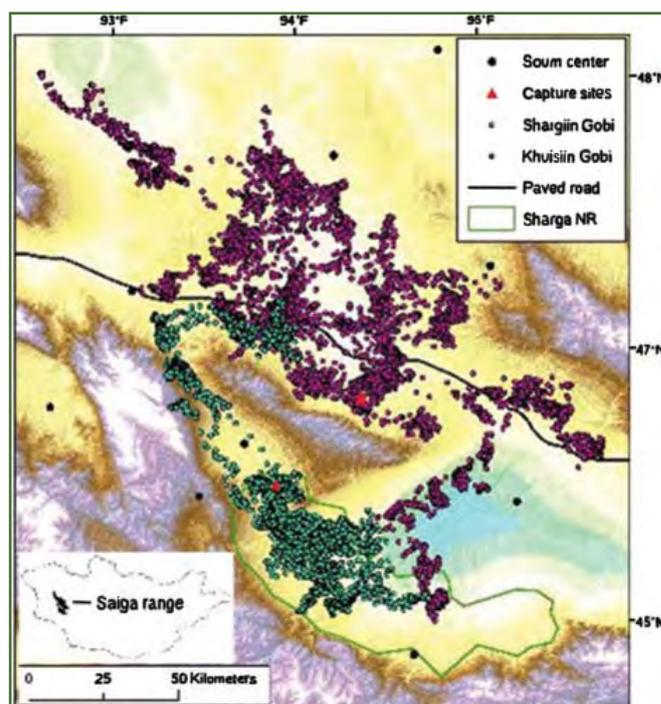


Figure 1. Movements of saiga antelope captured (n = 7) in Shargiin and Khuisiin Gobi between October 2015 and July 2016

Articles (cont)

Table 1. Capture details, movement rate per 2h (km), and home range (MCP – Minimum Convex Polygon) of the collared Mongolia saiga for the 10-month period between October 2015 and July 2016 in western Mongolia

Capture site	Collar ID	Tracking period	No. fixes received	Movement rate, Mean \pm SD	100% MCP, km ²
Sharga	62063790	09/30/15 - 10/15/15	182 *	0.98 \pm 1.11	184
	62068770	09/30/15 - 07/06/16	3358	0.55 \pm 0.73	1,115
	62670350	09/30/15 - 09/30/16	3357	0.79 \pm 1.06	2,268
	62676340	09/30/15 - 05/28/16	2895	0.61 \pm 0.88	2,967
Khuis	62060790	10/01/15 - 07/06/16	3358	0.84 \pm 1.16	7,81
	62673340	10/02/15 - 07/07/16	3356	0.79 \pm 1.12	4,918
	62679330	10/02/15 - 07/07/16	3351	0.72 \pm 0.99	2,611
	62679340	10/02/15 - 07/08/16	2875	0.68 \pm 0.98	6,403

* *An individual tracked for only 15 days*

the process of being upgraded to asphalt with the aim of improving the living standards of rural communities by facilitating access to markets, education, and health care. Part of the road traverses Khusiin Gobi, which is prime saiga habitat.

The road is predicted to result in substantial impacts on saiga by impeding movement, direct and indirect habitat loss, and increasing poaching due to better access to their range. In the absence of proper monitoring, mitigation measures aiming to reduce the impacts of the paved road cannot be planned effectively. Our overarching goal was therefore to implement field surveys to monitor the effects of paved roads on the distribution and movements of Mongolia saigas using satellite telemetry.

We captured and collared 8 saigas in Shargiin and Khuisiin Gobi between 30 September and 02 October,

2015 (Figure 1). Individual saigas were tracked using GPS collars (Sirtrack - Pinnacle Iridium Lite G5C 275F) which send a location every 2 hours. A total of 22,732 GPS location fixes were collected for a 10-month period from capture until July 2016, averaging 3,221 locations per animal (range = 2,875 – 3,358), excluding GPS locations collected for the one animal that was tracked for only 15 days. Approximately 7,006 locations (~ 69% of the total) from the four animals captured in Shargiin Gobi were within the Sharga Nature Reserve over the entire tracking period (Figure 1). We documented a new migration route that connects saiga subpopulations in Shargiin and Khuisiin Gobi, which is an alternative to the migration corridors previously defined using GPS radio-collars by Berger et al. (2008).

The average distance travelled per 2h was 0.71 \pm SD 0.99 km (data

pooled across 7 individuals) and the maximum distance travelled ranged between 5 and 14 km (Table 1). There was a significant difference in mean distance travelled between saigas captured in Khuisiin Gobi (0.77 km) and Shargiin Gobi (0.65 km; $t = -7.74$, $p < 0.001$). The cumulative distance travelled by a saiga over the entire survey period averaged $2,300 \pm \text{SD } 436$ km (Range = 1,752 – 2,822).

Range sizes varied more than 7-fold between individuals (range = 1,115 – 7,810 km²; mean = 4,013 km²; Table 1). The average range size for animals captured in the Khuisiin Gobi (5,436 km²) was substantially larger than those captured in the Shargiin Gobi (2,117 km²), where there is less human disturbance (Kruskal-Wallis test: $H = 9.34$, $p < 0.05$). The distance between individual saigas and the road varied monthly (One-way ANOVA: $F = 25.37$, $p < 0.001$) being the closest in February and furthest in July 2016 (Figure 2). Our results suggest that human disturbance primarily associated with road construction work in Khuisiin Gobi during May-October negatively influenced saiga distributions by

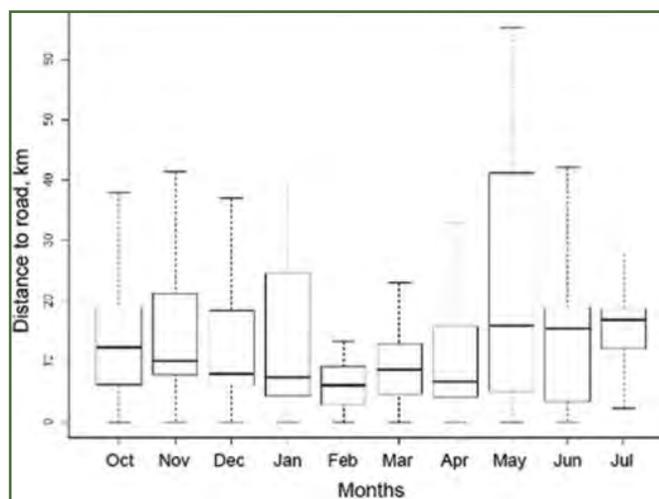


Figure 2. Monthly changes in distances of saiga locations from the paved road in Khuisiin Gobi during October 2015 and July 2016

causing them to use areas farther from the road.

Our planned analyses will relate the movement data to biological season, environmental and human associated variables, to determine other key factors influencing saiga movements, range size, and habitat use. Future monitoring efforts should consider capturing and collaring more animals and monitoring their movements for at least two consecutive years to better understand inter-annual variation in movement and habitat use in light of human disturbances, particularly paved roads.

Articles (cont)

The results of the aerial survey of saiga populations in Kazakhstan in 2016

Steffen Zuther and Albert Salemgareev

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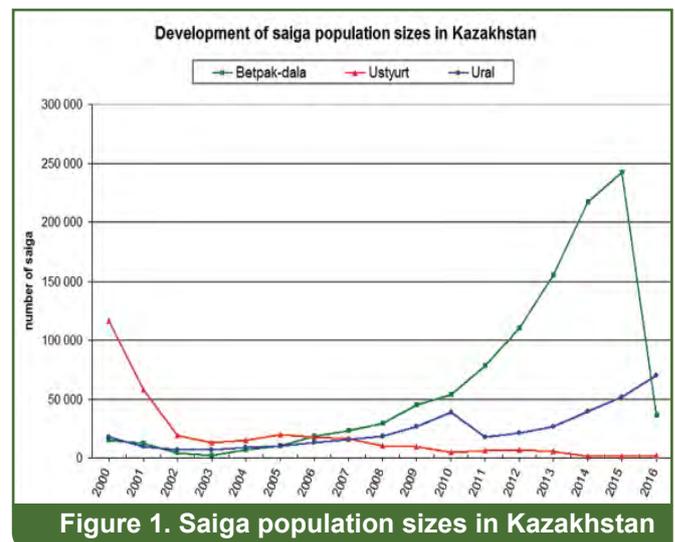
From 18 April to 3 May 2016 the Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan (ACBK) carried out an annual aerial survey of all three saiga populations in Kazakhstan – the Betpakdala, Ural and Ustyurt populations. The survey was ordered by the Committee for Forestry and Wildlife of the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Kazakhstan and was implemented in cooperation with Okhotzooptom and Kazaviaspas. The aerial survey involved officials from regional forestry and wildlife inspectorates, as well as from protected areas – the Altyn Dala Nature reserve, Irgiz Turgay State Nature Reserve and Korgylzhan Reserve.

According to the survey, in 2016 the total number of saigas in the Republic of Kazakhstan was 108,300 individuals, 36,200 of which were in the Betpakdala population, 70,200 Ural, and 1,900 Ustyurt.

The data indicate that the Ural and Ustyurt populations have grown in size. However, the number of animals in the Betpakdala population was lower than that in the previous year, which means the population has not yet recovered after the mass die-off in 2015. Nevertheless, the species' biological characteristics allow us to hope that it will recover soon.

The Ural population has been growing steadily at around 35% over the last few years and, according to the survey, is currently the largest one. The same growth rate was observed in the Betpakdala population and it can, therefore, be regarded as typical of saiga populations living in relatively good conditions without very harsh winters and active poaching.

The Ustyurt population remains the most vulnerable. The main cause of



the population decrease is poaching. However, the latest survey showed that the population has enough males for population growth even if the male proportion is low. The population size is not decreasing but is still very small.

The distinguishing feature of the 2016 aerial survey was that a new aircraft, the Eurocopter 145, was used instead of an AN 2 aeroplane. This substitution required some changes to make the survey conform to the necessary standards. This included rules of behaviour for the surveyors while on board the helicopter, based on the wide visual range through the aircraft's windows, a new communication system which had not yet been optimised, and the limited number of surveyors. In addition, there were some technical challenges associated with the fixation of survey transect markers



The team of surveyors. © ACBK

and the limited flight duration. However, these challenges were soon overcome by using a new fixation system and refuelling in the steppe from petrol tankers. All the problems were soon solved and the survey was carried out in complete conformity with the newly developed protocols, making it quite possible to compare the 2016 results with the those obtained in the previous surveys.

Spring in the Stepnoi Wildlife Sanctuary

Vladimir Kalmykov¹, Maria Vorontsova²

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It is spring. The steppe begins quickly to grow green and some places turns into a flower garden. Birds are returning to their homeland and the steppe is suffused with their chirrups. But the most important thing is that the time is nearing when baby saigas will arrive in the Stepnoi Sanctuary. This will be 16th calving at the reserve and the Sanctuary staff are preparing for it with particular care.

The 54,000 hectares of the officially designated Saiga Reproduction Zone is where saigas come in May each year. So as to ensure tranquility at this very challenging time, and in compliance with instructions from the Nature Management and Environmental Conservation Service of the Astrakhan region, movement is restricted on all the roads running through the Reproduction Zone and

Articles (cont)



A view of the ranger station in the Stepnoi sanctuary from a drone launched by José Antonio Hernandez Blanco (from the Institute of Ecology & Evolution)

signs have been posted informing drivers of the temporary closure. A feeling of anticipation for the miracle of new lives coming into this world has descended in the Sanctuary and it seems that everything is ready for calving. But in the end the saigas could not find that small piece of the Astrakhan steppes where baby saigas come into being. It was the weather that complicated the situation. Even elderly residents could not recollect similar weather; hurricane-strength winds, very heavy downpours making the steppe roads resemble Venetian canals, huge flooded plains – all these scared both the saigas and people, who stopped dead in anxious expectation.

In spite of everything, the saigas at last selected two places located about 20 km apart. By eye, about 2500 females gathered for calving and apparently were waiting for the weather to improve. And at last, on May 18th, a sun as bright and hot

as in the summer and a light wind began quickly to dry the soil and the emerald-silver feather-grass. In the afternoon, the steppe filled with the distinctive sounds of new-born baby saigas shouting to their mothers.

This year the team decided to prevent any disturbance, even for scientific purposes. Calving lasted just a week, and the death rate of females and newborns appeared very low. We observed the behavior of the vultures, which regularly fly into the calving grounds from far away. This time they had to satisfy themselves mainly by eating placentas. So we have hopes for a good population increase in 2016.

Life is pulsing in the Sanctuary: fox cubs, wolves and hares are gambolling around; bird of prey fledglings are growing up in their nests while young cranes are slowly waddling after their parents. And all these in the midst of the still-brilliant green blooming steppe. The steppe idyll! Yet rather soon this pleasing picture will be replaced by a more severe landscape; the



A team of Stepnoi rangers. © Nikolai Yudin



Saiga family. © Andrey Gilyov

multicolored spring carpet will turn into a yellow, hard surface that heralds the forthcoming season of wildfires - both natural (for instance, caused by a dry thunderstorm) and man-made. In order to minimize the losses from fire the staff sanctuary cleared the roads and ploughed up the especially hazardous places. This work was possible thanks to financing from the Nature Management and Environmental Conservation Service of the Astrakhan region along with support from the Russian Branch of the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW). It is also difficult to overestimate the assistance in prevention and extinguishing of fires which from local farmers, with whom the sanctuary staff have recently established friendly relations based on a love of nature and their native land, as well as mutual assistance and understanding. We are sure that together we will be able to defend the inhabitants of our sanctuary.

In conclusion, we would like to express our great gratitude to the Nature Management and Environmental Conservation Service of the Astrakhan region for their continued attention to the sanctuary as well as to our colleagues and partners who have helped us to do so much this year. Thanks to the Saiga Conservation Alliance, we managed to fit out a small station in the sanctuary where our rangers can rest. Thanks to IFAW, the ranger station has been equipped with a solar battery so we have light and power. Thanks to the funds raised by WWF-Russia, we didn't run out of petrol. What else... This year our long-standing dream has come true; IFAW presented the sanctuary with two camera traps which will help us to record hidden events (especially after dark): <https://www.instagram.com/p/BHR67cIASBC/>.

In spring and early summer of 2016, we were happy to host research scientists from Saint-Petersburg University and the Institute of Ecology and Evolution of the Russian Academy of Sciences, a group of cameramen from the UK (see: <https://nat.astrobl.ru/press-release/saygaki-v-astrahanskoy-oblasti-pod-nadyozhnoy-zashchitoy> and <http://www.ifaw.org/>

international/news/saiga-sanctuary-be-featured-our-planet-series), as well as members of the Caucasus Regional Branch of WWF-Russia, and eco-tourists from Volgograd (<http://africa-v-tebe.livejournal.com/54027.html>).

Articles (cont)

We always welcome those who visit us with good intentions!

And finally: all the members of our small staff work with their hearts and souls and, using today's vogue

word, are 'results-orientated'! Our expected result is to help saigas survive in the unfavorable conditions of the north-west pre-Caspian region and do our utmost to conserve this species for future generations.

Evaluating stakeholder perceptions towards the Saigachy Reserve

Sonia Dhandra¹, Elena Bykova², E.J. Milner-Gulland^{3,2}

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Introduction

The Saigachy Reserve in Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan was gazetted in 1991 to conserve the Ustyurt saiga antelope population. The reserve has just been re-designated from an IUCN category IV protected area to a Complex Landscape Reserve (see News Update above); the equivalent to an IUCN category 1b protected area. The upgraded reserve aims to be an effective protected area with designated funds, resources and management financed through offsetting of the environmental damage from oil and gas industrial developments in the region.

Prior to the re-designation a collaborative project between Imperial College London and the Saiga Conservation Alliance was undertaken to understand stakeholders' perceptions and attitudes towards the Saigachy Reserve. This consultation aimed to give the opportunity for all those who may be positively or negatively affected by the Reserve to be able to contribute towards management planning. We also evaluated the usefulness of this approach to participatory stakeholder engagement for Protected Area planning in Uzbekistan.



Saigas photographed by IFAW camera trap at the artesian lake close to the ranger station in the Stepnoi sanctuary

Data collection was carried out between 24th April and the 18th June 2015 in the cities of Tashkent and Nukus as well as two rural settlements, Kyrk-Kyz and Kubla Ustyurt. We used focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires to understand which different groups were, or might be, affected by the Saigachy Reserve re-designation. We also asked them what benefits and costs the Reserve might pose for themselves and others, and what positive and negative impacts each group might have on the Reserve. We classified respondents into three groups:

1. Local residents, encompassing individuals and groups from Kyrk-Kyz and Kubla Ustyurt villages.

2. Official organisations, including all the government and international organisations; UNDP, SCNP,

Gosbiokontrol, and the Department for Hunting and Fishing.

3. Interested parties, comprising those with an indirect interest in the reserve such as scientists, teachers and archaeologists.

In total we held 11 focus groups with participatory exercises and 13 semi-structured interviews. Information on local residents' knowledge of saiga ecology and conservation was also collected through 34 questionnaires.

Findings

Overall, local people were knowledgeable on the status and trends of biodiversity in the Ustyurt region and understood the laws regarding saiga hunting. The predominant theme from local residents, official organisations and interested parties was that local

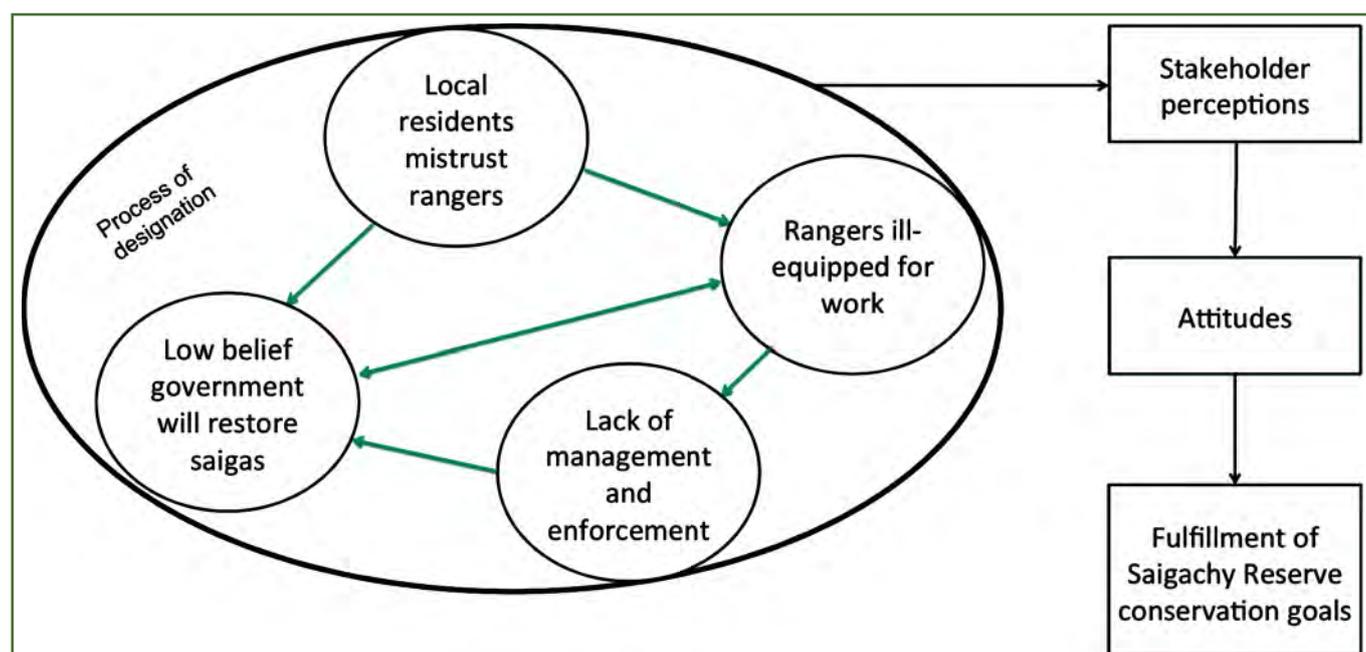


Figure 1. Interconnected factors that influence perceptions towards the re-designation of the Saigachy reserve. This theoretical scheme is based on a study by Nastran

Articles (cont)

Benefits		Positive Impacts	
Local People <input type="checkbox"/> Provides employment (e.g. as rangers) <input type="checkbox"/> If the saigas are restored then saiga will return to being a game animal		Local People <input type="checkbox"/> Work done at the reserve (i.e. construction work, eco-tourism, rangers)	
National and International Public <input type="checkbox"/> Preservation of natural heritage		Regional Government <input type="checkbox"/> Provide resources for the reserve (i.e. transport and fuel)	
Regional Government <input type="checkbox"/> If saigas are restored they will be able to hunt saigas and gain profit		Oil and Gas Companies <input type="checkbox"/> Provide financial and technical support to the reserve	
Scientists <input type="checkbox"/> Research opportunities in the area			
Costs		Negative Impacts	
Oil and Gas Companies <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of prospecting opportunities in the reserve		Local People <input type="checkbox"/> Hunting for saiga horns and meat	
Local People <input type="checkbox"/> Limited access to natural resources (i.e. livestock pastures)		Oil and Gas Companies <input type="checkbox"/> If further development occurs in the area then a negative impact on biodiversity	

Table 1. Common points of discussion across the stakeholder groups, on the benefits and costs of the reserve to different stakeholder groups, and the potential impacts of these groups on the success of the reserve

people would not be impacted by the reserve as they reside a great distance away from it and only herders and poachers visit the area, and then only infrequently. Saiga poaching may not be as prevalent as it once was, because saigas are now hard to find due to the drastic decline in their numbers in the area. Poaching was mentioned by each group of people, however, so it is still seen as one of the biggest threats to the Saigachy Reserve.

Stakeholder’s perceptions of Saigachy reserve

The perceptions stakeholders held towards the current protected area and the re-designation process showed how different groups were affected by interconnected factors (figure 1).

Local residents have poor perceptions of the current reserve and its functions, displaying mistrust towards rangers and disbelief that the government will restore saigas as a reality. Official organisations acknowledged Saigachy reserve would not fulfill its goals until finance, capacity and management are

provided for the reserve, allowing them to undertake their work to implement a well-managed reserve. Official organisations highlighted that the Saigachy Reserve was not on their current work agenda until the government signed off on the project, and so far UNDP have taken the main lead. Interested parties (scientists, teachers) showed encouragement for the re-designation process and had a positive outlook on the future of the reserve.

Costs, benefits and impacts of the reserve

Official organisations, interested parties and local residents were asked to state the potential benefits and costs to stakeholders of the reserve and to comment on how individuals or groups could have a positive or negative impact on the reserve. Similar points were raised in each discussion, so they have been amalgamated in Table 1.

Evaluating the participatory planning approach

Overall this methodology was difficult to undertake in the region, partly due to restrictions on access to the settlements and partly due to the unfamiliar concept of this research process to the stakeholders involved. Despite these obstacles, some good information was collected from the stakeholders, demonstrating that when consulted, stakeholder groups can make helpful contributions.

Participatory processes are emerging and being piloted in Uzbekistan, and



The research team in Ustyurt.
© Alexander Esipov

these approaches can complement and support the legal framework. Therefore the approach does show promise as a tool for supporting planning processes.

Recommendations

Recommendations are being implemented through the work of the Saiga Conservation Alliance in Ustyurt. Based on the outcomes of the study the following recommendations were suggested:

At the first stage after re-designation of the Saigachy Reserve:

- Strengthening anti-poaching patrols across the Ustyurt saiga range.
- Assisting with consultation on the Saigachy management plan, for example by providing indicators for monitoring both social and biological impacts of the reserve.
- Providing updated information to local residents and stakeholders regarding the re-designation process.

Articles (cont)

- Celebrating the re-designation with local and national ceremonies so the media and national government are actively involved.

At the second stage after re-designation of the Saigachy Reserve:

- Develop an education programme at the reserve for schools to undertake field trips and ecological lessons.
- Run workshops and capacity-building days for the rangers to build morale and their knowledge both about the ecology of the area and about the needs and priorities of local residents.

- Strengthen relations with the saiga conservation team in Kazakhstan and work towards a trans-boundary protected area across the Uzbek-Kazak border.

Acknowledgements

The research was funded by the Whitley Fund for Nature through the Saiga Conservation Alliance. We are grateful to the Academy of Science in Tashkent for their support and to the research team in Uzbekistan. A special thank you to everyone who participated in the focus groups and interviews.

Announcements

Announcing the winners of the 2016 SCA Small Grants Programme, supported by the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals

Carlyn Samuel, Saiga Conservation Alliance, mail@saiga-conservation.com

This year we are pleased to be supporting three exciting projects proposed by local conservationists within the saiga range.



Ranger team of the Stepnoi Sanctuary

The first winner is the *Ranger team of the Stepnoi Sanctuary, Russian Federation*. The status of the saiga population of the north-west pre-Caspian remains very precarious, numbering about 3500 animals. The main threat is poaching. About 2000 saigas live within the Stepnoi Sanctuary. Currently, a team of 10 rangers is always on duty, working around the clock to ensure that not only do poachers never harm a single saiga, but that the territory they live in is kept in optimum condition. Rangers carry out many duties



Bibigul Sarsenova

from putting out wildfires, creating and maintaining critically needed watering holes, and patrolling the entire area to prevent overgrazing and incursions by farmers and poachers, to carrying out wildlife education events. All this goes on despite the extremes of temperature they encounter, which range from 40o in the summer to -35o in the winter! Thanks to the hard work of the rangers the sanctuary has a growing reputation as a centre for science and conservation of saigas and other wildlife in the region. To strengthen this important element of their work we will be funding a new portacabin. This will be placed inside the sanctuary and will act as a hub for visiting scientists, filmmakers and conservationists. The rangers will also be able to hold environmental education sessions there to inform local people about the important role the sanctuary plays in preserving their wildlife, and to inspire them to get involved in conservation.

Bibigul Sarsenova, Chair of the Association 'Society and



Ekaterina Ochirova



Nadejda Pyurvenova

Environment', in the **Republic of Kazakhstan**, is another award winner. The award will enable her to review public attitudes to the challenge of conserving the Ural saiga population in Kazakhstan, which currently numbers around 70,000 animals. She will be working with colleagues at ACBK and the local network of children's Steppe Wildlife Clubs to identify the causes of poaching in the region and the attitudes local people hold towards the saiga. Bibigul will also be working with these groups to carry out environmental education activities focused on the challenges facing these critically endangered antelopes, and will be reaching out to students of local schools, art groups, environmental organizations and public institutions, as well as looking to engage with new schools in the area with the aim of setting up new Steppe Wildlife clubs. Her project will also see her hosting guided tours at the Centre for Wildlife and Conservation of Biodiversity in the Taskalinskoy district of West Kazakhstan, where there is a saiga captive breeding programme.

Announcements (cont)

Finally, *Ekatherina Ochirova and Nadezhda Pyurvenova* from the **Republic of Kalmykia, Russia** have been awarded a Small Grant to develop a booklet called 'Saiga - living heritage of our ancestors'. The saiga antelope features prominently in poems, songs, paintings and folklore, which will be gathered together in this booklet and distributed to schools and libraries in the region. It will draw together historical works which illustrate how entwined saigas are in the cultural heritage of local people, and aims to inform and inspire people to conserve the

species through highlighting the ancient links, symbolism and culture woven through a shared history. It will also educate the reader about modern day challenges facing saiga conservation, including the tragic story of the famous local ranger, Uldis Knakis who laid down his life to protect saigas. This powerful booklet will help people understand the importance of the species and the part everyone can play in its conservation.

Congratulations to all our award winners, we are looking forward to hearing more about your projects in the near future.

The Saiga Conservation Alliance 2016 Young Conservation Leaders award

Carlyn Samuel, Saiga Conservation Alliance, mail@saiga-conservation.com

The SCA recognises that it is imperative to support the next generation of conservationists, and so with our Young Conservation Leaders award we aim to support aspiring conservationists (individuals or groups) with grants which allow them to carry out grass-roots

conservation projects, and receive mentoring from SCA in-country partners. The 2016 awards are generously supported by Wildlife Conservation Network and we are pleased to be able to announce the winners.

In Kazakhstan four children aged 12-14 from the *Steppe Wildlife club 'Akbroken'*, led by their teacher, *Batima Bermuhambetovna Utalina*, will be carrying out an inspirational programme of events for the children in their school, and the local region. The team will create a circle of 'Saiga Friends', which aims to involve pupils from the fifth to eleventh grades in environmental activities and to start an environmental 'chain reaction'. Akbroken will give these Saiga



The members of the Steppe Wildlife Club 'Akbroken' from Kazakhstan are the winners of SCA Young Conservation Leaders award-2016

Friends talks on saiga conservation and raise the awareness of their fellow pupils through exhibitions and posters, newspapers and cartoons etc. It will also arrange field trips and environmental activities to include the new group in spreading the news. They will also be facilitating members of the biology department at their local university to get involved in their work. Finally, no group would be complete without a logo, and they plan to launch a school-wide competition to design a logo for the new Saiga Friends group.

In Kalmykia, Russian Federation, our winner is *Aigul' Maratovna Aitbaeva*, a 27 year old English teacher, who originally worked at the Centre for Wild Animals of the Republic of Kalmykia. Here she carried out saiga awareness campaigns for local schools and communities and helped arrange Saiga Day celebrations. She continues to help run the "Living Heritage" Steppe Wildlife club, supported by the SCA, at a local school. In 2014 she was awarded our Young Conservation Leader award and designed, wrote and produced the colourful booklet the "Amazing nomad" aimed at children in grades five to seven. This year she plans to launch the 'Rescue a Saiga' competition in three villages within the saiga's range. Aigul' will be looking for the best leaflet designed by children, which tackles the illegal advertising and sales of saiga-based products in rural villages. The



Young conservation leaders from Kalmykia and Mongolia: Aigul' Aitbaeva (left) and Munkhnast Dalannast (right)

winning designs will be printed and distributed in five other local villages. Aigul' plans to work with local Steppe Wildlife clubs who will visit each of these five villages with her, putting on shows and talks and handing out copies of her 'Amazing Nomad' booklet to raise awareness of saiga conservation.

In Mongolia, *Munkhnast Dalannast*, a young scientist who works for WWF-Mongolia has been awarded a grant to carry out some essential scientific work. Mongolian saigas are well adapted to hot and dry conditions, and can go without water for short periods of time. However, safe sources of drinking water are very limited during the dry season and we don't yet understand the water requirements of these animals. Many conservationists believe that effective management of water resources could be an important factor in the successful conservation of saigas in this and other, areas. With this in mind Munkhnast will carry

Saiga heroes

critical scientific research into the water requirements of the saiga antelope, he then will identify and map key saiga watering holes within the region. This new research will allow NGOs and authorities to work together to produce a management

plan in order to maintain these existing sites, as well as devising a plan to safeguard this critical aspect of maintaining the health and wellbeing of the saiga population and its environment.

Vladimir Kalmykov: The best part of my work is the tranquility of the Stepnoi sanctuary

Today we recognise Vladimir Kalmykov, Director of the Stepnoi sanctuary, and ask him some questions about his life with saigas. He is the head of one of the best saiga conservation teams, was the first state inspector in the sanctuary and participated in its creation. For his contribution to this work, which has completely absorbed all his life, Vladimir Kalmykov has been given awards by the Astrakhan regional government more than once. His team also won an award for Excellence in Anti-poaching from the Saiga Conservation Alliance.

Editor: When did you first become interested in saigas?

VK: Roughly 50 years ago, when I was a child, saigas were found rather widely in the Astrakhan region, and specifically near Promyslovka village, where I was lucky enough to come into the world. At that time all of us village boys were really interested to watch these quite unusual and swift-footed animals who seemed to be flying over the steppe plains of our native land.

Editor: When did you start to study and work on saiga conservation?

In 1988, for a variety of reasons, I decided to drastically change my life, which had previously been working in agriculture; I happened to get a job as a ranger with the Hunting and Fishing Society in Liman, where my duties included protecting hunting areas from poachers and



enforcing hunting rules. After working as a senior ranger there, I became a game management specialist in the Okhotnadzor Service (which supervises hunting activities) of the Liman and Kamyshov game management areas of Astrakhan region, where I gave particular attention to monitoring and managing game species including the saiga, controlling predators, checking that local people were

abiding by the hunting regulations, supervising rangers and investigating poaching. It was that "primary school", and the knowledge and experience I obtained there, which helped me not only to work in saiga conservation myself but also to share my experience and skills with my colleagues. In 1994, having realized that I did not have sufficient background knowledge, I enrolled in the distance learning programme of Volgograd Agricultural Academy, graduating in 2000. An important event for both the saiga and me happened in the same year: Stepnoi State Natural Sanctuary was gazetted in the Astrakhan region. I began to work there as a state inspector-motorcyclist from the very first days after its creation. And then I began to seriously observe and protect the saiga. Sixteen years have passed since that time and now I am the Director of this absolutely unique organization, the main task of which is saiga conservation, along with the conservation of all the saiga's *amazing neighbours*.

Editor: *What is your usual working day like?*

VK: *All my work should be planned for months ahead, yet every day is different. If I do not have to stay in my office and do paperwork, I go to the sanctuary where I drive round the territory with the inspectors, carrying out various activities and talking to the farmers who live within the sanctuary and along its borders.*

Editor: *Can you tell us an interesting story about saigas?*

VK: *The saiga is a very interesting animal. You can watch it endlessly and every time you can find something quite new and unusual in its behavior. One can study, study and study it... There is one question that neither my colleagues or I can answer; why do saigas abandon places where they are protected and move to the areas where they can be killed? Is it possible that the animals hope that people are humane? We cannot understand them. The birth of saiga calves is the most joyous and touching, but also very disturbing, period in the life of a saiga. A lot of stories can be told about the relationship between a female and her calves, but it is better if you see it with your own eyes.*

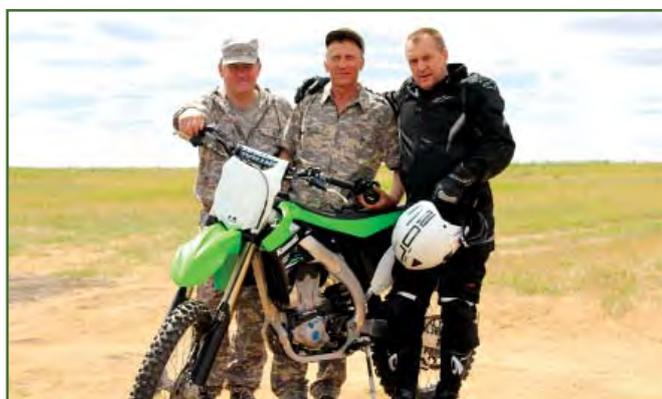
Editor: *What are the main problems in your work?*

VK: I think that in answering this question I will not be original; problems such as weak legislation, the low wages of inspectors, the constant need for petrol and new equipment are inherent to all saiga conservation organizations throughout its range.

Editor: *How can the obstacles in your work be removed?*

The answer to this question follows immediately from the answer to the previous question: wages should be increased the logistical support for

Saiga heroes (cont)



Three warriors: V.Kalmykov, N.Yudenko and G. Domovtsov. © Galina Kalmykova

the sanctuary should be improved; and no less importantly, the relationships between government structures need adjustment; they should all protect the saiga, including law enforcement bodies. But this requires political will at both federal and regional levels. In addition, the Stepnoi sanctuary's inspectors should have the authority which enables them to protect the saiga and, especially, to detain poachers not only within the sanctuary but also beyond its borders. This is important because the saiga, as a migratory species, often leaves the sanctuary.

Editor: *What is the best part of your work?*

The tranquility within the sanctuary, where one can easily come across grazing saiga herds, hares and foxes running from one bush to another, rodents watching over their foodstores near their burrows, a lot of birds... But such an idyll can be only reached as a result of the well-coordinated work of the sanctuary team. Our people are another

highlight of my work. I must say that once, some 20 years ago, there was a special saiga conservation squad in the Kalmykian republic, consisting of the highest-level professionals and supported by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture. With the advent of Perestroika and the ensuing major economic depression this squad lost support and nobody wanted them anymore. Naturally, having realized that there was no saiga protection, poachers started their "black deeds". And what about those people? We must confess with regret that many former saiga conservation officers are not among us; some went into business, others were left without a job with all the ensuing consequences. But the Stepnoi sanctuary was lucky: two of these men who were most professionally dedicated to the cause of saiga conservation have joined our ranks; Gennady Domovtsov and Nikolai Yudenko, who for a long time were not in demand where they could do most good. For two years already these first-class professionals have been passing their rich experience on to the younger staff, which has helped to substantially raise the level of protection in the sanctuary.

Editor: *What are the prospects for saiga conservation? What should be done first and foremost to help this species survive?*

It is of the utmost importance that every person who has been trusted

to protect nature as a whole, and the saiga specifically, should mind their own affairs and never use the saiga as an object of political bargaining, for commercial gain, or to solve questions that are relevant to other parts of government. It's extremely important to consolidate and align the activities of all those who have been entrusted to conserve this truly unique and unfortunate species, which throughout its history has endured periods of ups and downs in its numbers and reductions and expansions of its natural habitats. Only on this understanding can we help this species survive.

Editor: *You have worked for more than a decade on the conservation of threatened species. What has changed over the years and what are current trends in this field?*

In spite of the fact that much is being done in our country to conserve and restore threatened species (mostly for big cats), I am not very optimistic and cannot say that today's trends are positive, particularly in respect of the saiga.. As is evident from the statements of the Ministry of Nature Protection, in the near future the saiga will be included in the Red Book of the Russian Federation, yet I am not sure that even this will help the saiga survive...



Vladimir Kalmykov with wonderful team of the Stepnoi sanctuary. © Alexander Esipov

In memoriam

In memory of Nikolai Tkachyov

Nikolai Tkachyov, inspector-driver of the Stepnoi sanctuary, Astrakhan Region, died suddenly on April 15, 2016. He was a wonderful man who had worked at the sanctuary from the very first day of its creation (April 5, 2000). Nikolai Nikolayevich risked his health and life many times defending our natural heritage, saigas, from poachers. Everybody who knew Nikolai Nikolayevich would always note his professionalism (he knew everything about saiga natural history), modesty, laconic manner, outstanding responsiveness and kindness. He was a real man. Nikolai Nikolayevich's work will be continued by his son, Alexei Tkachyov, who came to work at the Stepnoi sanctuary after his service in the Russian Army, and for the last



Nikolai Nikolayevich with his son Alexei.
© Eugeny Polonsky

four years has gained much from his father's wide experience. He has become a worthy successor.

The SN editorial staff mourns along with the staff of the Stepnoi sanctuary and offers our most sincere condolences to the family and loved ones of Nikolai Tkachyov.

Tribute to Maria Karlstetter

Maria Karlstetter, a dedicated environmentalist who made a significant contribution to saiga conservation, sadly died in a tragic road accident in July in Germany.

Maria was a committed wildlife conservationist and biologist with extensive knowledge, interest and experience in Central Asia and a special affinity for the region's landscapes, nature and culture. After completing her studies, she initially worked with a variety of organisations engaging in research and conservation-related projects in the region, including setting up ecotourism infrastructure and a transboundary protected area.

Maria worked in Afghanistan with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), and then in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan with Fauna & Flora International (FFI).

As FFI's Saiga Programme Manager for 5 years from 2009, Maria led a project which took major steps forward in the understanding, enabling environment and practical action for the conservation of the Ustyurt saiga population. This project was done in close co-operation with Saiga Conservation Alliance and Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan. Her efforts contributed significantly to improving the awareness of the plight



Maria Karlstetter. © FFI

of this critically endangered species on the global agenda, but also locally and regionally, and putting conservation action into practice to ensure that this species has a greater chance of survival in the years to come. The project under Maria played a key role in increasing our knowledge of the Ustyurt saiga population, with telemetry and other studies, and implementing practical on-the-ground activities as well as higher-level engagement through the CMS treaty and multi-sectoral dialogue. Maria also started the innovative initiative with the Kazakh customs service to use sniffer dogs

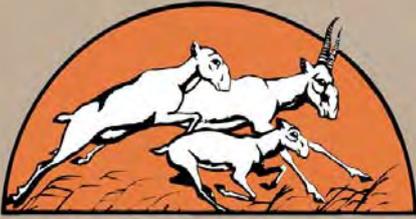
to detect illegally trafficked saiga horn. In spite of the challenges and difficulties, Maria was persistent and conscientious, committed to making a difference.

Wanting to be based in her homeland closer to family and friends, Maria moved back to Germany in 2013, but maintained her interest in Central Asia, first supporting the implementation of the Central Asian Mammals Initiative (CAMI) and developing the Programme of Work which was adopted by CMS Parties in November 2014, before moving on to a German consultancy working again on environmental projects across Central Asia and India.

Maria loved the outdoors, enjoying hiking, mountaineering and photography, whilst also relaxing with yoga and drawing. Tributes from colleagues in the region reflect on Maria's sincerity, kindness and encouragement to others. Those of us who had the pleasure and privilege of knowing and working closely with Maria will remember a warm friend and dedicated, professional and knowledgeable conservationist with a tireless desire to make a difference to the world we live in.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our deep gratitude to all the people whose donations of money and time support the work of the Saiga Conservation Alliance. We particularly thank the WCN staff and volunteers for their support and advice, and members of the public in the USA and worldwide for their generous donations to our recent appeal. We are grateful to the organisations that have supported this issue of the newsletter – CMS, WCN and WWF-Mongolia.



SAIGA CONSERVATION ALLIANCE

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