



# SAIGA NEWS

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



Photo by Alexander Esipov

## Steppe Wildlife Clubs: from an initiative to results

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In 2012-2013, Steppe Wildlife Clubs were established thanks to the efforts of enthusiasts and with the assistance of the Saiga Conservation Alliance. If we trace the geography of this initiative, we can see that it is rather broad, extending from the steppes of Kalmykia to the wild landscapes of the Aral Sea region and beyond. The towns and villages in these areas possess the inimitable features of their national culture and traditional ways of life. They are united by one common and very important feature; they are all located in the vicinity of saiga antelope habitats.

Over many years of proximity, people have got accustomed to numerous herds of saigas grazing alongside them. From time immemorial, saigas have been an inexhaustible source of food and clothing, spirituality and culture, evoking thoughts of the harmony and wisdom of nature. If today you ask a schoolchild living in a steppe village whether they have seen a saiga, most likely the answer will be negative. At best, children know saigas from pictures in books or from stories related by old people who

lived in the times when herds of these steppe nomads swept past their villages.

Over the years, an erroneous stereotype has formed in the minds of people living side by side with saigas: "Only take and consume" and give nothing in return! Nature has done its best by providing the saiga with a unique ability to survive and reproduce. Yet today the saiga is in real trouble. How can saiga be helped and who can come to their aid? First and foremost, people themselves should change their barbaric and consumptive attitude towards saigas, should learn to perceive saiga as a vital part of the arid ecosystem. For without saigas the steppe is doomed to rapid degradation.

### *Teachers as the wellspring*

Today, as always, teachers are the most progressive part of society; they are protectors of the best qualities of the nation, of moral values and attitudes towards the world.

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Possessing knowledge and critical thinking skills, teachers are always socially active and are among the first to respond to the problems emerging in the society and environment. Therefore, it is no wonder that in the steppe regions, the first initiatives for saiga protection were conceived by school teachers. The first groups of enthusiasts who blended the experience and wisdom of the older generation with youthful ardour started in schools on the steppe.

A large-scale event called "Saiga Day" was the first test of their capabilities and potential; it was implemented thanks to the direct participation and support of the Saiga Conservation Alliance, local authorities and the state nature protection agencies. These events are intended for various age and social groups in the local population and are usually held at about the same time of year, uniting villages in Kalmykia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (see articles below).

This year is a major landmark in strengthening public initiatives on saiga protection, as Steppe Wildlife Clubs have started to be formed. In the city of Elista, the capital of the Republic of Kalmykia, a Steppe Wildlife Club named “Living Heritage” has formed, with the participation of the Centre for Wild Animals of the Republic of Kalmykia, and located at Yashkul’ school. Members of this club have approved their Charter, adopted a long-term programme of actions and even acquired a logo with an image of a sweet and defenceless saiga baby.

Steppe Wildlife Clubs have been also formed near the ranges of the Betpakdala and Ural saiga populations in Kazakhstan, in the villages of Akkol, Azhibai and Nursai. In the Ustyurt saiga population in Uzbekistan, teachers and local community representatives have also supported the initiative, creating Steppe Wildlife Clubs at school № 54 in Jaslyk village, schools № 56 and 26 in Karakalpakia and school № 37 in Nukus.



Before starting up their clubs, teachers attended a seminar on the principles of ecological education, helping to ensure consistency in planning and action between groups.

### *The Steppe Wildlife Club phenomenon*

Madina Abdikarimova, an enthusiast and teacher from school 37 in Nukus, Republic of Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan, and one of the first supporters of Steppe Wildlife Clubs, says: "It is surprising, but our children know so little about saigas! How can they learn about them, when it is easier to find out about Antarctic penguins and African lions from the TV and textbooks than it is to learn about a unique antelope that was found close to their villages and towns until quite recently? Even in their playgrounds, our children are surrounded by images of exotic fauna. I cannot stand apart and just be an observer of a situation in which we are losing our knowledge about our own natural world!

children, and providing opportunities for adult development and education.

After deciding on the general priorities of the Steppe Wildlife Clubs, their activities were defined. It is important to foster an interest in the environment in the younger generation by involving them in practical conservation activities, by helping them acquire independent research skills, by developing communication and leadership skills, as well as laying the groundwork for their future professions. Together, these activities will help young people to participate in combatting saiga poaching, as it seems that teenagers are increasingly engaging in illegal saiga hunting. It is also important to consider the possibility of children's influence on adults. We have examples of children refusing to eat saiga meat on moral grounds, which then reduced their mother's motivation to buy saiga meat.



Photo by Irina Gupotchenko

**Members of the "Living Heritage" Steppe Wildlife Club meeting scientists from the Russian Forage Research Institute and the Centre for Wild Animals of the Republic of Kalmykia.**

The Steppe Wildlife Clubs also serve as bases for adult education, focussed on cultural development, broadening of their worldview, and fulfilling the needs of the older generation. The chance to gain skills and qualifications increases adult motivation to participate. For this reason, in the future it would be good to develop projects about handicrafts, applied arts and nature tourism.

By losing memories and knowledge, we are losing a sense of the value of nature and dulling the feeling that we are in danger of losing such an important steppe species as saiga. We need to begin with "our home", our street, our village, region, country and planet; with the history of the place where we live, history of our people and nation; with our way of life, soul and heart. We need a public space for ecological information to enable us to do this. The Steppe Wildlife Clubs offer an excellent opportunity to return to the "cradle" of our spirituality and enter the struggle for saiga conservation".

Steppe Wildlife Clubs are much broader than any of usual school ecology clubs, but still based on the ideas of enthusiastic teachers from local schools. All the club members are united by a passion for saiga conservation, being the species' active protectors, and a desire to stop poaching of this defenceless antelope. The clubs' activities can be divided into two important constituents; environmental education and awareness-raising for

**Editor's note:** The SCA is very grateful to the People's Trust for Endangered Species for supporting us to institute Steppe Wildlife Clubs in three countries in 2012-13, and to Disney Canada for their support for the first Steppe Wildlife Clubs in Uzbekistan.



Photo by Alexander Espov

**Madina Abdikarimova and the "Hope" Steppe Club, school № 37, Nukus, presenting their work at a press conference on Saiga Day.**

# Updates

## A conference on saiga conservation is held in Astana

Christiane Röttger, UNEP/CMS Secretariat, [CRoettger@cms.int](mailto:CRoettger@cms.int)

On 18 June 2013, a technical meeting for the Convention on Migratory Species' Memorandum of Understanding on saiga conservation took place in Astana, Kazakhstan. The objectives of the meeting were to discuss the impact of infrastructure construction such as railroads and border fences on saiga in Kazakhstan, to examine possible solutions to mitigate those impacts, and to launch an international coordination mechanism for the MOU, the Saiga Resource Centre website.

Participants discussed options for mitigating the negative impacts of the border fence between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (*see* SN 15) and planned railway infrastructure operations in Kazakhstan.

of Kazakhstan (ACBK) and Fauna and Flora International (FFI).

The second part of the workshop focused on the Saiga Resource Centre (SRC), a website which provides an online forum both for experts involved in saiga antelope conservation as well as for the interested public. The SRC is designed as a communication platform including all relevant information regarding saigas, and includes a comprehensive database of literature, images and videos for use by the saiga conservation community. The specialist resource section includes a database of saiga experts and projects related to saiga conservation. Government officials, NGOs, experts and interested individuals can register in this section and add their own expertise and projects as well as access information about other activities and specialists.

The main objective of the website is to share information on progress towards implementing the CMS Saiga MOU and to enable saiga range states, as well as states that consume or trade in Saiga products, to share information and experience on activities under the MOU. The SRC has been developed by the Saiga Conservation Alliance (SCA) and ACBK, the two technical coordinators of the Saiga MOU, with support and funding from the CMS Secretariat, Switzerland.



Photo by Alexander Espirov

**Welcoming speech by Erlan Nysanbayev, Vice-Minister for Environmental Protection of the Republic of Kazakhstan.**

A total of 1,600 kilometers of additional rail routes will be built by 2016 as part of a 'New Silk Road' to increase overland trade between Asia and Europe. The east-west railway corridor will cut through ecologically-intact and nearly uninhabited steppe – prime Saiga habitat.

Participants welcomed recommendations for saiga-friendly design of the border fence, such as removing the bottom two wires. To mitigate negative effects from railway construction, avoiding core Saiga range would be the best option. If construction through saiga habitat cannot be avoided, sound mitigation measures should be applied, such as minimising human presence along the railway. Offset mechanisms for any remaining damage to saigas could be funded by a "saiga conservation fee" for trains. These recommendations are in a report initiated by the CMS Secretariat, and funded by Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS), the Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity

*The report "Saiga Crossing Options. Guidelines and Recommendations to Mitigate Barrier Effects of Border Fencing and Railroad Corridors on Saiga Antelope in Kazakhstan" by Kirk Olson can be downloaded in English from:*

[http://www.cms.int/species/eurasian\\_mammals/kirk\\_olson\\_cайрак\\_connectivity\\_sw\\_kazakh\\_e.pdf](http://www.cms.int/species/eurasian_mammals/kirk_olson_cайрак_connectivity_sw_kazakh_e.pdf);

*and in Russian from :*

[http://www.cms.int/species/eurasian\\_mammals/kirk\\_olson\\_cайрак\\_connectivity\\_sw\\_kazakh\\_r.pdf](http://www.cms.int/species/eurasian_mammals/kirk_olson_cайрак_connectivity_sw_kazakh_r.pdf)

*The Saiga Resource Centre is at:*

<http://www.сайракresourcecentre.com/>

# Results of the 2013 aerial survey in Kazakhstan

Yury Grachev, Institute of Zoology, Kazakhstan, [teriologi@mail.ru](mailto:teriologi@mail.ru)

The annual aerial survey of saigas in Kazakhstan took place on 4th-27th April 2013. Participants were the Institute of Zoology, Kazakhstan, the Committee of Forestry and Hunting, the hunting management organisation "Okhotzooptom", the regional Forestry and Hunting Inspectorates, the Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan and the Scientific Research Institute on Wildlife. Preliminary analysis suggests that the total saiga population in Kazakhstan is 187,000, compared to

137,500 in 2012. The Betpakdala population is 155,200, Ustyurt population - 5,400, Ural - 26,400 individuals. The number of saigas has grown in the Betpakdala and Ural populations, while in Ustyurt numbers have decreased slightly. Compared to 2012, the Betpak-dala population has increased by 41%, Ural - by 26%, Ustyurt - has decreased by 17%. This represents an overall increase compared to 2012 of 36%.



Фотом КИТОХ МООС РК

## Saiga Day 2013

*Saiga Day has now become an international ecological festival, celebrated in all the countries of the saiga's range. Its aim is to attract public attention to the saiga's plight, raise awareness of conservation activities, and to change behaviour towards this critically endangered species.*

## Saiga Day is celebrated in Uzbekistan

Natalya Shivaldova, "Ekomaktab" NGO

Saiga Days have been held for the last few years in the steppe villages of Uzbekistan, and are much liked by local children. This year, the event has moved beyond just being school-based, with local government and community representatives enthusiastically joining in with organising the event. The festival was held this year in early May in Karakalpakstan (a village within saiga range) and in the regional capital of Nukus, with the participation of teachers and members of the local Steppe Wildlife Clubs. A new event within Saiga Day was "Ecology express", a competition which included sections on protecting local nature, the local language and traditions. School 54 from Jaslyk village and schools 56 and 26 from Karakalpakiya were involved, as well as school 37 from Nukus, which held its first Saiga Day.

This year the ecological poster competition was for adults as well as schoolchildren, with people from nursery schools, medical surgeries, the gas-compressor station and village. Along with cultural and creative events and quizzes, a football tournament was held in the village of Jaslyk and a volleyball match in the village of Karakalpakiya.



Photos by Alexander Esipov

Dance of the little saigas, school №26, Karakalpakiya village.

Local police officers, workers from the compressor station, local community representatives and the older pupils of the village schools took part in these "Saiga Protector" Cup competitions.

On May 7, 2013, a press conference about Saiga Day was held in the conference hall of the State Committee for Nature of the Republic of Karakalpakstan. It included presentations from the innovative teachers who had started up the Steppe Wildlife Clubs of Karakalpakstan in the spring. Journalists and interested people from the community attended. The event was organised with the active support of the State Committee for Nature, the Karakalpakstan branch of the Ecology Movement of Uzbekistan and in collaboration with the Saiga Conservation Alliance.



Photos by Alexander Espinov

Small viewers of saiga artworks, school № 56, Karakalpakkiya village.



Photos by Alexander Espinov

The "traditions" component of the Ecology Express competition, school № 56, Karakalpakkiya village.

During the press conference, there was a showing of the cartoon "The Steppe Tale" (see SN 16). The suggestion that children would make this cartoon by and for themselves was raised at last year's Saiga Day. In the post-showing discussion, the audience agreed that saiga conservation needed a range of activities, and that saigas can only be protected by the community and state working together.

## A festival for saigas in Kalmykia

Eugenia A. Samtanova, "Living Heritage" Steppe Wildlife Club

This year's Saiga Day was held at Yashkul' school on April 17, 2013. Pupils from seven schools in Kalmykia and from schools in the neighbouring Orlovsky district, Rostov region, participated. The festivities were opened with a traditional Kalmyk ritual called "It is time to think about the saiga". In this, the leaders of the Yashkul' Steppe Wildlife Club (SWC) called on community members not to stand on the sidelines of environmental problems, to be in the "centre" of the planet and take an active civic stand. They used a musical poem to describe the causes of the saiga decline, and told the legend of the local Buddhist god, the White Old Man Tsagan Aav, who ordered hunters not to shoot saigas. Pupils from classes 5-6 gave a performance which ended with this call to arms: "Believe us, the saiga is vital for the Kalmyk steppe. If we fail to save it, we will violate the rules of our forefathers".

Saiga Day continued with a theatre performance by the SWC and then children from different schools took part in a competition to put on mini-performances about the saiga and other steppe inhabitants, including people living side-by-side with them. All the costumes and stage settings had been

made by the children. There was also a very successful exhibition of the best artworks entered by children into the "Steppe Antelope" competition. 136 works were entered into the competition in four categories; drawing, handicrafts, composition, poem.



Photos by Eugenia A. Samtanova

A play by the Living Heritage Steppe Wildlife Club.

The SWC leaders then led a dance event, called "Let us protect and conserve saigas", in which children were divided into four dance teams, with competitions and quizzes about saiga conservation held in the intervals. The festival was closed by a chime of bells rung by representatives from each of the teams. The ringing of the bell symbolised the urgency of rising up in defence of saigas, as tomorrow might be late: We can only save the saiga by not being indifferent, and the more that people realise that saiga conservation is their own problem, the louder the bells will chime.



Photos by Eugenia A. Samantova

Performance by a team from Erdniyev school.

## Saiga Day in Kazakhstan

*Carlyn Samuel and Zhanna Aksartova*

This year saw ACBK holding the third annual Saiga Day celebration in Kazakhstan. When the first Saiga Day was held in 2011 five schools in five villages participated in the event. The 350 children who attended the first festival took part in quizzes and drawing competitions as well as reciting poetry and short stories. This year over 500 children, their families and volunteers all came together to celebrate.

Saiga Day has become such a key event for these communities that the mayors and village elders all attended the events this year, taking an active part in the festivities, making speeches, admiring the exhibitions and presenting prizes.

The celebrations opened with concerts, poetry readings and dances, and then officials and children's families and friends were invited to visit the saiga exhibitions and science projects the children had prepared in the preceding weeks.



Photo by ACBK

Can you draw a saiga from memory?

For the first time this year Saiga Day saw children of all ages taking part, so children were divided into age groups in order that they could experience a programme specially tailored to them.

The youngest children and their families were treated to a new saiga cartoon, and afterwards drew pictures to illustrate what they had learnt. Those who were a little older took part in a 'Saiga Marathon'; several rounds of competitions in which teams were tested on their knowledge of saiga ecology and biology, drawing saigas and answering quick-fire questions. By popular demand they ended by playing an interactive saiga game in which teams play the parts of poachers and saigas; struggling to carry out their migration in the face of obstacles and attacks.



Photo by ACBK

The children loved learning about other animals that share the steppe with saigas.

For the first time, older teenagers took part in Saiga Day, and found themselves battling for the title of 'Eco-Leader of the 21st Century'. The competition was fierce and generated some great teamwork and ideas from all the contestants, who showed their conservation knowledge, passion for their environment and great potential as future guardians of the steppe's magnificent biodiversity!

A really positive outcome of this event has been seeing the children realise how important they are and how they can help save the saiga in their own country.



Photo by ACBK

The future generation of steppe 'champions'.

## Media reports

### Another saiga mortality event in September 2013

On September 7, 2013, a die-off of saigas in the Betpakdala population was reported in the Akmola and Karaganda regions, Kazakhstan. Dead saigas were found on the southern, western and northern shores of Lake Tengiz, as well as on the open steppes.

A working group has been created to investigate the cause of the die-off, including representatives of the Ministry of Environmental Protection of the Republic of Kazakhstan (MEP RK), the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Education and Science and others. On September 8th-12th, the working group went to the die-off area to examine the evidence, along with representatives of the regional authorities, the Biosecurity Research Institute and the Karaganda regional veterinary service.

The survey (both vehicle and aerial) estimated the number of dead animals at 791, <http://www.eco.gov.kz/new2012/2013/09/3127-81/>, rather than the previously reported 3000 <<http://www.eco.gov.kz/new2012/2013/09/3126-192/>>. During a press conference, held on September, 10th, 2013 in Astana, Bakhytbek Duisekeev, the Head of the Committee for Forestry and Hunting, stated that a preliminary analysis of the samples from the dead animals suggested the presence of pasteurellosis.

This is not the first mass saiga die-off in Kazakhstan: In 2010, 2011 and 2012, a total of more than 13,000 animals

died in the Ural and Betpakdala populations. Despite the official determination of pasteurellosis as the cause of this latest event, this hypothesis is still debated in relation to previous events (see SN-11, 13, 14, 15). Earlier, and very large, mass die-offs attributed to pasteurellosis occurred in Kazakhstan in 1981, 1984 and 1988 (see SN-11).

### Huge consignment of saiga horns seized in China

On 5 September 2013 border police in Northwest China uncovered 35 boxes of antelope horns, containing 4,470 horns, that smugglers were attempting to sneak into the country. The boxes were tucked away underneath straw mattresses at the back of a truck, and were estimated to have a value of \$22 million.



Photo from video report by Laurie Blake

Saiga horns confiscated on 5th September in China.

The truck driver was detained and revealed that he had three accomplices waiting for him in China, who were caught by border police 40 kilometres from the point of entry. The value quoted in the news and above isn't the

market value of the horns, but is based on the value estimation system used by Chinese courts which is much higher than the real market value for the purpose of deterrence. The border crossing where the seizure took place is between China and Kyrgyzstan; this means that the most likely source was Kazakhstan.

For more information please see the video report by Laurie Blake at: <http://news.uk.msn.com/video-clips?videoid=773431b9-e1bf-4d98-9440-0f6031daa94c#tscptmf>.

Earlier this year (on 12th May 2013) 719 saiga horns were seized at Port Alashan, Xinjiang, China. Three Chinese citizens and one Kazakh citizen are suspects. According to Urumchi customs officials, the Urumchi border crossings remain a favourite smuggling route for saiga horns, generally on international trains between Almaty and Urumchi,

[http://www.xinjiangnet.com.cn/xj/corps/201306/t20130623\\_3329891.shtml](http://www.xinjiangnet.com.cn/xj/corps/201306/t20130623_3329891.shtml)



Photo by Xinjiangnet.co.cn

Customs officers examining seized saiga horns in Urumchi, 12 May, 2013.

## Captive breeding of saigas as a measure for stabilising natural populations

On May 28th-30th 2013, an international conference on "Keeping and breeding saigas (*Saiga tatarica* L.) in captivity" was held at Orlovsky village, Rostov region, This is the first time a conference has been held on this subject, and it was the initiative of the NGO "Wildlife of the Steppe Association", which has kept a captive population of saigas since 2003. The conference was actively supported by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Ecology of the Russian Federation, the Rostov Region Government, the Legislative Assembly of the Rostov Region, the Public Chamber of the Rostov Region, UNESCO, the Steppe Institute of the Urals Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the Southern Federal University, the Southern Scientific Center of the Russian Academy of Science, the Rostov Biosphere Reserve and others.



Saigas in Yashkul breeding centre, Centre for Wild Animals of the Republic of Kalmykia.

The saiga range in Russia includes the Republic of Kalmykia, the Astrakhan region and rare sightings in the east of the Rostov region. The latest official estimates place the population at a critically depressed level, around 5000 animals, with a shortage of males.

The conference had 75 participants, including representatives of two Russian saiga breeding centres; the Wildlife of the Steppe Association's Centre for Rare Animals, and Centre for Wild Animals of the Republic of Kalmykia's Yashkul' breeding centre. The conference participants emphasized the importance of captive breeding of saigas and their subsequent reintroduction to generate sustainable populations. These methods are widely used internationally in the conservation and restoration of rare species. Among the most widely known examples are the bison and Pere David's deer, while Przewalsky's horse has only survived due to being kept in captivity. In recent years, there has been great progress in Mongolia and China in creating natural populations of this species.

The conference resolutions were:

1. Given the critical condition of natural saiga populations, governments are recommended to step up protection and to pay attention to captive breeding and subsequent reintroduction of saigas.

2. The Ministry of Natural Resources and Ecology of the Russian Federation should develop and adopt the Federal Programme for Saiga Conservation including conserving the species in captivity.

3. The Ministry of Natural Resources and Ecology should include the saiga antelope in the Red Book of the Russian Federation.

4. In order to improve the status of the saiga population in the wild, the State Duma (parliament) should adopt amendments to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation in order to make the penalties for poaching more severe. Poaching and the lack of control of the wolf population negatively affect not only wild saigas but reintroduced individuals. This primarily refers to the saiga population in the North-Western pre-Caspian as it is the most vulnerable.

5. Given the experience which now exists in saiga breeding, it would be useful to create additional breeding centres in order to expand the captive population, study them experimentally, reintroduce them, and transfer them to farms, zoos and breeding centres for use for other purposes. It is recommended that regional and local authorities, businesses and funding agencies should support this initiative.

6. Using the positive experience of the Republic of Kalmykia, it is recommended that range state governments should prohibit the trade in saiga derivatives.

7. Conference participants support the initiative of the Ural branch of the Russian Academy of Science's to hold an annual ecological festival "Steppe Day" on May 31st, and, along with the Russian Geographical Society, to declare 2014 the "Year of the Steppes".

For more details, see

[http://civil-society.donland.ru/Blog/ViewPost.aspx?pageid=97328 & ItemID=93121&mid=90327](http://civil-society.donland.ru/Blog/ViewPost.aspx?pageid=97328&ItemID=93121&mid=90327)



Photo by the Wildlife of the Steppe Association

Conference participants.

## Camera traps are used in Uzbekistan

On July 19th, a seminar on "The use of camera traps for biodiversity research; the Ustyurt Plateau as a case study" was held at the State Committee on Biocontrol under the State Committee for Nature of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

This event was organized by the State Committee on Biocontrol, the Saiga Conservation Alliance (SCA), the Michael Zukkov Fund and the Small Cat Conservation Alliance (SCCA). It was preceded by a joint expedition to South Ustyurt as part of an exchange visit between the SCA and SCCA supported by the Wildlife Conservation Network.



Photos by Alexander Espinov

Jim Sanderson and SCA team.

The main purpose of this trip was to provide practical training on camera trapping to support future research and conservation of saigas and other rare animals of Uzbekistan. This technique is very promising for the study of animal behaviour, sex and age structure of population, abundance and topical problems such as the impact of man-made infrastructure on wildlife.

Camera traps have only started being used relatively recently but have been well received by zoologists. They are easy to use, economical and efficient.



Photo by Eugeny Polonsky

In the past, zoologists had to sit for weeks and observe animals' lives, worrying about scaring them away, but now it is all much simpler; you just set up a camera trap in the animals' tracks and take data from it as and when necessary. It is essential that no moving objects are close to the camera since its sensors are very sensitive, so that even a branch waving in the wind may activate the camera. Therefore, the researchers setting up the camera need to be skilled not only in technical aspects but also know the habits of wild animals and be able to orient the camera correctly considering topography, concealment and other factors.



Photos by Alexander Espinov

**Alexander Grigoriants opens the workshop on camera trapping in Tashkent**

His talk was greeted with great interest. In Uzbekistan, the first camera traps came into use only last year, yet there are already preliminary results from their use. Valentin Soldatov recounted his experiences in his presentation "The first successful experience of the use of camera traps in Uzbekistan, at the Djeiran Eco-centre". Maria Gritsyna, a member of the Turan NGO, reported the results of the expedition to Southern Ustyurt which was part of this WCN-funded exchange. The presentations made by Natalya Marmazinskaya and Elena Bykova discussed the results of their recent expeditions to the Ustyurt Plateau, which were funded by the Michael Zukkov Fund and GEF/UNDP. The scientists unanimously recognized that the use of camera traps has great potential. They will enable researchers to obtain reliable photo- and video images that will undoubtedly enable them to better understand the fauna of Uzbekistan.

*For more detail, see*

<http://econews.uz/index.php/item/2080-в-узбекистане-применяют-новые-методы-наблюдений-за-животными.html>.

## **The fundamentals of eco-education as exemplified by Steppe Wildlife Clubs**

On March 25-26, 2013, in Nukus, a training workshop was held for school teachers, on "The fundamentals of eco-education as exemplified by Steppe Wildlife Clubs". This training was conducted by SCA jointly with the local NGO



Photo by Alexander Espinov

**Participants in the training workshop.**



Photos by Alexander Espinov

**Camera trap setting.**

All camera traps operate in a similar way. As a rule they have three components: a movement-detecting sensor, a photo camera (with a video recording function) and infrared light-emitting diodes allowing photography during the hours of darkness. In addition accumulators or batteries are required. Currently, camera traps can work in a stand-alone mode for a long time, and in some remote areas researchers check the traps only every six months.



Photos by Alexander Espinov

**Jim Sanderson shares his international experience and findings on camera trapping at the Tashkent workshop.**

At the seminar Dr Jim Sanderson, Director of the Small Cat Conservation Alliance, discussed camera traps, data storage and analysis, based on his many years' experience of using the technology throughout the world.

Ekomaktab and the local branches of the government's Committee for Nature Protection and Ministry of Public Education. The objective of the training workshop was to upgrade teachers' professional skills and exposure to up-to-date educational techniques for the development of an ecological culture among their pupils.

It was also an opportunity for teachers from different schools to meet and exchange ideas and experiences, and to make contact with other teachers interested in ecological education.

During the training workshop, Steppe Wildlife Clubs were explained as additional extra-curricular educational opportunities, enabling pupils to realise their own creative and research potential, and increasing children's active understanding of environmental protection and the conservation of the region's rare and unique species of flora and fauna. Also during the meeting the teachers discussed together how to prepare for their Saiga Day festivals, and started to exchange ideas and discuss responsibilities and planning for these events. 16 teachers took part, from Ustyurt (schools ## 26, 54 and 56) and Nukus (schools ## 4, 34, 27, 1, 32, 37 and 29), as well as representatives of the local Committee for Nature Protection and the Eco-dvizhenie political party.

For more information see

<http://www.nuz.uz/rubrik/detail/2450/7573/> and <http://www.econews.uz/index.php/item/1948-основы-эко-образования-на-примере-степных-клубов.html>



Photo by Alexander Espinov

Demonstration of educational games by young teachers.

## Articles

### “A border incident” in the Stepnoi nature reserve: on whose land are saigas born?

Natalia Sudets

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On August 14th 2013, numerous vehicles drove into the Stepnoi State Nature Reserve, Astrakhan province, from the Republic of Kalmykia, which is a "saiga birth area"; two yurts (nomad's tents) were put up and timber for building was unloaded. As it turned out, these arrivals were Mongolian families who had come to raise horses, camels and goats there.

This part of the nature reserve is a zone for saiga reproduction. The uninvited guests set up camp at an artesian spring which had been re-opened 10 years ago by the staff of the Stepnoi reserve to be used as a watering place for wildlife. These Mongolians do not know any Russian and did not understand that their actions violated the rules of the

protected area. They also did not understand that they are at the centre of a painful territorial dispute between constituents of the Russian Federation. They had been sent there by Badma Yesinovich Garyayev, Director of the Kyrovsk stock breeding farm, in the Yashkul' district of the Republic of Kalmykia; he is the former head of the district who had leased this land, which at the time was within the borders of the Republic of Kalmykia.

The issue is that in this area, in the border zone between Astrakhan province and the Republic of Kalmykia, has not been regulated, and both constituents of the Russian Federation regard this territory as belonging to them.



Photo by Evgeny Polonsky

Mongolian yurts in the Stepnoi reserve.

During World War Two, the Kalmyk Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was liquidated by Decree of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. Its lands were shared among the neighbouring regions and the Kalmyks themselves were deported to Siberia. In the 1950s, the Republic was restored, though within a smaller area. The location of today's Stepnoi nature reserve was among the areas that were left as part of the Astrakhan region. After the USSR disintegrated, the constituents of the Russian Federation started litigation over this land. In 2001, the district court of arbitration sustained Kalmykia's claim and ordered that the western part of the area be transferred to it. In 2003, the Supreme Arbitration Court of the Russian Federation made a contrary decision. The status of the area has remained in dispute up to the present day. Currently, the Republic of Kalmykia and the Astrakhan province have created commissions of conciliation.

The disputed territory mainly consists of semi desert pastures playing an important part in saiga conservation. The number of saigas in the pre-Caspian population has declined catastrophically since the late 1990s, and today numbers about 5% of its 1997 level. The western part of the Liman district, where these disputed lands lie, is of great importance for the remaining saigas: a large group of antelopes stays here permanently, and this is a "birth area", a place where female saigas gather to calve.

Both constituents of the Russian Federation have declared regional-level nature reserves in this area to conserve saigas; called Tingutinsky in Kalmykia and Stepnoi in Astrakhan. The territories of these nature reserves almost coincide. Yet, since de facto this territory still belongs to the Astrakhan region, it is actually guarded by the Stepnoi nature reserve's rangers. The regulations of the Astrakhan nature reserve prohibit livestock grazing within the reserve without the consent of the nature reserve management.

There are a few reasons for this prohibition. Firstly, there is strong competition for grazing among saigas, sheep and goats; therefore in autumn it is appropriate to avoid sheep and goats grazing in key saiga habitats to ensure that the antelopes get through the winter well. Secondly, the people shepherding livestock constitute a potential poaching risk. Thirdly, outbreaks of disease; one serious outbreak among domestic livestock is more than enough to eliminate the remnant saiga population in this region. Understandably, the presence of livestock farms within the nature reserve is seen as objectionable and inadmissible.



Photo by Eugeny Polonsky

Scared saigas scattering from a watering place.



Photo by Eugeny Polonsky

**Hospitable and well-wishing Mongolian cattle-breeders do not suspect that they are violating the law by settling in the nature reserve.**

So far, no official position has been stated by the Kalmykian Ministry of Natural Resources. An unofficial opinion from the Ministry of Natural Resources was given by government employee Vladimir Badmayev: "When the Chernye Zemli reserve [a Federal-level UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in Kalmykia, which abuts the Stepnoi Reserve] was gazetted, Kalmykia transferred its part of the land to federal ownership, but Astrakhan has not coordinated with this transfer. Therefore, the nature reserve was gazetted in a down-sized version. Given the current confusion about the territorial affiliation of the disputed area, the transfer of this area to Federal ownership and the expansion of the Chernye Zemli biosphere reserve would be the best way out of the current situation".

On August 15th, the Chairman of the Astrakhan region's government Konstantin Markelov also commented the situation: "Today wildlife management officials and the police have visited the illegal construction site. It is obvious that the district authorities of the Republic of Kalmykia who have leased out this land have committed unlawful acts. At least two laws have been violated; the presence of foreign citizens within a constituent of the Russian Federation under authorization documents issued by another constituent; and nature conservation legislation. In the near future representatives of the police, Federal Migratory Service, the government of Astrakhan and local authorities will take measures to control these illegal activities within the Astrakhan region. I have warned the Chairman of the Republic of Kalmykia, I.A. Zotov. I requested that he take actions leading to voluntary termination of these illegal activities. The situation is under the control of the Governor of the Astrakhan region".

*A full version of this story is accessible at <http://strana.ru/journal/news/23202710>.*

**Editor's note:** As we went to press we have an unconfirmed report that the settlers have now left the reserve:  
<http://e-polonskiy.livejournal.com/237266.html>  
 As yet there is no official confirmation of this.

# Analysis of data from saiga monitoring in Uzbekistan, 2006-2012

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Saigas have been monitored in Uzbekistan since 2006, using three main approaches; opportunistic monitoring by scientists while on expedition, participatory monitoring using opportunistic sightings by local people, and in 2012 a transect-based approach implemented by local residents on motorbikes. We analysed these saiga sightings, to see whether there are any trends which could give insights into the distribution of saigas in Uzbekistan, both seasonally and spatially.

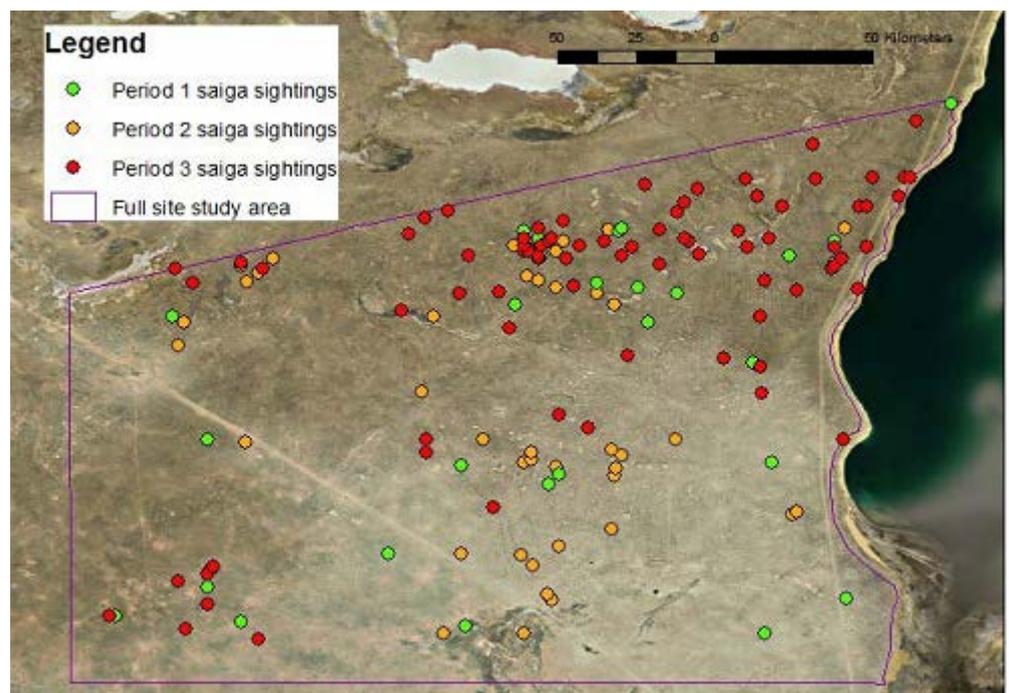
There were very few sightings in July-September, and so these months were excluded from analysis. We also excluded sightings from December 2005 (which were all along the railway line and therefore biased) and a few which were geo-referenced in Kazakhstan rather than Uzbekistan. Overall, 186 sightings were included in our analysis; 15 came from opportunistic monitoring, 147 from participatory monitors, and 24 from the transect study in 2012. These sightings are well distributed throughout the Ustyurt plateau, and also over different time periods of the year (Table 1, Figure 1).

The data are limited because the sample size is small, and the monitoring methods (apart from the transect study) are likely to have substantial bias according to where the observers went and the time of year they were in the field (e.g. not in harsh winters and not in the high summer). The saiga sightings were more likely to be near roads than would be expected by chance (Wilcoxon signed rank test;  $V=4542$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Conversely, saigas were less likely to be seen near settlements than would be expected by chance (Wilcoxon signed rank test;  $V=17319$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), and this was particularly true for the participatory and transect monitoring. It is not possible to say to what extent these results are due to observer bias in the locations surveyed, as opposed to the actual behaviour of saigas in avoiding or preferring particular locations, because only the transect monitoring included details of the routes taken by monitors, and therefore included information on the areas where saigas were searched for but not observed. Nonetheless some useful conclusions can be drawn.

Figure 1 suggests that saigas are widely distributed across the Ustyurt plateau throughout the year. It is interesting that there is potentially an area in the south-west of the plateau where saigas are present year-round. This is unexpected because if saigas were to migrate to this area from Kazakhstan they would need to cross the railway and road, and go past the main settlements of the region. This area is also not covered by the planned Saigachy protected area, and so these saigas are potentially vulnerable to poaching. It is important to investigate this area further, and to determine whether it hosts a resident saiga population or not. It is also clear that saigas are present in Uzbekistan

**Table 1. Number of saiga sightings recorded in each year, and the monitoring method used.**

Year	Number of sightings	Number of sightings
2006	11	Opportunistic
2007	28	Participatory
2008	42	Participatory, Opportunistic
2009	29	Participatory
2010	37	Participatory
2011	12	Participatory
2012	27	Transect, Opportunistic



**Figure 1. Map of the Uzbekistan part of the Ustyurt plateau, with saiga sightings shown for the three study periods: period 1 (Oct-Dec, green), period 2 (Jan-March, orange) and period 3 (April-June, red).**

during the birth period and into the early summer, and not just in the winter as is usually assumed. The saigas were more likely to be seen near the Kazakhstan border in April-June than in October-March (Kruskal-Wallis test,  $\chi^2 = 17.11$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p$ -value  $< 0.001$ ).

We used a Maxent model to determine the areas of highest use by saigas, based on the full dataset of 186 sightings, and using the variables distance to settlement, snow cover, NDVI and temperature as explanatory variables (see Emma Marsden's MSc thesis at <http://www.iccs.org.uk/publications/thesis-archive-general/> for more details). The results suggest that the areas of highest use correspond well with the proposed extension to the Saigachy reserve.

Monitoring saigas on the Uzbek Ustyurt is particularly challenging, with difficult logistical and climatic conditions and limited funding (see article by S. Offord in SN 14). Given this, it is not surprising that the data are limited and difficult to interpret. Opportunistic monitoring is a useful complement to a proper monitoring programme, but the information generated is only of limited use in analysing saiga distributions because of the inherent bias in the data. Participatory monitoring generated the majority of the datapoints, but its bias is unquantifiable because it is not carried out in a systematic manner. The transect data could not be used to its full potential in this analysis because of the small number of data points generated from the pilot study, but if it is continued it could in future be very useful because it is subject to much lower observer bias, and the sampling effort can be quantified.

Despite its limitations, this analysis has confirmed the importance of the extension to the Saigachy reserve for the



Photo by Victor Grigoryev

**Traces of saiga groups found on the bank of the Aral sea.**

conservation of the saiga in Uzbekistan, and has also suggested that saigas are more widespread in the Uzbekistan Ustyurt than previously recognised, both spatially and throughout the year. A key recommendation is to extend and intensify the transect monitoring, and to include areas below the railway line as well as above it in monitoring and conservation plans. The information generated from this monitoring programme can then be used to guide protection efforts for the species in Uzbekistan, including deployment of rangers and protected area planning. We thank the Whitley Fund for Nature and Fauna and Flora International for their support of this work.

## **Saiga Monitoring in the Irgyz-Turgai State Natural Reserve, Kazakhstan**

*Zhannur Bakytzhankyzy*

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The Irgyz-Turgai State Nature Reserve (SNR) is in the range of the Betpakdala saiga population, the largest saiga population in terms of both the area covered and saiga numbers. Irgyz-Turgai SNR is located in the south of the Aktyubinsk province and consists of two sites: "Atanbasy" and "Alakol", with the Turgai zakaznik. [reserve with a lower grade of protection] between them, which is also administered by the SNR (Fig. 1). The total area protected is 1,059,549 hectares.

The reserve plays a prominent role in saiga conservation. In the spring birth season, saigas usually concentrate in several places (Kulanal, Sunlarkia and Kosburek) in small groups. The general direction of migrations in this population, including through reserve, is from south to north in spring and north to south in autumn. During the migration 80-90% of the saigas pass round the Shalkar-Tengiz saline basin to the east, and only a small number to the west. In 2012 the spring migration began in



Photo by I. Zhakenov

**Zhannur Bakytzhankyzy with a new-born saiga.**

late February and lasted until the end of March-beginning of April. The autumn migration began in October, but mainly took place in November-December. Along with seasonal migrations, saigas roam from place to place throughout the year in search of better pastures or watering points. Altogether, totally by January 1st, 2011, there were more than 33,000 in the reserve, rising by 25% to more than 42,000 by January 1st, 2012 (Table 1).

In November, 2012, 17, 712 saigas were encountered on a vehicle transect in the south-eastern part of the reserve. In December 2012, there were about 15,000 saigas in the northern part of the reserve (Alakol), 2,000 saigas near Kosbuirek mountain and about 20,000 saigas in the south-eastern part (Aiymola, Atanbasy, Zhyngyldyozek, Tegene). Saiga rutting in winter 2012 took place in several parts of



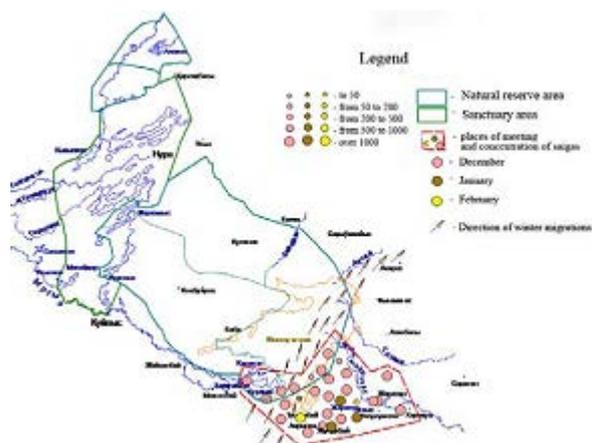
**Figure 1.**  
Map of the current area of Irgyz-Turgai State Nature Reserve and planned extensions

Area (ha)	Total area	Locations		
		Alakol	Zakaznik	Atanbasy
Number of saigas	42162	8250	6 200	27 712
Population density (/1000 ha)	39.8	93.6	20.9	41.0

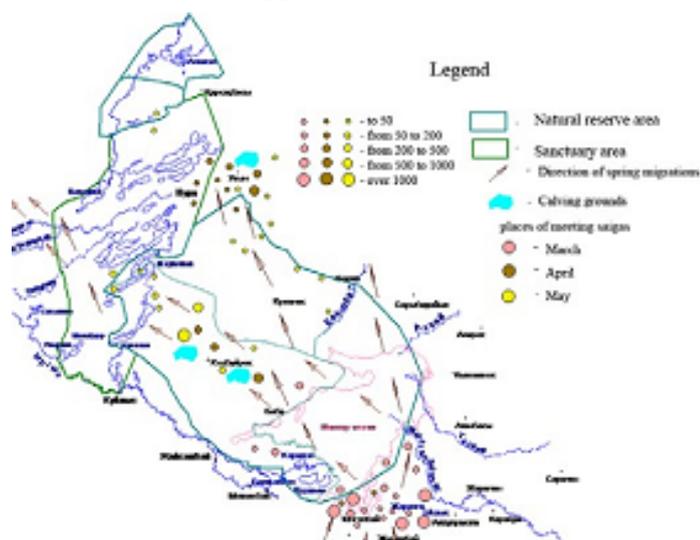
**Table 1.** The density of saigas in the Irgyz-Turgai State Nature Reserve in 2012

the reserve on December 10th-20th (Fig. 2). Calving took place from May 10th-20th in areas of moderate terrain with sagebrush-grass-saltwort vegetation, scarce saxaul shrubs and abundant Tatar rhubarb (Fig. 3). 252 calving females and 184 calves were observed, i.e. an average of 0.7 calves per female.

The data suggest that the Irgyz-Turgai SNR is an area of winter range for saigas and, to a lesser degree, summer range; rutting and calving also take place here. In different years and seasons the numbers of saigas in the SNR fluctuates, depending on the quality of forage and the availability of watering places.



**Figure 2.** Winter distribution of saigas in the Irgyz-Turgai SNR, 2012



**Figure 3.** Spring distribution of saigas in the Irgyz-Turgai SNR, 2012

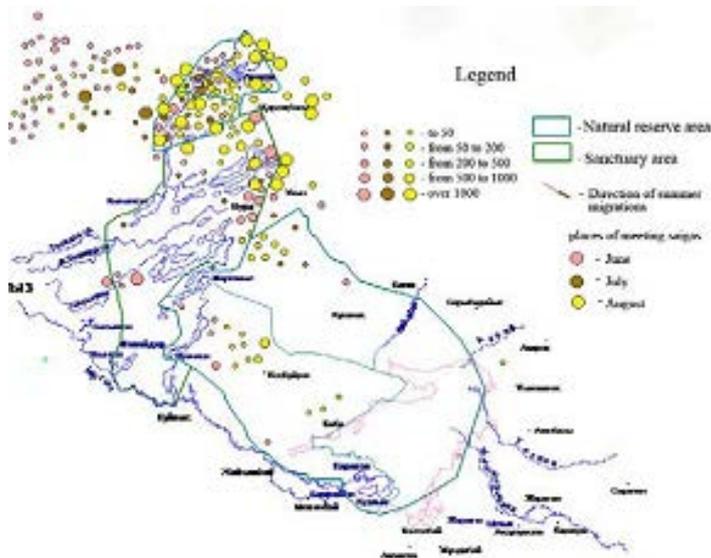


Figure 4. Summer distribution of saigas in the Irgyz-Turgai SNR, 2012

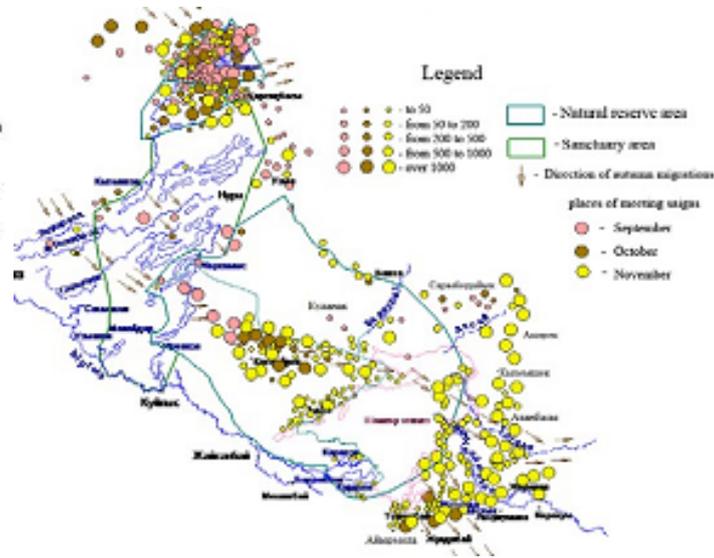


Figure 5. Autumn distribution of saigas in the Irgyz-Turgai SNR, 2012

## Using participatory monitoring to assess the status of the pre-Caspian saiga population

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### Introduction

The pre-Caspian saiga population followed global populations trends crashing from 800,000 in the 1950s to 15-20,000 in 2001. The most recent population estimate, in 2012, was 7,000 (*see* SN-16), and there is concern that the population is still declining. However there is much uncertainty in current population sizes, trends and distributions.

Since 2008 the Centre for Wild Animals of the Republic of Kalmykia has run three participatory monitoring projects; a British Council BRIDGE funded project from March 2008 to November 2009; a Rufford funded project from October 2010 to June 2011; and a US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) funded project from February to November 2012. The BRIDGE and Rufford projects both employed 25 monitors, with none in common, while the USFWS project employed 43 monitors, some of whom had worked on previous projects. Monitors were employed to record opportunistic saiga sightings (number of saigas seen, date and time of sighting, sex of saigas, distance and angle from observer, and other comments).

As monitors did not measure survey effort it is not possible to calculate absolute or relative abundances, however data on herd sizes and frequencies of sightings collected by monitors who had participated on multiple projects can be used to indicate changes in the status of the population (assuming their survey effort is similar between years). Comparing locations of monitors who did and did not record saiga sightings can be used as presence/absence data to assess changes in saiga distribution.

### Changing Herd Sizes

Each year was split into three seasons due to temporal variations in herd sizes; spring (days 1-122), summer (days 123-244) and winter (days 244-365). Summer herds were significantly smaller than spring and winter herds ( $\chi^2=46.2$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; Figure 1). Spring herd sizes were significantly different between years ( $\chi^2=12.0$ ,  $p=0.008$ ) with reductions in herd sizes between 2008 and 2012 and between 2011 and 2012. There were no significant differences between summer and winter herd sizes (Figure 1).

Despite greater numbers of monitors covering a larger area, there was a marked reduction in maximum and mean herd sizes in 2012 compared to previous years (Table 1).

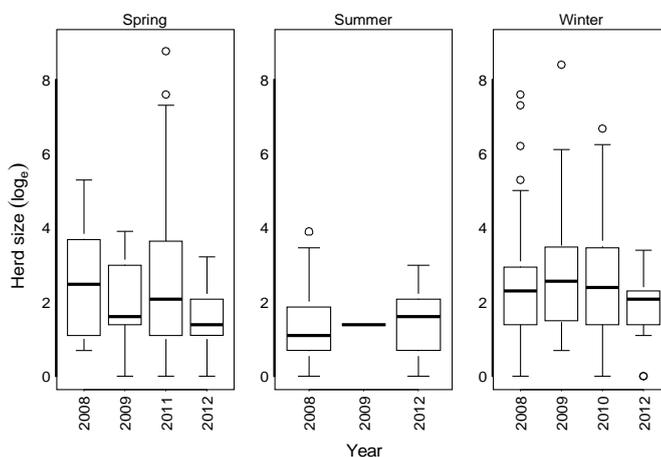


Figure 1. Differing herd sizes in each season and year of the participatory monitoring.

As different seasons and areas were covered in different years care must be taken in interpreting these statistics, however this may indicate the loss of larger herds in 2012.

There was a significant reduction in spring herd sizes between 2012 and all previous years combined ( $W_{255}=6175$ ,  $p=0.0012$ ). There was no significant difference between summer herds in different years ( $W_{185}=3249$ ,  $p=0.52$ ). Winter herds were larger in previous years than in 2012, however this difference was not quite significant ( $W_{259}=3536$ ,  $p=0.086$ ).

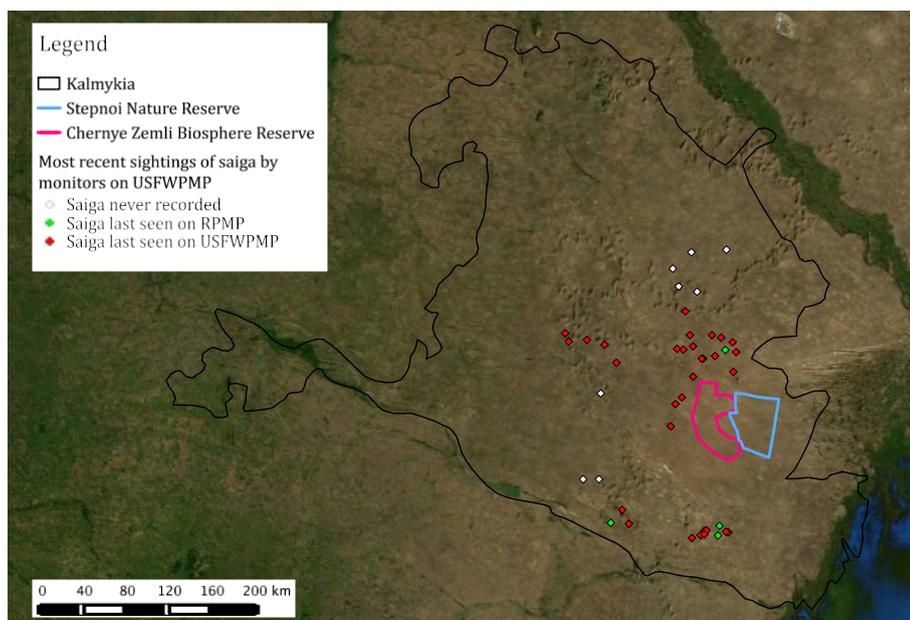
Linear mixed effects models were used to investigate changes in herd sizes comparing only those monitors who had monitored in more than one year. This showed average herd sizes increasing from 2008 to 2009, and then in 2010 dropping to below 2008 levels and continuing to decrease in 2011 and 2012. The only significant difference in herd size was between 2009 (when herd size was largest) and all the other years.

#### Changes in Numbers of Sightings per Month

Changing frequencies of saiga encounters by monitors who had participated in multiple projects were investigated, under the assumption that if monitor effort was the same from year to year, fewer encounters would indicate that there were fewer herds on the steppe. There was a significant reduction in the numbers of sightings per month for the eight monitors who participated in both the BRIDGE and USFWS projects; from an average of 1.6 sightings per month in 2008/2009 to 0.5 per month in 2012 ( $V_8=26$ ,  $p=0.047$ ). For the 20 monitors who participated in both the Rufford and USFWS projects there was a significant reduction in average sightings per month from 0.89 in 2010/11 to 0.32 in 2012 ( $V_{20}=188$ ,  $p=0.0002$ ).

**Table 1. The maximum and mean herd sizes (with 95% confidence intervals), total number of herds recorded and the number of active monitors in each year that a participatory monitoring project has run. The minimum herd size was 1 in all years.**

Year	Maximum herd size	Mean herd Size	Numbers of sightings	Number of monitors
2008	2000	32±11	222	25
2009	4500	544±440	46	25
2010	800	48±13	89	25
2011	6500	86±32	220	25
2012	30	7±0.45	122	43



**Figure 2. Map showing changes in saiga range from the BRIDGE (2008/2009) and Rufford (2010/2011) projects to the USFWS (2012) project. Points show locations of monitors on the USFWS project coloured by the project during which they last saw a saiga.**

#### Changes in Saiga range

There is little indication of a change in the saiga's range over the period 2008-12 (Figure 2). The majority of monitors who participated in more than one project saw saiga during both projects ( $n=24$ ). The four monitors who saw saigas during the Rufford project but did not see saiga in the USFWS project lived near to monitors who did record saiga in both projects (between 5.7 and 12.1 km apart).

#### Conclusions and Recommendations

Changing monitor locations is likely to be partly responsible for the high degree of variation in herd sizes between years (Figure 1). Five monitors from the Rufford project, who were not monitors under the BRIDGE or USFWS projects, recorded the biggest herds and most frequent sightings of 2010 and 2011. They live in part of the saiga's core range immediately to the south of the Stepnoi and Chernye Zemli reserves. Their inclusion in the Rufford project but not the USFWS project may make perceived differences in herd sizes between the two projects more extreme and weakens our ability to draw accurate inferences on population trends. However this analysis does suggest that saiga populations could be lower in 2012 than in previous years.



**Females with calves quickly vanish from sight.**

Photo by Leejiah Dorward

# The level of illegal hunting of rare ungulate species on the Ustyurt Plateau in Uzbekistan

Elena Bykova and Alexander Esipov

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Three endangered ungulate species definitely inhabit the Ustyurt Plateau in Uzbekistan. They are saiga (*Saiga tatarica*), goitred gazelle (*Gazella subgutturosa*) and Ustyurt red sheep (*Ovis vignei [orientalis] arkal*). As part of a participatory monitoring programme with local people, we attempted to assess the poaching mortality on these species based on a questionnaire survey of the local population, supported by FFI and WCN. The results suggested that 250 saigas (76 males and 174 females), 22 goitred gazelles and one red sheep were poached between October 2009 and December 2012. To assess hunting efficiency, we analyzed the number of saigas and goitred gazelles that were killed by one particular team of hunters (1 motorcycle, 2 men) during one calendar year (from May, 2010 to April, 2011).

It should be noted that hunting for male saigas, whose horns are in demand on the black market in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, is an absolute priority for poachers. Therefore, males are primarily hunted, irrespective of their age, including one-year-old individuals. Adult females are hunted for meat. In 2013, 1 kg of fresh saiga horns cost 1,000,000–1,500,000 soums (US\$370-550); meat was 9,000–10,000 soums/kg, which is 1.5x cheaper than beef, mutton and camel meat. Goitred gazelles are also illegally hunted mainly for meat. Along with this, local people use their horns, like saiga horns, as trophies and protective amulets. Since goitred gazelles are scarce, inhabit remote areas far from the majority of villages of the Ustyurt Plateau and are used only locally, hunting for this species is not as popular as saiga hunting.

Contrary to popular opinion that hunting is most intense during the saiga's migration period, our data show that hunting takes place uniformly throughout the year. Poachers carry out one to nine trips per month, depending on the



Photos by Alexander Esipov

**A saiga skull with horns cut off by poachers which was found near the village of Karakalpakstan.**

weather conditions (less in severe frost, deep snow, rain, and thaw) and personal reasons (money, health, etc.). In the specific case for which we have data, hunting took place over 10 months (not in January or March 2011 due to severe weather and personal reasons). Forty six trips took place, in 4 of which no saigas were seen. Of the 42 trips in which saigas were observed and attempts made to kill them, 30 were successful. The average distance travelled per kill was 290 km. According to hunters, in the past they needed to drive an order of magnitude less far in order to kill a saiga. On average, poachers shot 47% of the saigas they detected. Along with hunters' skills and natural factors (the relief, soil quality and so on), hunting efficiency depends on individual hunter behaviour (some hunters adhere to the principles that animals less than one year old and pregnant females should be spared). The maximum number of animals killed in one hunting trip was 10, the average 3.9. Every month they killed between 3 and 39 saigas, averaging 11. The total number of saigas killed by this one team over the period May 2010 to April 2011 was 132 animals (39 males and 93 females). There is also proof that Uzbekistan citizens hunt for saigas in the border areas of Kazakhstan. Over this same period, the poachers killed 18 goitred gazelles (7 males and 11 females), mostly between April and August. This is because goitred gazelles are either hunted at the same time as saigas or in warm periods when there are fewer saigas in Uzbekistan. 9 out of 10 hunts for goitred gazelles were successful. Note that our data do not reflect the actual level of poaching since our sample was limited. However, they confirm that poaching is continuing and give an idea of its periodicity and efficiency.



Photos by Alexander Esipov

**A poacher.**

# Saiga heroes



Photo by Victoria Khludneva

Anatoly KHLUDNEV, Director of the Stepnoi State Nature Reserve, Astrakhan region. Anatoly's career was as an officer in the Russian Army, and he is now a retired lieutenant colonel. For the last ten years, he has been devoting all his time and energies to the conservation of this unique steppe antelope in the steppes of the north-western pre-Caspian region.

Aline Kuhl, was a scientific consultant for the UK film. We often conduct tours for schoolchildren, because if we foster care for nature early in their life, we will win in the future. Every year in spring we conduct tours with foreign tourists from Great Britain, Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

**Editor:** Can you tell us any interesting story about saiga?

**A.Kh.:** For sure!!!! There are very many stories but most of all I was amazed by a scene which I saw at the very beginning of my career. One fine day I was an eyewitness to adult saigas' care for their youngsters. It was in June, in the period of "upbringing" of young saigas. A migrating herd was moving through the nature reserve, females were leading the way followed by small saigas – a "kindergarten" – and 5-6 adult males brought up the rear. These males would not let the youngsters lag behind and get lost; they would carefully lift the tired little things with their noses and took care of them in every way. Later, repeatedly watching such herds, I named such males "nannies".

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

**A.Kh.:** I consider underfinancing of law enforcement and the lack of interaction with the environmental agencies of the Republic of Kalmykia to be the key problems.

**Editor:** And how can the impediments in your work be removed?

**A.Kh.:** I believe that the nature conservation problems are resolvable, but that they should be tackled at the regional level or above, by officials of the Astrakhan region and the Republic of Kalmykia.

**Editor:** When did you become interested in saigas for the first time?

**A.Kh.:** I heard about saigas in my earliest childhood, however I managed to see them for the first time just by good fortune when I was in the 7<sup>th</sup> form at school. I remember that day very well. I was part of a group of villagers who were out winter fishing. All of a sudden a group of animals running very fast came in sight on the crest of the hill and all the adults shouted: "Saigas!!!". I managed to have a good look at these animals, all of them were in "winter dress" and the group consisted of about 500 animals. I could see males with horns amongst them.

**Editor:** When did you begin to work on saiga conservation?

**A.Kh.:** After I completed my military service in 2000, I was offered a job in saiga protection, as the Director of the Stepnoi Nature Reserve. Having assembled a team of nature protection enthusiasts, we developed proper security for saigas, persistently carried on awareness work among the local population and rigidly controlled any attempted poaching within the Stepnoi Nature Reserve and in the adjacent area.

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

**A.Kh.:** I do not consider myself an armchair worker, so I do my best to do all my paperwork as soon as possible and most of my time is spent out on duty to ensure our continuous presence in the reserve. My working day is filled with different events. Alongside performing our direct official duties, our team helps with scientific research conducted by students and scientists visiting our reserve. We have participated several times in the filming of popular-science films created by the TV-channels "STS", "ZOO TV", and by a film crew from Great Britain. A member of the Steering Committee of the Saiga Conservation Alliance,

Photo by Elena Zharkova



Anatoly Khludnev and the ZooTV team.

**Editor: What is the best thing in your work?**

**A.Kh.:** A well-coordinated team where the notions of Honour and Conscience are not empty words!!! Striving by all team members to work with their hearts and souls, each of us, is the way to get results! And for us the result is to help saigas survive in these conditions, which are anything but simple.

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

**A.Kh.:** At this moment poaching persists in the Republic of Kalmykia. And if we do not create a specialized Federal squad the future of the Russian saiga population is under serious threat.

**Editor: You have been working in the field of nature conservation for more than a decade. What has changed over these years and what are the current trends for conservation?**

**A.Kh.:** Changes have mainly taken place within the Astrakhan region; poaching by the local population has been completely eradicated. Mass poaching by Kalmykian

residents has also reduced, yet so far we cannot talk of a complete cessation of saiga poaching in Kalmykia. We managed to stabilize the population at about 20,000 in 2000-2007. After the Federal unit was disbanded in Kalmykia and the powers for wildlife conservation were passed to regional control, nature protection collapsed. There was practically no protection for nine months in 2008. For this reason, in 2010 the saiga population dropped to 12,000 animals. Currently, the Russian saiga population is no larger than 7,000 animals.

*Editor's note:* Based on his achievements at the Stepnoi reserve, Anatoly has just been appointed as Director of the newly created "Volga-Aktiubinsk Interfluve" regional reserve. We wish Anatoliy every success in his new role. His Deputy, Vladimir Kalmykov, who worked with him in setting up the Stepnoi reserve from the beginning, has been appointed as the new Director. We give him all our support, and are sure that the Stepnoi reserve is in very good hands.

Photo by Anatoly Khlidnev



Saigas at a watering place in the Stepnoi reserve.

# Announcements

## The Saiga Resource Centre is launched!



The Saiga Conservation Alliance, Association for the Conservation of the Biodiversity of Kazakhstan and Bonn Convention on Migratory Species are happy to announce the official launch of The Saiga Resource Centre. This website will be the central focal point for saiga conservation across the globe and enable the large number of organisations and individuals working on or interested in saiga conservation to better share ideas, experiences and information, leading to improvements in the efficiency and effectiveness of saiga conservation activities.

The Saiga Resource Centre is available in four languages:

- English: <http://www.saigaresourcecentre.com/>
- Russian: <http://ru.saigaresourcecentre.com/>
- Chinese: <http://cn.saigaresourcecentre.com/>
- Kazakh: <http://kz.saigaresourcecentre.com/>

The site has three key functions. The first is to be an introduction to saigas and their conservation. The site has been designed so that it provides information useful to a

broad range of users. Those discovering saiga antelope for the first time can be introduced to the species and key conservation topics such as the CMS Memorandum of Understanding. The site also holds information useful to saiga conservation professionals such as reporting formats for the CMS MoU.

The site's second function is to be a resource repository. You will find within the site a large number of saiga photographs, videos, literature and environmental education activities. These resources are held on the site so that they can be accessed anywhere by anyone for the purpose of supporting or promoting saiga research and conservation activities. We're sure that there are many resources from across the range states that are not currently available on the site. To improve the site we are asking all Saiga News readers who have pictures, videos, published literature (in any language) or descriptions of educational activities to contact [saigaresourcecentre@gmail.com](mailto:saigaresourcecentre@gmail.com) so we can discuss the best way of integrating your content into the site.

The third and perhaps most important section of the site is the Specialist Resources section. This password-protected area of the site is designed for the use of all saiga professionals. Whether you work as a translator, a ranger, a research scientist or any other saiga-linked profession this section of the website provides an opportunity to create a personal profile and share information about your work. By creating a directory of saiga professionals, their expertise and work, we can help to facilitate communication between range states and the sharing of experiences. This section will allow more efficient and effective projects to be designed in the future and will enable progress towards the goals of the CMS MoU to be assessed.

We hope you enjoy the website, there is much more to the site than there is space to describe here. Most of all we look forward to your engagement with the Saiga Resource Centre so that together we can build an effective network of people interested in saiga antelopes and start conversations that will ultimately lead to better conservation of the species.



## Fond memories

We are sad to report that long-time SCA supporter and great friend, Joy Covey died recently in a tragic accident. Joy was 50 years old and enjoying retirement after her position as Amazon's first Chief Financial Officer, having joined when it was a new company.

Joy, and her eight-year old son Tyler loved to support unusual animals, and took a particular interest in our work with saigas. We greatly appreciate all their support for our projects in Uzbekistan, which amongst other things, enabled us to help set up wildlife clubs for young children and launch an embroidery enterprise for disenfranchised women. Our thoughts are with Tyler and the rest of her family at this sad time.

## Acknowledgements

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