

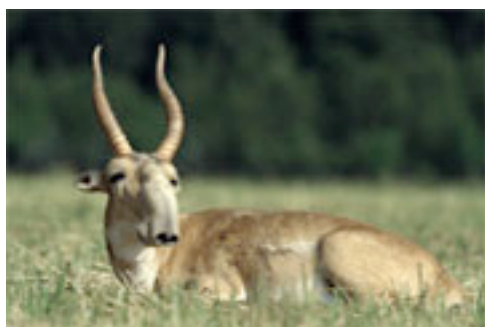


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UN and Central Asian countries agree to measures to conserve Saiga antelopes



The Saiga antelope

13 September 2010 – The United Nations Environment Programme ([UNEP](#)) and several governments in Central Asia and Russia have concluded an agreement on conservation measures for the migratory Saiga antelopes, whose population have been in decline during the past two decades, the agency reported today.

During an international conference in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, representatives from Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Russia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and UN bodies gathered under the auspices of the Convention on Migratory Species ([UNEP/CMS](#)) and agreed to include the Mongolian Saiga in an international conservation pact.

The meeting was also attended by representatives from intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local communities from the region.

Saiga antelopes roam the vast plains of Central Asia and Russia. They can undertake migratory journeys between summer and winter of more than 1,000 kilometres. Although sometimes described as the “ugly duckling” of the world’s antelopes, the Saiga comprise a vital part of the natural and cultural heritage of the plains of Eurasia.

They numbered around one million in the early 1990s, but declined to between 60,000 and 70,000 in 2006. In response to conservation efforts, their populations have stabilized, according to UNEP.

Currently there are reportedly about 85,000 animals in Kazakhstan, with almost 12,000 dying in a disease outbreak in May. Another 8,000 live in Mongolia, at least 10,000 animals are in Russia and several thousand live in Uzbekistan in winter. No Saiga mass migration has been observed in Turkmenistan in the last 10 years, where the species used to migrate during harsh winters.

Despite legal protection, the Saiga are hunted for their meat and horns, which are used in traditional medicine. Other threats include disease, pasture degradation through overgrazing by livestock and other disturbances from oil and gas extraction work and possibly climate change.

The new conservation measures are expected to harmonize monitoring and surveys to regularly track all populations. Aerial and ground surveys will determine changes, with emphasis on calving, rutting and two migration areas. Due to their long migration between winter and summer pastures, it can be extremely difficult to find them.

The experts at the meeting carried with them figures released in a report commissioned by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and compiled by TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network, which raised the alarm over the levels of illicit trade in Saiga horns even before this year's mass deaths.

The report brings together information on the Saiga horn trade gleaned from interviews with experts and government officials, together with market surveys in Malaysia and Singapore, where Saiga horns are readily available.

"The key to success for the conservation of these unique looking antelopes of the Eurasian steppes has been the engagement of local people," said CMS Executive Secretary Elizabeth Maruma Mrema. "This week's meeting paves the way for implementing the international action plan for the conservation of this remarkable animal across its entire range."

Governments are seeking to address the fundamental motivation for poaching Saiga, namely poverty and unemployment. Involving local communities will be critical to the conservation measures implemented under the CMS Saiga agreement. Incentives to combat poaching are being developed through alternative livelihoods in deprived steppe communities.

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