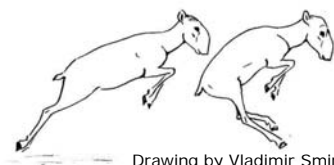


Saiga News

summer 2006: Issue 3



Drawing by Vladimir Smirin

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

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Opening of the Visitor Centre at the Yashkul saiga breeding centre

On 15th May 2006, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, Head of the Republic of Kalmykia of the Russian Federation, formally opened the new visitor centre of the Centre for Wild Animals's saiga breeding centre in the Yashkul district of Kalmykia. This opening is the culmination of years of hard work by the Director of the Centre for Wild Animals, Dr Iu.N. Arylov, and his staff. Children and teachers from the local school performed traditional songs and dances, and the President declared that next year Kalmykia would hold a Festival of the Saiga.



The Head K. Ilyumzhinov and Dr V. Neronov cutting the ribbon. Photo by E.J.Milner-Gulland



Dancers rehearsing outside the new visitor centre. Photo by E.J.Milner-Gulland

The Visitor Centre is equipped with displays about the saiga's ecology and conservation, computer projection facilities, and an exhibition about Kalmykian culture. The breeding centre also has facilities for researchers to stay on site, and a classroom for school visits. It has already formed a close relationship with a number of local and international educational establishments, who come to observe saiga behaviour and learn about captive breeding techniques.

The Centre for Wild Animals is the world leader in keeping saigas in captivity, and its expertise is increasingly in demand.

The development of the Visitor Centre will continue, with the aim that it will act as a hub for environmental education and action for Kalmykia. Many international organisations have supported it financially, including the UK government's Darwin Initiative and SEPS, Large Herbivore Foundation, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Denver Zoo, Foundation Zoos Help, Colorado Zoo, ITERA, TNT-Express."

E.J. Milner-Gulland, Imperial College London
Anna Lushechikina, UNESCO/MAB

For further information: <http://saigak.biodiversity.ru/news/250506.html>



The Head of Kalmykia discussing saiga conservation with the Director of the Centre for Wild Animals. Photo by E.J.Milner-Gulland

Editorial team. China: Dr A. Kang, WCS China (ygling@online.sh.cn); Kazakhstan: Professor A. Bekenov & Dr Iu.A. Grachev, Institute of Zoology (terio@nursat.kz); Mongolia: Dr B. Lhagvasuren, Institute of Biology (ecolab@magicnet.mn) & Yo.Onon, WWF-Mongolia (mpo-species@wwf.mn); Russia: Professor Yu. Arylov, Centre for Wild Animals of the Republic of Kalmykia (kalmisaigak@elista.ru) & Dr A. Lushchekina, Institute of Ecology & Evolution (mab.ru@relcom.ru); Turkmenistan: Dr. D.Saparmuradov, National Institute of Deserts, Plants and Animals (sjuma@untuk.org); Uzbekistan: Dr E. Bykova & Dr A. Esipov, Institute of Zoology (esip@tkt.uz); UK: Dr E.J. Milner-Gulland, Imperial College London (e.j.milner-gulland@imperial.ac.uk).

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All contributions are welcome, in any of our six languages. Please send them to esip@tkt.uz or to one of the editors. We publish twice a year.

Updates

INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL

Establishment of the Saiga Conservation Alliance

The Saiga Conservation Alliance is an informal network of researchers and conservationists, who have worked together over 15 years to study and conserve the saiga antelope. We are committed to restoring the saiga to its position as the lynchpin of the Central Asian and pre-Caspian steppes, reflecting the species' cultural and economic value to local people and its fundamental role in the steppe ecosystem. We work collaboratively, and freely share our expertise and love for saigas. We disseminate our work widely, to the public throughout the world, governments and the conservation community.

The Saiga Conservation Alliance has no formal status and is open in its membership. The idea is that this umbrella grouping will help us to present our work coherently, prioritise conservation actions and compete better for funding opportunities. There is a website at <http://www.iccs.org.uk/SaigaAlliance.htm>. Saiga News is one of the activities which we are carrying out under the Saiga Conservation Alliance umbrella. If anyone would like to be involved in the Alliance, do let us know.

The Saiga Conservation Alliance has recently been awarded its first grant. This was from the Wildlife Conservation Network, and will enable Elena Bykova to travel to San Jose in October 2006 to present her work on saiga conservation in Uzbekistan to the Wildlife Conservation Expo.

For more information contact E.J. Milner-Gulland, Imperial College London, e.j.milner-gulland@imperial.ac.uk and Elena Bykova, Institute of Zoology, RUz, esip@tkt.uz.



Progress for CMS - meeting in Almaty in September 2006

CMS and the CITES are very pleased to announce that the Forestry and Hunting Committee of the Ministry of Agriculture, Kazakhstan, has offered to host the First Meeting of the Signatories to Memorandum of Understanding concerning Conservation, Restoration and Sustainable Use of the Saiga Antelope (*Saiga tatarica tatarica*). The meeting will take place in Almaty, Kazakhstan, from 25-26 September 2006. We would like to kindly invite you or your organisation to consider attending the meeting. MoU meeting documentation and a pre-registration form are available from the CMS Website: http://www.cms.int/bodies/Agreement_MoU_Meetings.htm. The deadline for registration is 30 June 2006.

The objectives of the meeting will be to:

1. Share information on the Saiga's conservation status within the respective Range States;
2. Review the status of implementation of the MoU and the Action Plan and determine future priorities;
3. Adopt a report format for future reporting under the MoU; and
4. Discuss a coordination mechanism for the MoU.

CMS and CITES are also pleased to announce that a one and a half day technical workshop and partnership initiative is scheduled in conjunction with the MoU meeting. The IUCN Species Survival Commission Antelope Specialist Group and the European Sustainable use Specialist Group will convene this special event. The workshop is scheduled for 23-24 September 2006. Please indicate on the pre-registration form your intention to join the workshop.

The workshop and the partnership initiative will aim to:

1. Review the Saiga's conservation status;
2. Develop a tabular summary of Saiga-related projects and activities within the Range States; and
3. Recommend priority activities under the Action Plan that could form the basis for a medium term international work programme.

In the near future a reporting template will be circulated for interested organizations to providing information about their Saiga-related activities and projects.

Lyle Glowka (CMS Agreements Officer) and Tom de Meulenaer (CITES Senior Scientific Officer). E-Mail: secretariat@cms.int.

Uzbekistan signed memorandum of understanding for conservation of saiga

The secretariat of Bonn Convention for Conservation on Migratory Species (CMS) has announced that the Ambassador of the Republic of Uzbekistan to Germany, Mr Bakhtiyar Gulyamov, signed the Memorandum of Understanding concerning Conservation, Restoration and Sustainable Use of the Saiga Antelope (*Saiga tatarica tatarica*).

Uzbekistan is the second range state, after Turkmenistan, to sign the Memorandum of Understanding, which was opened for signing at the 8th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Migratory Species of Wild Animals in November 2005. Robert Hepworth, CMS executive secretary, said: "Uzbekistan is the first CMS Party to sign this Memorandum as a Range State. I am confident that this will give the remaining Range States another reason to join the MoU." For additional details, please contact Irina Bekmirzaeva of International Department of State Committee for Nature Protection of the Republic of Uzbekistan at envconf@uzsci.net and visit: http://www.cms.int/news/PRESS/nwPR2006/May/nw230506_saiga_signing.htm.



Bakhtiyar Gulyamov and Robert Hepworth at the moment of signing MoU. Photo by secretariat CMS

Saiga mentioned at an international conference at the Rostov nature reserve

An international conference dedicated to the 10th anniversary of the Rostov State Nature Reserve, one of the few true steppe nature reserves in Russia, was held at Orlovsky village on 28th April 2006. More than 100 experts from Russia and overseas attended the conference. There were a number of presentations about the ecology and conservation of steppe biodiversity, and particular attention was paid to saiga conservation and research. For additional information, please contact L.V. Klez, Director of the Rostov reserve, at gzr@orlovsky.donpac.ru.



A small statuette of saiga (paper and cardboard). Jelilova Alvena, 5th grade pupil. Photo by Anna Lushekina

A competition “Master of the Steppe” held in Kalmykia

This Republic-wide competition was held in early 2006, with the aim of raising awareness among religious communities of issues surrounding nature conservation and environmental education for adults and children. It was organised by the Center for Ecological Projects of the Republic of Kalmykia together with the Kalmyk Central Buddhist Monastery “Geden Sheddup Chup Choi Korving” and the Ecological-Biological Centre of Students of the Republic of Kalmykia. Financial support was provided by ARS, the alliance of religions and environmental protection. Competitors came from 23 schools and 9 media organisations. Participants presented work in categories including mass media publications, and artworks by children and adults. The general theme was “Ecology, History and Ethnography, Popular Traditions”, and a number of the artworks had a saiga protection theme. For additional information, please contact Olga Ongenova, the Director of the Centre for Ecological Projects of the Republic of Kalmykia at centercep@yandex.ru.

A prize-winning film about the saiga

The film made by A. Misailov and D. Shpilenok “Saiga – Karma of the steppes” (see *Saiga News*, 2, 2005) took third place in the UNESCO/MAB Web Video competition. The editorial board members of the bulletin *Saiga News* heartily congratulate the authors of the film on this award.

Programme on saigas shown on Chinese TV

At the end of 2005, CCTV, China's largest and most famous TV station, sent a team to the Endangered Animal Research Centre of Gansu Province. They produced a film about the Centre and saigas, which was shown on CCTV channel 7 in February 2006. The film recorded the daily life and winter mating behaviour of Saiga antelopes bred in the centre. They also interviewed veterinarians and researchers at the centre, discussing the threats that saigas face and their conservation status in the wild. This is first time that Chinese TV has aired information about the Centre and about saigas. They tried not only to arouse people's attention concerning the captive animals, but also to raise awareness about the species and its future.

Productive raid

None of the participants in the routine raid by the police and inspectors of Kazakhstan's Kyzylorda branch of “Ohotzooptom” expected to see such a haul. They stopped a UAZ-469 vehicle on the Kumkol-Kyzylorda highway, and found 13 shot saigas, males and females, and a five-cylinder rifle. As well as confiscation of their vehicle and rifle, the suspects will face a very large fine, about 2,300,000 tenge (approximately US\$ 19,000). A criminal case has been launched under Article 288 (illegal hunting) of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Please follow the link for details <http://saigak.biodiversity.ru/news/020306.html>.

Border guards detain poachers from Uzbekistan

Illegal hunting of saigas in western Kazakhstan was stopped by border guards in the Batys region in April 2006. They detained four Uzbekistani citizens, who were poaching in Kazakhstan approx. 20 km from the Uzbekistan border. Inspection of their vehicle revealed 11 dead saigas, numerous horns and hunting rifles with cartridges. An investigation into this case has been launched. Based on internet reports from KAZINFORM, 13.04.06. For details please visit <http://www.press-uz.info/index.php?id=2452>.

Poachers sell saiga meat in Urgench

In January 2006, saiga meat was recorded on sale in Urgench, Khoresm province, Uzbekistan. The poachers must have had to bring the meat long distances because at this time of year saigas are found on the Ustyut Plateau, 600-700 km from Khoresm province. The scale of poaching in Ustyurt has grown so large that the saiga meat is now being sold in Khoresm, where it has not been seen since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Based on internet reports from Ferghana.ru, 02.02.2006. For details please visit <http://news.ferghana.ru/detail.php?id=240977376138.44.1891.2022197>.



Photo from <http://www.tigers.ru/inters/ecology/saigak.html>

Saigas in the news

Russia: *Izvestiya Kalmykii*, No 46, 1 February 2006 [abridged]

Shooting the future

In 2005, three criminal investigations into the poaching of 19 male saigas were launched in Yashkul district. On 31 December 2004, Sh.H. Parizhed, a resident of Khulkhuta village, Yashkul district, decided, by all appearances, to obtain saigas for his festive table. Alas, he did not get to see in the New Year as he was detained with six male saigas by a patrol of the Rosselhosnadzor administration, Republic of Kalmykia. On 27 May 2005, by the decision of the Yashkul district court, he was imprisoned. The court found him guilty of committing a crime under Article 258 part 2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation and sentenced him to one and a half years in a penal colony. Additionally, he was fined 36,000 roubles (about US\$ 1,300) for the damage inflicted. However, this case did not serve as a lesson for another resident, M.T. Beysenov, who was detained not far from Khulkhuta while illegally hunting a male saiga. He was sentenced to two years imprisonment in a penal colony.

In November 2005, a patrol spotted poachers, who, however, managed to escape the scene of the crime in the direction of the villages Utta and Khulkhuta. 12 dead saigas were found at the scene, some of which had already been gutted ready for transportation.

This attitude towards male saigas is criminal, because it deals a heavy blow to the genetic diversity of the population. We urge people not to neglect these cases. All those who care for saigas can report saiga poaching cases to the administration of Rosselhosnadzor. If you have not seen saigas in your neighborhood for several years, but have suddenly spotted them in the steppe, please inform us about them.

B. Ubushaev, Deputy Head of Department of Ohotnadzor under the Administration of Rosselhosnadzor in the Republic of Kalmykia.



Grazing saiga females. Photo by Jean-Francois Lagrot

Kazakhstan: Newspaper *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, Nos 88-89, 14 April 2006

No antelopes near Jem

They seem to be gone from these places, perhaps gone for ever. Because seeing them people turn predatory and greedy as if a wolf demon seizes their souls. They have moved far beyond the mountain passes of Donyztau escarpment, to the sands of Mataikum and the border areas, hiding from and skirting around human settlements for dozens of kilometers. They are saigas.

But death finds defenceless antelopes everywhere. The danger comes not only from the ground, but also from the air. The steppe is filled with the roar of helicopters, motorcycles, MAZ and KRAZ trucks and other "iron evil spirits" scudding along in the dead of night. The shooting violates the tranquility echoing in vast unpopulated areas of the Ustyurt Plateau, which can be reached only by the "cool ones" equipped from head to toe, with mobile communication devices, up-to-date night vision binoculars and super-crazy arms.

And nobody has the heart to say that the residents of villages Oimaiyt, Miyaly, Diar and others, around which no saiga can be recorded for many miles, may be involved in these hunting raids. The police report mostly residents from Atyraus, Mangistau and Kyzylorda provinces, and neighbouring Uzbekistan, as the saiga pathways have moved closer to it.

This fact was confirmed by Mr Berdihan Kemeshov, the district chief. He says that the numbers of these animals have significantly declined; they are practically on the brink of extinction. Previously, saiga herds came down to the watering place near Jem even near Karaulkeldy; large herds passed by the villages of Zharkamys and Kopa. Now, there no trace of these animals is to be seen.

Of course villagers, who are used to seeing many antelopes near their houses, are no angels. Hardly anybody can resist if there is a rifle on hand. Previously it was a sporting interest, but there is no fun in shooting all the animals, cutting off their horns and leaving dead bodies to decay. It is terrifying that there are such human monsters. They are very likely to hold high office and are fond of boasting that they have shot a defenceless saiga and sold their horns on the side. They get 300-500 dollars per kilogram on the market.

Unfortunately, the Hunt Inspectors, whose patrols time and again track down poachers in Baygan district, have documented mainly petty poachers. These are largely unemployed residents of Mangistau and Atyrau. Many saigas were shot in September last year. Fifty rifle cartridges, 10 saiga horns and an Ural motorcycle without plates were confiscated from B. Nurmaganbetov, a resident of Mangistau, and K. Kazybaev, a resident of Atyrau,. They shot a total of 16 saigas, causing damage amounting to two million tenge (about US\$ 17,000).

The regional Hunt Inspectors get in touch with the local police only when they detain the criminals, so as to launch criminal cases against them. There are no hunt inspectors in the district, even non-permanent staff. Today they are vital for Baygan district. However, this suggestion has been sent up to the regional center.

The fate of the district militia officers is of concern. Can you imagine such an officer without any mobile communication or transport, but who has to walk his patrol or hitch-hike. The area he has to inspect is as big as, say, Uil district. It's no surprise that they will never be able to catch well-equipped criminals. It is no use waiting for a call from this inspector, or from other inspectors who have control such vast areas. This is why the sale of saiga horns flourishes. The shots in the night violate the tranquility, while on the stations of neighbouring provinces local "merchants" offer saiga meat delicacies to train passengers...

Baigurinov Zhubanysh

Full version at <http://www.earthwire.org/cache.cfm?aid=109992>

Articles

A potential reserve in China for saiga restoration

Li Lishu

WCS China



Xia'erxili nature reserve. Photo by Aili Kang

The Xia'erxili Nature Reserve (hereafter Xia'erxili NR) is located at E81°43'-82°33', N45°07'- 45°23' along the northern slope of Alataw Mountain in the Mongolian Autonomous Prefecture of Bortala, Xinjiang Autonomous Region, China. The northern border is adjacent to Kazakhstan. The biodiversity in this region has been effectively conserved because there has not been any disturbance from human activities in a long time. This pristine condition is quite rare in Central Asian and Mongolian transition regions.

An area of 58 km² around the Chinese Alla Pass region, the national boundary which separates China and Kazakhstan, is to be managed by the Xia'erxili NR. A 36 km² region of the Hariturege Forest to the South and South-West of the reserve will also be incorporated into the Xia'erxili NR. Thus, the Xia'erxili NR will expand from 220 km² to 314 km². Following this expansion, there will be a bid to upgrade the Xia'erxili NR to a National Nature Reserve.

Historically, the Xia'erxili NR was reported as a permanent range area and a migration route for the saiga. In fact, the herdsman living in Dzungarian Basin used to see herds of saiga throughout the region in the early 1950s. However, since then, the saiga population has disappeared because of the severe hunting pressure which also affected many other wild animals. After the 1960s, saiga could no longer be found in the Dzungarian Basin.

Haiying, a Professor from the Xinjiang Normal University's Biology Department, has noted that the newly expanded area of the Xia'erxili NR near Alla Pass is a narrow green corridor. This area has abundant *Stipa* and *Artemisia*, favoured foods for saiga. As such, this region presents the highest potential for saiga habitat restoration in China.

Mongolian Saiga: Results of Recent WCS Site Visit

Kim and Joel Berger

WCS North American Program

In October 2005, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) initiated a reconnaissance of saiga and their habitat in western Mongolia. The goal of the trip was to evaluate the feasibility of developing a 3 to 5 year field project to enhance conservation of Mongolian saiga. Specific objectives were to: 1) evaluate the current interest of Mongolian agencies and individuals in saiga conservation, and 2) assess the feasibility of collecting biological information that could aid in the conservation of saiga in their existing habitat. The reconnaissance was conducted by authors in conjunction with Amanda Fine, Director of the WCS Mongolia Country Program.

The team spent three weeks in the field surveying areas in and around the Sharga-Mankhan Nature Reserve, Khar Us Nuur National Park, and Huysyn Gobi (Figure). A total of 460 saiga were observed on October 10th-19th. A saiga ranger from the Darvi soum (D. Chin-unen) counted an additional 100 animals to the northwest of the Sharga-Mankhan Nature Reserve during this same period, in an area not visited by the WCS survey team. Because the goal of the site visits was to assess the suitability of potential areas for future field work, the surveys were not carried out in any systematic way. Consequently the results of the surveys should not be construed to represent a thorough count of the current Mongolian saiga population. Nevertheless, the observations indicate that a sizeable number of animals remain in the wild, suggesting that conservation efforts should continue to focus on the protection of saiga and their habitat.

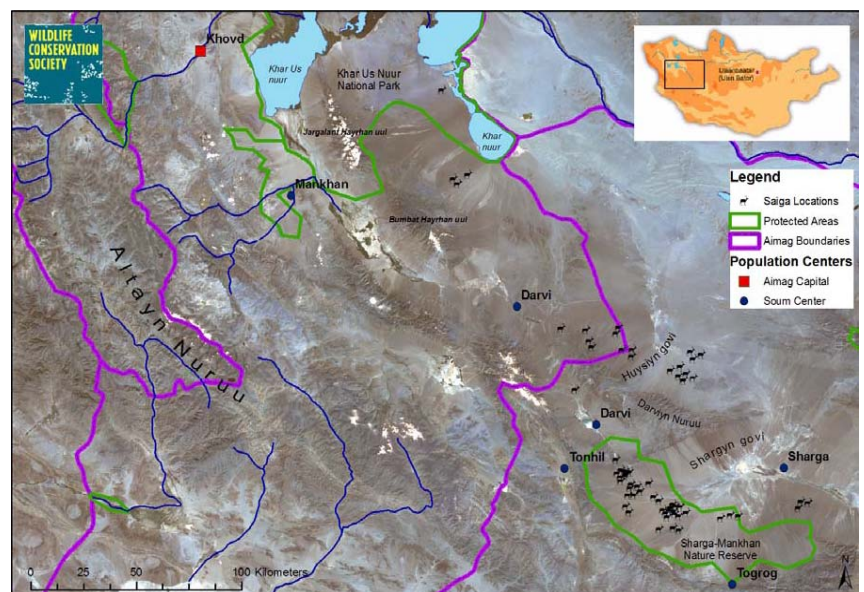


Figure. Results of recent WCS saiga surveys in western Mongolia.

In addition, during the four-week visit the team met with representatives from key Mongolian institutions involved in saiga conservation to seek advice on the most important unanswered questions and data necessary for conservation of saiga in the wild. Meetings were conducted in Ulaanbaatar and in two aimags, Khovd and Gov-Altai, with the following organizations and/or individuals: International Snow Leopard Trust, Mongolian Academy of Sciences, Khar Us Nuur National Park, World Wide Fund for Nature, the Steppe Forward Programme, UNDP Altai-Sayan Project, Environmental Protection Agency, National University of Mongolia, Khovd University, and individual rangers involved in saiga protection. These meetings underscored the following needs: 1) information on seasonal movements and migration, especially during periods of severe winter; 2) effects of competition with livestock in areas with low and high herder densities; 3) development of a rigorous method for assessing population trends; 4) empirical information on adult and juvenile survival and factors affecting saiga demography; 5) genetics; 6) potential translocation of saiga to former ranges that have experienced local extirpations; and 7) capacity building including recruiting and training rangers, Mongolian scientists and students, and developing opportunities for local communities to benefit from saiga conservation. Given the enthusiasm expressed by representatives of all groups for saiga conservation, as well as the success of the field surveys, a field study aimed at enhancing saiga conservation is in the process of being developed.

Experience in rearing saigas at the “Wildlife of the Steppe” Association

A.D. Lipkovich

Association “Wildlife of the Steppe”, Rostov province

In 2004, captive breeding of saigas was started at Khutor Kundyuchensky, situated in Orlov district of Rostov province. It is being carried out by the association “Wildlife of the Steppe” with the support of the administration of Rostov province, scientific supervision of the Southern Scientific Center of Russian Academy of Sciences and financial support of the “Bashneft-Uyug” group of companies.

On 9 October 2004, a group of 5 male and 5 female five-month-old saigas was brought from the breeding centre of the Centre for Wild Animals (CWA), Republic of Kalmykia, under the supervision of Yu.N. Arylov, CWA Director.

The animals were caught with nets, tied up, injected with *ramitar* and transported by truck on hay bedding. They were placed in three open-air cages measuring 15x18m with corrugated iron roofs. These cages were oval in shape to reduce potential injuries. A watch tower was placed near the central cage to monitor the animals.

In the first week following transportation two females died. Autopsy revealed numerous haematomas and severe stress. Three of males were lame; one of them could not put weight on one leg. The front leg of one of the remaining females was broken. The high level of trauma, in our opinion, was the result of the method of capture. The animals were herded into nets in which they were struggling to escape until they were released.

The animals were monitored daily after release. When the cold season came the animals moulted and judging by their appearance gained weight. On 13 November an adult male was brought from Kalmykia for the rut. He was released into an enclosure with three females. On 27 December, the male ceased to show any interest in the females. On 12th-15th January, keepers observed signs of heat in the injured female, Jadi, who had recovered from her fractured leg. On 12 January, during the morning feed, she was excited and making loud noises, to which the adult male responded. Young males, separated by a corrugated iron wall, were also excited and making noises. Jadi tried to break out of her enclosure through a slightly opened door, a behaviour that had previously not been noted. In January, the young males started to play-fight, although the lame male was in worse condition than the others. All three females became pregnant. The first calf was born about 6 pm on 17 May, and within 1.5 hours was standing and bleating. The second calf was born on 19th May, and Jadi gave birth to a calf on 14th June.



The feeding of young saigas. Photo by A. Lipkovich

In early October, 2005, ten more five-month-old saigas were transferred to the breeding centre, which had been taken from the wild, from the "Stepnoi" reserve, in May. The young saigas were placed in a separate open-air enclosure with a covered shelter and a heat-lamp.

In December 2005, the males of the previous year started to display more aggressive behaviour. One of them, considerably larger than the others, obviously dominated, showing direct aggression. In late December the weakest male died, and an autopsy revealed haematomas and penetration wounds.

On December 24, 2005, the animals were examined and were found to be in good condition. Six females were transferred to an open-air enclosure with the adult male. He showed rutting behaviour, including harem-formation, and the young males again showed play-fighting behaviour. As of the end of December 2005, there were 14 saigas at the breeding centre

Development of gas deposits on Ustyurt Plateau: a new threat for saigas?

Elena Bykova¹, Alexander Esipov¹ & Rustam Murzakhanov²

¹Institute of Zoology of Uzbek Academy of Sciences, ²Center for Ecological Law Armon

Uzbekistan holds the eighth place in gas extraction in the world. Of 2.44 trillion cubic m of gas (the estimated reserves of Uzbekistan), 1.7 trillion cubic m is deposited in Ustyurt Plateau.

The Ustyurt Plateau is a region boasting unique natural resources, including about 250 vertebrate species. One of Ustyurt's key species is the saiga. Because it is remote, with a low level of economic development, its unique ecosystems are relatively intact. However, a difficult economic situation aggravated by the Aral Sea disaster has resulted in a drop in living standards, and unemployment has become a major cause of human impacts on wildlife. In particular, levels of saiga poaching have significantly increased. However, poaching is not the only threat for this unique species. Implementation of joint projects by Uzbekistan and Russia, involving the development of the region's energy sector, is a serious potential threat to saiga populations.



Emergency gas dump, near the Tuley gas-compressor station. Photo by Alexander Esipov

Two gas pipelines (Central Asia-Centre and Bukhara-Urals) stretch across this plateau. Four gas-compressor stations serve them, namely Kyr-Kyz, Tuley, Karakalpakiya and Kubla-Ustyurt. Besides, the national holding company Uzbekneftegaz, together with the major Russian companies Lukoil and Gazprom, intends to develop the large deposits of natural gas on the Ustyurt Plateau. Lukoil will explore the promising Kungrad site, and plans to construct a gas-chemical complex, two compressor stations, a 200-km main gas pipe and two industrial sites by 2010. An agreement between the national holding company Uzbekneftegaz and Gazprom Ltd, signed in 2002, anticipates cooperation in exploration and development of promising gas deposits on the Ustyurt Plateau, as well as the transportation of gas. An agreement on division of the Shahpahty deposit's production has already been signed.

The next agreement, for the Urga, Kuanysh and Akchalak deposits, is planned for mid-2006. Gazprom needs Central Asian gas for the growing export trade to Europe, and so is planning to modernize Uzbekistan's gas-transport networks, including repairing the Uzbek site of the main Central Asia-Centre gas pipeline. Beginning in 2007, Gazprom will start the construction of a new branch of the pipeline.

Another Russian business in Uzbekistan is UzPEC LTD, which previously belonged to the British Trinity Energy. In common with Uzbekneftegaz, UzPEC LTD is planning to explore and develop deposits in Central Ustyurt which are already open.

Thus, in the near future the Ustyurt Plateau will experience severe pressure connected to the development and operation of gas deposits. This will inevitably and very quickly affect the status of biodiversity in the region. The Karakalpak part of the Ustyurt Plateau is the main saiga wintering ground to which it migrates from Kazakhstan. In the past (1960-1970s), during the active development of oil and gas industries in the region, cases of mass mortality of saigas in deep trenches dug for gas pipelines were repeatedly recorded. High levels of poaching by geological teams conducting surveys for oil and gas deposits were also noted. Such "hunting" most resembled a massacre, in which whole herds of animals were exterminated just for fun. Currently, the existing branches of the gas pipe are not a serious barrier for saigas as they are almost completely dug into the ground. However, now there has been a critical reduction in numbers, any additional mortality could prove fatal for the population.

We note, in particular, that the above-mentioned Urga and Kuanysh deposits are situated on the saiga's migratory route, while Shahpahty is known as a key wintering ground. In this connection, a study of the effect of gas extraction on the condition of the Ustyurt population is crucial and timely for the saiga population, together with an investigation of potential mitigating measures. If mitigating measures are not taken, we predict deterioration of its status due to these planned projects affecting key habitats during the breeding, migration and wintering periods over the short term. Mitigation may include ecological education for workers, builders and the management of the companies involved. We do hope that Russian Lukoil and Gazprom, which have declared their concern for the environment, will be open to cooperation in conserving the saiga.

Project round-up



A project on the creation of alternative livelihoods in Kalmykia

The socio-economic crisis in the 1990s brought about a sharp decline in livestock numbers and as a result, the impoverishment of the local population in Kalmykia. This loss of livelihood forced the residents into poaching, which, together with other factors, has inflicted enormous damage on the saiga. As a result, the saiga population is in a critical state. To address this situation, we are carrying out a project entitled "Rotating cows as a tool for saiga conservation in Kalmykia", supported by the Small Environmental Projects Scheme of the UK Government's Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The team is led by Yuri Arylov of the Centre for Wild Animals of the Republic of Kalmykia, with Imperial College as the UK partner. The British Council in Moscow is administering the project.

During our previous Darwin Initiative project (see *Saiga news*, 1 2005), we asked local people in the vicinity of the Chernye Zemli Biosphere Reserve about how best we could support their livelihoods. Respondents repeatedly noted that improvements in livestock husbandry were key to the sustainable development of the region. We decided to contribute to this by instituting a "rotating cow" scheme, which is an idea used by many development agencies. In these schemes, families are chosen by the local people to receive a cow from the project. Female offspring born during an agreed period are returned to the central "cow bank" to be passed on to the next family, and so the project snowballs.



On the project site. From left: Yuri Arylov, Anna Shugaeva, E.J. Milner-Gulland and the Tsebikov family. Photo by Anna Luschekina (left); A morning milking. Photo by Yuri Arylov (right)



Families are chosen based on need, but the participating villages can be chosen on the basis of agreement to abide by conservation rules such as not supporting saiga poachers.

We held meetings with the Administration of Yashkul District, and agreed that we should start the project in the two villages where our social surveys had been carried out, because of their proximity to saiga habitat. Khulkhutta is 30 km north of the biosphere reserve and Tavan-Gashun is close to the reserve's southwest border. One family in each village was selected to receive a cow, as well as help in the construction of cowsheds, purchase of equipment and fodder and veterinary services. The offspring of their cows will be returned to the project for the first three years. Already, there is a great deal of interest in the project in the villages, which will, we hope, have the effect of increasing awareness of the link between saiga conservation and livelihoods. The second component of the project is based at the Centre for Wild Animals, where two cows and a bull form the project's core herd. A dairy has been set up at the CWA, and the produce will be given to local schools and kindergartens.

The project is funded until the end of 2007, by which time we hope that the momentum we have set up will allow the scheme to be sustained into the future. For further information please contact the head of project, Yuri Arylov, Center for Wild Animals of the Republic of Kalmykia, kalmisaiga@elista.ru, project participants Olga Obgenova, Centre for Ecological Projects of the Republic of Kalmykia, centercep@yandex.ru and E.J. Milner-Gulland, Imperial College London, e.j.milner-gulland@imperial.ac.uk.

We must make the world better and kinder – TNT project in Kalmykia

Beginning in 2003, the company TNT-Express has supported the work of the Centre for Wild Animals of the Republic of Kalmykia. The funding provided has been used to buy high-quality food for newborn saigas, to repair and expand enclosures, and to raise conservation awareness among local residents. Besides, this company has involved a significant number of its clients in saiga conservation, and has developed a project called "Save the saiga".



This involved TNT-Express sending out a Customer Loyalty Measurement form to its clients, and donating 20 euros to the Centre for Wild Animals of the Republic of Kalmykia for every form returned. Every year more and more clients are getting actively involved in this project. For further information, please contact Anna Lushchekina, UNESCO/MAB, mab.ru@relcom.ru.



The USA helps to protect saigas in Russia

As announced in *Saiga News 2*, the US Fish and Wildlife Service have given grants for saiga conservation in Russia. This funding has allowed the Chernye Zemli state biosphere nature reserve to equip its rangers with radios and field equipment, and to set up border signs around the reserve.

This enabled improved protection of saigas in the nature reserve, where almost all the saigas in the north-western Caspian region aggregate during rut and calving. The USFWS, together with the Large Herbivore Foundation and other sponsors, also funded the construction of the recently-opened visitor center at the Yashkul saiga breeding centre (see above).

For further information, please contact A. Lushchekina, UNESCO/MAB, mab.ru@relcom.ru.



On the border of nature reserve.
Photo by Anna Lushchekina



A new Darwin Initiative project in Kalmykia

The Darwin Initiative has just announced the award of a grant to Imperial College London and colleagues in Kalmykia, to support the project "Evaluating approaches to public engagement in saiga conservation in Kalmykia", which will run from 1st May 2006 to 31st December 2007. This is a follow-up to our previous Darwin project "Using saiga antelope conservation to improve rural livelihoods", which ran from April 2003 to March 2006, and was awarded to us on the basis of our success in achieving the goals of this first project.

The new project will be coordinated overall by E.J. Milner-Gulland. The coordinator in Kalmykia will be Olga Obgenova of the Centre for Ecological Projects (centercep@yandex.ru). Other participating teams are the Centre for Wild Animals of the Republic of Kalmykia, the Chernye Zemli Biosphere Reserve, the Dharma Centre, Yashkul School, the Arshan Children's Home and the Stepnoi Zakaznik (Astrakhan Oblast). Dr A. Lushchekina will act as a consultant to the project. Our aims are:

- 1) To continue the monitoring of saiga antelope population ecology and poaching activity and develop a database for analysis of these data.
- 2) To support the activities of the Yashkul Saiga Breeding Centre, particularly their rotating cow project and visitor centre.
- 3) To develop a strong Republic-wide educational programme, including excursions, ecological clubs and children's competitions.
- 4) To evaluate the attitudes of local people to saiga antelope conservation, analysing the differences between areas which have received different levels and types of conservation intervention, and hence to plan effectively for future interventions.
- 5) To raise the profile of saigas in the area, through the media and through distribution of public awareness materials. In particular to highlight the importance of nature conservation in the Buddhist faith.
- 6) To catalyse long-term links between groups in the UK and in Kalmykia, through an exchange programme between the countries in early 2007.
- 7) To build long-term capacity for saiga conservation in the Republic, through support of conservation NGOs and other key organisations.

For more information contact E.J. Milner-Gulland, Imperial College London, e.j.milner-gulland@imperial.ac.uk

Review of recent saiga publications

Lindeman G.V., Abaturov B.D., Bykov A.V., Lopushkov V.A. The dynamics of the population of vertebrate animals in Zavolzhskaya semi-desert (Responsible Editor: M-R. D. Magomedov). The Institute of Dendrology. Moscow: Nauka Publishers, 2005, 252 pp.

The book describes the current status of vertebrate animals in the second half of the 20th century in the virgin semi-desert and man-made forests, mainly in Janybek station of the Institute of Dendrology of Russian Academy of Sciences. Some articles are devoted to the dominant, rare and protected species, including the saiga. In the authors' opinion, changes in the plant cover caused by cyclic changes in the climate and large-scale agricultural activities in steppe and semi-desert zones affect the state, numbers and distribution of the saiga.

Neronov V.M., Arylov Yu.N., Badmaev V.S., Lushchekina A.A. An Ecosystem approach and territorial form of the protection of key species of steppe biodiversity (the case study of the saiga). The role of strictly protected natural territories in the conservation of biodiversity. The proceedings of the international scientific-practical conference devoted to the tenth anniversary of State Nature Reserve Rostovsky, 26-28 April 2006, Village Orlovsky, Rostov Province. Rostov. Printing house of Rostov University. 2006. P. 74-77.

On the basis of the saiga, the article suggests the ecosystem approach and territorial form of nature protection for the conservation of key species of steppe biodiversity and their rehabilitation. Contact person: Valery Neronov, mab.ru@relcom.ru. *

Erdnenov G.I., Lukbanov P.K., Ubushaev B.S., Lushchekina A.A., Milner-Gulland E.J. peculiarities of rut and calving in saigas in the territory of the biosphere nature reserve Black Grounds. The role of strictly protected natural territories in the conservation of biodiversity. The proceedings of the international scientific-practical conference devoted to the tenth anniversary of State Nature Reserve Rostovsky, 26-28 April 2006, Village Orlovsky, Rostov Province. Rostov. Printing house of Rostov University. 2006. P. 344-347.

Findings of the field surveys conducted with the support of the Darwin Initiative Foundation (No 12/028) and INTAS (No 03-51-3579) during heat and calving of saigas in 2004-2005 in the territory of the Chernye Zemli biosphere nature reserve and adjacent areas. The article showed that the places of rut and calving practically coincided and that 70-80 % of the saiga population inhabiting north-western Caspian region are breeding in this territory. Contact person: Anna Lushchekina, mab.ru@relcom.ru. *

* the book of collected articles of the international scientific-practical conference devoted to the 10th anniversary of the nature reserve Rostovsky can be ordered from the director of the nature reserve, Mr L.V. Klez, at gZR@orlovsky.donpac.ru