

Saiga Antelopes: a Last-Minute Rescue

Saiga antelopes live in the extreme conditions of Eurasian cold-winter deserts: temperatures may reach 50 °C in the shade during summers and -40 °C in winter.

Survivors in danger

The cold-winter deserts of Central Asia are the home of the saiga antelopes. Although the species' distribution range once reached into Central Europe, today it is restricted to five mutually isolated areas in Russia, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia. The main causes are the disappearance of once vast, open landscapes and the spread of forests and human settlements. Today, saiga antelopes are classified as a critically endangered species. The most acute threat is poaching, which is currently on the rise again. NABU engages on the ground to protect the saiga antelopes.

Horns to the market, meat for the stove

Saiga antelopes have been hunted by people for thousands of years. At the beginning of the 20th century, the increasing use of firearms pushed the species to the brink of extinction. During the Soviet era, populations recovered because guns were confiscated and the saigas put under formal protection. Although thousands of animals were still shot each year in an industrial way to fulfil the 'State Meat Plan', hundreds of thousands were left alone. Their numbers rose quickly, as saigas mature early and usually give birth to twins.

The situation changed when the Soviet Union collapsed. Unemployment was rife, government-employed saiga hunters were poorly paid, and all inspections ceased. At the same time, the demand for saiga horns flourished in the context of traditional Chinese medicine, offering enormous income opportunities. Saiga meat was sold on local markets, but the horns were traded to China. As the saigas became rarer, the price for horns increased further, making it profitable for poachers to kill even the last buck in a herd. The species' rapid reproduction, which had saved it before, now failed. Suddenly, vast tracts of steppe were devoid of saigas. Despite increased government protection and inspections at the borders, the threat of extinction to the saiga antelopes has not been averted.



In the early 1990s, approximately 254,000 saiga antelopes used to graze the Ustyurt. In the spring of 2015, only about 1,300 individuals were left, which are still being pursued by poachers. Government wildlife rangers are unable to effectively protect the huge area. A newly constructed railway and a border fence cut across the saigas' migration routes, posing an additional danger to the survival of the herds. If the Ustyurt population were to become extinct, reintroducing the saiga to the region would be virtually impossible given the vast distances and the barriers erected by people.





Diseases can kill large proportions of the saiga population within a few days. This happened in the Betpakdala steppe of Kazakhstan in 2015. In one sweep, 90 percent of the saiga population died from an epidemic. However, so far populations have always been quick to recover.



Environmental education started early on. NABU has been using animated cartoons, a school textbook, and a comic to raise awareness for saiga protection among the younger generation.

NABU: Turning herders and poachers into saiga guardians

Starting as early as 2004, NABU has been educating local people, and especially the younger generation, about the endangered saigas and ways to protect them. Two animated cartoons, a comic, and a school textbook in the local languages have reached thousands of people in Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Mongolia. In the Ustyurt region, where the most acutely endangered saiga population lives, NABU has equipped government rangers with field glasses and other gear to prevent poaching effectively. Unfortunately, neither our support to the rangers nor the training of customs authorities facilitated by other organisations have proven sufficient to check the decrease of the saiga population in Ustyurt.

Starting in the autumn of 2015, NABU has launched an additional initiative, mobilising people from the villages of the Ustyurt region to renounce poaching and instead act as guardians of the saigas. NABU experts not only found remains of recently poached saigas in some of the villages, they also managed to get into conversations with local people. The locals see the saiga as part of their homeland, feel a responsibility to protect the species, and are ready to prevent poaching. To be able to do this, they need to be allowed to take on the rights and duties associated with their proposed community wildlife sanctuaries.

NABU collaborates with Kazakh environmental organisations 'Eco-museum', 'Center for Environmentally Sustainable Technologies' (CINEST), and 'Koldau Kazakhstan' and is in close communication with the conservation authorities. In addition, NABU directly supports local initiatives with technical advice and equipment. The activities that are already under way will be expanded to build a network of community wildlife rangers and sanctuaries across the entire saiga habitat in Ustyurt. There are also plans to re-introduce the Asiatic wild ass. Furthermore, NABU is an official partner to the UN-backed agreement on saiga conservation, signed by the saiga range countries under the auspices of the Bonn Convention on Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS).



How you can help to save the saigas of Ustyurt

Become a Sponsor of NABU International – Foundation for Nature. Your contribution supports the work of the wildlife rangers, helping to prevent the extinction of the saigas. As a Sponsor, you will receive regular updates on the saiga antelopes and other endangered animals around the world. Support NABU International now to protect the last saiga antelopes.

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© 2018, NABU International, 1st edition 01/2018, NABU International – Foundation for Nature, Charitéstr. 3, 10117 Berlin, www.NABU-International.de; Text: Stefan Michel, Til Dieterich; Editor: Britta Hennigs; Layout: Miriam Bittar; Translation: Philipp P. Thapa; Printed by: Medialogik GmbH, Karlsruhe, printed on 100% recycled paper; Images: p. 1 t. & b.: shutterstock.com/Victor Tyakht, p. 2 l. to r.: NABU/Til Dieterich, NABU/Stefan Michel, b.: Francois Langrot; **ARTICLE-NO.:** 9519-2