



**For Immediate Release
24 September 2006**

Central Asian Agreement to Conserve the Threatened Saiga Antelope Takes Effect

Almaty, 24 September: A new Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to conserve the threatened Saiga Antelope (*Saiga tatarica tatarica*) came into effect today. The MoU provides an international framework for Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, where the Saiga occurs, to work more closely together on regional conservation issues.

Saiga Antelopes once numbered in the millions across the vast grasslands of the Central Asia steppe. A separate sub-species, *Saiga tatarica mongolica*, is found in Mongolia where approximately 1,500 individuals remain.

The sight of these elephant nosed, goat-sized creatures in their huge herds numbering in the tens and hundreds of thousands racing across the landscape created a spectacle rivalling that of the wildebeest's famed migrations in Africa's Serengeti. But over the course of only 15 years, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, scientists estimate only 60,000 remain - mostly the victims of unsustainable hunting - one of the most dramatic declines on record for any mammal.

A primary underlying driver of the Saiga's demise was the erosion of state controlled management and the opening of strictly controlled borders, combined with staggering poverty and lack of economic opportunities after the abandonment of collective farms in local communities of the four Range States. Local people have been driven to unsustainably hunt the remaining male Saigas for their horns, fetching up to US\$80-100/kilo and much more in Asian end markets, and for local consumption of meat and skins. Saiga horns have been a key ingredient in traditional Asian medicines for hundreds of years.

The MoU was negotiated over the course of four years under the auspices of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS). Kazakhstan today signed the agreement in Almaty, Kazakhstan, joining Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan who had signed the MoU earlier. The signing ceremony took place during the First Meeting of the Signatories to the Memorandum of Understanding Concerning Conservation, Restoration and Sustainable Use of the Saiga Antelope.

By signing the MoU, the three countries agreed to cooperate and reinforce efforts to conserve and restore the remaining populations of Saiga Antelopes. When the

populations are put on a safe footing, sustainable use of the Saiga for its meat and its horns will be considered.

Robert Hepworth, the CMS Executive Secretary said: “I congratulate all attending this historic meeting in Kazakhstan, which will be a milestone on the road to recovery for the Saiga Antelope. The MoU will provide a lasting basis for collaboration in Central Asia, a region that is vital to avian and terrestrial migratory species and which represents a key focal area for CMS.”

Lyle Glowka, CMS Agreements Officer, added: “The MoU is CMS’s third initiative in the Central Asian Region. We have been particularly pleased with the very close working relationship that has developed with countries here on our other CMS MoUs involving Siberian Crane and Bukhara Deer. We will build on this experience for future collaborative activities involving migratory species important to the region, including other Central Asian mammals such as the Wild Ass, Bactrian Camel and Snow Leopard, as well as the migratory waterbirds of the Central Asian Flyway, African-Eurasian raptors and the Houbara Bustard.”

The international trade in Saiga and in Saiga horns and other products has been regulated under CITES since 1995. Concerns about the sustainability of the levels of export authorized by Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation in the late 90s led CITES to recommend a suspension of all Saiga trade from these two Range States. Because of persistent illegal trade in horn to supply an ever-growing demand in Asia, CITES furthermore adopted a series of measures to *inter alia* improve trade controls, enhance collaboration between Saiga Range States and consuming countries, and support the CMS MoU and the implementation of the Action Plan.

CMS and CITES are working very closely with the Range States to support the implementation of the MoU and its Action Plan, “The value-added of CITES and CMS working together on a species of common concern to both Conventions is immeasurable” said Willem Wijnstekers, the Secretary-General of CITES. “This is a good example of how CMS and CITES can combine their regulatory measures and technical expertise to significantly enhance conservation, management and development.”

Background information on the biology of the species, the MoU Meeting and the MoU and Action Plan is posted at:

< http://www.cms.int/species/saiga/1st_saiga_range_states_meeting.htm >.

For more information please contact:

Lyle Glowka, CMS Agreements Officer, +49.228.815.2402 or lglowka@cms.int;
Veronika Lenarz, +49.228.815.2409. See also www.cms.int.

Tom De Meulenaer, CITES Senior Scientific Officer, +41-22-917-8131 or tom.de-meulenaer@cites.org;
Juan-Carlos Vasquez at +41-22-917-8156 or juan.vasquez@cites.org;
Michael Williams at +41-79-409-1528 (cell), +41-22-917-8242 (office) or michael.williams@unep.ch. See also www.cites.org.