



Signs of Hope for Saiga Antelope after Mass Die-off in 2015

Bonn, 15 June 2016 - In May 2015, a catastrophic and unprecedented mass die-off caused by a bacterial infection wiped out more than 200,000 saiga antelopes within a few weeks. The Betpak-Dala saiga population in central Kazakhstan lost almost 90 per cent of its animals, which is equivalent to over 60 per cent of the global population, leaving the species in a critical situation.

Today, the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Kazakhstan published the results of an aerial census, which was conducted in April 2016 (<http://mgov.kz/po-rezultatam-aviaucheta-chislennost-sajgakov-v-kazahstane-sostavila-bolee-108-tys-osobej/>). The census data shows an increase of saiga numbers in all three populations within Kazakhstan, the antelope's main Range State. It is especially good news that the central Betpak-Dala population, which used to be the world's largest population, shows some signs of recovery.

"During the mass die-off in 2015 this population mostly lost females and calves. Additionally poaching was on the rise, so we were very concerned about the future of this population," says Steffen Zuther, who heads the Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative (ADCI) on behalf of a group of national and international organizations and the government of Kazakhstan. Zuther and his colleagues from the Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan (ACBK) led this year's state funded saiga census.

In total 36,200 adult saigas were counted in the Betpak Dala region in central Kazakhstan during the April 2016 census. "This is far below the 242,000 animals we counted in spring 2015, before the mass-die off. But we are grateful for this glimpse of hope," states Albert Salemgareyev from ACBK, co-leader of the Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative.

The two other remaining populations within Kazakhstan also show some signs of hope. One population in the European part of Kazakhstan, west of the Ural River seems to have recovered fully from a mass die-off in 2010 and is now the largest population with more than 70,000 animals, according to this year's census.

The Ustyurt population in Western Kazakhstan remains the most vulnerable of the saiga populations. Poaching had brought this population to the brink of extinction, but new data from the 2016 count revealed that a small but significant number of males survived, which allows further reproduction. The population has not declined any further. Nevertheless saiga numbers are still at a dramatically low level with less than 2,000 animals being counted.

"The news about recovering saiga populations in Kazakhstan is a sign of hope after the catastrophic saiga mass die-off event in 2015," said Bradnee Chambers, Executive Secretary of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS). "At the same time, poaching remains a serious threat to the species and we need to be aware of the fact that mass die-offs such as the one which shocked the world in 2015 can occur again and that we have still not fully understood the underlying causes of the mass die-off," said Chambers.

The Memorandum of Understanding concerning Conservation, Restoration and Sustainable Use of the Saiga Antelope (Saiga MOU) under the auspices of CMS is the only international

instrument for the conservation of this critically endangered species. Since 2006, CMS regularly brings together all five Range States of saiga as well as partner organizations and other stakeholders to agree on conservation measures and coordinate their implementation.

The investigation of the 2015 mass die-off event is still in process. For information on the current status please see:

<https://fzs.org/en/news/surprising-findings-research-saiga-antelope-mass-die/>

NOTES TO THE EDITORS

Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative

The Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative (ADCI), is a large scale programme to conserve steppe and semi-desert ecosystems and their key species (mainly saiga antelope) in Central Kazakhstan. The initiative is a partnership of the government of Kazakhstan namely the Ministry of Agriculture with the Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS), The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), Fauna & Flora International (FFI) and the Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan (ACBK).

See:

www.mgov.kz

<http://www.acbk.kz/ru/pages/6339.html>

<https://fzs.org/en/projects/kasachstan/>

<http://www.rspb.org.uk/whatwedo/international/>

<http://www.fauna-flora.org/explore/kazakhstan/>

The Memorandum of Understanding concerning Conservation, Restoration and Sustainable Use of the Saiga Antelope (Saiga MOU) under the auspices of UNEP/CMS is the only international instrument for the conservation of the critically endangered saiga antelope. After the catastrophic die-off in May 2015, CMS dispatched an emergency mission of international experts from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN and the Royal Veterinary College of London, ACBK and FZS to assist the government of Kazakhstan in initial sample collection and analysis. In October that year CMS organized the meeting of the signatories to Saiga MOU, where all Range states as well as non-governmental stakeholders developed and adopted a set of measures in the Medium-term International Work Programme 2016-2020 to protect the remaining saigas.

<http://www.cms.int/en/legalinstrument/saiga-antelope>

Saiga antelope

The saiga (*Saiga tatarica*) is a migratory ungulate that exists in two subspecies and five major populations: three ranging mostly in Kazakhstan, one in Russia (Kalmykia) and one in Mongolia. Some of them migrate from Kazakhstan to southern Russia and Uzbekistan. In the 1970s there were almost 2 million saigas, but catastrophic declines since the 1990s resulted in only 30,000 remaining, scattered across an immense area. Originally hunted for meat, in the 1990s the population declined dramatically due to ruthless hunting for meat and horns due to rural impoverishment after the end of the Soviet Union and to satisfy demand from

China, where saiga horn is used as a traditional medicine. At the beginning of the century only a few thousands persisted in the Betpak-Dala range, where historically the largest population of almost 1 million thrived. Since the year 2003 this population recovered significantly to more than 242,000 animals but was hit hard again in 2015 by a catastrophic mass die-off wiping out 90 per cent of this population.

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Photos and maps related to this article can be found at:
<http://photos.fzs.org/Press-Photos/Saiga-Census-2016/>.