

## Rhino rescue plan decimates Asian antelopes

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An antelope that just a decade ago crammed the steppes of central Asia is this spring on the verge of extinction, victim of an epidemic of poaching. Biologists say it is the most sudden and dramatic population crash of a large mammal ever seen.



Now you see him, soon you won't  
(Image: NATUREPL.COM)

In 1993, over a million saiga antelopes roamed the steppes of Russia and Kazakhstan. Today, fewer than 30,000 remain, most of them females. So many males have been shot for their horns, which are exported to China to be used in traditional fever cures, that the antelope may not be able to recover unaided.

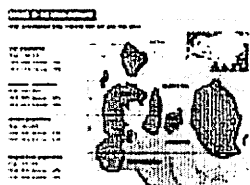
The slaughter is embarrassing for conservationists. In the early 1990s, groups such as WWF actively encouraged the saiga hunt, promoting its horn as an alternative to the horn of the endangered rhino.

Saiga (*Saiga tatarica*) once dominated the open steppes from Ukraine to Mongolia. They have always been hunted for meat, horns and skins. However, even in Soviet times, hunters killed tens of thousands each year, without dramatically lowering the population.

But since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a lucrative market in the horns has opened up, with hunters using motorcycles and high-powered weapons to chase and kill their quarry. In China, saiga horns fetch around \$100 a kilogram. Organised gangs illegally export the horn by train from Moscow to Beijing, or across the border from Kazakhstan.

## Black with antelopes

"The plains used to be black with these antelopes, but now you can go out there and not see any at all," says Abigail Entwistle, a zoologist from Fauna and Flora International, a British-based charity. "This is the most sudden change in fortune for a large mammal species recorded in recent times."



Decline of the saiga antelope

The closest comparison may be with the African elephant, which faced a similar poaching frenzy in the 1980s, causing its numbers to fall from a million to half a million in a decade. But the saiga's numbers, which started at a similar level, have fallen by 97 per cent.

The scale of the slaughter, and its almost total destruction of the male saiga, has overwhelmed the animals' famed fecundity. "We don't know of any case in biology where the sex ratio has gone so wrong that fecundity has crashed in this way," says Eleanor Milner-Gulland of Imperial College, London, the leading expert in the West on the species.

Between 1993 and 1998, saiga numbers across central Asia almost halved, to around 600,000. Then, with most of the males gone, the population crash began in earnest, says Milner-Gulland. Numbers have halved each year since, until 2001's census recorded just 30,000 individuals. There is, she says, no sign that the crash is due to disease or unusual weather.

## No return

One of the most critically endangered herds is in the huge Betpak-Dala region in central Kazakhstan, where in 1993 more than half a million saiga lived. By 2001 their numbers had crashed to just 4000 - a 99 per cent drop from which there may be no return.

Aerial surveys in 2001 by the Institute of Zoology in Kazakhstan revealed no adult or juvenile males, only females, says Milner-Gulland. And time is running out to bring extra males in, as saiga antelopes normally

only live for three to four years.

Conservationists have struggled to keep up with the scale of the disaster, and did not put the saiga on the Red List of critically endangered species until October 2002. In the coming months they will launch an emergency appeal to rescue wild herds.

"We think we have probably got just two years to save the species," says Entwistle. "The trouble is, most people have never heard of the animal, so it is hard to raise funds."

## Confined to zoos

It is unlikely that hunters will drive the saiga to total extinction, as they did the dodo, quagga and passenger pigeon. But without a dramatic reversal of its fortunes, it will soon be confined to zoos and a few small reserves.

A decade ago, the saiga antelope seemed so secure that conservationists fighting to save the rhino from poaching suggested using saiga horn in traditional Chinese medicines as a substitute for rhino horn.

Research commissioned by WWF at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in the late 1980s found it to be as effective as rhino horn in fighting fevers, and in 1991 WWF began a campaign in Hong Kong to publicise it as an alternative. The following year, the UN Environment Programme appointed WWF ecologist Esmond Bradley Martin as its "special envoy" to persuade pharmacists across Asia to adopt saiga horn (**New Scientist** print edition, 9 March 1991 and 3 October 1992).

But the saiga had died out in China in the 1960s, and the resulting upsurge in demand opened the floodgates to unregulated imports. By 1993, says Milner-Gulland, "Hong Kong markets were piled high with saiga horn" from Kazakhstan and Russia. The slaughter had begun.

Bradley Martin is unapologetic. He told **New Scientist**: "I supported the use of saiga antelope horn as a substitute for rhino horn from the early 1980s. In my opinion it was the correct policy at the time. But I stopped around 1995, when I read about the start of the sharp decline in saiga populations."

Fred Pearce

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