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WWF Mongolia Programme Office Position on Conservation of Mongolian Saiga

The saiga antelope is ranged from southeastern Europe, Middle and Central Asian steppes to Gobi in Mongolia. There are two distinct subspecies of saigas: *Saiga tatarica tatarica* and *Saiga tatarica mongolica*. The nominate species is distributed in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Russia. But the Mongolian saiga is an endemic species and found only in restricted areas of western Mongolia. Explicitly, the Shargiin Gobi and Khuisiin Gobi depressions are the last living places of the remaining few herds of Mongolian saigas.

The distribution range and number of Mongolian Saiga has been dramatically reduced in last century and it intensified during last several years. Between 1998-2000, Mongolian saiga population showed an increase in numbers reaching around 5000 individuals in 2000 and as a result the distribution range was expanded and went further to north as well. But, due to several confounding factors such as consecutive years severe winter, pasture competition with domestic livestock and increased poaching activities, the population has declined dramatically in last 2-3 years. According to surveys done by researchers in 2003, there are only less than 800 Mongolian saigas left in Mongolia. At the moment, conservationists fear that they might go to extinct unless urgent and efficient actions taken. Furthermore, this coming winter might determine the rise or fall of the last remaining Mongolian saiga herds in western Mongolia, the only population over the world.

We acknowledge that effective cooperation between agencies and stakeholders, in particular local community, and financial assistance from donor countries are still, and will be vital for a successful protection of this critically endangered species. Therefore, we call for urgent actions at national and international levels to save Mongolian saigas from extinction and to ensure the survival in the wild.

What can be done at national and international level to protect saigas? Notably, the current focal area focused on country independent conservation activities in range countries should be changed. We should bring the range countries' cooperation up to new level in order to ensure the long-term survival of the species. For example, in regional cooperation of the authorities of the saiga range countries great attention should be paid on improvement and development of a more effective control on illegal trade of saiga horns. Especially, border control agencies of range countries extensive and regular cooperation is urgently needed. It is crucial that saiga horn trade must be stopped at the international and national market for next several years, in order to stop dramatic decline caused by mass scale shooting. This ban should not be lifted in the future, until the population recovery is accepted.

Developing the management plan for the conservation of Mongolian saiga was identified as a major tool for better and efficient conservation for this endangered species. Thus, WWF Mongolia Programme office developed a conservation plan for Mongolian saigas in 1999 with the supports of local and international communities. Since then the conservation plan has provided needed coordination for saiga conservation activities, this conservation plan should be updated and implemented at the national level.

It is important that scientists develop better management techniques and methodologies that will be used by management agencies and local administration for better population monitoring. Furthermore, the study methodologies and technologies should be reviewed and improved. Due to lack of standardized survey methodologies, some natural or human induced complexity may appear as the major problems in a given time. Therefore, there should be concerns about the reliability of the data provided by researchers and its scientific merit.

Although main part of the distribution areas of the species have been taken under state and local protection in Mongolia, there is still a lack of opportunities to widely carry out conservation activities for the species because of insufficient funds for the management. Moreover, today, the state administrative organizations are insufficiently carrying out activities for reducing adverse impacts on the species and their resources and habitats, and many important planned activities still remain unimplemented at the policy and law enforcement levels. Therefore, state administrative organizations should consider improving policy implementation and law enforcement.

Habitat competition with domestic livestock, as one of the main threats to the Mongolian Saiga in prior to consecutive years of severe winter has been and potentially could become an important root cause for decline. Due to the accelerated increase of livestock number in the last two years, grazing pressure will remain for quite some time. Increased frequency of drought and harsh winter due to climate change especially in Saiga distribution range makes the situation worse. It is needed to introduce sustainable grazing management in consideration of Saiga habitat requirements for their survival.

Illegal shooting is one of the major threats to saigas in Mongolia, the same as in other range countries. The driving forces of killing saigas are the demand on Chinese traditional medicine market and increased poverty in rural areas. The current enforcement system is really inadequate and cannot prevent the saiga population from being deteriorated. Evidence of this is the rapid decrease in numbers and change in sex ratio of the species in past few years. Therefore, there is a need to develop a mechanism that could increase local people's interests in protecting saigas, to offer them sustainable exploitation of natural resources, and to help locals to obtain and sustainably develop alternative income sources. Also the operation of mobile anti-poaching units should be encouraged. The experiences we have with Irbis-1 anti-poaching unit provide good examples and lessons in law enforcement and in stopping the poaching.

Conservation of endangered species is most critical and challenging when they are very low in numbers. Thus, to save the Mongolian saigas, all agencies should leave their door open to anyone who wants to contribute or cooperate, and use the available resources effectively. WWF Mongolia Programme Office welcomes your cooperation.

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