

Battle to save the Saiga



The Saiga, Europe's only antelope, has been poached to near extinction in just 10 years. A project, run by Imperial College in London, is studying this unique animal and its habitat in southern Russia in an effort to help save it. **Helen Galland** describes a cultural exchange visit to the region.

There is a little-known antelope that inhabits three places in the world: Mongolia, Kazakhstan and Kalmykia. In case you haven't heard of the latter, it is a small independent state in southern Russia. The people, who have suffered much persecution in the past, are descended from Mongolians and, although they speak Russian, they also have their own language, Kalmykian – during the war, this was outlawed but is now being reintroduced into schools.

As well as having a unique language, they are also the only European people whose main religion is Buddhism. It is also a country which boasts the only European antelope, the Saiga, or elephant nosed antelope (*Saiga tatarica*).

I recently took part in a cultural exchange programme to Kalmykia which was funded by the Darwin Initiative (part of Defra). The aim was to get to know the local people, their culture and traditions, in order to understand the issues surrounding their wildlife, including the Saiga antelope, whose population has plummeted in the past decade from a million animals to only 10% of that number today.

The reasons for this drastic decline are multiple. Firstly, the animal grazes the vast steppe land of southern Russia which was used as grazing land for millions of head of livestock during the time of collective farms

run under Stalin. Overgrazing caused desertification in various areas and, where the thin fertile soil is eroded away, nothing can establish and grow.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the collective farms were disbanded and many farmers were left poverty stricken and unemployed. After eating their livestock (sheep and camels) there was little choice but to look to the abundant wildlife to meet their

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dietary requirements. Black tailed gazelle and Saiga antelope were then so numerous that huge herds would pass villages during their migrations. Thousands were hunted to provide food for poor families.

After the collapse, wildlife laws were not upheld and poaching continued unabated and unchecked. As well as being killed for food, the Saiga was much in demand by the Chinese medicine trade where the horns (only the male Saiga has horns) are used as a fertility aid. Some Russians have made a fortune off the back of the open market that

evolved between Russia and China during this time.

So what is the current state of affairs? I first heard about the project when I read an article in the *BBC Wildlife Magazine*, and the outlook seemed pretty bleak for the Saiga. The exchange programme provided a real insight into what was happening in Russia and how outside help might make a difference.

On a hot day in May, three participants took off from Heathrow, along with our translator and E J Milner-Gulland, the project leader.

I went as a city farmer, educating school children about farming and nature –





- Far left: the visitor centre at Yashkul
- Left: a Saiga
- Below left: a newborn calf waits for its mother
- Below: project leader E J Milner-Gulland with a calf

something which most city kids are disengaged from. This linked in to the Russian project as we were to visit schools in Kalmykia to see how the children there learn about living with wildlife.

Alison, another member of the group, is an artist and she aimed to help the project by meeting artists from Kalmykia to organise a fund-raising exhibition of their works in the UK. Rosa, a film maker, planned to film the expedition so she could make a documentary about the Saiga Project to help raise awareness of it.

Arriving in Moscow, we headed on to Volgograd and met our exchange partners for the first time. We didn't speak much Russian, and they didn't speak much English, so we had to rely on the translating abilities of both EJ and her dad Robin, as well as using a bit of impromptu sign language! After making acquaintances, we were soon to discover what a most hospitable and friendly lot Kalmykian people are.

Welcoming statue

But we had a mission. Our one aim was to see a Saiga for real, as all we had seen in the UK were pictures. Before we would get that opportunity, however, there was the small question of travelling a few hundred kilometres to Kalmykia.

As you enter the region you are welcomed by a huge statue of three leaping Saigas. This was a fairly new addition, and it was good to see that the Saiga is valued as a local point of interest. They surely can't be hunted to extinction if they are given the honour of welcoming visitors to the area!

We spent a few days in the capital, Elista, and visited the Buddhist temple built in 2006 for a visit by the Dalai Lama. Unfortunately, the great man never did make it to Kalmykia!

Our group was keen to see Saiga in the wild, but we were warned this would be unlikely. Even if we did see them, they would put a distance of several kilometres between us as soon as they caught wind of our presence.



Outside the temple is a statue representing the protector of all living beings. By his side is a Saiga antelope.

We then journeyed further into the Steppes to the Centre for Saiga Breeding at Yashkul. This is the only captive breeding centre for Saiga in the world, and offers advice to zoos interested in taking Saiga. They are very hard to keep alive in captivity, but Yuri Arylov, director of the centre, has vast knowledge of these animals and has had great success where others have failed. A secret of his success is that he spent many hours sourcing local vegetation to formulate an appropriate diet for the animals. Wormwood is a very important constituent of their diet as it acts as a natural vermifuge.

Another demand is space; the animals are so timid they need a huge flight distance in order to feel comfortable in captivity. So their enclosures are huge.

The breeding centre is a safety valve: should anything happen to the wild population, at least there are captive bred animals which could be released back into the wild to allow re-population.

Sponsorship sought

Because the plight of the Saiga is partly linked to human poverty, the centre also strives to address this issue. The Kalmyk Red, the local breed of cow, is bred at the centre, and the poorest members of the community are given a cow. This provides the family with dairy produce and, when they breed from the animal, female calves will be destined for other needy families. The project is in its formative years, but it is hoped it will be as successful as the Goats for Africa campaign. Sponsorship is similarly sought from donors in the UK.

The breeding centre is doing much to help the Saiga, and there is a new visitor building (in the shape of a Buddhist kibitka, or hut).

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We trekked into the Zapovdnik (nature reserve) in the early evening to be met by the hard working and low paid rangers.

They are very proud of their work and often put their lives on the line in the fight to stop poachers killing the Saiga. Guns and motorbikes are used in the combat.

The Rangers told us they had been