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CITES 2004

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WWF POSITION STATEMENT

13th MEETING OF THE CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES TO CITES, BANGKOK, 2-14 OCTOBER 2004

SAIGA ANTELOPE

Document 32

Ireland, on behalf of the Member States of the European Community, has submitted a draft Decision on the conservation of saiga antelope (*Saiga tatarica*).

WWF RECOMMENDATION: SUPPORT

WWF urges the CITES Parties to:

- adopt a decision incorporating the recommendations contained in this document; and take determined action, both at CoP13 and following the CoP, to address the root causes of the catastrophic on-going population decline of the saiga antelope.

SUMMARY

WWF supports the proposed Decision in Document 32. WWF considers the issue of the conservation of the saiga antelope to be of urgent concern:

- urgent measures need to be undertaken to address and reverse the catastrophic declines in the populations of this Appendix II species;
- international cooperation is the key factor for achieving conservation success for this species:
 - *Saiga is a migratory species, migrating thousands of kilometres twice a year, and crossing national borders ;*
 - *Poaching in range States is driven by the demand for saiga horn for Asian medicine.*

RATIONALE

The saiga antelope (*Saiga tatarica*) was included in Appendix II in 1995 following the unanimous adoption of the listing proposal at the 9th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (Fort Lauderdale, USA, November 1994).

Saiga antelope populations numbered over one million as recently as the early 1990s, but have been reduced to no more than 40,000 in total. Poaching and illegal trade in horns, uncontrolled hunting for meat, destruction of habitat, and construction of irrigation channels, roads and other obstacles preventing natural dispersion and migration have all contributed to recent saiga population declines. However, the primary cause is excessive illegal hunting even though hunting for Saiga is prohibited in all range states namely Kazakhstan (1999), Russian Federation (1998), Turkmenistan (1994), Uzbekistan (1990), and Mongolia). IUCN has recently re-categorized the species as Critically Endangered.



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Continuing large-scale impoverishment of the rural population has led to extensive poaching of saiga for meat and horns (for use in traditional Asian medicine). This has been facilitated by the breakdown of the government anti-poaching system as well liberalisation of foreign trade, following the breakdown of the USSR. Before 1991, all foreign trade was fully under the control and monopoly of the state but subsequently numerous private companies and individuals were allowed to establish export/import operations. Simultaneously, border controls were weakened, thus allowing the development of hundreds of exporting businesses, without effective regulation of the exported products.

Both Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation have already taken positive steps in enhancing conservation efforts, such as the voluntary suspension of exports of saiga specimens. Nevertheless, populations have continued to decline, in some areas precipitously. In order to improve the protection of the saiga antelope and their habitat within each range State, there is an urgent need for enhanced regional and international cooperation.

Co-ordinated and concerted national and transboundary actions by the authorities of the Range States, sub-regional, regional and international organizations such as the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species (CMS), trade and business associations, local communities, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders, are all needed to ensure recovery of the populations to their former levels. In order to enable the species' recovery and avoid the otherwise imperative and inevitable transfer to CITES Appendix I, these actions should be considered to be of the greatest conservation urgency.

It is crucial that range states formally ratify the Memorandum of Understanding and Action Plan for Saiga conservation that was drawn up by the CMS in 2002. Moreover, it is important that those countries that import saiga horn (China, Malaysia *etc.*), recognise the Memorandum and Action Plan, and undertake special measures to ensure that the illegal international trade is totally eliminated.

Because of the saiga's migratory behaviour, consistent levels of conservation effort across the range States and co-operation between them is also crucial to its recovery.

The major initial population decline was caused by selective poaching for horns for use in traditional Asian medicine. With the recently-lowered population density and skewed sex-structure, poaching for medicinal purposes is no longer as profitable, and has decreased. However, the high level of poverty of local people means that saiga will continue to be an important food resource. Special attention should be paid to poverty reduction strategies in the region, including in particular the establishment of alternative sources of protein and livelihoods for local people.

Previous and continuing experience shows that anti-poaching measures need to include both mobile anti-poaching units as well as the establishment of a system of protected areas throughout its migration route, including potential seasonal sanctuaries. It will also be necessary to ensure current patterns of habitat use are identified, as some of the major migratory routes have changed during in recent years.



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In addition to significant population declines, the sex ratio within saiga populations has been severely impacted and skewed, due to selective poaching for adult males for their horns. This must be addressed as a matter of urgency if the species is to survive. It is estimated that in some populations, males comprise only 1-2% of the population. This will not allow populations to recover naturally even where very strict and efficient anti-poaching measures are in place. Special scientifically-based measures to address imbalanced population structure can be implemented in some cases (e.g., establishment of special breeding centres, breeding animals in favourable conditions, release of additional males into female groups before the reproductive season).

The process of establishment of state borders is on-going for the countries of Central Asia, with the construction of engineering systems along the borders in some areas. This can cause additional problems for Saiga migrations as it blocks their route and this problem should be addressed through the establishment of saiga migration corridors.

Special attention should also be devoted to the role that saiga plays within the ecosystem in which it is found. In both Kalmykia (Russia) and Kazakhstan, livestock numbers have significantly decreased in recent years, as has the area of ploughed lands in the steppe zone. While the process of steppe ecosystem restoration has started, the drastic reduction in saiga numbers is resulting in an absence of natural grazing pressure, which can lead to ecosystem degradation and contribute to an increase in steppe fires. To counteract this, it is imperative for effective ecosystem functioning that species' migrations and migration routes should not be prevented by roads, pipelines, border engineering systems, etc. WWF notes that Article IV of the Convention requires that species populations be maintained at levels that ensure the fulfilment of their role in their ecosystem.

WWF'S INVOLVEMENT WITH SAIGA ANTELOPE

Since 1994 WWF has been heavily involved in the conservation and management of the saiga antelope. This has taken the form of a variety of actions, including:

- participation in the development of the saiga Action Plan;
- support to and promotion of the development of the CMS Memorandum on saiga conservation;
- raising public awareness within range States of the need for and importance of saiga conservation;
- preparation of a socio-economic assessment in order to develop alternative incomes for local communities;
- participation in the organisation of the international workshop on saiga conservation in Kalmykia in 2002;
- jointly with national governments and other partners, provision of support to anti-poaching activities for the Betpakdala population of saiga in Kazakhstan.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES

WWF recommends that the Conference of the Parties adopt the Decision proposed by Ireland on behalf of the European Union, specifically that:

1. All range states should be urged to immediately sign the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) drafted at the workshop in Kalmykia in May 2002 and implement the Saiga antelope Action Plan in order to restore the habitat and populations of the species, and enhance transboundary and international cooperation through *inter alia* a regional conservation and management strategy;



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2. Range states should be requested to report about their actions and impact of those actions to the Secretariat and the Standing Committee;
3. Range states should be requested to resolve current implementation problems through close cooperation with the Secretariat, other competent Management authorities and Non Governmental Organizations;
4. The Secretariat should address the CITES-relevant aspects of the Action Plan and of the MOU, and:
 - regularly assist with assessment of the implementation of the Action Plan and MOU,
 - provide assistance to the Saiga range states as a matter of priority,
 - intensify its cooperation with the CMS Secretariat on issues pertaining to the Saiga-antelope, including but not limited to the implementation of the saiga antelope Action Plan and MOU, and
 - report back to the subsequent meetings of the CITES Standing Committee and the 14th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties.
5. The Standing Committee should be requested to discuss the issue and recommend appropriate action, at its meetings between CoP13 and CoP14.
6. Consuming countries should be urged to establish effective measures of border control and regulation of domestic trade in saiga products and report the results to the Standing Committee prior to CoP14.

Finally WWF considers it to be very important that donor Parties, aid agencies, and non-governmental organizations assist the range states in any way possible with the conservation of this species, including the provision of:

- a) funding;
- b) enforcement and anti-poaching assistance;
- c) training and capacity building;
- d) equipment, particularly for anti-poaching activities;
- e) assistance with education and public awareness;
- f) assistance with population monitoring; and
- g) gathering and exchange of scientific, technical, and legal information and expertise.