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The Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative: A long term commitment to save the steppe and its saigas, an endangered couple

The Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative (ADCI) is a large scale project to conserve the northern steppe and semi desert ecosystems and their critically endangered flagship species like the saiga antelope (*Saiga tatarica tatarica*) and the Sociable Lapwing (*Vanellus gregarius*). ADCI is implemented by the Kazakhstan government, the Association for Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan (ACBK), the Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS),



Betpakdala saiga female during calving.

Photo by Eva Klebelsberg

the Royal Society for Protection of Birds (RSPB; BirdLife in the UK) and WWF International. The German Centre for International Migration and Development (CIM) is supporting the project through the long-term integration of two experts who have working for the Association for Conservation of Biodiversity in Kazakhstan since the beginning of 2007.

The "Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative" ("altyn dala" means "golden steppe" in Kazakh), started in 2006 and focuses on an area of about 55 million hectares (the size of France) which includes the range of the Betpakdala saiga

ADCI's main objectives are:

- to address the main threats to the future viability of the Betpakdala saiga population and its habitats, such as poaching as well as habitat conversion and fragmentation
- to establish a network of protected areas of various categories and corridors to conserve the migration routes and habitats of saigas and other key species like the Asian wild ass, goitred gazelle, great bustard and sociable lapwing.
- to identify and put in place key enabling conditions such as the genuine involvement of local communities and other relevant stakeholders, as well as ensuring tangible contributions to people's livelihoods and rural development.
- to gather baseline understanding of the Kazakh steppe and semi-desert ecosystems and their species in order to inform the planning and implementation of these conservation measures.
- to raise awareness and understanding for steppe and saiga conservation nationally and internationally.

Continuation at p.2.

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This publication is available online at www.saiga-conservation.com, <http://saigak.biodiversity.ru/publications.html>, www.iccs.org.uk/saiganews.htm and <http://www.wildlifewarden.net/wcs/mini/Saiga-Chinese.pdf>, as a pdf, or in hard copy on request in Chinese, English, Kazakh, Mongolian, Russian and Uzbek.

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Progress so far:

Saiga conservation: The ADCI has set up three ranger teams that are equipped with cars, tents, binoculars and other necessary field equipment. The rangers will support the state ranger brigades in the field, try to prevent young people from becoming poachers through intensive work with schools and local authorities (like the traditional “board of elders”) and collect data on key species observations for the project’s monitoring system



ADCI Rangers in Betpakdala .
Photo by Orken Shaimukhanbetov

Large calving ground found

The most astonishing success of recent months was the identification and protection of a saiga calving area which is thought to be the most important one described for the Betpakdala population in recent years. Recently, the Betpakdala population’s calving areas have been split into small groups and no mass aggregations have been observed. But three weeks ago the ADCI field team found an area with at least 4,000 females calving simultaneously within a period of about twenty days. The rangers and scientists remained in the vicinity of the herds and closed the roads through the area to avoid disturbance and poaching, and cooperated with the state rangers of the nearby Irgiz-Turgay Rezervat. They also collected data on the distribution, size and behaviour of the herds. During this expedition three more smaller calving sites were identified. In the next few months the rangers will try to follow the herds and help ADCI to get a clearer idea of their migration and pasture use.

In April 2008 the ADCI team participated for the first time in aerial saiga counts, which are conducted annually through the “Saiga and Wild Ungulate Conservation Programme” of the Kazakhstan government. ADCI is currently supporting the Kazakhstan Committee of Forestry and Hunting to improve the monitoring of the Betpakdala saiga technically and methodically and obtain more reliable numbers in the long term. Due to the lack of “modern” equipment like GPS and altimeters and the use of a methodology which has not been adapted to the current low numbers, data obtained in recent years seem not to be very reliable. However, these data still might give us information about the population trend, which seems to be positive.

Protected Area establishment: A 500,000 hectare steppe and wetlands area, an important saiga summer pasture and calving area, is already included in the governmental “Protected Areas Development Programme” through the lobbying and support of ADCI. The project team has funded and developed the required scientific assessment of the area, which describes the protected area’s biodiversity resources. Now we are developing an economic and technical feasibility study. The protected area is likely to be finally established by 2010.

ADCI is currently identifying new sites to be included in the governmental “Protected Areas Development Programme” through a “gap analysis”; a method to identify areas with ecosystems underrepresented in Kazakhstan’s protected area system, important habitat for saigas and hot spots of biodiversity. This summer the Altyn Dala Team will conduct an expedition to one or more of these sites to see what is there and what relevance these places have for saigas.

The goal of Altyn Dala is to establish a protected area network of about 3 to 4 million hectares within the Betpakdala saiga range.

Ecosystem understanding for conservation planning: The northern hemisphere’s steppe and semi desert ecosystems and their biodiversity are still poorly understood. But there is strong evidence that the saiga plays a significant role for animal and plant communities of this natural grasslands and semi deserts. Saigas are thought to disperse the seeds of steppe plants over large distances, to fertilize the soil with their droppings and tread the seeds into the soil enabling them to germinate. The lack of cyclic grazing has led to massive changes in the vegetation, degradation and expansion of a poor and low diversity vegetation cover. Recent studies by the RSPB and ACBK indicate a tight relationship between the critically endangered (IUCN 2007) Sociable Lapwing (*Vanellus gregarius*) and the grazing of steppes by wild ungulates. The most important breeding areas of this rare bird are in Kazakhstan, where it breeds on the ground depending on low, unevenly grazed vegetation for nesting and taller tussocks for the chicks to hide in. This is a natural situation which is not produced by intensive grazing of domestic livestock.

Large rodents like the Steppe Marmot (*Marmota bobak*) and susliks (*Spermophilus* sp.) might also depend on extensive grazing by wild ungulates. Their decline is likely to influence the numbers of their direct predators, first of all birds of prey like the pallid harrier (*Circus macrourus*), long-legged buzzard (*Buteo rufinus*) or the steppe eagle (*Aquila nipalensis*). Also the nearly complete disappearance of the Cinereous Vulture (*Aegypius monachus*) and the Eurasian Griffon (*Gyps fulvus*) might be related to the small numbers of saiga.

During the winter, when snow covers the ground and rodents and other smaller mammals are impossible to hunt, wolves depend on the saiga herds. They hunt old or weak individuals of the species, which, when healthy, run quite fast and are difficult to catch. The current imbalance in the predator-prey relationship forces wolves to come closer to villages to feed on sheep or other domestic animals. This causes problems to local herders and in consequence leads to massive killing of wolves.

Through the establishment of cooperation with universities and research institutions and its own research and monitoring activities, ADCI tries to collect baseline knowledge for the planning of protected areas, corridors and conservation measures:

- ADCI is currently developing a research project on steppe succession and ecosystem regeneration together with the University of Greifswald and Kazakhstan’s research institutes and universities
- The Sociable Lapwing project of the RSPB and ACBK conducts research on ecosystem requirements and interaction with domestic and wild ungulates.
- A study on the socioeconomic situation, land use and demographic trends within the range of the Betpakdala saiga population is currently being conducted by ADCI with the support of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (German Technical Cooperation) GTZ.