

Asia's odd-ball antelope faces migration crisis

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A saiga mother and calf. Saiga are now threatened by development in Mongolia that threatens to choke off a key migration route. Credit: Rich Reading

Take a deer's body, attach a camel's head and add a Jimmy Durante nose, and you have a saiga – the odd-ball antelope with the enormous schnoz that lives on the isolated steppes of Central Asia. Unfortunately, they are as endangered as they are strange-looking due to over-hunting. Now, according to a recent Wildlife Conservation Society study, their migration routes are in jeopardy as well.

The study, which appears in the latest issue of *The Open Conservation Biology Journal*, tracked saiga with GPS collars in Mongolia and discovered a “migration bottleneck” – a narrow corridor of habitat that connects two populations. The authors say that the corridor, which spans

just three miles wide, is threatened by herders with livestock, along with increased traffic from trucks and motorcycles.

“Like other species of the steppes and deserts, saiga have avoided extinction by being able to migrate long distances as their habitat changed over time,” said Dr. Joel Berger, a Wildlife Conservation Society conservationist, and professor at the University of Montana. “Given the uncertainty of how global climate change might affect specific regions, and how and where species might persist, prudent conservation strategies must take into account the movements of highly mobile species like saiga.”

According to Berger, the Mongolian government, which participated in the study, has already expressed interest in protecting the bottleneck.

Saiga once occurred in Alaska and Yukon but vanished in North America after the last ice age. Today, they exist only in isolated pockets in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kalmykia, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia. Their numbers have plummeted by 95 percent, from an estimated one million animals 20 years ago, largely due to poaching for horns used in traditional Chinese medicines and competition with livestock.

Standing just under two feet at the shoulder and weighing about 50 pounds, the most striking feature of the saiga is its large nose, or proboscis. The function of this unusual nose is not clear, but it may serve to warm or filter air during Mongolia’s frigid winters and notorious dust storms.

Source: Wildlife Conservation Society

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