

# Last chance to save the saola from extinction?

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Saola *Pseudoryx nghetinhensis*. Image: Wikimedia Commons

Conservation biologists based in four countries gathered for an emergency meeting in Vientiane, Lao PDR, August 19, to address the peril of extinction facing one the world's most enigmatic mammals, the Saola.

The Saola (*Pseudoryx nghetinhensis*) inhabits remote valleys of the Annamite Mountains along the border of Lao PDR and Vietnam. It was discovered to world science only in 1992. At the time of its discovery, it was already rare and restricted to a small range. The experts attending the meeting agree that Saola numbers appear to have declined sharply since then, dangerously approaching the point of disappearance. In this it is reminiscent of Kouprey, a wild cattle species endemic to Indochina,

which may have slid quietly to [extinction](#) sometime in the last twenty years. Today, the Saola's own increasing proximity to extinction is likely paralleled by only two or three other large mammal species in Southeast [Asia](#) (such as the Javan Rhinoceros).

Saola resemble the desert antelopes of Arabia, but are more closely related to wild cattle. The animal's prominent white facial markings and long tapering horns lend it a singular beauty, and its reclusive habits in the wet forests of the Annamites an air of mystery. Saola have rarely been seen or photographed, and have proved difficult to keep alive in captivity. None is held in any zoo, anywhere in the world. Its wild population may number only in the dozens, certainly not more than a few hundred.

Saola are threatened primarily by hunting. The Vientiane meeting identified snaring and hunting with dogs (to which Saola is especially vulnerable) as the main direct threats to the species. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species lists Saola as Critically Endangered, which means it faces "an extremely high risk of extinction in the wild". With none in zoos, and almost nothing known about how to maintain them in captivity, for Saola extinction in the wild would mean its extinction everywhere, with no possibility of recovery and reintroduction.

The conservationists convened under the auspices of the International Union for [Conservation](#) of Nature's Species Survival Commission (IUCN SSC). The gathering was organized by the Saola Working Group of IUCN SSC's Asian Wild Cattle Specialist Group ([asianwildcattle.org](http://asianwildcattle.org)). Funding came from the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, with additional support from the IUCN Lao PDR Country Office, BirdLife International in Indochina and Global Wildlife Conservation. The Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund is a joint initiative of l'Agence Française de Développement, Conservation International, the Global Environment Facility, the Government of Japan, the MacArthur

Foundation and the World Bank. A fundamental goal is to ensure civil society is engaged in biodiversity conservation.

The meeting's theme was From Plans to Action, in recognition that increased collaborative action is needed to save the species from extinction. The Saola Working Group includes staff of the Forestry departments of Lao PDR and Vietnam, Vietnam's Institute of Ecology and Biological Resources and Vinh University, as well as biologists and conservationists from non-government organizations, such as the Wildlife Conservation Society and the World Wildlife Fund. Experts from the Smithsonian Institution and Gilman Conservation International also joined the meeting.

The participating agencies and organizations committed to take specific actions in the next twelve months to significantly improve conservation of the species. Above all, the group emphasized that Saola cannot be saved without intensified removal of poachers' snares and reduction of hunting with dogs in key areas of the Annamite forests. They also highlighted the importance of:

- Improved methods to detect Saola in the wild;
- Radio tracking to understand the animal's conservation needs;
- Heightened awareness in Lao PDR, Vietnam and within the world conservation community of the perilous status of the species; and
- Markedly increased donor support for Saola conservation.

According to William Robichaud, Coordinator of the Saola Working Group and chair of the meeting, "We are at a point in history when we

still have a small but rapidly closing window of opportunity to conserve this extraordinary animal. That window has probably already closed for Kouprey, and the partners at the meeting are determined that Saola not be next."

Source: World Wildlife Fund

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