

Mystery disease kills rare Kazakh antelopes

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Kazakh authorities have launched an inquiry to find the cause of the deaths of the saiga, which are listed as critically endangered by the WWF. No other [animal species](#) in the area appeared to have been affected.

"We were told Thursday by the hunting and forestry rangers in western Kazakhstan that a fatal zoological disease has badly hit these animals in Janibek district," the regional emergency situations department said.

The region is home to the biggest herds of saigas, the department was quoted as saying by the Interfax Kazakhstan news agency.

Numbers of the animals, which live on the steppes of western Kazakhstan, have plummeted during the 1990s from around one million to 50,000, according to the WWF.

Saigas are recognisable by their distinctive bulbous noses, which resemble short trunks. They are also known for their spectacular migrations which involve tens of thousands of animals.

The antlers of the males are prized in Chinese traditional medicine, fuelling an increase in poaching after the fall of the Soviet Union.

The saigas' habitat is also threatened by the extension of farming land.

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