

Asian 'unicorn' photographed for first time in over 10 years

September 17 2010



This is a saola, which was captured by villagers in Laos. Credit: Bolikhamxay Provincial Conservation Unit

For the first time in more than ten years, there has been a confirmed sighting of one of the rarest and most mysterious animals in the world, the saola of Laos and Vietnam. The Government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (also known as Laos) announced on September 15 that in late August villagers in the central province of Bolikhamxay captured a saola and brought it back to their village. The animal died several days later, but was photographed while still alive.

This is the first confirmed record of the species since two photographs of wild saola were taken in Laos in by automatic camera traps in 1999.

The saola was discovered as a species new to science only in 1992, in Vietnam's Vu Quang Nature Reserve, near the country's border with Laos. It was one of the most spectacular zoological discoveries of the 20th century. With their long horns and white facial markings, saola resemble the antelopes of North Africa, but are more closely related to wild cattle.

Saola are so secretive and so seldom seen (no biologist has ever reported seeing one in the wild) that they have been likened to unicorns (despite actually having two horns). In fact, at least one historian has speculated that a Chinese myth of a magical unicorn, the qilin, may have derived from familiarity with saola in prehistoric China (although the species does not occur there presently, if it ever did).

Today, saola occur only in dense forests of the Annamite Mountains along the Lao/Vietnamese border. The species is classed as "Critically Endangered" by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and probably no more than a few hundred survive. It is one of the most threatened large mammals on the planet, and there are none in zoos anywhere in the world.

A statement issued by the Provincial Conservation Unit of Bolikhamxay Province said: "The death of this saola is unfortunate. But at least it confirms an area where it still occurs, and the government will immediately move to strengthen conservation efforts there."

When news of the saola's capture reached Lao authorities, the Bolikhamxay Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office immediately dispatched a technical team, advised by the Lao Program of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and the IUCN Saola Working Group, to examine the saola and release it. Unfortunately, the animal, an adult male weakened by the ordeal of several days in captivity, died shortly after the team reached the remote village.

The IUCN Saola Working Group is part of the IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC). It is a network of scientists and conservationists under the auspices of the IUCN SSC Asian Wildlife Cattle Specialist Group, and provides strategy and technical guidance for saola conservation.

William Robichaud, Coordinator of the Saola Working Group, said, "The government of Lao PDR and WCS are to be commended for their rapid response and efforts to save this animal. We hope the information gained from the incident can be used to insure that this is not the last saola anyone has a chance to see."

The animal was reportedly found in the village's sacred forest in remote Xaychamphon District, but it is not clear why the villagers took it into captivity. After its death, the technical team transported the carcass to Pakxan, the provincial capital, where biologists from WCS and the Lao government preserved all parts for analysis, future study and reference. This is the first saola specimen to be so completely preserved.



There was a rare sighting of a Saola in Laos. Credit: Bolikhamxay Provincial Conservation Unit

Dr. Pierre Comizzoli, a veterinarian with the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute and a member of the Saola Working Group, said: "Study of the carcass can yield some good from this unfortunate incident. Our lack of knowledge of saola biology is a major constraint to efforts to conserve it, and this can be a major step forward in understanding this remarkable and mysterious species".

"It's clear that further awareness-raising efforts about the special status of saola are needed," said Robichaud. "But saola doesn't have much time left - at best a few hundred survive, but it may be only a few dozen. The situation is critical."

The Lao Department of Forestry (DoF) and provincial and district authorities are moving to urge villagers in the area not to capture saola, and immediately release any they might encounter. Bouaphanh Phanthavong, Director of DoF's Division of Forest Resources Conservation (and a member of the Saola Working Group) said, "As a Party to the Convention on Biological Diversity, and as outlined in our National Biodiversity Conservation Strategy, Laos is committed to conserve biodiversity, and we want to give special attention to 'flagship species', such as the saola."

The national representative for the IUCN Lao Programme, Ms. Latsamay Sylavong, noted, "This incident highlights the importance of Laos to global wildlife conservation. Saola and several other rare endemic species are found almost nowhere else in the world. Our knowledge of them is limited, and in Laos we need to improve protection of both the ecosystems and the special species they hold, like the saola. Much needs to be done".

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