

# Mass saiga calving sparks hope for a critically endangered species

June 25 2020, by Nathan Williams

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Credit: Bakhtiyar Taikenov/ACBK

The last 30 years have not been kind to the saiga. The break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 triggered a poaching free-for-all and the loss of more than 95% of the global population, a catastrophe followed by successive mass die-off events.

But last year a census revealed a more-than doubling of Kazakhstan's saiga [population](#) over just two years to 334,400, a real fillip for a species on the brink. And in the last few weeks conservationists have once again been celebrating (cautiously) after the discovery that the smallest and most threatened population of saiga in Kazakhstan has experienced its largest mass calving in recent years.

The 530 calves born to the Ustyurt Plateau population of saiga represents the largest number of calves recorded in recent years by the Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan (ACBK), a partner of Fauna & Flora International (FFI) in the country. And ACBK was there to record one of the calves taking its first tentative steps!

In 2019 just four calves were located, down from the 57 calves found in 2018. The calving numbers for 2020 are therefore a significant leap on previous discoveries.

Aerial censuses, which can provide a more comprehensive overview of population sizes, revealed there were 5,900 adults in 2019, up from 3,700 in 2018 and just 1,900 in 2015, which all indicate a slow but steady gain for the Ustyurt population, a gain borne out by this year's calving discovery.

"As the smallest saiga population in Kazakhstan, the Ustyurt population is at heightened risk of extinction. The discovery of this mass calving is therefore very encouraging," said Bakhtiyar Taikenov, head of ACBK Ustyurt ranger team. "The saiga remains, however, critically endangered, the threats are very real and there's no room for complacency. It would not take much to set our efforts back or push the species to extinction."

In the late 1980s the Ustyurt population of saiga in Kazakhstan was as large as 265,000 adult individuals; however, large-scale poaching after the collapse of the Soviet Union saw this population—and the species as

a whole—nose-dive.

## **Conservation efforts—drones, data and rangers**

Saiga often change the location of their calving, sometimes traveling hundreds of kilometers every year. The calving site this year was found with help from local communities, satellite telemetry data and drones.

All saiga populations are a prime target for poachers, particularly the male antelopes, whose horns are among the animal parts used in traditional Asian medicine. Working with ACBK and the Kazakhstan government, FFI is monitoring the distribution and movement of the Ustyurt saiga population, and has supported the establishment and training of a new ranger team, and the deployment of sniffer dogs, to help deter and foil illegal trade in saiga horn within Kazakhstan and across the border.

For a critically endangered species in freefall, this year's calving success combined with last year's positive survey results have provided grounds for cautious—but very real—optimism. The population is still many millions shy of its population size in the 1980s, however, and in saiga conservation eternal vigilance remains the name of the game.

Provided by Fauna & Flora International

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