

Saola still a mystery 20 years after its spectacular debut

May 21 2012, By Sarah Bladen



Female saola, Lak Xao, Bolikhamxay Province, Laos, 1996. Credit: William Robichaud

Two decades after the sensational discovery of a new ungulate species called the saola, this rare animal remains as mysterious and elusive as ever. WWF, the Saola Working Group (SWG) of the IUCN Species Survival Commission and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) warn the species is sliding towards extinction because of intensive hunting pressure and poor reserve management.

A cousin of [cattle](#) but recalling an [antelope](#) in appearance, the [saola](#) was

discovered in 1992 by a joint team from [Vietnam](#)'s Ministry of Forestry and WWF surveying the forests of Vu Quang, near Vietnam's border with Laos. The team found a skull with unusual long, straight horns in a hunter's home and knew it was something extraordinary. The find proved to be the first large mammal new to science in more than 50 years and one of the most spectacular zoological discoveries of the 20th century.

Twenty years on, little is still known about the saola's ecology or behaviour. In 2010, villagers in the central Laos province of Bolikhamxay captured a saola, but the animal died several days later. Prior to that, the last confirmed record of a saola in the wild was in 1999 from camera-trap photos in Bolikhamxay.

“Saola are extremely secretive and very seldom seen,” said Nick Cox, Manager of WWF-Greater Mekong's Species Programme. “While they inhabit a very restricted range, there is still no reported sighting of a saola in the wild by a scientist, and the handful of saola that have been taken into captivity have not survived.”

The difficulty in detecting the animal has prevented scientists from making a precise population estimate. “If things are good, there may be a couple of hundred saola out there,” said William Robichaud, Coordinator of the Saola Working Group. “If things are bad, the population could now be down in the tens.”



Female saola, Lak Xao, Bolikhamxay Province, Laos, 1996. Credit: William Robichaud

Greatest threat comes from illegal hunting

While development is encroaching in the saola's forest habitat, the greatest threat comes from illegal [hunting](#). Saola are caught in wire snares set by hunters to catch other animals, such as sambar deer, muntjac deer and civets, which are largely destined for the lucrative wildlife trade, driven by traditional medicine demand in China and restaurant and food markets in Vietnam and Laos.

“Paradoxically, the saola seems to be one of the few vertebrates in the Annamites without a high price on its head,” added Robichaud. “Saola are caught largely as bycatch – like the tuna and dolphin scenario.”

Since the discovery of the saola, Vietnam and Laos have established a network of protected areas in the animal's core range and some reserves are pursuing innovative approaches to tackle rampant poaching. In the

Saola Nature Reserve in Vietnam's Thua Thien Hue Province, a new approach to forest guard co-management, supported by WWF, is delivering good results. Since February 2011, the newly established team of forest guards patrolling the reserve have removed more than 12,500 snares and close to 200 illegal hunting and logging camps.

“The establishment of critical reserves by the governments of Vietnam and Laos is to be commended,” said Dr. Barney Long, Asian species expert for WWF-US. “However, without increasing efforts to adopt new approaches to manage the protection of saola habitat through targeted snare removal, these protected areas will be little more than lines drawn on a map.”

“If hunting levels can be significantly reduced, we are optimistic about the species' prospects,” said Chris Hallam, WCS-Laos' Conservation Planning Advisor. “This will require funds for more patrol boots on the ground in saola areas, developing positive incentives for its conservation, and ultimately reducing consumer demand for wildlife meat and products.”

Efforts to save the saola have reached a greater level of urgency since another of Vietnam's iconic species, the Vietnamese Javan rhino, was confirmed extinct in 2011 after the battle to save the last individual was lost to poachers.

“The saola has made it to its twentieth anniversary, but it won't have many more anniversaries unless urgent action is taken,” added Hallam.

An icon for biodiversity in the Annamite mountain range

The saola is an icon for biodiversity in the Annamite mountain range

that runs along the border of Vietnam and Laos. This biodiversity hotspot boasts an incredible diversity of rare species, with many found nowhere else on the planet. In addition to the discovery of the saola, two new species of deer, the large-antlered muntjac and the Truong Son muntjac, were uncovered in the Annamite's rugged, evergreen forests in 1994 and 1997 respectively.

“The lack of significant demand for saola in the wildlife trade gives great hope for its conservation,” said Robichaud. “But we still need to act. One of the rarest and most distinctive large animals in the world has been quietly slipping toward [extinction](#) through complacency.”

Provided by WWF

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