

SEPS Project 383 - Rotating cows as a tool for conserving saiga antelopes

Report of a visit to Kalmykia, 14th-20th May 2006

E.J. Milner-Gulland,
Imperial College London



Pictures: Krasilka, one of the rotating cows. Saiga calves in the Chernye Zemli Biosphere Reserve.

Project Background

The saiga antelope *Saiga tatarica* is listed as Critically Endangered on the Red List of IUCN - the World Conservation Union. It is found in the North-West Pre-Caspian area of Russia (Republic of Kalmykia and Astrakhan province), Kazakhstan and Mongolia. The NW Pre-Caspian population is concentrated in the vicinity of the Chernye Zemli Biosphere Reserve (Kalmykia) and the adjacent Stepnoi Sanctuary (Astrakhan), and is the largest and most secure saiga population in the world, thanks to ongoing conservation efforts. However it is still threatened by poaching, which is partly driven by poverty and lack of livelihood options following the break-up of the Soviet Union.

In April 2003, we started a project funded by the UK Government's Department of Food and Rural Affairs, under their Darwin Initiative. This project involved developing a robust monitoring system for saigas, as well as carrying out social surveys to uncover the factors influencing local people's attitudes to saigas and enhancing public awareness of the plight of the saiga through education and the media. A key issue that local people raised in relation to saiga poaching was the need to develop sustainable livelihoods, particularly for poorer and more vulnerable members of the community, based on traditional livestock rearing. The SEPS project, which runs for one year from September 2005, is aimed at addressing this need. The project leader is Professor Iuri Arylov, Director of the Centre for the Study and Conservation of Wild Animals of Kalmykia (CWA), and the UK partner is Dr E.J. Milner-Gulland, Imperial College London.

The concept of the project is taken from a strategy that has been successfully used around the world to empower rural households while building community spirit. We bought 4 cows and a bull, and housed the herd at the CWA's Saiga Breeding Centre. The animals were of the Kalmykian Red Cow breed, which is a highly-regarded local breed, well suited to local conditions. In consultation with local community leaders, we selected two families to receive

a cow each. These families live in the two villages where we had previously carried out social surveys, and in which there is known to be ongoing saiga poaching. The Tsebekov family in Khulkhutta is made up of a widow with 4 children and their grandfather. The Krestinov family in Tavn-Gashun has small children and their father is unemployed. The families were helped to build a pen for their animals, and given dairy equipment, veterinary support and fodder for the first winter. In return, they have agreed to return all offspring born in the first 3 years to the project. These will be distributed to other families, creating a snowball effect. The remaining two cows and a bull are kept at the Saiga Breeding Centre to form the nucleus of the herd. Their produce is given to local children, and this gives an opportunity for educational activities explaining the link between saiga conservation and livelihood development. The fact that the entire project is based at the Saiga Breeding Centre, which is a focal point for saiga conservation in the area, also enhances this link.

Visit report

The team visiting the SEPS project comprised E.J. Milner-Gulland (UK partner), Anna Lushchekina (Institute of Ecology & Evolution, Moscow, project partner) and Anna Shougaleeva (British Council, Moscow, SEPS projects manager). We visited the Tsebekov family in Khulkhutta, but rain prevented a visit to the Krestinov family in Tavn-Gashun. We also attended the opening of the new Visitor Centre at the Saiga Breeding Centre, saw the dairy facilities there and met the cows and the workers who care for them.



Picture: From left: Prof. Iu. Arylov, A. Shougaleeva, E.J. Milner-Gulland, Mr Tsebekov, Mrs. Tsebekov, Krasilka.

The cow belonging to the Tsebekovs has been christened Krasilka (Little Beauty) by the children. She gives a substantial quantity of high fat-content milk, and has been the subject of much discussion in the village, with people wondering how they too can participate in the scheme. This suggests that the project has been very successful in achieving its aim of promoting the link between help for sustainable livelihoods and community cooperation in saiga conservation.



Picture: An example of Krasilka's produce.

The Saiga Breeding Centre's Visitor Centre was opened by the Head of the Republic of Kalmykia, Kirzhan Ilyumzhinov on 15th May 2006. There was substantial press coverage of the event, which included newspaper articles about the SEPS project. Hence the link between saiga conservation and livelihoods has been unambiguously made.



Pictures: Dancers rehearsing their traditional dance depicting the mating rituals of the Demoiselle crane next to the Visitor Centre. K. Ilyumzhinov and V. Neronov (Deputy Chair, UNESCO Man and Biosphere Programme) cutting the ribbon to open the Centre.

Next Steps

The SEPS funding is coming to an end in September 2006. We have received follow-on funding from DEFRA's Darwin Initiative to continue and extend our work in Kalmykia, and this will include funds to maintain the rotating cow project until December 2007. This will give the project team the chance to extend the scheme to other families and to continue to build their relationship with school children and local communities.