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# Kazakhstan: Almost Half of Endangered Antelopes Dead

By The Moscow Times

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Dead Saiga antelopes lie on a field in the Zholoba area of the Kostanay region, Kazakhstan.

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Almost half of Kazakhstan's population of rare saiga antelopes has been wiped out in recent weeks. The endangered beasts are believed to have succumbed to a lung disease that is sweeping across the steppe.

Latest figures show that the number of dead saigas has reached 120,977, the Agriculture Ministry reported on May 27. That is 40 percent of Kazakhstan's total saiga population of 300,000 before disease started striking down the long-nosed antelopes, according to government estimates. Astana's figures are higher than an estimate of 265,000 released last year by the international Saiga Conservation Alliance after an aerial study of roaming grounds in Kazakhstan.

Some 90 percent of the dead animals are females, the Agriculture Ministry said. This has enormous implications for breeding capacity to restore the population.

"Measures to monitor the state of the wild animals and establish the cause of mortality continue," said the ministry, which has set up a working group and flown in experts from the United Kingdom, Germany, and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization to assist with the investigation.

The Saiga Conservation Alliance also has a team in the field, a representative told EurasiaNet.org, and the government says the World Organization for Animal Health is to send in specialists.

Scientists suspect the cause of death to be pasteurellosis, a disease that attacks the lungs and killed nearly 12,000 saigas in a 2010 epidemic.

Other theories floated include poisoning by rocket fuel from launches at Kazakhstan's Baikonur spaceport, which is leased by Russia. However, Meirbek Moldabekov, the head of the government's Aerospace Committee, has argued that the vast areas over which saigas are dying make this hypothesis unlikely.

The decimation of Kazakhstan's saiga population is disastrous for conservation efforts to restore the species, which is listed as Critically Endangered on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List.

Previously, conservationists had reported something of a success story in Kazakhstan's saiga recovery, with numbers rising more than tenfold by last year from a low of 21,000 in 2003. One million saigas were estimated to be roaming in Kazakhstan in 2000.

There are no reliable estimates for the size of the global population of the saiga, a distinctive creature with a long, humped nose that allows it to filter air during the dusty summer months and breathe warm air during the freezing winters. The animal also roams remote areas of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Mongolia and Russia, but Kazakhstan is believed to have the world's largest numbers.

The saiga population has been decimated by loss of habitat and poaching for its horns, which are valued in Chinese medicine and are smuggled across the border to China, where they fetch large sums.

In Kazakhstan, adverts to buy saiga horns can be spotted in cities in the regions where they roam, and a government announcement that it would ban such advertising never came to fruition.

Saiga horns are sold to smugglers for a pittance in Kazakhstan: In one case reported in 2012, a man was buying horns for around $80 a pair and selling them on for $500 a kilo, while in China they can reportedly fetch up to $4,000 a kilogram.

Conservationists say the penalties for killing the endangered species are too low to serve as a deterrent: Most poachers get off with a fine, or — more rarely — a short jail sentence of just 15 days

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