

## **A saiga schoolbook as a tool for saiga conservation**

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In the autumn of 2004, I was sponsored by the German Academic Exchange Agency (DAAD) to ascertain what measures can be taken to protect the critically endangered saiga antelope from being hunted to extinction. Interviews revealed that saigas are often killed by boys’ aged 13-14 years on motorcycles. Without even using a gun, these adolescents simply chase male saigas to death. From the boys’ point of view this method is convenient, as motorcycles are easy to obtain in rural areas and, since the motorcycles rarely have number plates, officials hardly ever catch them. The boys perceive of this form of poaching as an adventure: it gains them respect among their peers and a relatively high income.

So far, the Kazakh state and international non-governmental organizations have tried to protect the endangered saiga by focusing attention and financial sponsorship (roughly € 750,000 annually) on well-armed “anti-poaching brigades” who patrol saiga habitat and arrest poachers. The success of these brigades in actually stopping poaching is questionable, and we feel there are other, additional options in the “saiga conservation tool box” that can be used to protect this species.

Most rural inhabitants feel the state does not provide them the means for a decent life, as it did in their eyes during the “good old days” of the Soviet era. As long as most rural people live in or near poverty, anyone who tries to prevent them from increasing their income (for example by poaching saiga) is presumed an enemy. The military appearance of the anti-poaching brigades exemplifies a classical top-down approach to conservation, based on deterrence.

I hypothesize that many locals have an aversion to the brigades, who they feel are exercising authority over them, and this dislike is projected onto the saiga antelope. The animals thus bear the brunt of local frustrations about poverty and neglect by the government, which are only added to by the commanding image of the anti-poaching brigades, resulting in an unsustainable basis for saiga conservation. Conservation can only be successful if at least part of the local population is aware of the need to protect the species concerned, and if the animal is perceived positively or valued in the community. That is unlikely to be the case if

- no in-depth information about the saiga antelope and the need to save it is presented to the villagers,
- the comparatively low standard of living in the country’s remote areas is not improved,
- the practice of saiga conservation is (solely) governed by armed, organized groups, and
- there is no local interest in or value of the saiga antelope.



Our research revealed that there is a lack of educational material about the saiga antelope for schoolchildren, especially for the ages immediately before they become the next generation of poachers on motorcycles. By providing knowledge and creating a positive image of the saiga through a schoolbook, we hope to sow the seed of understanding and insight for conservation. With the information offered in the book to pupils (and therefore to some extent to their parents), we try to reduce acceptance of saiga poaching in these rural areas.

The saiga schoolbook – a project of NABU – has been published in Russian and will be published in the Kazakh language soon. It is aimed at children around the ages of 9-13 living in communities close to saiga habitat, and gets them acquainted with this unique animal as well as its threatened status. The content is structured in two parts: the first, for younger children, includes legends and fairy tales about the saiga as well as poetry, art, and handicraft projects. The illustrations incorporate a saiga cartoon character that follows readers throughout the story. The second part of the book, aimed at schoolchildren aged 12-13, provides facts about the biology and the ecology of the saiga, threats to its ecosystem, the need for conservation, and some actions that have already been undertaken in worldwide saiga conservation. This part shows what schoolchildren can do on the local level to save the saiga and its habitat.

The main aims of the saiga schoolbook project are to:

- provide knowledge about the saiga antelope in Kazakhstan and neighbouring countries,
- improve the image of the saiga antelope in Kazakhstan and neighbouring countries,
- reduce acceptance of poaching,
- integrate additional civil society stakeholders into saiga conservation activities, and
- promote creativity in conservation efforts.

The schoolbook is not intended as a “better” solution to current anti-poaching activities. But the book tries to animate people to think of their own creative ideas for saiga conservation. We need diversified approaches to conservation that complement one another. Demonstrations of power by armed brigades do not win many allies; but positive images and interesting information are things that everybody can appreciate and participate in – even in the poorer regions of Central Asia. Children especially can identify with the material presented in the book, and may end up teaching their fathers not to poach anymore. The book intends to change people’s minds about the value of this unique animal. Finally, the saiga schoolbook is, in comparison to current approaches, a relatively cheap tool in the “saiga conservation tool-kit.”

The book was written, designed and co-edited by our partners from Karaganda, Kazakhstan (EcoObraz and Arlan) who are professional teachers and biologists. NABU and the German Ursula-Merz-Foundation provided funding with additional financial support for the Russian edition from WWF-Russia/FZS, and INTAS. Printing of the Kazakh edition will be funded by the Seimar Social Fund (Kazakhstan). Bilingual distribution (Kazakh and Russian) will be 20,000 initially, with the option of additional print runs if funding allows. If organizations in other saiga range states endorse such an effort, the book can also be translated into other, e.g., Uzbek or Turkmen languages.



The book is freely distributed. It can be required from Jan Dierks, [jdierks@uni-greifswald.de](mailto:jdierks@uni-greifswald.de) and Maria Zhirkova, [ecoObraz@nursat.kz](mailto:ecoObraz@nursat.kz).

The book will be available online at

[www.saigak.biodiversity.ru](http://www.saigak.biodiversity.ru),

[www.oopt.kz](http://www.oopt.kz)

[www.iccs.org.uk/papers/Saiga\\_Schoolbook\(rus\).pdf](http://www.iccs.org.uk/papers/Saiga_Schoolbook(rus).pdf)

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