

ALTYN DALA

CONSERVATION INITIATIVE

RESTORING THE GOLDEN STEPPE

Landscape scale steppe restoration and species conservation in Kazakhstan

THE PROJECT TERRITORY



The project territory of the Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative (Altyn Dala) encompasses the distribution range of the Betpak-Dala saiga population in Central Kazakhstan (see map above) that covers a total area of approximately 50 to 60 million hectares. The Betpak-Dala population once was the largest of the three distinct saiga populations in Kazakhstan.

Altyn Dala aims to establish a network of protected areas within the historic boundaries of the Betpak-Dala saiga population to effectively protect saiga, their endangered steppe and semi-desert habitat, and other flagship species including great bustards and sociable lapwing. Once completed, this network of protected areas is anticipated to cover 3 to 5 million hectares. The Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative started in 2005 and aims to have the network fully established and operational by 2015.

SUMMARY

Pasqueflowers are one of the first blooming in spring © Tatyana Bragina

The Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative (Altyn Dala) is a new large-scale initiative from the Government of Kazakhstan that has brought together a partnership of national and international organisations. Altyn Dala will conserve globally important biodiversity, flagship species, and steppe and semi-desert habitats in an integrated and representative network of large protected areas in Central Kazakhstan covering between 3 and 4 million hectares. The area has been chosen to correspond to the historic distribution of the world's largest saiga population that was catastrophically reduced by over 95% in only 15 years by devastating poaching. Building greater understanding among the remote local communities of the international importance of this region, and encouraging their sustainable development will be essential to the success of this ambitious project.

Altyn Dala will build upon results from saiga research, the ECONET project, and the »Important Bird Areas« project, and is enabling the Government of Kazakhstan to contribute significantly to meeting its obligations under the Programme of Work on Protected Areas of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Convention on Migratory Species and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.



THE TRAGEDY OF THE SAIGA

The saiga (Saiga tatarica) is a migratory ungulate that exists in two subspecies and five major populations: three in Kazakhstan, one in Russia (Kalmykia) and one in Mongolia. Some of them winter in southern Russia, Uzbekistan and China respectively. More than 2 million existed in the 1950's, but catastrophic declines since the 1990's resulted in only 30,000 remaining, scattered across an immense area. Originally hunted for meat, in the 1990's the population declined dramatically due to ruthless hunting for horns to satisfy demand from China, where saiga horn is used as a traditional medicine. Only hundreds persist in Altyn Dala, where historically the largest population of 1 million thrived, as it was both a calving ground and provided rich summer grazing.

Project partners support mobile warden units whose patrols investigate and deter poaching, and monitor the migrating herds. Patrols will be intrinsic to the recovery of the Altyn Dala saiga, combined with law enforcement, public awareness and socioeconomic development to make poaching a far less attractive option for rural people.

Saiga calf © Jean-François Lagrot



VISION

On summer days gone by, a shimmering expanse of feather grass spreading right across the horizon covered the pristine steppes of Central Asia in a golden glow. On closer inspection, the vast unbroken expanse of steppe was inhabited by millions of migrating saigas, grazing amongst colourful swathes of delicate flowers blooming briefly before their seeds were cast on the wind. Amongst sunburnt grasses, enigmatic bustards strutted and elegant cranes strode slowly searching for food mingling with truculent wild asses and wild horses, while industrious steppe marmots sought out juicy roots, but kept their eyes peeled for ghostly wolves, and steppe eagles effortlessly circling high above.

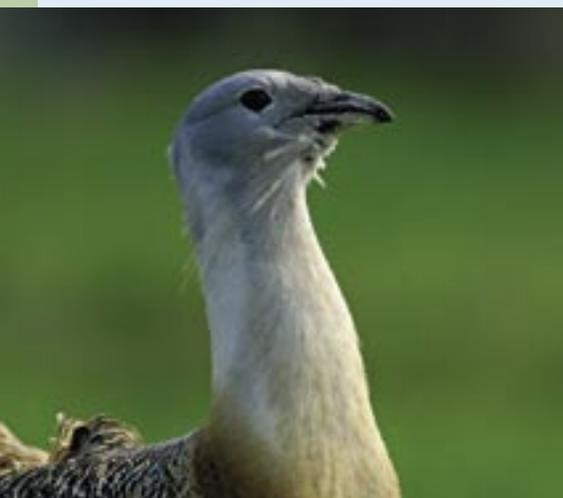
Natural steppe shimmers to the horizon © Tatyana Bragina



CONSERVATION BASED ON HIGH QUALITY SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

Biodiversity and ecology of this vast region remain poorly understood. High quality research data are essential to provide the baseline for effective planning and protected areas management for the Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative. This data will help to determine the requirements for species protection and habitat management to support long-term steppe biodiversity conservation. Future research will evaluate the potential of restoring species such as the kulan (Asian wild ass), Przewalski's horse and the great bustard into the Altyn Dala region.

FZS will share expertise from their Serengeti migratory wildebeest project to better understand saiga migration patterns. A monitoring scheme will be developed to observe the population dynamics of wild ungulates in the steppe ecosystem. ACBK and the RSPB are jointly undertaking a research and conservation project on sociable lapwing, probably the most endangered steppe bird. The »Important Bird Areas' project is being implemented by ACBK and RSPB to identify key sites for bird conservation. The WWF ECONET project created a blueprint for effective conservation by identifying key habitats and sites that require protection in Kazakhstan.



The majestic, but rare steppe inhabitant
– the great bustard © Franz Kovacs



These »oceans of grass« were interrupted by »islands of water« – wetland oases that were vital to millions of migrating geese, ducks and pelicans that filled the air with an enthusiastic cacophony during the day, matched only by the sound of amorous amphibians and incessant insects at night. This idyllic scene was, until recently, a reality in the Central Asian state of Kazakhstan, almost equivalent in size to the whole of Europe, and originally home to the largest single expanse of steppe grassland in the world.

Nowadays, it is almost impossible to find larger herds of saiga
© Jean-François Lagrot

ALTYN DALA - CONSERVING THE STEPPE LANDSCAPE

From the Mugodshary Mountains and Kazakh Rolling Hills that encompass Altyn Dala in the southern Turgai Lowlands, numerous rivers and streams bisect steppe and semi-desert, sustaining an impressive array of wetlands, making this region unique. The North and South Turgai Lowlands cover 16 million hectares. By 2015, the Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative aims to protect between 3 and 5 million hectares of the Turgai by establishing an integrated network of protected areas, and beginning to restore populations of saiga and other key species.



The saiga collapse in the Turgai coincided with a very sharp decline in domestic sheep, horses and cattle herds when the Soviet Union disintegrated. Until the mid-1990's state authorities managed the saiga well, enabling hunting that supplied meat across the Soviet Union.

Saiga is a keystone species, playing a role similar to wildebeest in the Serengeti. Saiga grazing maintains the natural composition of steppe flora and fauna, and supports numerous predators. Without extensive grazing, the globally significant steppe and semi-desert will eventually be lost permanently.

A variety of salt and freshwater lakes surrounded from slender bands of green are hotspots for birds and other animals. © Eva Klebelsberg

Worldwide, now very few fragments of pristine steppe remain, yet perversely steppe remains the world's least protected terrestrial habitat. Much of Kazakhstan's steppe was also destroyed in the 1960's to enable growth of cattle and grain production at any cost for the Soviet Union. Fortunately, its enormous size enabled Kazakhstan to retain the largest remaining steppe in all the northern hemisphere.

A demoiselle crane guards its chick © Maxim Koshkin



SOCIABLE LAPWING - A STEPPE FLAGSHIP THAT RELIES ON GRAZING

*How are the destinies of a small pale grey bird and a large grazing mammal linked in the steppe of Kazakhstan? The historic range and population size of the sociable lapwing (*Vanellus gregarius*) are poorly known, but of at least 5,000 birds known in 1990 numbers decreased to between 600 and 1200 in 2002.*

A rapid decline in the last decade appears to be due to the collapse in populations of both wild ungulates and domestic livestock grazing the steppe. Research suggests that unevenly grazed habitat left by migrating saiga once created the lapwing's ideal breeding grounds.

Every year more than 1.5 million waterbirds migrate from Siberia and northern Kazakhstan through Altyn Dala to breed further south. The wetlands they use as stopover sites give this region international significance. Many other birds that breed on the steppe such as the steppe eagle and the lesser kestrel appear to be declining rapidly. The understanding of migration patterns, population trends, and factors affecting steppe birds is still very poor.

The sociable lapwing is one of the rarest birds of the Kazakh steppe © Maxim Koshkin



Tragically, goitered gazelles, Asian wild asses and wild horses have also all but vanished and these steppes are now empty of their emblematic saiga, which almost disappeared after massive uncontrolled hunting for horns to sell for Chinese traditional medicine. In the past 15 years, the saiga population has declined catastrophically by an estimated 95%, so that now only a few thousand saiga remain where millions grazed before.

Historically, the steppe was also the breeding ground for charismatic and nowadays very rare steppe birds such as the great bustard – the world's heaviest flying bird, but now extinct from the steppe. The sociable lapwing can no longer live up to its name, as it is one of Eurasia's most endangered bird species, but can still be found breeding in tiny isolated populations across the steppe.

Fortunately, the steppe belt of northern and central Kazakhstan still supports an astonishing array of internationally significant freshwater wetlands that support millions of migrating birds including some of the world's most endangered species such as red-breasted geese, white-headed duck and Siberian cranes.



Young steppe marmot with its mother © Tobias Mennle



In spring wild tulips bloom in a range of brilliant colours © Tobias Mennle



The little suslik is a common and charismatic rodent in the natural steppe © Maxim Koshkin

THE HUMAN DIMENSIONS OF ALTYN DALA



The increase in poaching of saiga after the collapse of the Soviet Union was caused by the breakdown of rural livelihoods and people's struggle to survive in addition to a lack of public awareness on environmental issues.

However the steppe, with its resources and Kazakh culture, are deeply linked to each other. As nomads, the people have lived off the land and culturally adapted to this rough, but rich landscape for thousands of years. Their grandchildren should still be able to watch the saiga grazing in the golden steppe. Therefore, raising people's awareness and encouraging them to identify with their environment, in synergy with reducing rural poverty and providing people with the relevant environmental educational tools, are crucial for the saiga's conservation.

Altyn Dala aims to enable and strengthen participation and genuine involvement of local residents in protected area and buffer zone planning, decision making and management. At the same time, the initiative aims to ensure tangible contributions to livelihoods and regional rural development by supporting systems of natural resource and grazing management (since one of the major problems is overgrazing). In addition, it strives to enhance the access to direct or indirect financial benefits in the form of employment possibilities or the demand for service provision by the protected areas being established. Equally important is educating people about wildlife law, and promoting the penalties awarded by the courts as a deterrent to discourage poaching activities.

The improvement of local people's livelihoods is crucial for the conservation of saiga and its habitats © Martin Lenk

The Government of Kazakhstan intends to meet its global responsibility to protect its natural heritage, and has created the Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative (Altyn Dala) – a unique new initiative for the long-term conservation and restoration of the unique biodiversity of steppe and semi-desert.

The children of the steppe © Martin Lenk



THE ALTYN DALA PARTNERSHIP



The Forestry and Hunting Committee of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Environment Protection of the Republic of Kazakhstan will implement the Altyn Dala Conservation Programme in partnership with the Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan (ACBK), a leading national conservation organisation, which has headquarters in Almaty and the capital Astana.



Besides Altyn Dala, ACBK also implements the BirdLife International Important Bird Area Programme in Kazakhstan (jointly with the RSPB) and is a partner in many national conservation initiatives. ACBK runs a growing network, currently comprising seven local groups, and implements conservation projects in all regions of Kazakhstan.

The Kazakh partners are supported by an international partnership of:



Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS) – an international nature conservation organisation based in Germany that has developed the key saiga conservation projects in Kazakhstan and that is internationally recognised as one of the world's leading organisations for large mammal conservation in Africa.



The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is Europe's largest nature conservation organisation that supports conservation initiatives in Central and Eastern Europe as well as in Central Asia. On behalf of BirdLife International, the RSPB is supporting ACBK to identify the 'Important Bird Areas' in Kazakhstan.



The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) is one of the world's leading conservation organisations, which for many years maintained the largest programme for Russia and Central Asia. WWF works at both field and policy levels to conserve threatened species and habitats, including the influential biodiversity mapping project ECONET.

This initiative requires some technical support to achieve its ambitious goals, so the Government has formed an international partnership with the Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan (ACBK), the Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS), The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF).

»Altyn Dala« translates from Kazakh to mean »Golden Steppe« or »Golden Plain« and reflects the reverence and respect of the formerly nomadic Kazakh people for the steppe landscape and its diversity of wildlife that shaped their proud history and rich culture.

An ocean of feathergrass covers the steppe of Kazakhstan © Tatyana Bragina



INITIATIVE OF:



IMPLEMENTED BY:



IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:



PUBLISHED BY

Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity
of Kazakhstan (ACBK), Almaty, Kazakhstan

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