

Saiga Day-2014

For several years, villages in the saiga range have been celebrating Saiga Day - a festival in honour of saigas. The event takes place in late April - early May during the calving season.

The purpose of Saiga Day is to draw the attention of the younger generation to the threats faced by saigas and to raise public awareness of saiga conservation efforts. Holding this festival is made possible through the support of international funds. In 2014 Saiga Day was supported by the People's Trust for Endangered Species, the Coins for Change, Disney Canada and the Disney Worldwide Conservation Fund.

Saiga Day in Kalmykia

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Saiga Day took place in the Yashkul' and Chernozemel' districts of Kalmykia in April. These are the main saiga range areas in Kalmykia, which is why the "Living Heritage" (Yashkul village) and "Bamba Tsetsq" (Adyk village) Steppe Wildlife Clubs were set up here in 2013. These clubs played a major role in the Saiga Day festival this year.

Many school children of all ages from six different schools were invited to the celebration held at Yashkul school. Representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science and Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment of the Republic of Kalmykia, the staff of the Centre for Wild Animals and Kalmyk State University came to welcome the participants. Guests from the UK and Kazakhstan also took part in the celebration.

Saiga Day began with the traditional Kalmyk rite that usually precedes every important event. Kids from the "Coeval" children's club demonstrated the worship of the four elements - water, earth, air and fire. Their performance emphasized the importance of preserving Kalmyk traditions, which are based on respect for nature and all living things in general, and the saiga antelope in particular.

"Fly to the sun baby saiga!" was a performance prepared by members of the "Living Heritage" Steppe Wildlife Club, and aroused great interest among the audience. Members of the "Ecos" team drew attention to the changes in saiga numbers



A Kalmyk dance at Saiga Day festival.



A poster presentation in Adyk high school.

over a 30 year period and appealed to the audience to remember the threats to saigas and contribute to their conservation.

The second part of Saiga Day was dedicated to the "Environmental Express – Become a friend to nature" competition, which consisted of visiting each of four "stations": Poetry, Music, General knowledge and Art. Young people showed a good knowledge of Kalmykia's nature and its protection, they composed poems, painted posters and made up slogans about saigas. We also announced the results of a competition to design a leaflet on the theme "Save me, human". School children expressed

love for the saiga and anxiety over its fate at the hands of humans. Members of the "Living Heritage" club posted informative leaflets in their villages.

Saiga Day was also celebrated in Adyk high school and lots of young conservationists from Yashkul and Sarul schools attended the event. The pupils played a highly engaging game called "Fort Boyard", and members of the "Bamb Tsetsq" club performed a concert entitled "Saiga is a beauty of the steppe". One of the most remarkable moments was a performance by poet Gregory Kukareka, an Honored Worker of Culture of the Republic of Kalmykia. He read his poem about saigas which emphasised the importance of the occasion.

It is a pleasure to report that teachers and parents joined in our celebration for the first time this year. Technology teacher Vladimir Byurchiev and members of "Bamb Tsetsg" Steppe Wildlife Club gave a master-class on carving wooden saiga souvenirs during Adyk's Saiga Day. Lastly, club members from Yashkul' village organized a "Save the Saiga" flash mob, which inspired and animated children and adults alike.

In addition to Saiga Day in Yashkul and Adyk, staff from the Centre for Wild Animals gave lectures to pupils and organized excursions to the Yashkul' saiga breeding centre, where children experienced saigas up close. Additionally, a "Saiga" relay race was held for the junior students of Troit' school in Tselin district.

Our successful events give us hope that our joint efforts



Photo by Aigul' Aiboeva

Saiga Day in Adyk high school.

will not be in vain and large herds of saigas will appear on our steppes in the near future.

Saiga Day in Uzbekistan: Scaling up

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Saiga Day has been running for eight years in the remote villages of Ustyurt and has gained essential support from the State Committee for Nature Conservation, the Republic's Children's Tourism board, and the Regional Studies and Ecology Centre. Steps have been taken to garner support from the Ministry of Education. In April these supporters of Saiga Day joined us, along with Steppe Wildlife Club leaders and school teachers, in a short workshop which discussed shared experiences of the festival and how we could develop the celebrations and involve even more members of the community.

Many of the most popular competitions made it back onto the festival program again this year, for instance the "Ecological Express" with its various themed stations. The National Traditions station, was especially popular with the audience again; this year children learnt how to weave cane mats and make thick felt from camel-hair. An important aspect of this station is that the younger generation seeks the advice and assistance of their parents and grandparents, who are the true keepers of national traditions. In this way, Saiga Day allows the ties between generations to be restored and strengthened, and forgotten national traditions and



Photo by Natalia Shivaldova

Ecological Express, National Traditions station, Kyrk-kyz village.

handicrafts to be recovered. Another important innovation in the scaled-up festival in Jaslyk village was that a team of school teachers enthusiastically participated in the competitions alongside children's teams.

A "Saiga defenders" marathon was an interesting addition this year at school # 54. This initiative was suggested by senior students; members of the "Akboke" Steppe Wildlife Club. They decided to gain first-hand knowledge of how saigas feel when running in the steppe under a boiling sun. Of course, the organizers thought out a safe route for the children. There were tables with drinking water along the road, and the runners were accompanied by a vehicle with a doctor. Runners could drop out of the race any time, yet all the children were very enthusiastic and

committed. Eventually, the teams reached the finish line without loss... The marathon was followed by a discussion of participants' impressions and everybody drew the analogy with saigas crossing the steppe. Children began to understand better how well saigas have evolved and this only increased their respect for this amazing creature.

When the sun was setting and the heat of the day was over, Jaslyk residents (children and their parents, teachers, gas company workers, police and village elders alike) moved to the open-air stage. Muscial numbers alternated with prize-giving to competition winners. Village dignitaries - the Chairman of the Community Council, the headmaster and elders - presented the prizes, lending great solemnity and meaningfulness to the event. The programme ended in Jaslyk with a dance of little saigas, performed by kindergarten children.



Photo by Natalia Shivaldova

Winners of saiga football cup from Jaslyk.

When the music had stopped, and the guests were going home, I asked Sadyrbai Shaimenov, the junior school vice-principal what the Saiga Day festival meant to him. He answered: "It is an important event for our school and for our whole village. We approach this with great responsibility and creativity. This year practically all the teachers in our school helped us to prepare for the festival. Everybody understands that this is our opportunity to make our contribution to the cause of saiga conservation. What can we do? We can develop love for our nature and its unique



Photo by Natalia Shivaldova

Saiga Day participants from Nukus city.



Photo by Natalia Shivaldova

The little artists from Kyrk-kyz village.

species. And also we can change consumer attitudes towards saigas so that they are more caring and protective".

At Kyrk-kyz, the celebrations started with a hymn to the saiga, sung by members of the "Green patrol" Steppe Wildlife Club in their native language, hand in hand. The hall was turned into a gallery of drawings, posters, and craftworks in which the saiga was the main character. The diversity of artistic techniques used to depict saigas was amazing and included embroidery, mosaics made of seeds, plasticine and glass figures, and picture books, all devised and made by children.

One children's performance stands out. Scene one: a saiga family is frolicking on the grass; the father and mother are rejoicing in their kids. Scene two: a man with a gun shows up; the father-saiga stands in defence of his kids and is killed. Scene three: the little saigas rise in defence of their mother and direct their tiny horns at the poacher and the man is forced to retreat. During this mini-performance I turned my eyes from the actors to the audience. The adults were wiping tears from their eyes; little ones, literally "with mouths agape", did not tear their eyes away from the actors. The reaction of senior students was striking; at first they seemed to be a little disengaged... Then they riveted their gaze, tears sparkled in their eyes but they held them back; it is not appropriate for boys to weep. This is what "the force

of art " can do, the educative content of this event probably had a ten times stronger effect than an ordinary school lesson.

We were also impressed by a competition to "Create your own saiga", in which a drawing of a saiga is cut into a jigsaw puzzle. With their eyes closed, the children have to assemble the puzzle. The winners were the quickest and most accurate at assembling all the puzzles. We also saw another, very touching and heartfelt ballet about little saigas, a wonderful gallery of drawings and craftworks using glass beads, thick felt and straw to depict saigas.

However, the pinnacle of the festival was a musical greeting from the popular Karakalpak singer and composer, Koblan Edenbayev, and a video created specially by the Gala-Film team for Saiga Day (ed. see above). All the children, hand in hand, sang along with the singer in the video. After the festival was over I spoke to two young teachers, Nasiba Abdramanova and Nigora Narimbetova, who lead the Steppe club in school # 31 and organised the festival. My first question was, of course, about the dance performance about little saigas which astounded the whole audience.

Photo by Natalia Shivaldova



Start of the Saiga Migration game.

"Who was the author of this performance?"

"We thought up the plot all together, children and adults. We made the costumes and choreographed the dance jointly".

"And why did the saigas have to defend themselves from a poacher on their own?"

"There was a lot of debate about this", says Nigora Narimbetova, "but the children decided that we needed to show how defenceless the saigas are against a man with gun.

Let those people who go to the steppe to kill poor animals be ashamed". Truly "truth comes from the mouths of babes"...

This year the festival was coloured with new hues; in some places it became more emotional, in others – more crowded, and in some places – more profound and serious. But overall it opened a door to the world of wonderful and beautiful nature which requires protection and understanding.

Mongolian saiga poacher sentenced

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On 22 January this year Mongolia saigas were poached in Tovgor, Khukhmorit district, Gobi-Altai province in Mongolia. The crime was detected within a very short time in a joint investigation by the "Irvs-3" anti-poaching team, the Saiga Rangers' Network and the Police Department of Gobi-Altai province. The court hearing was held recently and the individual was found guilty and sentenced accordingly. This unacceptable crime was committed by A. Ganpurev, from Khukhmorit district, Gobi-Altai province, and the court sentenced him to three years and ten days

imprisonment. The court hearing was held in public in Khukhmorit district.

Previously, open court hearings have been held in Sharga and Tugrog districts concerning cases of illegal poaching. Protection of nature and wildlife has to be everyone's concern. It's a pity that greedy people continue to interfere with Mother Nature by engaging in illegal poaching. Holding open public court hearings, as in this case, sends a clear signal to potential poachers that crimes will be punished, helping to deter such crimes.

Photo by G. Olombatar



Confiscated wildlife products.