



PRESS RELEASE

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SAIGA CONSERVATION ALLIANCE LAUNCHES ECOTOUR TO SOUTHERN RUSSIA 10-Day Tour Directly Contributes to Conservation of the Critically Endangered Saiga Antelope and Provides Revenue for Struggling Local Economy

In the early 1990s, one million saiga antelopes migrated across the Russian and Central Asian steppes. In recent years they hold a sad record in the animal world – they are one of the fastest declining mammal species on our planet today. Since the early 1990s global saiga numbers have declined by over 95%. As a result there is considerable international concern and saiga have been listed as Critically Endangered by IUCN.

Poaching is the main factor driving the decline of saiga populations. They are primarily hunted for their translucent amber horn, which is used in Southeast Asian countries for Traditional Chinese Medicine. The breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991 resulted in the collapse of rural economies and saiga poaching provided an alternative source of income and food albeit illegal. The border with China reopened in the late 1980s fuelling further exploitation.

Urgent conservation action is needed to halt this decline. At the Saiga Conservation Alliance (SCA) we believe in informed, efficient, incentive-driven conservation action which is built on local partnerships and delivers sustainable long-term solutions. Saiga is our target species; but we aim to conserve the steppe ecosystem as a whole, taking into account human needs as well as other species of fauna and flora.

Ecotourism has been shown to be an effective means by which to achieve these goals by directly contributing to conservation activities and by providing revenue to local communities - stimulating economies and enhancing the value of natural resources. Responsibly managed tourism can empower local communities to take control of their own destinies, whilst reducing pressure on the environment and raising international awareness.

Accordingly, the SCA has worked with a local tour company, Saga Voyages, to develop a tour of the saiga range area in southern Russia, to run in September 2011. The tour will include visits to key SCA project sites and will directly support the work of committed, in-country conservationists, whilst providing a source of much-needed income for the local economy and fostering links with the wider international community.

The 10-day tour, arranged by award-winning Saga Voyages, will explore the rich natural history of this little-known region taking in the thriving grasslands of the Southern Russian Steppe, the arid Caspian region, and the lush wetlands of the Volga Delta, and will involve direct contact with the people who inhabit these lands including those of the Republic of Kalmykia, the only official Tibetan Buddhist state in Europe, and the historic city of Astrakhan.

The saiga antelope is a relict of the ice age fauna that included mammoths and sabre tooth cats. It is a symbol of the steppe for the nomadic people it shares its habitat with, and has been an important source of food and inspiration for centuries. It is our hope that initiatives such as this will restore the saiga antelope to its position as the flagship species of the Central Asian and pre-Caspian steppes, reflecting the species' cultural and economic value to local people and its fundamental role in the steppe ecosystem.

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About the SCA: The SCA is committed to saving the critically endangered saiga antelope from imminent extinction. We are a long-standing network of scientists and conservationists who work across saiga range states on grassroots projects informed by sound science. We believe in bringing stakeholders together to emphasize human needs and to act as a catalyst for sustainable conservation solutions. For more information, visit www.saiga-conservation.com.