

SAIGA CONSERVATION ALLIANCE

Twentieth Anniversary Report

2006 – 2026



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Welcome



E.J. Milner-Gulland,
SCA Co-Founder & Chair

Just over twenty years ago, I was approached by the Wildlife Conservation Network to submit a proposal to partner with them, having recognised the value of our work to conserve the saiga antelope.

What an exciting, transformative, opportunity! But it was also slightly alarming — we saiga researchers had been working together for over a decade, and had a strong informal network, but we had no NGO, no name, no logo, no structures. Together with Lena Bykova and Aline Kuhl, I rushed to put together a project proposal — which was successful! In September 2007, we held our first meeting of the SCA Steering Committee.

And here we still are, 20 years later, colleagues and friends new and old, some sadly missed, some happily joining us. We have an established reputation as an organisation that brings people together and works wholeheartedly for the benefit of the saiga, its habitats, and the people who share these beautiful landscapes.

I feel the SCA embodies the values that we need if we are to make conservation work in this increasingly fragmented and polarised world, and I couldn't be prouder of my role in keeping us going through the hard times (mass mortalities, geopolitical ruptures, funding crises, and more), and shepherding us towards a better future. The saiga is supremely adapted to survive and thrive in a dynamic world (as it has done since the Ice Age). The SCA needs to show similar resilience and flexibility, and I hope this report shows that we have done just that.

As one of our founding members, Professor Yuri Arylov, was fond of saying, "Step' bez saigaka kak Kalmykskiy chai bez moloka" — the Steppe without saigas is like Kalmykian tea without milk; unthinkable. Thank you so very much to everyone who has been part of this 20 year journey.



Peter Damerell,
SCA Director

Although I wasn't part of the Saiga Conservation Alliance from the beginning, I've been privileged to work with the organisation on projects since 2011, and I'm proud to be its Director as it marks its 20th anniversary. For any conservation NGO to reach such a milestone is a significant achievement, and one that cannot be accomplished alone.

In every saiga project I have joined, I have been struck by how collaboration underpins success: from communities and schools supporting conservation in Uzbekistan to governments and international organisations engaging with international policy instruments. That this collective commitment to collaboration has grown stronger through two decades of setbacks and successes gives me great optimism.

The threats facing saigas and their habitats are increasingly diverse and interact to create new combinations of challenges. But as we enter our third decade, our dedicated community of funders, donors, scientists, rangers, policymakers, conservation practitioners and local champions gives me confidence for the future. Together, we can make saigas a catalyst for conserving Asia's steppe and semi-desert landscapes in a time of unprecedented change.

Our Purpose

Why saigas?

Saigas have roamed the Central Asian and pre-Caspian steppes since the Ice Age. Today, they remain one of the most distinctive animals of these vast open landscapes, moving over great distances as seasons, forage, and water availability change.

They are important both ecologically and culturally. Saigas have long featured in the history and traditions of communities across their range, and remain a powerful symbol of the steppe.

Their recent history is one of severe decline and remarkable recovery. Saiga numbers fell dramatically across much of their range in the 1990s and early 2000s, and populations have also been hit by sudden mass mortality events, including the catastrophic 2015 die-off in Kazakhstan. Some populations have since rebounded strongly, but recovery is uneven, and new management challenges are emerging where numbers are now very high. Continued conservation remains essential as the pressures facing saigas continue to evolve, from poaching and trade to disease, habitat change, and barriers to movement across the steppe.

Why an Alliance?

Saigas move across vast landscapes and national borders, while trade and demand for saiga products link range states to countries far beyond them. Protecting the species therefore requires coordinated action across countries, disciplines, and organisations.

The Saiga Conservation Alliance was created to help make that possible, bringing together conservationists, researchers, rangers, communities, governments, and partner organisations across the saiga range and beyond. By combining local knowledge, scientific expertise, and long-term relationships, SCA helps strengthen conservation across the range.

Over the past 20 years, this collaborative approach has shaped everything from research and monitoring to education, ranger support, grants, community engagement, and international coordination. SCA's role is not to work alone, but to connect and strengthen the efforts of people already working for saigas, and to help ensure that knowledge and experience are shared across the range.

A species that crosses landscapes and borders needs conservation that does the same.

Our Mission

We are committed to restoring the saiga antelope to its position as a flagship species of the Central Asian and pre-Caspian steppes, reflecting its cultural and economic value to local people and its fundamental role in the steppe ecosystem.

We work collaboratively, share our expertise openly, and disseminate our work widely to those working for saiga conservation, governments, the wider conservation community, and the public.



20 years of SCA

2006 – 2007

SCA is founded and holds its first Steering Committee meeting in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.



2007

SCA launches Saiga Day in Uzbekistan.



2007

SCA becomes a full partner organisation of the Wildlife Conservation Network.



2010

SCA joins the Convention on Migratory Species Saiga Memorandum of Understanding.



2010

SCA awards its first Small Grants to support grassroots conservationists.



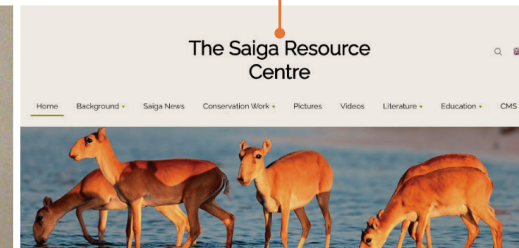
2014

SCA launches its Young Conservation Leader and Excellence in Saiga Protection Awards.



2013

SCA launches the [Saiga Resource Centre](#).



2013

SCA establishes the first Steppe Wildlife Clubs.



2010

SCA becomes a registered charity in the UK.



2015

SCA joins the response to the catastrophic saiga mass die-off in Kazakhstan.



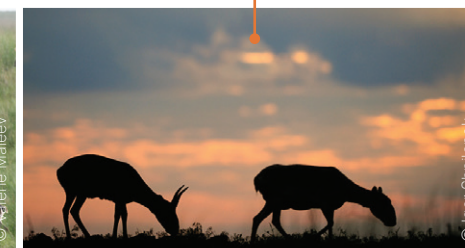
2023

Saiga recovery in Kazakhstan sees the species downlisted to Near Threatened on the IUCN Red List.



2024

SCA appoints a Director, marking a new chapter for the Alliance.



2026

SCA celebrates 20 years of working with partners and communities for saiga conservation.

Our Work at a Glance

Our work starts in the saiga range states and extends worldwide through partnerships, collaboration, and action.

Education and Awareness



Rangers and Protected Areas



Research and Monitoring



International Cooperation



Communities and Livelihoods



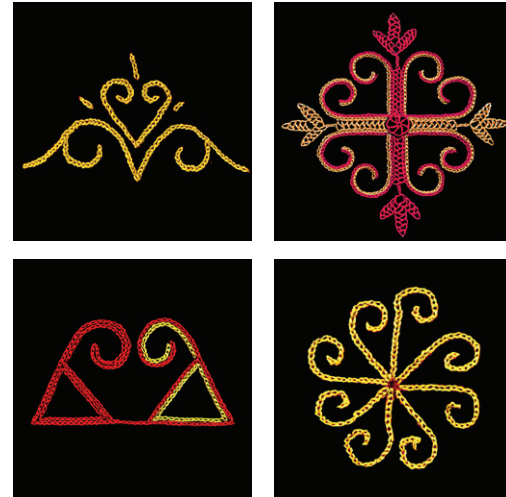
Grants and Awards



20 years of action **6** interconnected strands of work

 Approximate saiga range
Source: CMS.

Living alongside saigas



▲ Examples of embroidery motifs, clockwise from top left: saiga hoof, steppe flower, camels, and flower.

An embroidery enterprise

At a time when saiga numbers on the Ustyurt Plateau had fallen dramatically, poaching remained a serious threat, and local economic opportunities were limited, SCA recognised the importance of working with communities to find solutions that benefited both people and saigas. In 2008, SCA began piloting an alternative livelihood programme centred on traditional Karakalpak embroidery. Working with women in Jasyk and Karakalpakia, the programme supported the development of embroidery skills and traditional designs, creating handcrafted products for sale. Many of the motifs reflected the landscape around them, from steppe flowers and new shoots to camels and the distinctive shape of a saiga hoof, weaving local culture and wildlife into traditional designs.

As the programme developed, training expanded from embroidery techniques into production and business skills. Village leaders learned new techniques and passed them on to other members, while SCA supported materials, equipment, product development, and access to wider markets. Make-up bags, coin purses, and other embroidered products found buyers locally, in Tashkent, at the Wildlife Conservation Network (WCN) Expo, through zoo shops, and through SCA's own channels. In 2014, the embroidery activity became an officially recognised small enterprise, placing production and sales on a more formal footing.

Conservation was built directly into the initiative. SCA developed agreements with participating individuals and villages that included commitments not to buy, sell, or consume saiga products, not to hunt saiga, and to discourage poaching among family and friends. SCA also wanted to understand what the programme was achieving rather than simply assume that it was working. Research into the initiative culminated in [The Impact of Community Conservation Initiatives in the Uzbek Ustyurt](#). The study found that participants were extremely positive about the embroidery groups, particularly valuing the opportunity to learn skills, socialise, and spend time together. It identified these social and non-cash benefits as one of the programme's strongest features, while also highlighting the need for stronger markets and clearer links between the enterprise and its conservation goals.

The programme evolved as participants' circumstances changed, but what it demonstrated has endured. Traditional skills could become part of a wider conservation effort, creating opportunities for income and participation while bringing saiga conservation into everyday community life. Just as importantly, the experience gave SCA practical lessons about what works, what needs adapting, and how livelihood initiatives can form part of a broader, long-term approach to conserving saiga alongside the people who share their landscape.



▲ Women participating in the Kuralai embroidery programme display their handcrafted designs in the Uzbek Ustyurt.

Participatory monitoring

People living alongside saigas often see and understand changes in the landscape long before they can be captured through occasional formal surveys. From the late 2000s, SCA helped develop participatory monitoring in Russia and Uzbekistan and supported similar work in other range states, giving local residents a direct role in gathering conservation information. Monitors recorded saiga sightings and information on numbers, distribution, movements, and poaching across vast and remote areas. In Uzbekistan, these observations complemented transect surveys, questionnaires, camera trapping, and government monitoring, helping build a fuller picture of saiga presence and pressures across the landscape. It brought conservation closer to the people who shared the landscape with saigas, while strengthening the monitoring needed to protect them.



▲ Local monitoring team conducting a transect survey on the Ustyurt Plateau. © Dmitri Golovtsov

Learning to protect the steppe

Steppe Wildlife Clubs

Since 2013, SCA's Steppe Wildlife Clubs have grown from a small number of clubs in Uzbekistan into a much wider network across the saiga's range. Working through local schools and teachers, the clubs give children regular opportunities to discover saigas and steppe wildlife, explore their local environment, take part in conservation activities, and prepare for celebrations such as Saiga Day.

Activities vary from club to club, but the emphasis is practical and participatory. Members take part in lessons, competitions, field trips, environmental projects, and creative activities, using saigas as a starting point for exploring the wider steppe ecosystem. Club activities follow an ecological calendar built around key conservation dates, including SCA's Saiga Day, International Migratory Species Day, and the Day of Protected Areas, creating regular moments of excitement and shared activity throughout the year.



▲ Steppe Wildlife Club members taking part in a Saiga Day activity.

Behind the clubs are the dedicated teachers and leaders who keep them active. SCA has supported them with training, teaching guides, educational materials, activity planning, and opportunities to exchange ideas across the network. In Uzbekistan, SCA also developed successive government-approved saiga education programmes, providing a formal framework for ongoing activities in local schools and Steppe Wildlife Clubs. Over time, many clubs have taken on greater responsibility for shaping their own activities, with growing communication and exchange between clubs across the network.

Today, the Steppe Wildlife Clubs remain one of the most enduring parts of SCA's education work. Through learning, creativity, and shared celebration, they continue to give new generations of young people opportunities to participate in conservation and build a lasting connection with the landscapes they share with saigas.



▲ Steppe Wildlife Club members learning about saigas through a group activity. © Zhanna Aksartova

Saiga Day

SCA launched Saiga Day in Uzbekistan in 2006 as a celebration of saigas, the steppe, and the arrival of the first calves each spring. Since then, it has spread across the saiga's range, bringing communities together in Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Russia, and Uzbekistan through local culture, music, art, sport, and shared celebration.

More than an awareness event, Saiga Day gives communities a chance to celebrate their connection with saigas and the steppe. Children take part alongside families, teachers, local organisations, and conservation partners, while some events extend into protected areas and the wider landscape. By bringing learning, culture, and shared experience together, Saiga Day helps make conservation a memorable part of community life.

In 2023, Uzbekistan formally established the regular observance of Saiga Day through Presidential Resolution No. 171, marking an important milestone for a celebration SCA began nearly two decades earlier.



▲ Traditional dance performance at Saiga Day.



▲ Sports activities at a 2026 Saiga Day.



Medet Mukhanov,
Teacher and Steppe Club leader,
Uzbekistan



▲ Participants at SCA's Summer Wildlife Academy for Environmental Teachers, 2017.

Medet became involved in SCA's education work in 2017, after organising a school event linking sport and ecology. Later that year, he joined an SCA international summer academy for teachers in Nukus, where he gained new ecological knowledge and a new sense of what he could bring to his students. "I realised that I can teach students to value and protect our nature and all its resources," he says. "And most importantly, I really enjoy doing this."

Since then, Medet has become a committed part of the Steppe Wildlife Club and Saiga Day at School No. 54. He has watched students grow more enthusiastic year after year, eagerly looking forward to the activities and throwing themselves into them.

In 2018, at a teachers' academy in the Astrakhan region, Medet saw saigas in the wild for the first time. They were far away, but the moment stayed with him. For Medet, teaching children about saigas matters because it helps them understand the role the species plays in the steppe ecosystem, and why the wildlife and landscapes around them are worth valuing and protecting.

Protecting saigas on the ground



Aralkum: strengthening a new protected area

Following the creation of Aralkum National Nature Park in 2022, SCA continued working with the park authorities to help turn protected status into effective conservation. A major focus has been the park's functional zoning, identifying areas of particular importance for saigas and other wildlife so that conservation priorities are reflected in how the landscape is managed.

SCA has also supported the park's rangers with camera traps, field equipment, and practical training in camera-trap use and wildlife monitoring. In 2025, donor support provided 35 winter uniforms and durable boots for work in harsh conditions.



▲ Discussing proposed zoning for Aralkum National Nature Park.

Mirbek Nurlybaev, Senior Ranger, Aralkum National Nature Park

“Without a doubt, [SCA's support] has helped improve working conditions, safety and the effectiveness of the rangers' work.”

Saigachiy: sustaining work on the ground

Since 2016, SCA has provided long-term practical support to Saigachiy Integrated Landscape Reserve on Uzbekistan's Ustyurt Plateau. Reserve Director Alisher Abdurakhmanov describes SCA's long-term support as invaluable. Rangers have received field clothing, sleeping bags, and camera-trap batteries, as well as a refrigerator for use during the intense summer heat. A quad bike has helped transport water, firewood, and other essential supplies to remote field sites.

SCA also supported a solar-powered artificial watering point in an area with no natural water bodies. Camera traps there have recorded saigas alongside steppe and golden eagles, corsac foxes, and black-bellied sandgrouse.



▲ Caption: Members of the field team in Saigachiy Reserve. © Saigachiy Reserve

Stepnoi: safeguarding a vital refuge

Stepnoi Reserve in Russia has been an important partner in SCA's work to protect saigas in the Northwest Pre-Caspian. Its first director, the late Anatoliy Khludnev, led the reserve for 13 years and dedicated much of his life to protecting saigas and the steppe. He became a much-loved member of the international saiga conservation community and is remembered with great warmth by SCA and those who worked alongside him.

Over the years, SCA supported Stepnoi's rangers with equipment and resources, as well as through its Small Grants Programme, helping them carry out their work across this remote landscape. This has included research and monitoring, anti-poaching patrols, and outreach and environmental education with local communities. Support also helped establish a permanent ranger station within the reserve, providing the team with a base for their work. Under director Vladimir Kalmykov, the Stepnoi team has continued to protect saigas and provide a safe refuge for wildlife in the Northwest Pre-Caspian.



▲ Anatoly Vasilyevich Khludnev (1952–2018), Stepnoi Reserve's first director and a much-loved member of the saiga conservation community.

Recognising outstanding protection

Since 2014, SCA's Excellence in Saiga Protection Award has recognised individuals and teams making an outstanding contribution to protecting saigas. Recipients from across Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Russia, and Uzbekistan have been recognised for dedicated frontline work that can often go unseen.

The award reflects the many different ways people protect saigas. Recipients have been recognised

for engaging local communities as volunteer rangers in Mongolia, strengthening the detection of wildlife crime, and effective law enforcement on Uzbekistan's Ustyurt Plateau. In Kazakhstan, it has also honoured extraordinary courage: in 2018, Yerlan Nurgaliev was recognised posthumously alongside his injured colleague Piotr Nitsyk.



Working together to understand saiga

When a research network was ready for crisis

Saiga recovery is one of the great conservation stories of the past two decades. But in May 2015, that progress suffered a devastating setback. During the calving season on Kazakhstan's Betpak-Dala steppe, seemingly healthy saigas began collapsing and dying. Within three weeks, more than 200,000 had died — approximately 62% of the global population at the time.

Following earlier die-offs, Professor Richard Kock of the Royal Veterinary College proposed annual research into saiga disease ecology, working with ACBK, the Frankfurt Zoological Society and Kazakh authorities. This groundwork proved crucial: when the 2015 catastrophe struck, a research team was already in the field, able to collect vital samples and environmental data as the event unfolded.

The investigation brought together Kazakh scientists and authorities, wildlife veterinarians, ecologists, and conservation organisations. As Steffen Zuther of ACBK recalls, "SCA has been one of the driving forces behind the investigation group," helping connect researchers from different disciplines. It also fielded international enquiries, giving ACBK space to focus on work on the ground. Bringing different perspectives to the same urgent questions, the partnership investigated not just what had killed the saigas, but why the outbreak had been so devastating. The research identified haemorrhagic septicaemia caused by *Pasteurella multocida*, with unusually warm, humid conditions helping to explain the scale of the deaths.

The collaboration's impact extended beyond identifying the cause of the die-off. With support from SCA and other partners, specialists developed [practical guidance for monitoring and responding to future wildlife-health emergencies in Kazakhstan](#).



▲ Saiga mortality in Kazakhstan. © Sergei Khomenko

For SCA, the crisis reinforced a lasting lesson: scientific collaboration must be built before it is urgently needed. Connecting researchers across disciplines, supporting their work and linking findings to conservation practice can make a critical difference. As saiga populations recover, that ability to work together remains essential to understanding emerging threats and safeguarding their future.

Sarah Robinson, researcher involved in the 2015 die-off investigation:

"The mass mortality was terrible but the scientific collaboration which emerged, especially between people with very different disciplines and perspectives, was amazing."

Looking beyond recovery

As saiga populations recovered, questions arose about how they might be managed in the future, including whether sustainable use could ever be possible. In 2020, the CMS asked SCA to use its international network to bring together researchers and conservationists from across the saiga range, China, and beyond to examine the evidence.

SCA led the resulting report, [The Sustainable Use of Saiga Antelopes: Perspectives and Prospects](#), drawing together decades of research and practical experience from across countries and disciplines. By connecting range-state and international expertise and bringing this knowledge together, SCA created a strong evidence base for understanding what would need to be in place before sustainable use could be considered.



▲ Confiscated saiga horns, among the many factors considered in exploring the future of sustainable use.

A growing body of research

SCA has supported [more than twenty student research projects](#), connecting students with local partners and conservation challenges. Their research provides valuable evidence, fresh perspectives, and valuable experience for emerging conservationists.

Selected students' projects

Year	Researcher	Project Focus
2008	Elisabeth Whitebread	Participatory monitoring of saigas with local villagers
2011	Henrietta Chilton	Saiga distribution in West Kazakhstan
2014	Sophie Elliot	Adolescent aspirations and saiga conservation initiatives
2015	Laura Kor	Drivers of illegal behaviour affecting Ustyurt saigas
2015	Sarekha Dhanda	Stakeholder views on improving Saigachy Reserve impact
2016	Kirsty Simpkin	Evaluating SCA's conservation impact in Uzbekistan
2021	Hunter L. Doughty	Reducing demand for saiga horn in Singapore

2024

Ruth Arnold:
Using novel approaches to better characterise wildlife supply chains
"Working alongside the SCA over the last few years has not only been a joy, but an essential foundation for all the research that I completed for my Master's... I continue to learn a great deal through the SCA as they are an incredible team who connect research results to actionable conservation outputs."

2026

Jessica Hass:
Identifying priority emerging issues for saiga conservation
"My research wouldn't have been possible without SCA's network, which allowed me to access knowledge and perspectives from across the saiga range."

CASE STUDY

Resurrection Island

How one project brought together science, people, and policy

1. A remarkable place

THE LANDSCAPE

Once an island in the Aral Sea, Resurrection Island became part of the surrounding landscape as the sea retreated. Known as Aralsk-7, the island was once a secret Soviet biological weapons testing site. Largely isolated from other human activity for decades, it became a refuge for wildlife, including saigas. As the waters receded, however, its isolation diminished, opening the landscape to new pressures from roads, oil and gas development, and other human activity.

2. Building the evidence

2014 – 2017

Satellite imagery was used to explore the little-known saiga population on Resurrection Island, before SCA and its partners undertook two field expeditions with Uzbek scientists and local researchers in 2017. Together, they documented the island's wildlife and the pressures it faced.

123 vascular plant species **127** vertebrate species

The surveys revealed the landscape's ecological significance, strengthening the case for its protection and informing continued monitoring of its saiga population.

3. A bigger idea takes shape

2018 – 2019

In 2018, during a visit to Resurrection Island, E.J. Milner-Gulland began to envision a new future for the landscape. WCN trustee Bill Unger, who was on the trip, later recalled the idea taking shape:



Bill Unger, WCN:

"If saigas wanted it, why not give it to the saigas?"

E.J. began exploring the possibility with Uzbek officials. By 2019, SCA and its partners had developed the idea into a five-year programme combining ecological research, community needs, protected-area planning and engagement with government and industry.

4. The project's scope widened

2020 – 2021

Darwin Initiative funding helped turn the vision into a programme combining conservation and sustainable development.



- **Science:** Field surveys and monitoring revealed two previously unknown saiga groups, improving knowledge of their distribution and habitat.
- **Communities:** Research and consultations explored local needs and opportunities, laying the groundwork for future livelihood initiatives.
- **Education:** Two new Steppe Wildlife Clubs opened in local schools.
- **Industry:** 34 employees and consultants received training in biodiversity and social impacts.
- **Protection:** Habitat mapping and engagement with Uzbek officials helped shape plans for Aralkum, identifying priority areas for wildlife protection.

5. From vision to lasting change

2022 – Present

By 2022, years of research, collaboration and planning were translating into lasting change. Resurrection Island became part of the newly established Aralkum protected area, with SCA and its partners helping shape its boundaries and zoning.

SCA also strengthened wildlife monitoring and ranger capacity, supported conservation education, helped establish ten homestays and pilot tourism routes, and worked with industry to improve biodiversity safeguards.

Today, SCA continues to support conservation in Aralkum while building on these achievements across the wider Aral Sea landscape.

From recognising a landscape's value to shaping its future

Backing big ideas

Young conservation leader awards

Launched in 2014, the Young Conservation Leaders (YCL) Award supports young conservationists aged 12-30 to lead projects that contribute to saiga conservation while building their skills, experience, and professional networks.

Awardees receive project funding, mentoring from the SCA network, and support to identify training, professional development, and future funding opportunities. Individual awards of up to £1,500 help turn ideas into practical conservation action.

Across countries including Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Uzbekistan, and China, projects have ranged from identifying breeding areas, water sources, and habitat pressures to using camera traps, running wildlife clubs, organising festivals, creating educational materials, and engaging schools and communities.

Over time, these opportunities can become important stepping stones, giving young conservationists the experience, confidence, and connections to take on more ambitious work and contribute more widely to conservation.

14 YCL projects supported since 2014

2019 YCL winner:

"The grant marked an important stage in my professional development."



Aibat Muzbay,
Kazakhstan

Aibat's 2019 YCL project focused on identifying key watering sites and understanding land allocation among farmers within the range of the Ustyurt saiga population. He was able to spend more than two weeks in the field, map potentially important water sources, and gain his first practical experience working with land-cadastre data.

The impact of that early project has reached far beyond the original research. Information on water sources helped inform discussions with local government during the establishment of a wildlife protection and use area. Today, saiga are using these sites, and key water sources are now located within the conservation area, contributing to a much larger conservation outcome for the Ustyurt landscape.

The skills Aibat gained also continued to shape his work. Years later, they became directly relevant to his research on the Ural saiga population, particularly around habitat loss, land use, and potential conflicts between saiga and farmers.

Today, Aibat works across a much broader range of wildlife conservation issues, including saiga, argali, leopard, urial, protected areas, and habitat conservation. His work continues to combine field research, land-use information, and collaboration with local communities and government, building on the experience and skills developed through his YCL project.

Small grants programme

Launched in 2007, SCA's Small Grants Programme supports practical, locally led projects that advance saiga conservation. Past projects have included population monitoring, ecological research, anti-poaching, wildlife-friendly livelihoods, education and public engagement, and efforts to reduce illegal trade.

Grants of up to £5,000 give conservationists the opportunity to test ideas, generate evidence, and respond to local challenges. These relatively small investments have helped lay the foundations for longer-term conservation work, stronger local capacity, and lasting benefits for saigas and their habitats.

44 small grants awarded since 2007



Vera Voronova,
Kazakhstan

A 2009 SCA Small Grant supported Vera's work at the Karaganda Ecomuseum, developing saiga displays and public engagement. Today, she is Executive Director of ACBK and Chair of the Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative, helping lead conservation across Kazakhstan's steppe.



Bayarmaa Chuluunbat,
Mongolia

Bayarmaa's 2023 SCA Small Grant gave her the opportunity to lead her first independent research project, investigating relationships between Mongolian saiga and livestock. Her research led to two peer-reviewed publications and international presentations. Today, she is Conservation Science Manager and Wildlife Ecologist at the Wildlife Science and Conservation Center of Mongolia, a PhD researcher, and Mongolia's first National Geographic Young Explorer.



Buuveibataar
Bayarbaatar, Mongolia

SCA Small Grants in 2010, 2013, and 2015 gave Buuvei the opportunity to turn research ideas into practical fieldwork at an important early stage in his career. At a time when funding for locally led Mongolian saiga research was limited, the grants supported surveys across the saiga's range, including work on diet and the development of a systematic population-monitoring framework. That framework became the standard approach for monitoring Mongolian saiga, providing consistent data to assess population trends and inform conservation decisions.

Today, Buuvei is a Senior Scientist with WCS Mongolia, leading research on wildlife movement, landscape connectivity and infrastructure impacts. He remains closely involved with SCA as a member of its Steering Committee.

100%

said the grant helped them develop professional skills

83%

said their project continued or led to follow-on work

67%

reported new collaborations or partnerships

▲ Based on responses to an SCA survey of Small Grants and YCL award recipients.

Conservation without borders

Coordinating conservation across the saiga range

"International cooperation is an area in which the SCA's activities have really helped to make a difference, over the last 20 years, in collaboration with our colleagues in range state governments, NGOs, funders, and international conventions.

The drastic decline in saigas following the break-up of the Soviet Union first came to broad international attention in 2001, and triggered the saiga's unprecedented leap straight from the Near Threatened category in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, to the highest category of Critically Endangered. The species had been on Appendix 2 of CITES since 1995, and Appendix 2 of the UN Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) in 2002. The real breakthrough came, however, in 2006, when a group of saiga experts met in Elista, the capital of Kalmykia, to sign a [Memorandum of Understanding on international cooperation for saiga conservation under the CMS](#), and develop the first action plan for the species. Notably, this MOU is a joint endeavour between CMS and CITES, as befits the saiga's status as an internationally traded species. The MOU is accompanied by a "Medium Term International Work Programme" which runs in 5 year cycles. The saiga community has been meeting roughly every 4 years since 2006, with technical meetings in between, to report progress against the work programme, plan actions and exchange ideas and experiences.

In the last few years, the Central Asian Mammals Initiative has come to the fore as an umbrella instrument for coordinating the relevant MOUs work programmes under the CMS. This has great benefits in its ability to find synergies, policy efficiency and share lessons across species and countries. For example it has done some great, impactful work on [linear infrastructure](#), which affects a lot of CMS species in the region including saigas.

Although the saiga MOU can only be ratified by countries, as official Parties to the CMS, the saiga MOU

has always been a broad tent, into which NGOs, academics and others working on saigas have been welcomed. The Saiga Conservation Alliance proudly joined five other international NGOs and the IUCN Species Survival Commission as a Cooperating Organisation at the second meeting of the signatories to the MOU in 2010, along with the Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity in Kazakhstan (ACBK). At that meeting, SCA and ACBK were also appointed as technical coordinators for the MOU, facilitating exchange of information between all interested parties, and supporting the input of technical expertise into meetings, including drafting key documents and leading technical workshops. We have supported CITES side events, and convened a large group of saiga experts to write a particularly influential [report on the sustainable use of saigas](#). The SCA also supports the MOU by disseminating information on what's going on in the world of saigas through the Saiga Resource Centre and Saiga News.

The saiga MOU is often cited as a great success and example to follow. Not just because of the saiga's remarkable powers of recovery as a species, but because the MOU brought the community together to tackle its conservation issues in an integrated way. This includes governments, NGOs, funders and academics all agreeing on the status of the species, the main threats, the most effective conservation actions, as well as a prioritised list of actions at the international and national levels, against which they all report regularly. There is a strong spirit of cooperation. That may seem the least that every species should have, if it is to recover, but it's not the norm. Some species have communities which tear themselves apart, hampering effective action. I won't cast aspersions here, only to note that it seems to me that the conservation community for a species resembles the species itself. The saiga is a social creature, a herbivore, agile and resilient — say no more!"

E.J. Milner-Gulland

International cooperation on trade and demand

Protecting saigas means looking beyond the steppe. Demand for saiga horn in traditional medicine connects populations in Central Asia with markets thousands of kilometres away. For 20 years, SCA has worked across borders with researchers, conservation organisations, and government agencies to understand the trade, strengthen enforcement, and address consumer demand.

These partnerships have translated cooperation into practical action. In 2012, SCA brought together authorities from Mongolia and China, strengthening cross-border cooperation and training more than 40 enforcement officers. In 2017, SCA and the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan delivered three wildlife trafficking workshops for 80 customs officers, border guards, police, and rangers. Alongside this work, SCA has supported research into the trade, including a review identifying 419 Russian-language online advertisements for saiga products and studies of consumer demand in Singapore.

In 2022, SCA secured a major five-year award from the US Fish and Wildlife Service to connect

organisations working across the saiga horn supply chain, from poaching and trafficking to consumer demand. Supported by the Cooper Fund and Wildlife Conservation Network (WCN), SCA and its partners are working to complete key activities begun through the programme and carry forward the cooperation it established.

Bringing evidence into international policy discussions is another important part of SCA's work. At CITES CoP20 in Samarkand in 2025, SCA and TRAFFIC jointly hosted a side event presenting Oxford student Ruth Arnold's research into international wildlife trade supply chains, sharing emerging findings with an international audience.

Looking ahead, SCA and the University of Oxford hope to bring a Wildlife Trade Masterclass to Central Asia, strengthening regional expertise and collaboration. Building on two decades of enforcement training, research, and international policy engagement, SCA will continue connecting people and evidence across borders to address evolving trade pressures and protect saigas.



▲ Customs officers receive training in identifying saiga horns and other wildlife products in Uzbekistan.



▲ 2012 CMS MoU Meeting in Mongolia.



▲ SCA and TRAFFIC's joint side event at CITES CoP20 in Samarkand.



▲ At the saiga MOU technical workshop in Vilm, Germany, 2019.

Connected by conservation

At the heart of SCA is a network of relationships connecting people across borders for saigas and the steppe.



Elena Bykova,
SCA Co-Founder &
Executive Secretary,
Uzbekistan

"It is incredible to see how much has changed over the 20 years since we founded the SCA. What started as an urgent impulse among international colleagues to save a species facing catastrophic decline has grown into a powerful conservation movement. Coming from a generation that remembered abundant saiga herds, we felt a duty to reverse their decline and restore them as a keystone species of the Eurasian steppes.

What I value most about our community is its strategic vision, professionalism, adaptability and refusal to give up. Our relationships are built on love and commitment to our shared cause, a strong belief in our mission, genuine friendship and, above all, profound respect. As a multicultural community spanning different languages and traditions, inclusivity is built into our DNA. New members join effortlessly, and even those who formally step down remain part of our extended saiga family.

Looking ahead, strong relationships will remain essential. Climate change, habitat loss and fragmented landscapes are challenges far too large for any one nation to solve in isolation.

Our work is far from over, but if the past 20 years have taught us anything, it is that hope and unity are unstoppable forces. Together, SCA will continue protecting not just a unique species, but the ecosystems and local communities that depend on it."



Anna Lushchekina,
SCA Steering Committee
Member, Russia

"When we created the Alliance in 2006, I did not think that our relationships would become more than professional. Over time, we became one family, rejoicing together in the successes achieved and grieving together over failures and, especially, human losses.

Without diminishing the contribution of government organisations, international foundations and all those who have worked and continue to work with the saiga, I believe that the relationships we developed in the early 2000s have played an important role in the species' survival and recovery.

Looking ahead, I hope that one day the Alliance will again be able to cooperate fully with colleagues in Russia and across all saiga range countries, as we were able to do before."



▲ SCA 2025 Networking Event in Samarkand.

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OF AGRICULTURAL
SCIENCES

TRAFFIC
the wildlife trade monitoring network



The next 20 years

Visions for the future

"When the Saiga Conservation Alliance reaches its 40th anniversary, I hope saigas will once again be numerous and a lynchpin of healthy steppe ecosystems: abundant enough to fulfil their ecological role as one of the great grazing species of the steppe and as prey for recovering predator populations. I hope their range will have expanded beyond its current extent, with free-ranging saigas once again roaming countries and landscapes from which they are currently absent. And I hope that, by helping to restore functioning, resilient steppe ecosystems, saiga conservation will have made these vast but fragile landscapes better able to withstand the growing pressures the next two decades will bring. I hope you'll join me in making this ambitious but achievable vision a reality."

Peter Damerell,
SCA Director



Our people, past and present

Our heartfelt thanks to everyone who has given their time, expertise, and commitment to guide SCA over the past 20 years.

Our Steering Committee



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Buuveibataar Bayarbaatar



Albert Salemgareev



Chimeddorj Buyanaa



Alexander Esipov



Elena Bykova



Anna Lushchekina



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Thank you

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the last 20 years possible.
Together, we can shape
the next 20.*

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Your support can help saigas thrive
for generations to come



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SAIGA CONSERVATION ALLIANCE

**Twentieth Anniversary Report
2006–2026**

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