

Can Mongolia unilaterally protect iconic Saiga Antelope?

The UB Post 30 Aug 2019 By AVILASH ROUL Dr Avilash Roul is a guest professor/principal scientist, at the Indo-German Centre for Sustainability of the Indian Institute of Madras, India.



On August 22, an opportunity to provide highest protection to endangered Saiga Antelope was lost due to opposition from Russia, China and Kazakhstan. During the 18th Conference of Parties, held from August 17 and 28, at the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) in Geneva, the proposal submitted by Mongolia and the US to confer highest protection (Appendix-I), which prohibits international commercial trade in threatened species, to Saiga Antelope (a critically endangered species found in steppes), was turned down by the other Saiga range states. Instead, the elongated nose antelope remains in the Appendix-II, which allows controlled exploitation of the endangered species.

Despite rejection from other range states, a consensus has reached to formalize an existing voluntary moratorium by Saiga range states not to export any Saiga horns. Contrary to the need of the hour, the Mongolian Saiga antelope are unable to evade the commercial interest which will be detrimental to the species survival. Does a zero commercial quota at CITES protect Saiga?

At Geneva, the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, the EU, and China opposed the Mongolia sponsored proposal on the basis that if the proposal were to include all populations of Saiga in range countries. The argument was provided that in Kazakhstan the population of Saiga has already bounced back including national moratoria in range states on hunting have been in place. As usually it occurs in CITES, a split-listing of Saiga would encourage illegal trade as well as enforcement would be inefficient. The Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, the EU, and Uzbekistan and others supported a proposed amendment to the Mongolia proposal of zero export quota for Saiga to curb international trade.

Despite getting increased attention internationally, the endangered species is vulnerable in verge of extinction in Mongolia. Once roaming across Eurasia, from the Carpathian Mountains in Romania to steppes in Mongolia, the Saiga is now confined to numbers 3,000 in Mongolia, 6,000 in Russia, 500 in Uzbekistan, a few in Turkmenistan and 334,000 in Kazakhstan. With more than two million in number as recently as in 1970s, the species experienced drastic decline, reaching an all-time low of about 50,000 animals in the early 2000s in range states.

Alarmingly, nearly 80 percent of the population of Saiga lost in a decade due to disease inflicted massive die-offs, loss and fragmentation of habitat, loss of natural fodder, poaching for their horns and illegal trafficking, and over and above all, climate change and desertification. In 2018, population of the Mongolian Saiga has dwindled by 40 percent as 3,000 in total than the previous year (2017) according to a recent survey by World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Mongolia. The climate change induced droughts and severe dzuds are becoming one of the major culprit of dwindling population as well. In 2001, consecutive drought and dzud restricted the number of Saiga at 750. Despite a joint effort by Mongolia government and WWF which increased the total number up to 14,000 in 2014, an outbreak of goat plague reduced the numbers to 5,000 in 2017. Last year, the dzud severely affected the natural fodder for the Saiga population. Increasing desertification and harsh winters in Mongolia due to climate change has been shrinking the natural grazing areas for Saiga population which is detrimental to recovery of Saiga population. The species has been excessively hunted from time immemorial for its skin, flesh and horns. While the male Saiga has only horns, which are being used in traditional medicine in China and Southeast Asia as substitute for rhinoceros horns, illegal killing of males have dwindled the sex ratio of Saiga population. As the horns are sold in high price in China and general believe in Mongolia, China and other South East Asian countries that blood of Saiga is good for human health, illegal culling has been widespread. As long as commercial market for Saiga derivatives is

flourishing, any unilateral measures of Mongolia can't be successful in protecting this species. There are even few cases in Mongolia where Saiga is being domesticated with the goats and sheep as herds of a family. Due to their proximity to people, acclimatized with vehicles and lights or noise, they are easy prey to poaching. Saiga hunting has been prohibited since 1930 in Mongolia, with the species included IUCN Red Book in 1987. Since 1993, Mongolia has set aside two protected areas, Sharga Nature Reserve (286,900 ha) and Mankhan Nature Reserve (30,000 ha) for the Saiga population. While Mongolia became a member of the CITES in 1996, Saiga had already been included in CITES Appendix II in 1995. In 2002, the Saiga antelope was listed as Critically Endangered species on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. It is also listed on Appendix II of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals. After 2014 ground surveys, the Mongolian government with Wildlife Conservation Society, WWF-Mongolia, the Veterinary department of Govi-Altai and Khovd provinces, and Saiga Conservation Network Team successfully surveyed through satellite collaring in 2017. Species conservation is limited within parameters of unilateral measures if the threats are beyond national boundary. The principle of cooperative effort between and among range countries including consumer and trading countries are crucial to devise a conservation plan for threatened species. Mongolia must initiate a concerted effort through environmental diplomacy with neighboring countries which are both range states as well as trade destinations of illegal trading centers of derivatives of Saiga. The MediumTerm International Work Programme for the Saiga Antelope (2016-2020) agreed under CITES, has been delayed in implementation and verification by range states. Mongolia may take the lead to host a dedicated international conference on Saiga Antelope sooner than later to germinate the cooperative effort to protect the species. As the 2018 report of Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services presented, discussed and acknowledged by countries in May this year of ominous declining of nature globally in this Anthropocene but hardly taken into consideration over commercial interest, it is prudent within the "precautionary approach" to remove the clause of "sustainable use" even the population are not under endangered category at least in the case of Saiga. However, under CITES if a species is found in more than one countries with status of endangered or declined in some and secure in others, the international effort foes to protect the endangered one in the country. This practices raise questions of the relevance of CITES and other similar international institutions dedicated for conservation of wildlife. However, the iconic antelope of Mongolia, always lucky enough to see the herds during spring season from the windows of train from Ulaanbaatar to Sainshand, is facing similar dilemma as Asian Elephant.