

A meeting to launch a new saiga website and discuss emerging threats from linear infrastructure

On 18 June, a technical meeting under the CMS Saiga MOU took place in Astana, Kazakhstan. The objectives of the meeting were to discuss the impact of infrastructure construction such as railroads and border fences on Saiga in Kazakhstan. The meeting also examined possible solutions to mitigate those impacts and saw the launch of an international coordination mechanism, the Saiga Resource Centre website.

Participants discussed options for mitigating the negative impacts of the current border fence and railway infrastructure operations in Kazakhstan. A total of 1,600 kilometres of additional rail routes will be built by 2016 as part of a 'New Silk Road' to increase overland trade between Asia and Europe. The east-west railway corridor will cut through ecologically-intact and nearly uninhabited steppe – prime Saiga habitat.

Participants welcomed recommendations for Saiga-friendly design of the fence along the border between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, such as removing the bottom two wires. To mitigate negative effects from railway construction, avoiding core Saiga range would be the best option. If construction through saiga habitat cannot be avoided, sound mitigation measures should be applied, such as a minimization of human presence along the railway and offset mechanisms (a "Saiga conservation fee" for trains). These recommendations are contained in a report initiated by the CMS Secretariat, together with the Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS), the Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan (ACBK) and Fauna and Flora International (FFI).

The second part of the workshop focused on the Saiga Resource Centre (SRC), a website to provide an online forum both for experts involved in Saiga antelope conservation as well as for the interested public. The SRC is designed as a communication platform including all relevant information regarding Saiga, and comprises a comprehensive database of literature, images and videos for use by the Saiga conservation community. The Specialist Resource Section includes a database of Saiga experts and projects related to Saiga conservation. Government officials, NGOs, experts and interested individuals can register in this section and add their own expertise and projects as well as access information about other activities and specialists.

The main objective of the website is to share information on the progress towards implementing the CMS Saiga MOU, and to invite Saiga Range States as well as States that consume or trade in Saiga products, to share information and experience on activities in the framework of the MOU. The SRC has been developed by the Saiga Conservation Alliance (SCA) and ACBK, the two technical coordinators of the Saiga MOU, with support and funding from CMS and Switzerland.

The report "Saiga Crossing Options. Guidelines and Recommendations to Mitigate Barrier Effects of Border Fencing and Railroad Corridors on Saiga Antelope in Kazakhstan" by Kirk Olson can be downloaded in English:

http://www.cms.int/species/eurasian_mammals/kirk_olson_saiga_connectivity_sw_kazakh_e.pdf

and Russian:

http://www.cms.int/species/eurasian_mammals/kirk_olson_saiga_connectivity_sw_kazakh_r.pdf

Saiga Resource Centre: <http://www.saigaresourcecentre.com/>