IUCN SSC
Species Survival Commission

Position Statement
on the conservation of Saola

POSITION STATMENT ON THE CONSERVATION OF SAOLA

The IUCN Species Survival Commission believes that Saola *(Pseudoryx nghetinhensis)* persists in the wild and calls for a concerted effort to determine how this species can be saved. So far, only about 30% of potential Saola habitat has had any form of wildlife survey that can detect Saola. Saola-focused surveys have occurred in about 5% of it. And potentially as little as 2% has been searched relatively intensively for the species. Many key areas in Saola range have not been surveyed at the high intensities needed, and using appropriate methods required, to detect the species if present.

Per-individual detection probability and population density are both thought to be very low, making any data-driven conclusion on presence or absence premature (i.e., it is plausible that Saola persists within areas already surveyed yet went undetected). Closing the substantial gap in search effort for Saola requires intensive survey efforts within strategically selected locations as well as wider survey coverage. The mission of SSC is to avert the extinction of species, and for a species as rare as Saola, IUCN SSC urges immediate action to identify and conserve existing populations before it is too late.

Context

Saola lives in the dense forests of the Annamite Mountains that run through Viet Nam and Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR). This elusive species, more closely related to wild cattle than to the antelopes it somewhat resembles, was discovered to science only as late as 1992.

It is listed by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species as Critically Endangered. The very few Saola detections since 2005 suggest that it is now very rare. Saola has not been detected conclusively since 2013. An integrated IUCN One Plan approach, that involves *in situ* and *ex situ* efforts, is needed to save the species from extinction. Finding the remaining Saolas is crucial to achieve this.

Although it is not directly targeted, the biggest threat to Saola comes from hunting, in particular from non-selective snaring. Across the Annamites, snares are placed in the forest, often in long lines, to catch ungulates, small carnivores, galliforms and other wildlife for sale in the wild meat trade. Saola, which does not have a high trade value, is at risk of being caught in the snares as bycatch. This

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Cover: Wild saola camera-trapped in central Laos (Bolikhamxay Province) in 1999. ©Ban Vangban village & Wildlife Conservation Society.

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snaring has devastated populations of many mammal species within the Saola's range, a phenomenon which has been termed the 'Southeast Asian snaring crisis'.

Saola search efforts

Effective and intensive searches for Saola are needed to detect this extremely rare species. Previous efforts have included the use of camera traps and emerging environmental DNA-based techniques, along with the use of local knowledge to focus detection efforts. Other species in the Saola range such as bears and Gaur can be detected using signs such as footprints. However, it is unknown if it is possible to detect Saola reliably using footprints, given that its signs resemble so closely those of other species.

Expert opinion suggests that only about 30% of potential Saola habitat has had wildlife surveys, of any form, and for any purpose, capable of detecting Saola. Targeted Saola searches using several methods have been deployed in various landscapes since 2017 but have not resulted in a confirmed detection. Such Saola-focused approaches are believed to have covered less than 5% of potential habitat, and only about 2% has been surveyed specifically and moderately intensively for Saola. A Saola Knowledge Review coordinated by the IUCN SSC Saola Working Group, to be published within 2021, reviews detection efforts. It will document surveys to date within Saola habitat, and present the best available scientific evidence to guide future detection efforts. Furthermore, camera-trap surveys as currently deployed routinely do not detect other species known to be present based on other methods. This indicates that additional other species not detectable by these other methods (such as Saola) may have been present but not camera-trapped. With good natural history grounds to infer that Saola has a low per-individual detection probability compared with other ground-living mammals of comparable size, Saola is at particular risk of being among these overlooked species in each survey area.

In sum, this rare species is expected to have very low detection probabilities and only a small proportion of its range has been intensively surveyed. Hence, IUCN SSC does not consider that a lack of Saola detections in a particular landscape is an indicator of a lack of the species's presence.

For example, in one intensively surveyed area in Lao PDR, around 300 camera-traps operated for over a year, with collective trapping effort approaching 100,000 trap-nights. However, the area monitored is less than 1% of this 90 km^2 area. Through these efforts, species like Gaur *(Bos gaurus)*, which have been confirmed by signs, have not yet been photographed by the camera traps. This supports the argument that other species with very low detection probabilities, like Saola, may also exist in the area but not yet have been photographed.

The discovery in 2016 of a hunter's Saola trophy also suggests that Saola may have persisted in at least one locality in Viet Nam until at least 2012. This particular forest area is isolated, relatively small, and has been heavily hunted, which makes it one of the least likely landscapes in which to expect Saola survival. Nevertheless, with the evidence suggesting that Saola survived there, it is reasonable to expect that it still does so in some of the other areas of suitable habitat that are much larger, better connected with other potential Saola habitat, and in some cases have been less heavily hunted.

Conclusion

The available evidence and expert opinion suggest that Saola persists in the wild, probably scattered across multiple localities and in extremely low numbers. Much greater search effort for Saola is urgently required. Concurrently, it is vital to increase the intensity and total coverage of survey, and further to develop the ecological knowledge and methods needed to detect Saola reliably. This is the key cornerstone to rescue the species from the brink of extinction through the wider IUCN One Plan Approach. To deliver this conservation outcome, we encourage the committed involvement of the necessarily broad coalition of international and incountry stakeholders in a coordinated programme. We strongly believe that a substantial increase in search effort is needed in strategically focused key areas to secure the future of the species.