

Soalas



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Often called the Asian unicorn, little is known about the enigmatic saola in the two decades since its discovery. None exist in captivity and this rarely-seen mammal is already critically endangered. Scientists have categorically documented saola in the wild on only four occasions to date.

The saola was discovered in May 1992 during a joint survey carried out by the Ministry of Forestry of Vietnam and WWF in north-central Vietnam. The team found a skull with unusual long, straight horns in a hunter's home and knew it was something extraordinary. The find proved to be the first large mammal new to science in more than 50 years and one of the most spectacular zoological discoveries of the 20th century.

Saola (pronounced: sow-la) are recognized by two parallel horns with sharp ends, which can reach 20 inches in length and are found on both males and females. Meaning “spindle horns” in Vietnamese, they are a cousin of cattle but resemble an antelope. Saola have striking white markings on the face and large maxillary glands on the muzzle, which could be used to mark territory or attract mates. They are found only in the Annamite Mountains of Vietnam and Laos.

The saola—one of the rarest and most threatened mammals on the planet—was photographed in Vietnam for the first time in 15 years by a camera trap set by WWF and the Vietnamese government's Forest Protection Department.

The actual size of the remaining population is unknown. Its rarity, distinctiveness and vulnerability make it one of the greatest priorities for conservation in the region. The current population is thought to be a few hundred at a maximum and possibly only a few dozen at a minimum.

With its unusually long horns and white markings on the face, the saola is a strong symbol for biodiversity in Lao and Vietnam.

HUNTING

Saola are often caught in snares set in the forest for wild boar, sambar or muntjac deer. Local villagers set some snares for subsistence use and crop protection. Recent increases in lowland people hunting to supply the illegal trade in wildlife has led to a

massive increase in hunting, driven by traditional medicine demand in China and restaurant and food markets in Vietnam and Laos.

HABITAT LOSS

As forests disappear under the chainsaw to make way for agriculture, plantations and infrastructure, saola are being squeezed into smaller spaces. The added pressure from rapid and large-scale infrastructure in the region is also fragmenting saola habitat. Conservationists are concerned that this is allowing hunters easy access to the once untouched forest of the saola and may reduce genetic diversity in the future.

“Only recently discovered, saola are already extremely threatened. At a time when species extinction on the planet has accelerated, we can work together to snatch this one back from the edge of extinction.”

Dr. Barney Long, WWF Asian species expert



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WWF has been involved with the protection of the saola since its discovery. WWF's work to support the saola focuses on strengthening and establishing protected areas. We also work on research, community based forest management, capacity building and strengthening law enforcement. WWF has been involved in creating a plan for the management of protected areas and continues to work on projects in the region. We helped improve the management of Vu Quang Nature Reserve where the saola was discovered. In the last four years we have helped establish two new adjacent saola reserves in the Thua-Thien Hue and Quang Nam provinces. We lead saola surveys, do research and play a very active role in an international working group established to save the saola.

