

# NOTES FROM THE FIELD

— FALL 2022 —

---

PROTECTING SAIGA  
IN WARTIME

---

A UNITED FRONT AGAINST  
OKAPI TRAFFICKING

---

A CHANGE OF PLANS  
FOR BEAR HABITAT

20  
YEARS

Wildlife Conservation Network

# Protecting Saiga in Wartime

Under a wide blue sky, 60-ton tanks leave deep gashes across the sprawling green fields of the Askania-Nova Biosphere Reserve. Located in Ukraine's Kherson region, this reserve is a vibrant ecosystem teeming with life. It's been nicknamed the "Ukrainian Serengeti" for its abundance of wildlife, including Critically Endangered saiga antelope. Saiga are ancient creatures and Askania-Nova is the oldest steppe reserve in the world, but recent events in the Russo-Ukrainian War have brought great peril to this sanctuary, compelling the Saiga Conservation Alliance (SCA) to come to the aid of the saiga and their neighbors.

Askania-Nova has been a protected UNESCO territory since 1985, with its core and adjacent areas spanning over 81,000 acres. Along with saiga, over 3,000 animal species live in

the Reserve, including Przewalsky's horses, Turkmen kulans, and European fallow deer. Askania-Nova's staff supervise its large saiga population. Their work has been instrumental in bolstering saiga numbers, from 72 individuals in the 1970s to about 700 individuals today. These saiga are semi-wild, meaning they roam freely and do not often interact with people, but Reserve staff do provide them with sustenance when necessary. For example, this territory has no open sources of water, so Reserve staff drilled artesian wells to accommodate the 1,200 ungulates in Askania-Nova.

In February, the Russian invasion of Ukraine brought instability to Kherson. Being located strategically close to the Black Sea, Russians occupied the region, making it dangerous for Ukrainians and wildlife. In July, Russian forces seized some territory bordering the Reserve, and



Viktor Gavrilenko

*Above: Askania-Nova is a haven for many different species, including Przewalsky's horses.*

*Below: Saiga herds have flourished within the Reserve, but still rely on artesian wells and occasional feed from staff to survive.*

while staff refused to cooperate with the invaders, the passage of tanks and armored vehicles through the Reserve tore up the landscape. Reserve staff and wildlife are also forced to endure the thunderous threat of combat aircraft and missiles flying low overhead. This invasion disrupts both the Reserve's work and wildlife's quality of life. The Reserve has lost roughly \$2.1 million in national funding during this

occupation since money is needed for the war, crippling their ability to maintain the animals' well-being. Funds for equipment upkeep, animal feed, and electricity have dwindled, and there is a risk that water flow from the wells may also be impeded.

SCA, who are in close contact with Reserve staff, have launched fundraising efforts to keep rangers and other personnel employed during the conflict. Donations have helped the Reserve survive for the past few months, allowing employees to continue supplying the saiga with feed and do their best to keep them safe. SCA support also contributed to the purchase of an autonomous power generator, which, in the event of electricity failure, will keep the artesian wells pumping water for the animals. This is particularly vital since there has been no rain in Askania-Nova since last autumn and their reservoirs are dry.

SCA will continue to support the Reserve and raise awareness about protecting the saiga and other animals from starvation, dehydration, and other hazards of war. While conditions remain fragile, they are hopeful that people and wildlife will weather this difficult time and see an end to the conflict soon. ■





# A United Front Against Okapi Trafficking

*OCP and Conserv Congo hand over all seized wildlife contraband to ICCN authorities. In addition to okapi skins and body parts, they have also recovered leopard skins, forest elephant tusks, and pangolin scales and meat.*

*Okapi skin, meat, and bones are easily disguised within shipments of similar, legal products from domestic animals, making them difficult for authorities to spot.*



*Above: An okapi in Okapi Wildlife Reserve. Opposite page, left: ICCN ecoguards are heavily involved in patrolling the Reserve and assisting with wildlife contraband confiscations. Right: An okapi skin seized from traffickers.*

The dust diffused in the afternoon sun as Congolese authorities lugged several containers of illegal cargo into the light. Each box contained the velvety brown, uniquely striped skins and body parts from okapi poached in the Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC) Okapi Wildlife Reserve. This seizure, which also resulted in an arrest, is indicative of an unsettling increase in illegal wildlife trafficking between eastern DRC and Uganda. Conserv Congo, a local NGO partnering with authorities, seeks to smother this emerging trend with support

from the Okapi Conservation Project (OCP), who have protected the Reserve's okapi for over 35 years.

Okapi are Endangered relatives of giraffes found only in the remote forests of DRC, so distinctive and rarely seen that they are sometimes called Africa's unicorns. The Reserve is one of their only strongholds, housing approximately 3,200 okapi as of a 2018 census. But this already fragile population has been declining in recent years due to increased poaching. Okapi in the Reserve, as

well as Lomami and Virunga National Parks, are being killed and trafficked to Uganda and faraway markets like Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Their ornate skins are sold as decorations, while okapi meat, bones, and fat are targeted for false medicinal value, with every part selling for thousands of dollars.

With OCP providing financial support and information about illegal sales from neighboring communities, Conserv Congo is leading a thorough response to the trafficking of okapi and other wildlife. Their investigation revealed that 80% of the illegal wildlife products seized in Uganda originate from DRC, and estimates that products from up to 10 okapi have been crossing the border every month since 2019. OCP worries that, if this poaching is not stopped, it may decimate DRC's small okapi population within just a few years.

Together with DRC and Ugandan authorities, Conserv Congo created a taskforce to pursue these wildlife criminals on both sides of the border. Their large informant network helps identify the sellers and buyers of okapi

products. OCP's close relationship with DRC communities and Reserve ecoguards plays a crucial role in this pursuit, helping Conserv Congo receive tips on poaching activity, develop a map of trade routes, and collect intelligence that facilitates arrests. By exchanging data and launching joint patrols, this taskforce has successfully captured nine traffickers in possession of okapi products and is currently investigating another eight. Two of these criminals have been sentenced, but convictions are sometimes difficult to secure; it is not uncommon for charges to suddenly be dropped. OCP



aid allows Conserv Congo to stay involved throughout the lengthy prosecution process to ensure each trafficker is appropriately sentenced.

OCP will continue supporting Conserv Congo to disrupt the international trade of okapi parts between DRC and Uganda. They intend to build upon what has worked so far to expand the area covered, further enlist community assistance, and help authorities bring more poachers and traffickers into custody. With so few okapi left in the wild, OCP and Conserv Congo will work with the DRC government to dampen this growing threat. ■





# A Change of Plans for Bear Habitat

*Calicantro is roughly 2,400 acres and is directly on the other side of a key watershed from Dibujos, another vital area that SBC purchased last year to secure as permanent bear habitat.*

*WCN supported SBC with the purchase of their camera traps, which led to the discovery of the importance of Calicantro to the Tumbes bear population.*

Isai Sanchez squinted as he leaned closer to the computer screen, studying the camera trap footage for any signs of bears. Over 15 years as Spectacled Bear Conservation's (SBC) Logistic Director has made Isai an authority on finding and identifying specific bears. But after months of combing through footage from northern Peru's Salas community lands, 6,000 feet up the mountains, dread slowly crept into his mind—there were hardly any bears. SBC's plans to protect Peru's Tumbes bear population rested on the assumption that Salas was prime bear habitat. But Isai's discovery turned those plans upside down.

SBC was working with the Salas Indigenous community to turn it into a protected area. Salas seemed like an ideal bear stronghold, filled with mountain forests and adjacent to the Laquipampa National Wildlife Refuge, where 40 bears reside. SBC placed 160 camera traps throughout the Tumbes region, including Salas, to evaluate the bear population and establish their range. Isai's team of monitors collected the footage every eight weeks, pouring through piles of data for an entire year, but only found two bears in that time. They realized that Salas was too highly fragmented by human development to be suitable for bears, but the footage also revealed something else—the Calicantro land at the base of the mountains was buzzing with bear activity.



*Isai Sanchez installing a camera trap in the field.*

While the wildlife refuge houses most of the Tumbes spectacled bears, it's not large enough to sustain them all. SBC originally thought that the bears wandered into Salas for food, but the camera trap data proved they were actually moving down into Calicantro to reach its dense sapote fruit groves. Calicantro also acts as a transit hub, uniting Tumbes' isolated bears and allowing them to travel freely between the refuge, Salas, and neighboring Pan De Azucar. This makes Calicantro's flatland dry forests the most vital habitat in the entire region.

Isai's discovery was a complete surprise, but emboldened SBC to refocus their conservation efforts on Calicantro, not Salas. Research is the lifeblood of conservation, providing critical information that leads to the largest impacts in the right places. Time is always short when it comes to protecting endangered species, and without their camera trap data, SBC could have wasted years and precious funds securing the wrong habitat. With Calicantro being central to the region's 60-75 bears, SBC now knows this land must be purchased and protected, no matter the cost. Were it instead sold to mining or agricultural interests, the Tumbes bears would lose their main food source and be permanently isolated from each other, dooming them to extinction.

Reinvigorated by this revelation, Isai and SBC have fully pivoted to purchasing Calicantro. They have made an agreement with the landowner and put down a first payment, and will spend the next several years raising funds for the full amount. Their research will continue once the purchase is complete, assessing the health of the bears and restoring Calicantro to peak condition. With ironclad data guiding their efforts, SBC is confident that this lasting plan to protect the Tumbes bears will boost their survivability. ■



Michel Leon/SBC



*Above: Calicantro is the core area uniting all of the bear habitats in the Tumbes region. Below: A spectacled bear and her cub caught by camera trap footage.*



**WCN is celebrating  
our 20th Anniversary  
with a special  
campaign for wildlife.  
Join us at  
[wildnet.org/20years](http://wildnet.org/20years)**

**WCN protects endangered  
wildlife by supporting  
conservationists who  
ensure wildlife and people  
coexist and thrive.**

## **Invest In Wildlife Conservation**

We greatly appreciate your dedication to protecting wildlife. Your generous support is what makes wildlife conservation possible.

### **WAYS TO GIVE**

- ▶ Donate by mail, phone, fax, or online
- ▶ Become a monthly donor
- ▶ Give a gift on behalf of someone else
- ▶ Include WCN in your estate plans
- ▶ Donate stock or other securities

WCN maintains Charity Navigator's highest possible 4-star rating. Charity Navigator is America's leading independent charity evaluator, and rates over 8,000 charities on their Financial Health and Accountability & Transparency.



EIN # 30-0108469 • CFC # 63038

If you prefer to receive the WCN newsletter in electronic form, please let us know by calling 415-202-6380 or emailing [info@wildnet.org](mailto:info@wildnet.org).

NONPROFIT ORG.  
US POSTAGE  
PAID  
OAKLAND, CA  
PERMIT NO. 259



209 Mississippi Street  
San Francisco, CA 94107, USA  
Ph. (415) 202-6380

**wildnet.org**