

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

— WINTER 2023 —

■
HELPING SAIGA
THRIVE IN ARALKUM

■
RESPONDING TO
STRANDED
MARINE MAMMALS

■
WELCOMING NEW
PAINTED DOG PACKS
TO HWANGE



WCN

Wildlife Conservation Network

Helping Saiga Thrive in Aralkum

Pale dust plumed as the Saiga Conservation Alliance (SCA) team pulled their vehicles off the main road, arriving at two artesian wells. This water source is one of the few found in what was once Uzbekistan's Aral Sea, now a vast region of sand and salt. The team looked around, awed by the sight of hundreds of hoofprints surrounding the wells, confirmation that the region's only herd of Critically Endangered saiga antelope was venturing closer to human-dominated areas to find water. This formerly ruined landscape has recently become the country's newest protected area, and SCA must now ensure these desert-dwelling saiga have the resources and protection necessary to thrive.

Since 2016, SCA has spearheaded ecological surveys of the former Aral Sea and fought for its protected status as vital saiga habitat. In March 2022, Uzbekistan's government designated the region—covering nearly 2.5 million acres—as Aralkum National Park. Although this represented a tremendous win for saiga conservation, no borders or management plan were established for the new park. Seeing there was still much work to be done, SCA took charge of making Aralkum a reality.

SCA's first step was using past and current survey data to map out key biodiversity areas, water sources, and human activity in Aralkum, creating a park zoning map for the government that prevents commercial development near saiga and other wildlife. There are lingering mining and natural gas extraction projects occurring in parts of Aralkum, which will remain for several more years—SCA's map confines these operations to specific zones, prohibiting their expansion into the core zone, where most wildlife is found. SCA is also training members of local communities as park staff, teaching them how to monitor wildlife. A stable population of about 200 saiga lives within Aralkum's core zone, mostly around "Resurrection Island," a land mass near the Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan border. But this former island is located deep in the desert, where little water is found.

While poaching is the main threat to saiga antelope, Aralkum is largely free of poachers due to its inaccessible, difficult terrain. There is only one gravel road and no offroad vehicle can outpace a swift saiga in the sandy, salty desert. This makes Aralkum safe for saiga and over 130 other species, including caracals, flamingos, golden eagles, and foxes.

Most water sources are in Aralkum's industrial zone for human workers.

The two artesian wells—located near the main road—are the closest to Resurrection Island, meaning the saiga must travel far from the core zone out of necessity and tolerate being near high human activity. SCA regularly speaks with these companies to ensure their staff do not disturb any saiga that come searching for water. Once these industrial projects conclude, the wells will be free of human disruptions and the whole park will become more hospitable for the saiga, hopefully leading to steady population growth. In the meantime, SCA is investigating where they can add more artificial water sources across Aralkum, particularly closer to Resurrection Island. SCA also plans to strengthen its collaboration with conservation groups in

Kazakhstan, as the saiga migrate between both countries. Increased transboundary coordination can lead to the establishment of more wildlife corridors to connect protected areas that house saiga.

The founding of Aralkum National Park, and the continued dedication of SCA, furthers the restoration of this once desolate wasteland and secures it as an important protected area for saiga and countless steppe wildlife. ■



The Aral Sea was the planet's fourth largest body of freshwater, until unsustainable irrigation programs depleted virtually all water by the early 2000s. It was one of history's greatest man-made environmental disasters, contributing to the loss of one of Earth's largest saiga populations. SCA is turning this wasteland into a haven for saiga, transforming ecological tragedy into conservation success.



Responding to Stranded Marine Mammals



MareCet holding stranding response workshops with Malaysian communities.

MareCet provides stranding response kits to fishers who live in areas where death strandings often occur. These kits include rubber gloves, measuring tape, receptacles for biological samples, and report sheets to collect details about the animal. This enables local people to participate in citizen science and aid MareCet's research to mitigate the causes of strandings.

Setting down the life-sized inflatable dolphin, Dr. Vivian Kuit directed the onlookers toward the beach. A volunteer laid supine along the sand, clad in flippers and a fake dorsal fin. Marine mammals often strand themselves along Malaysia's long coastline, and as a Scientific Officer for MareCet, leading stranding response workshops for locals is one of Vivian's regular duties. While inflatable dolphins make a good visual, it's important for workshop participants to understand what lifting a live animal feels like, hence the surrogate dolphin in plastic flippers. As they raised their peer on a makeshift stretcher, Vivian continued the lesson, which equips local people with the necessary skills to save stranded marine mammals.

MareCet has held stranding workshops across Malaysia for over a decade, inviting local fishers, NGOs, beachgoers, and staff from Malaysia's Department of Fisheries and other government agencies to learn how to respond to stranded marine mammals. Death strandings are frequent, where a marine mammal carcass washes ashore as a result of boat strikes or fatal injuries sustained from bycatch—the accidental capture of marine mammals in fishing nets. Live strandings are much rarer, where the marine mammal has beached itself out of stress, illness, or due to injuries; often the animals can be saved in these incidents, but the response must come within a few hours of the stranding. MareCet receives a handful of calls every month about strandings, which are a threat to endangered species like Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins, Irrawaddy dolphins, and Indo-Pacific finless porpoises.

While the actual rate of strandings in Malaysia is unknown, stranding reports have increased in recent years. MareCet hangs informative posters with their contact



Low visibility underwater makes it difficult for marine mammals to see fishers' nets, so MareCet's Bycatch Mitigation Project attaches acoustic pingers to them that emit high frequency sounds. This alerts marine mammals to avoid the nets, thus avoiding bycatch that leads to strandings.

information throughout coastal communities, so people immediately know who to call whenever a stranded marine mammal is found. But people who call are often too far away for MareCet to reach in person, especially in the event of a time-sensitive live stranding. This is what makes MareCet's workshops so important—they teach communities how to save stranded marine mammals, or in the event of death strandings, how to contribute to research that supports marine mammal conservation. MareCet also offers video calls to those reporting strandings from faraway locations, to walk them through each step of what to do.

MareCet's workshops typically draw between 20-70 attendees, and can last between several hours or several days. Techniques they teach include providing shade to the stranded

animal, making sure its skin stays moist with seawater, keeping its eyes and blowhole free of sand, keeping the animal upright, digging pits beneath its fins to relieve joint pressure, keeping away large crowds, and to avoid dragging the animal by its tail. Over the years, these workshops have been received very favorably and interest in them has only grown, with MareCet now being invited as guest speakers to similar workshops held by those they've inspired.

Vivian and her teammates want anyone to be able to play a role in marine mammal conservation, and by acting as first responders to strandings, everyday people can make a significant difference for marine mammals and help MareCet make Malaysia's waters safer. ■

Welcoming New Painted Dog Packs to Hwange

Jealous Mpofo adjusted his grip on the radio telemetry antenna jutting out of the window. The midday sun caused the truck's metal door to sting his arm, but he ignored the discomfort. As PDC's Chief Tracker and Field Manager, Jealous uses his extensive tracking skills to help Painted Dog Conservation (PDC) trace every inch of the buffer zone between



Peter Lindsey

PDC's many years of hard work have made Hwange's buffer zone a mostly secure and desirable place for painted dogs to live.

Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park and communal lands, often camping in the bush for days while monitoring the area's fragile painted dog population. As the shadows slowly crawled across the dirt road, several dogs from the newly-formed Umkhonto pack finally emerged from the grass. Recently, Hwange's buffer zone has become home to five painted dog packs—the most ever seen in the area—and PDC is ramping up their efforts to keep these new dogs safe.

In the past 25 years, there have never been more than two packs recorded in the buffer zone at a given time. Jealous is very familiar with the native dogs—the Mpindothele and Bachijwa packs—but in early 2023, he discovered that three new packs had moved in, which PDC named the Umkhonto, Kingsbury, and Thutshu packs. While this was cause for celebration, Jealous and his team had to quickly familiarize themselves with the new dogs and broaden their efforts to protect them.

Hwange's buffer zone is somewhat paradoxical. On one hand, this sudden influx of packs indicated that painted dogs from surrounding areas were recognizing the buffer zone as safe territory. This is largely due to the quarter century that PDC has spent reducing threats to the

The buffer zone outside Hwange National Park is roughly 1.5 million acres—larger than Grand Canyon National Park—and each pack's territory overlaps the others. This makes it challenging for Jealous and PDC's monitoring team to track all the packs' movements, but they are already adapting to handle the increased population.



Nicholas Dyer

Jealous Mpofo, recent recipient of the Tusk Wildlife Ranger Award, on patrol in Hwange National Park's buffer zone.

dogs and prey species across this landscape. On the other hand, bushmeat poaching still occurs within the zone and represents the greatest threat to painted dogs despite PDC's regular anti-poaching unit patrols, which remove thousands of snares every year. Vehicle traffic also poses a danger to the packs that have settled close to the few roads in the area. PDC needed

to escalate their work to give the new dogs the best chance at survival in their new home.

To protect the growing population of dogs living along Hwange's border, PDC added eight new scouts to their core anti-poaching unit, bringing the unit total to 25. They have also increased engagement with nearby communities, enlisting over 140 local people to assist with anti-poaching patrols to ensure they can cover every pack's territory, particularly near poaching hotspots. In the last six months, the unit has conducted over 1,300 patrols and removed over 3,300 snares. Jealous and his trackers also utilize radio and GPS collars to monitor the two native packs, with plans to collar the new packs as soon as possible. And to reduce traffic fatalities among the dogs, PDC successfully lobbied the government to install speed limit signage and rumble strips on the roads.

Every dog matters to Jealous. He spends countless hours following them, learning their individual behavior, and thinks of them as his own. By adapting to a rare population jump and expanding their reach, PDC is providing long-term protection for more painted dogs than ever before, which will foster further growth for Jealous' new canine neighbors. ■



Roads in the buffer zone can pose a danger to the painted dogs, like the Umkhonto pack seen here.

Happy Holidays from WCN!

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