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Conservation Efforts to Help Bring Back the Bukhara Deer, the Bactrian Camel and the Asiatic Wild Ass to Central Asia

Bergen/Norway, 23 November 2011 – Almost half a century ago, the Bukhara deer – a species endemic to Central Asia – disappeared from the forests along the Syrdarya river in Kazakhstan due to unsustainable agricultural practices, logging and shrub felling on river banks, overgrazing by livestock, and uncontrolled hunting.

This flagship species of Central Asia has since been reintroduced to Karatchingil in Kazakhstan and Badai-tugai in Uzbekistan thanks to the conservation efforts of Central Asian governments to protect the natural habitat, locally known as tugai forests, which are characterized by thickets of trees and grassy clearings interspersed with wetlands.

This week representatives from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, as well as international experts, gathered on the margins of a UN wildlife conference convened by the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals under the UN Environment Programme (UNEP/CMS) in Bergen, Norway, to review the conservation status of the Bukhara deer and to agree on future priorities.

Since 2002, when a Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation and Restoration of the Bukhara Deer was concluded under CMS with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, the World Wildlife Fund of Russia and the International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation, the overall population of the deer in Central Asia quadrupled from 350 to 1,620. Afghanistan has set another positive signal towards strengthening transboundary cooperation by adding its signature to the agreement.

Reintroducing deer bred in captivity in 2007 and establishing protected areas have been part of this successful conservation strategy. Sanctuaries were also created; water drainage systems improved and canals were cleaned to ensure water flow from rivers to the lakes in the sanctuaries, allowing as well for the recovery of the lakes, forest and populations of various other species.

However, the degradation of riparian forest ecosystems continues and constitutes a major threat to the long-term survival of the deer species. As a result, delegates to the Conference also agreed on a roadmap to conserve the Bukhara deer and its habitat, including the development of a new Action Plan for the species.

The Bukhara deer will benefit from the new overarching CMS Eurasian Aridland Mammals Action Plan to improve the protection of large mammals in the arid regions, cold deserts, steppes and mountains of Central Asia at regional, national and local levels.

CMS Executive Secretary Elizabeth Maruma Mrema said: “Compared to the world’s most famous migrations, such as the wildebeest movements in the Serengeti-Mara Ecosystem of Tanzania and Kenya, the large migrations of Mongolian gazelles, Saiga antelopes and Kulans in Eurasia attract much less attention. CMS works to protect these animals and the unique Eurasian arid lands as a sanctuary for migratory species.”

Central Asia is one of the few regions with a largely coherent network of diverse ecosystems. Bactrian camels, Saiga antelopes and gazelles depend on these ecosystems, while preserving them at the same time. During their migratory journeys they cover large distances across the Central Asian steppes and deserts and need intact, contiguous ecosystems. In return, they are important indicators for the status of these ecosystems.

But habitat degradation is increasingly also threatening wild camels, antelopes, gazelles, goats, yaks, wild ass and snow leopards. Desertification caused by overgrazing as a result of increasing livestock numbers, climate change, more frequent and more serious natural disasters, unsustainable irrigation systems leading to scarcity of water and poverty threaten to destroy the quality of prairie and pasture land as well as people’s livelihoods - with far-reaching consequences not only for biodiversity, but also for the social and economic structures of local communities.

Infrastructure projects linked to exploitation of oil, gas and mineral reserves - most of which are found in Central Asia - divide important habitats and create barriers to migratory animals whose populations are split into smaller groups, exposing them to a higher risk of extinction.

Maintaining ecological networks and migration corridors is essential to connect important sites and helps to conserve viable populations. Research and monitoring using standardized methods for data collection and sharing are needed to fill substantive knowledge gaps and to better understand migration patterns and population dynamics.

Under the new Action Plan wildlife agencies and park rangers will be trained and strengthened. Economic incentives, for example such as sharing income from controlled sustainable hunting and eco-tourism to local communities, will support people in managing natural resources in a responsible way.

The Plan also includes protecting the lowland riparian forests that can still be found along the river basins of the Amudaria and Syrdaria, being the largest and most important water arteries in Central Asia and critical habitat for the Bukhara deer. It also covers the major Pamir and Tian Shan mountain ranges, home to the wild argali and markhor sheep, the highly endangered snow leopard as well as poaching and illegal trade.

“The CMS Plan provides a first strategy for increased transboundary collaboration among governments, nature conservation agencies, NGOs and local communities to enhance research, wildlife law enforcement and information exchange,” added Ms. Maruma Mrema.

At the 10th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CMS, which is being held from 20 to 25 November in Bergen, Norway, the Argali sheep of the Central Asian Highlands is also being proposed for listing on Appendix II of the Convention.

Notes to Editors:

The Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (UNEP/CMS) works for the conservation of a wide array of endangered migratory animals worldwide through the negotiation and implementation of agreements and action plans. CMS is a growing convention with special importance due to its expertise in the field of migratory species. At present, 116 countries are parties to the Convention.

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