

Illegal and Unsustainable Wildlife Hunting and Trade in Mongolia

Peter Zahler¹, Badamjav Lhagvasuren², Richard P. Reading³, James R. Wingard⁴, Sukh Amgalanbaatar², Sundev Gombobaatar⁵, Nigel Barton⁶ and Yondon Onon⁷

¹Wildlife Conservation Society, P.O. Box 485, Ulaanbaatar 211238, Mongolia e-mail: pzahler@wcs.org

²Institute of Biology, Mongolian Academy of Sciences, Ulaanbaatar 51, Mongolia e-mail: Ecolab@magicnet.mn

³Denver Zoological Foundation, 2900 E. 23rd Ave., Denver, CO, 80205, USA e-mail: rreading@denverzoo.org

⁴Innovative Concepts International, Inc. 7015 Siesta Dr., Missoula, MO, 59802, USA e-mail: jrwingard@icintl.org

⁵National University of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar 210646, Mongolia e-mail: gomboo@num.edu.mn

⁶Steppe Forward Programme, National University of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar 210646, Mongolia e-mail: gobiology@yahoo.com

⁷WWF-Mongolia, Hydrometeorological Building, Room 309, Khudaldaany Str. 5, Ulaanbaatar-46, Mongolia e-mail mpo-species@wwf.mn

Abstract

Recent reports and studies document dramatic declines in a wide variety of wildlife species in Mongolia. The prime driver in these declines appears to be illegal and unsustainable hunting, both for local trade and consumption and for the international market. While data on these declines are sparse, comparisons of survey reports since the 1980s present evidence that some species may have declined by up to 90% in recent years. We outline the situation for eight major species of wildlife in Mongolia (saiga antelope, Mongolian gazelle, red deer, musk deer, argali, brown bear, Siberian marmot, and saker falcon). We then review the existing legal conditions and government efforts to control this situation, and suggest specific changes and actions that Mongolia should take to halt these dramatic declines in wildlife populations and avoid what may soon become an extinction crisis.

Key words: unsustainable hunting, trade, endangered species, mammals, birds

Introduction

Mongolia's transition in the early 1990s from a relatively strong Soviet-dominated economy with strict controls over hunting and trade to a struggling free-market economy has resulted in a dramatic increase in illegal hunting and trade. A faltering economy, increased reliance on trade with China, porous borders, and little revenue and will for enforcement has led to rapid declines in a range of wildlife. Much of this hunting is for local trade or consumption, but there are a number of species in Mongolia threatened by illegal international trade, and evidence suggests that this threat is growing and beginning to spread to new species.

Unlike Southeast Asia, where the international trade focuses primarily on small animals, much of the illegal hunting and trade in Mongolia is directed at larger mammals. Red deer (*Cervus elaphus*),

musk deer (*Moschus moschiferus*), Mongolian gazelle (*Procapra gutturosa*), saiga antelope (*Saiga tatarica*), brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), and a host of furbearers are the main components of the illegal trade market. As these species decrease in number, hunters and traders are already switching to other species such as moose (*Alces alces*), roe deer (*Capreolus pygargus*) and even red squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*) (Pratt *et al.*, 2004).

Eight examples illustrate the currently unsustainable illegal hunting and trade pressure in Mongolia.

Saiga Antelope: The Mongolian saiga antelope (*S. t. mongolica*) is a distinct subspecies long isolated from the main populations in Kazakhstan and Russia by the Altai Mountains. Saiga antelope are herd animals that live on open steppe and desert steppe communities. In Mongolia, they are found in the southwestern part of the country, primarily in Hovd and Govi-Altai Aimags.