

Prestigious recognition from The Earthshot Prize 2024 for efforts to protect and restore vast grasslands in Kazakhstan

- A long-term large-scale collaborative conservation initiative in Kazakhstan has today been named as a finalist for His Royal Highness Prince William's Earthshot Prize 2024
- The Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative (Altyn Dala) is one of three finalists in the 'Protect and Restore Nature' category, following its vision and results to conserve and restore the grassland, wetland, and deserts of Kazakhstan
- Covering an area equivalent to Turkey (over 75 million hectares / 185 million acres), the work of Altyn Dala has been instrumental in the remarkable recovery of the once *Critically Endangered* Saiga Antelope while also benefiting other threatened wildlife and creating rural employment.

The Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative (Altyn Dala - meaning Golden Steppe in Kazakh) has today been announced as one of 15 finalists for The Earthshot Prize 2024 and one of three in the 'Protect and Restore Nature' category. The initiative has been recognised for its efforts to conserve and restore the ecosystems of the ancient Kazakh steppe, wetlands, and deserts for the benefit of Saiga Antelope and other globally important wildlife.

As a long-term collaborative partnership between Kazakhstan's Ministry of Ecology & Natural Resources, the Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan (ACBK), Fauna & Flora, Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS), and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), Altyn Dala, was initially founded in 2005 to prevent the extinction of Saiga Antelope .

Today, Altyn Dala is working across 75 million hectares (185 million acres) of steppe ecosystems - equivalent in size to Turkey - to create and expand protected areas, restore threatened species' populations, address illegal wildlife trade, and provide professional training and public education.

Through these efforts Altyn Dala has reversed spectacularly the prospects of the unique Saiga Antelope, a keystone species across the steppe. Targeted by criminal poaching gangs for their horns, the Saiga Antelope population collapsed by 2005, reaching lows of fewer than 40,000. Sustained research, anti-poaching, anti-smuggling, protected area establishment, and public education efforts have since enabled Saiga Antelope populations to recover to an unprecedented level of over 2.8 million in 2024. This represents one of the most dramatic recoveries of a mammal ever recorded.

Beyond the efforts to recover Saiga Antelope populations, Altyn Dala partners are additionally working to revive a series of other priority threatened species, including Steppe Eagles, Sociable Lapwing, Kulan (wild ass) and Przewalski's Horse - the latter reintroduced in 2024 after a 200 year absence.

Having today been selected as a finalist for The Earthshot Prize 2024 from over 2,400 nominees, the announcement follows the global recognition of Altyn Dala by the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration as one of only 17 World Restoration Flagships in 2022.

As Daniyar Turgambayev from the Committee of Forestry and Wildlife of the Government of Kazakhstan's Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources shares: *"We are delighted to receive this recognition on the world stage for the collaborative efforts of the Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative and we congratulate our fellow finalists. There is, however, much work to still be done to ensure the golden steppes of Kazakhstan continue to benefit people, wildlife, and climate long into the future. We*

intend to continue to work as a partnership to further utilise our experience and provide training to local conservationists across a wider range of sites”

Building upon Altyn Dala achievements, significant challenges remain to expand protected areas further, recover more depleted species, and ensure rural communities continue to benefit from nature restoration within Kazakhstan. Beyond Kazakhstan, due to the multiple problems facing temperate grasslands globally, Altyn Dala is collaborating with other major grassland initiatives in the Mongolian steppe, the American prairie, and Argentinian pampas regions. By sharing knowledge and experience with like-minded teams, Altyn Dala is contributing to global initiatives to protect and restore temperate grasslands.

On hearing the news, Vera Voronova, Director of ACBK, said: *“It is both inspiring and deeply humbling that our conservation efforts alongside Kazakh governmental agencies and civil society organisations have been recognised by such a prestigious global award. We hope this recognition will enable us to expand our partnerships, bringing in additional expertise, experience, and resources to scale up our work in protecting and restoring grasslands for the benefit of nature, climate, and communities.”*

Efforts to secure the long-term future of the ancient Kazakh steppe ecosystems are ongoing through Altyn Dala, and will include building their resilience to climate change impacts, maintaining anti-poaching and anti-smuggling activities, completing the recovery of threatened species and connecting restored landscapes that function both for wildlife and communities’ land uses. Additionally, to strengthen national capacity for delivering conservation effectively, investment in existing professionals, the current generation of students, and school children across Kazakhstan will all be crucial to further restoring and understanding the unique habitats, flora and fauna found in Kazakhstan.

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Additional quotes

The RSPB’s global conservation director, Katie-jo Luxton, said: *“We are delighted to learn that the Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative has been recognised by The Earthshot Prize 2024 for our collective action to protect and restore the ecosystems, and the wildlife found within it, across the Kazakh Steppe. With nature in crisis across the globe, this nomination recognises just what can be achieved when governments and civil society organisations come together at the scale needed to create lasting positive impacts for nature, climate and people”*

FZS’s CEO Dr. Christof Schenck, said: *“The Frankfurt Zoological Society is proud to be an initiatory partner of the Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative and is uplifted by this nomination for an Earthshot Prize. Alongside ACBK, the Government of Kazakhstan and our international partners, we are dedicated to the long-term cooperation that is key to supporting the restoration of these globally important grasslands.”*

David Gill, Director of Eurasia, Fauna & Flora, comments: *“Altyn Dala – and its recognition as an Earthshot Prize 2024 finalist - is a testament to what can be achieved when local and global conservationists join forces, fusing knowledge and resources. We are restoring the Steppe ecosystem for the benefit of people and wildlife. We are proud to have supported the Government of Kazakhstan’s efforts to strengthen monitoring and to address illegal wildlife trade. We’ve seen the wonderful and weird saiga antelope rebound from the brink of extinction. I’m so proud of what’s been achieved to date, and there is much more to be done.”*

For further information please contact the RSPB press office on 0300 121 0475

High quality images and video for your use with this story are here:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Zrui5olq4nCXizEHGkJKkLgtJnPBprO_?usp=drive_link

Editor's notes:

About the Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative

The Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative brings together experts from the the Committee of Forestry and Wildlife of Kazakhstan's Ministry of Ecology & Natural Resources (Government of Kazakhstan), the Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan (ACBK), Fauna & Flora, Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS), and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). Each performs their own crucial role in the conservation efforts, from establishing nature reserves, to training reserve rangers and scientists, and from strengthening anti-poaching efforts to supporting customs and border officers to tackle trafficking in Saiga horn, as well as educating university students and schoolchildren about nature conservation. Beyond Kazakhstan, Altyn Dala is sharing knowledge and experience with other large-scale initiatives for conserving and restoring temperate grasslands.

The Committee of Forestry and Wildlife of the Government of Kazakhstan's Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources is a central executive body of the Republic of Kazakhstan with responsibilities including biodiversity conservation. They deliver a leadership role, particularly in the areas of formation and implementation of state policy and coordination of management processes for the benefit of people, wildlife and natural resources. In the context of Altyn Dala, this includes nature conservation legislation, and meeting the obligations of international environmental conventions that Kazakhstan is a signatory too. Additionally, they are responsible for anti-poaching activities, identification, designation and management of state protected areas, and leasing and management of state hunting areas.

The Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan (ACBK) is the lead implementing partner of the Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative. Founded in 2004, they are the largest national conservation organisation in Kazakhstan, and the country's official BirdLife International representative. ACBK seeks to ensure the sustainable conservation of biodiversity through developing strong partnerships, supporting local initiatives and building national capacity and expertise. Their remit includes conservation education and capacity development; large-scale ecosystem restoration; biodiversity research and policy advocacy; protected area management and ecotourism development.

Fauna & Flora (FF) has been working to support local actors to better respond to and prevent illegal wildlife trade of key species from these landscapes, including the Saiga Antelope, Steppe Tortoise and Saker Falcon. By helping the Government of Kazakhstan to effectively prevent the trade and hunting of these species, we're helping to bring about the conditions for these species to flourish, and once again fulfil their former roles in the ecosystem.

Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS) have been working to combat the poaching of the Saiga Antelope in Kazakhstan since 2002. Utilising experiences from large mammal conservation in Africa, they have helped to develop robust methodologies in use for over a decade to monitor the population dynamics of wild animals including Saiga. These data help them to advise on protection and mitigation of contemporary threats such as infrastructure. FZS have also been working to reintroduce locally extinct flagship species such as the Asiatic wild ass, or kulan, and supporting the reintroduction of the Przewalski's Horse.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is dedicated to assisting ACBK and the Government of Kazakhstan in establishing a series of connected State Protected Areas for the benefit

of wildlife, climate and people. Employing conservation science, protected area establishment, threatened species recovery and capacity development skills, the RSPB is a founding partner of Altyn Dala, and has been working alongside partners to conserve and begin restoring Kazakhstan's vast landscapes since 2005.

About steppe habitat

Working across 75 million hectares (185 million acres) of Kazakh steppe means that the initiative's efforts benefit a vast array of wildlife, flora and fauna, all of which contribute towards what makes this ancient ecosystem so unique. Like the Argentine pampas and American prairies, the Eurasian steppe is a vast ecoregion of grassy plains and wetlands, characterised by a harsh continental climate and strong winds. In spring, it transforms into a colourful carpet of blooming tulips, while in autumn, the drying grasses create a stunning golden landscape (which gives the initiative its name, as 'Altyn Dala' literally translates to 'Golden Steppe'). In addition to its unique biodiversity, the steppe has millenia-old history of supporting nomadic cultures and historic transhumance (migratory grazing), where herds of cows, sheep, horses, and camels remain an enduring feature of the plains. The Kazakh steppes were also the location where wild horses were first domesticated over 4,000 years ago.

Grasslands are vital to global climate efforts, storing one-fifth of the Earth's terrestrial carbon. The Kazakh Steppe, one of the largest intact grasslands in the world, plays a crucial role in this, holding vast reserves of stable carbon due to its expansive area and minimal disturbance compared to intensively farmed regions. Conserving and restoring vast landscapes of the steppe therefore underpins its role as a carbon reservoir.

About The Earthshot Prize

Launched by Prince William and Sir David Attenborough in 2020, The Earthshot Prize is a global award that recognises game-changing innovations that will help us repair our planet.

With over 2,400 nominees in 2024, the 15 finalists were announced during an event at New York Climate Week on 24 September at 11:00am EDT.

The winners of each of The Earthshot Prize's five categories will be announced during Earthshot Week in Cape Town in November 2024

Key facts

- The 2024 Saiga census results show that there are now an estimated 2,833,600 adult Saigas in Kazakhstan. Overall, Kazakhstan supports more than 95% of the global population of Saiga Antelope.
- Back in 2005, less than 40,000 Saiga were estimated to remain in Kazakhstan. The rapid decline in Saiga populations in Kazakhstan was triggered by the collapse of the Soviet Union and corresponding increase in unregulated poaching for Saiga horn, as well as a series of natural mass die-off events caused by naturally occurring bacteria becoming toxic to the Saiga.
- Having roamed the earth since the last Ice Age, Saiga Antelope have outlived iconic extinct species like woolly mammoths and sabre-toothed tigers, and play a crucial ecosystem role as a selective grazer, influencing vegetation structures, distributing nutrients, and in turn, supporting biodiversity across its habitat. They are a keystone species of the steppe ecosystem.

- In response to the Saiga's risk of imminent extinction, the Altyn Dala Conversation Initiative was founded in 2005. At the Convention on Biological Diversity global Conference of Parties in December 2022, the initiative was announced as one of the first 10 "World Restoration Flagship" projects by the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration.
- Multiple protected and conserved areas covering over 5 million hectares have been established across Kazakhstan thanks to partners' efforts, most recently the over 657,000 hectare Bokey Orda-Ashiozek Nature Reserve in western Kazakhstan. The grasslands and wetlands of Bokey Orda-Ashiozek Protected Area form the key calving and rutting sites of the world's largest Saiga Antelope population, over 1 million strong.
- In December 2023, the IUCN announced that Saiga Antelope was reclassified from '*Critically Endangered*' to '*Near Threatened*'. This unparalleled positive change in global IUCN Red List status is a rarity in conservation and is thanks to Altyn Dala's dedicated efforts to recover Saiga Antelope populations.
- During the summer of 2024, seven 'Critically Endangered' Przewalski's horses (known locally as Kertagy) returned to central Kazakhstan after a nearly 200-year absence. As the world's last remaining genetically wild species of horse, their reintroduction to their native homeland aims to enhance the local wildlife, benefiting pollinators, small mammals, and ground-nesting birds through their grazing activities. More Przewalski's horses are expected to be relocated to the steppe, alongside Kulan (wild ass) as the project continues to invest in restoring the functions of the Steppe ecosystem.