



Saola Working Group Report

Achievements and Highlights: January – Sept 2019



Field staff, Hamnoy and Ley, setting a camera trap in Bolikhamxay Province, Lao PDR, Aug 2019. The camera trap location is marked using GPS.

Overview

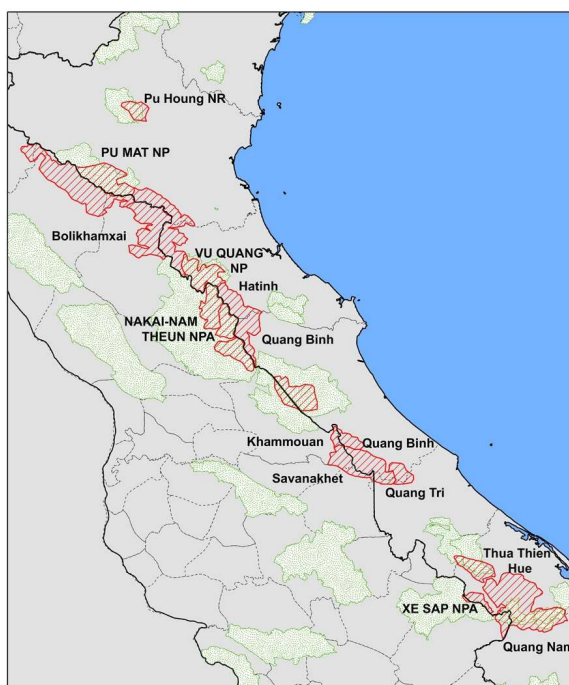
This is an interim report of the significant achievements of The Saola Working Group in the last nine months. In 2019, our primary focus has been on the ongoing search for the last remaining wild Saola in Lao PDR and Vietnam. Alongside detection efforts, we have completed negotiations with the Government of Vietnam to begin construction of the Saola and Endangered Ungulate Captive Breeding Centre in Bach Ma National Park, Vietnam. Without partner and donor support, our program would not be possible. Here we summarize the many highlights and achievements, made possible by your support, from January to September 2019.

Report structure

SWG activities fall into six objective-themed categories:

- i) Detect Saola and Large-antlered Muntjac (LaM)
- ii) Capture Saola and LaM
- iii) Ex-situ breeding of captured animals
- iv) In-situ conservation of Saola, Saola habitat and other Annamite biodiversity
- v) Raise support for the IUCN's One Plan Approach to Saola Conservation
- vi) National capacity building and mentoring

Highlights and achievements in January to September 2019 are summarized as progress made within these categories. Activities are based within Saola range in both Lao PDR and Vietnam, with key sites illustrated on the map below.



Priority sites in Lao PDR and Vietnam

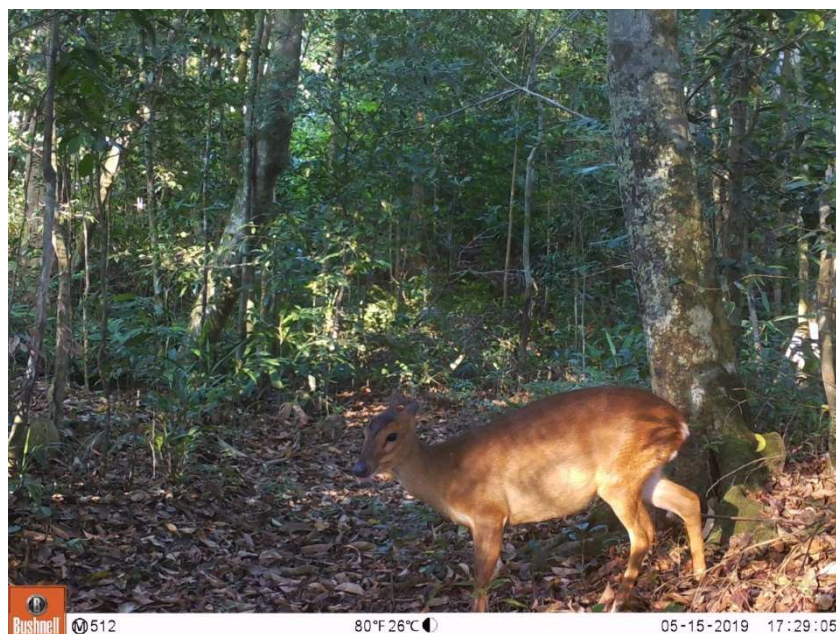
Objective 1. Detect Saola and Large-antlered Muntjac (LaM)

In the last 9 months we have continued to employ intensive efforts across priority sites in Lao PDR and Vietnam to detect wild Saola, using a mixture of camera-traps, local knowledge, forest surveys and DNA analysis of dung samples. Frequent indirect reports from our growing network of local informants suggest that Saola are still out there, in very low densities. Analysis of a massive backlog of thousands of camera trap images is ongoing and will be reported in the annual report.

Focused Camera Trap detection surveys in Laos (KXNM, Xe Sap) and Vietnam (PuMat)

In Lao PDR, in KXNM there was more than 57,000 trap-days of effort, using 281 camera locations over a 20-month period from June 2017 to April 2019. The team retrieved most cameras from KXNM, leaving about 50 cameras at the site, and the data is currently being analysed.

These cameras have provided some really exciting news regarding other species in KXNM, and at least 32 species of large mammal have been detected by camera trapping. We can demonstrate populations of globally significant species such as Bourret's Box Turtle, Crested Argus, Red-shanked Douc, *Nomascus gibbons*, Rooseveltorum-group muntjacs & Annamite Striped Rabbit. Large-antlered Muntjac (LaM) was detected at over 50% of camera-trap stations and was the most commonly photographed species at the site. This high frequency of LaM detections and the robust populations of large, ground dwelling mammals makes LaM captures realistic once the Breeding Centre is ready. It is also a positive indication that Saola may still be present in these areas. This is the most exciting news from our fieldwork during this period. We also placed 146 camera traps in Xekong Province (Xe Sap) which resulted in about 30,800 camera trap days. Data is being analysed from these cameras and will be shared in the annual report. We have also recently started carrying out camera trap monitoring working with our partner LENS 2 in Bolikhamxai. Below are some recent photos from camera traps in KXNM:



Large-antlered Muntjac



Crested Argus



Annamite Striped Rabbit

In Vietnam, targeted camera trap work is ongoing in Pu Mat National Park, working with Vinh University. There are five survey sites with 150 camera traps, and our efforts have achieved 57,570 trap-days of effort. Three camera trap maintenance field trips took place in Pu Mat (Khe Cong-Tu, Khe Pong and Pha Bang) and two trips to collect cameras from Nui Chua and Tam Hop. We are currently analysing camera data and will provide details in the annual report.



Saola dung search, collection & DNA analysis (including training of partners)

The SWG created custom designed Saola dung collection kits, carefully tailored to be light and durable for carrying in the field, and able to preserve genetic material. Our team also designed training materials and protocols so that kits can be used by partners working in Saola range and by local informants. In Lao PDR, ranger teams and community members in six forest landscapes have been trained and are using dung collection kits. In Vietnam, 76 kits were deployed in total, to 3 ranger teams and 6 local informants in four provinces (Hue, Quang Nam, Quang Tri, Ha Tinh). From January to June, Vinh University analysed 23 dung samples, though none have yet proved positive for Saola. Most recently 4 samples were collected from Vietnam Phong Nha Ke Bang National Park, Vietnam and 7 Samples from Lao PDR.

In Lao PDR SWG have been working to strengthen our collaboration with Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) to maximise conservation efforts to protect Saola in Phou Sithone Endangered Species Conservation Area (PST ESCA). An integrated detection survey in co-operation with WCS and supported provincial government ranger teams has been carried out. Currently there are 45 cameras in the forest and all ranger teams have been trained in dung collection and are carrying dung collection kits.

Integrated detection activities focused on local knowledge-led activities

In Lao PDR, integrated local knowledge led detection efforts in Bolikhamxai have led to identification of two high priority communities for integral involvement in Saola detection efforts. The SWG acted quickly on this positive news, by initiating camera trap monitoring with our partner LENS2, and dung collection for Saola detection in these areas. Communities around two additional other forest areas are also priorities for further engagement, and opportunities for engagement are being explored through the help of partner organisations. Another potential Saola lead in a fifth area/community is being actively pursued.

In Vietnam, the interview survey team has conducted interviews in 18 villages in the provinces of Nghe An, Ha Tinh, Quang Nam, Hue, Quang Binh and Quang Tri. In Pu Huong Nature Reserve, local hunter interviews led to recruitment of two expert hunters to assist with field research in nearby Pu Mat National Park (which has higher potential to still hold Saola). The team received credible reports of recent Saola activity (i.e. within 6 months), in two locations, in Quang Tri and Vu Quang. Our next step, is to facilitate hunter-led surveys for Saola dung in these sites.

Other achievements:

- The 'Response guidelines following a Saola detection in the forest' has been produced (version April 2019). This document outlines the Saola Working Group (SWG) protocols for when an individual Saola is detected (i.e a detection that is a 100% certainty) in the forest prior to having permission to capture it.
- A communication strategy in the case of a Saola detection in the wild has been drafted, and will be circulated to partners and stakeholders for review and finalization.

Objective 2. Capture wild Saola and Large-antlered Muntjac

The effectiveness of using hunting dogs to capture Saola

Important progress has been made in determining the most effective ways to capture Saola in the last few months. The capture method of using dogs has been reviewed by SWG for its potential effectiveness. The recommendations resulting from this assessment define the appropriate situations and requirements of training before implementation. For example, it is recommended 'Capture dogs are only used in the case of a definite, fine-scale detection (i.e. we know that a Saola has been in a given area within the last few days)'. Further details are available in the report: Dog Research in Nakai Nam Theun National Protected Area, Lao PDR: trip summary and capture dog recommendations, available on request.

Other achievements:

- SWG now has a final version of 'Rapid Response Plan for the Incidental Capture of a Saola' (Version April 2019), including Vietnamese translation. This document outlines the Saola Working Group (SWG) protocols for what to do in the event a Saola is captured incidentally and reported to the SWG.
- A list has been compiled of details of drugs/equipment needed (prepared by international vet team), associated costs, permits and where they can be sourced. Investigation into helicopter options in Laos with Lao Skyway have been carried out, including a helicopter briefing at Lao skyway headquarters in Vientiane with an introduction to key staff and tour of the facility.



The field time for the capture dog mission in Lao

Objective 3. Ex-situ breeding of captured animals

The Centre for captive breeding of Saola will be built in Bach Ma National Park, Vietnam. Since signing the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in late 2018, SWG has received agreement from MARD for initial construction before the Project Document has been signed. Funding was previously secured for initial construction.

Bach Ma site visit

Preparation has been occurring in the last few months for this site visit, which will take place in November 2019. The team will be led by Radoslaw Ratajszczak (who will represent the SWG Captive Breeding Task Team and also, as his zoo will be responsible for the administration of the Centre once it is up and running) with other members of the team including Tuan Bendixsen (Vietnam Director Animals Asia, for his vast experience carrying out site visits such as this in Vietnam and dealing with MARD in this situation and also, to translate when necessary), Julia (as architect representing the SWG), Nguyen Manh Hiep (from MARD) and Mr Nam, Director of Bach Ma NP. We expect construction to begin in early 2020.

There is also a need to have a holding facility under expert care in Lao PDR to temporarily hold animals captured in-country. A site that is currently being investigated and seems to be the most suitable option is the Ban Keun Zoo run by the Lao PDR Conservation Trust for Wildlife (LCTW). SWG is working closely with LCTW and proposed plans and a budget to construct and manage a temporary Saola enclosure at this site have already been drafted.

Other achievements:

- A successful test run and training exercise in rescuing and transporting an animal has recently occurred. A baby Serow was rescued recently by the Cat Tien National Park Wildlife Rescue Centre, led by Dr Bac Tien Hai and is being cared for at Bach Ma. This team have committed to be the SWG First Response team, in the event of an unexpected Saola or LAM capture in Vietnam. Wroclaw Zoo are providing funding and technical support.



Objective 4. In situ management for Saola and other Annamite biodiversity

The SWG's objective in this area is to work with key stakeholders to implement effective conservation management of priority sites. This section will be expanded in the annual report with updates on our work with partners.

Objective 5. Raise support for the IUCN One Plan Approach to Saola Conservation

In March 2019 the Saola Working Group hosted a national One Plan Meeting in Hanoi to promote the Saola conservation program. This meeting was co-hosted by the Government of Vietnam's Administration of Forestry of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. The meeting emphasized the need and opportunities for a Saola conservation breeding program. More than 40 conservationists participated, from conservation organizations, government agencies, and academic institutions throughout the country, and the SWG. The meeting concluded with an official launch ceremony for the signing of the MoU. The meeting was a real success because people were grateful to hear the latest news and be invited to give their views.

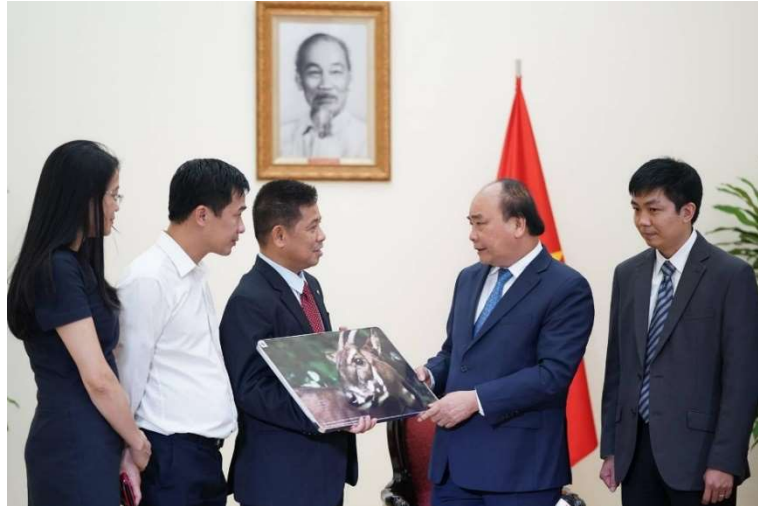


Participants at the One Plan meeting in Hanoi

Also in Lao PDR an MoU has been drafted and has already been shared within the SWG network and external advisors for review, and has been professionally translated into Lao language. It has also been informally reviewed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry GoL. It is now close to being ready for submission. The MOU is essential to enable SWG to carry out detection and capture work in Lao PDR that is necessary to save Saola.

In September, Dr Van Ngoc Thinh, Country Director for WWF-Vietnam met with Vietnam's Prime Minister, H.E. Nguyen Xuan Phuc, who publicly declared his strong support for saving the Saola. This is a

landmark success to publicly engage with Vietnam's highest-level minister and receive his public declaration of support for conservation.



Country Director for WWF-Vietnam meeting with Vietnam's Prime Minister

Objective 6. National Capacity Building and Mentoring

Since receiving the first SWG Women For Annamites Conservation Fund in December, Nguyen Thi Anh Minh (Minh) from Vietnam has received permissions for her project, which can now move forwards. Also during this time a second grantee Tran Thi Kim Hoan has received SWG support. She is working on a project entitled "Integrated value chain and conservation development of *Scaphium macropodum* for enhanced income security of ethnic minority communities in Quang Nam, Vietnam."

SWG organisational structure

The SWG's Organisational Structure has been optimized through the formation of a new Governance Body, a Conservation Strategy Group and a Fundraising Group. The new Governance Body is now operating, and supporting decision-making within SWG. A SWG Conservation Strategy Group is busy developing a plan for a long-term strategy for the coming 12 months (2020) and beyond, facilitated by Jamie Copsey of the IUCN SSC Conservation Planning Specialist Group. It is planned that the wider SWG members will have a chance to input in November 2019.

Summary

This report highlights the major progress made by SWG in the last 9 months. The SWG is immensely grateful to all our members and to our funding and technical partners for their support, without which none of the incredibly important work would have been possible. We hope that you will continue your support, so that together we can save this unique and beautiful species from extinction. Please contact us if you are interested to support our work or to get involved.



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