



Saola Working Group Report

Achievements and Highlights: January – June 2020



*Hamnong and field staff collecting habitat info at a camera station,
KXNM, Khammouane, Lao PDR.*

Overview

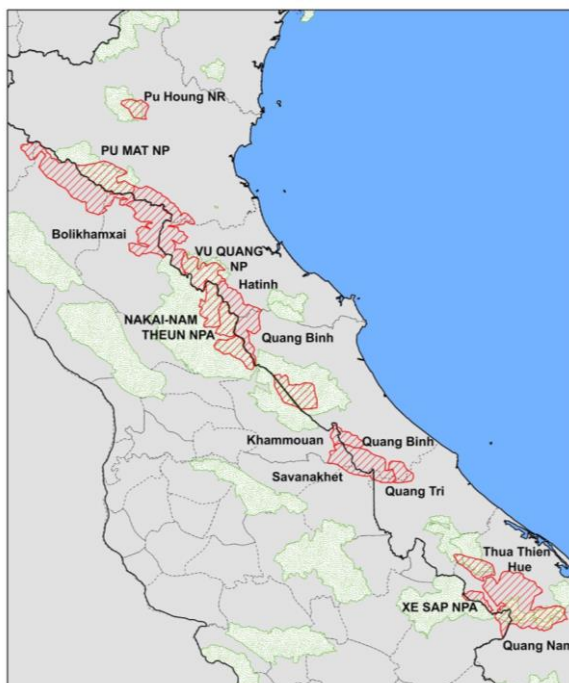
This is an interim report of the significant achievements of The Saola Working Group in the last six months. Our primary focus has been on the ongoing search for the last remaining wild Saola in Lao PDR and Vietnam. Without partner and donor support, our program would not be possible. Here we summarize the many highlights and achievements, made possible by your support, from January to June 2020.

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 June 2020 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 6 months we have continued to employ 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.

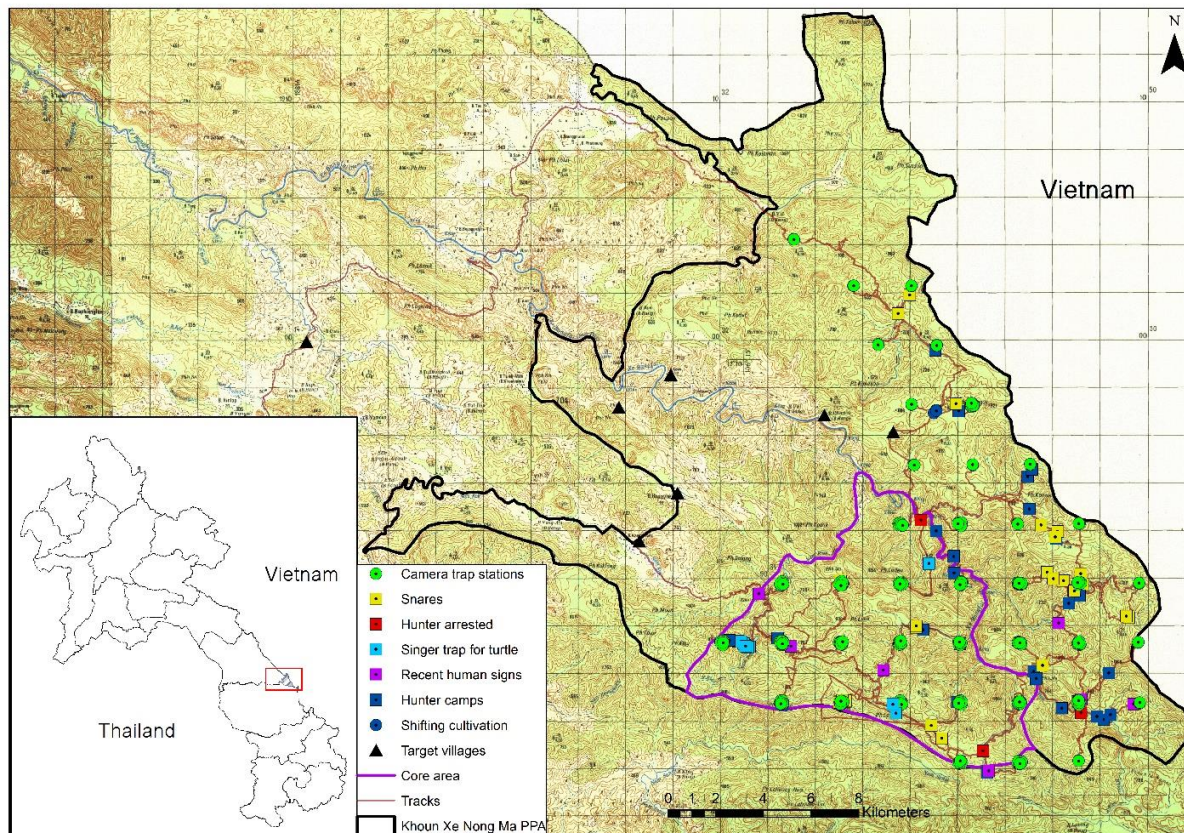
Focused Camera Trap detection surveys in Laos

Khoun Xe--Nongma (KXNM) Protected Area, Khammoaune

In advance of entering into the field, a planning and training workshop entitled " Biodiversity Monitoring Baseline Surveys: Step By Step Camera-Trap Survey Protocols" took place between the 10th and 16th of February 2020 at Katoc Village, in KXNM PPA, Boualapha District, Khammoaune Province. There were 32 people in total involved including 15 staff from PAFO, 8 from DAFO, 4 students from Champasak University, 3 military staff and 2 villagers. There were 4 lesson parts including (1) survey design and navigation (2) camera trap preparation (before field) (3) camera trap location selection and setting and (4) habitat and threat measurements. The SWG field team helped lead the training, done in collaboration with our partners the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and the Integrated Conservation of Biodiversity and Forest project. During the first field mission, which took place between the 28th of February and the 1st of April 2020 and involved 57 people in total (6 SWG members, 5 PAFO, 3 DAFO, 3 military staff and 40 local people), the Lao SWG field team managed to set 270 camera traps in 39 locations in KXNM. Following the mission, members of the Lao team ran a data processing and storage training on the 25-26 June for at least 10 people of government staff from KXNM, Nam Ha and Nam Kan NPAs linked to the camera trapping surveys. The next mission to the field is planned for August to retrieve the SD cards.



The team that went to KXNM to set camera traps

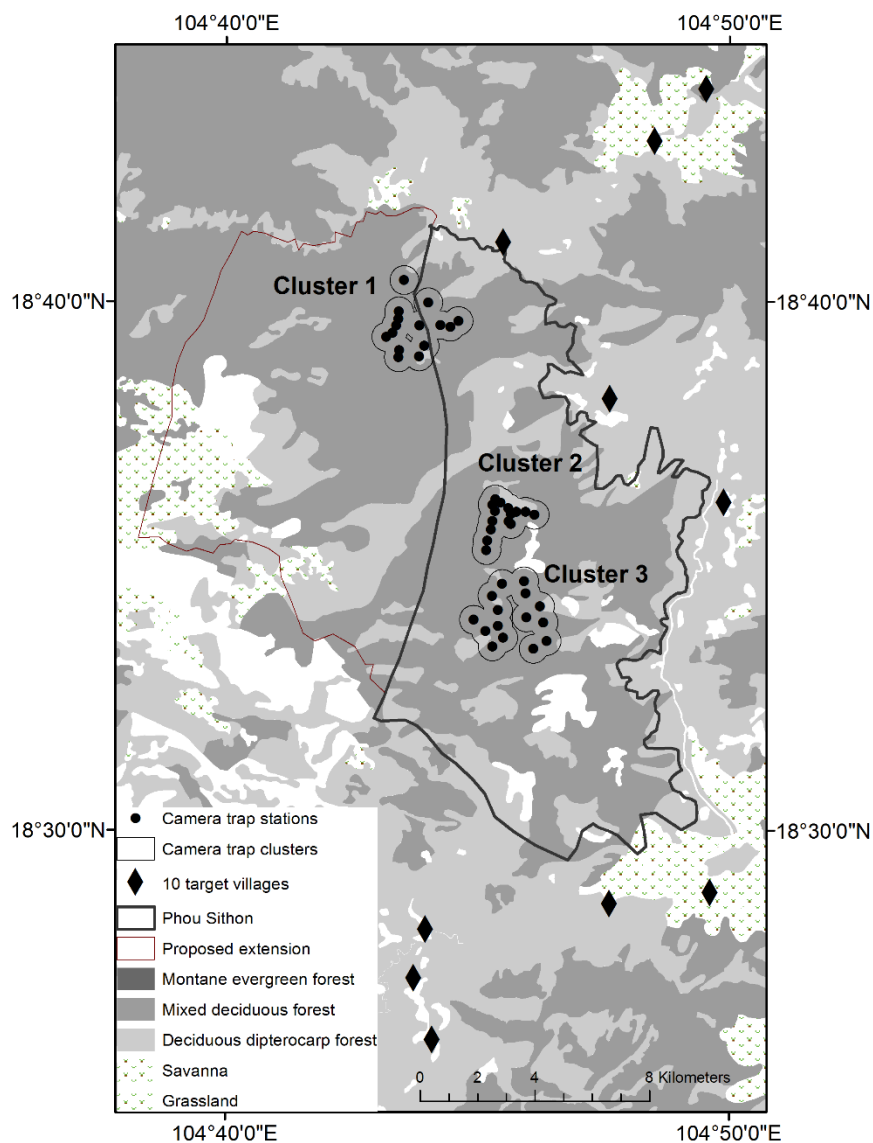


Map showing the camera trap locations and threats in the core area of KXNM

Sadly, the team noted many signs of hunting during this field mission to set the camera traps. A total of 665 snares were removed and destroyed during the survey and recent human signs also detected. During the survey, the team found and arrested 9 hunters from Ban Laving, Xepon district, Savannakhet province (5 people) and Ban Pakern (4 people) and at least 34 hunter camps were found and destroyed/burned. SWG is working with our partner, Asian Arks, to carry out emergency law enforcement work in the core area to address this.

Phou Sithone Endangered Species Conservation Area (PST), Bolikhamxai:

In collaboration with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), 45 camera traps were set in PST in July 2019, which were then checked in November 2019, when 2 additional cameras were added. These 47 camera traps were recently retrieved in June 2020. The results from this work will be presented in the annual report.



Map of the camera trap locations in PST, BKY

Thongmixay Village (TMX), Viengthong District, Bolikhamxai:

The camera traps set in July 2019 in Bolikhamsai province (BKY) in collaboration with LENS 2 have been removed in February 2020. Sadly, of the 7 camera traps set, one camera was stolen and 2 SD cards from other cameras were taken.

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, through collaborations in KXNM and PST, along with local people in TMX, people have dung kits on hand and have been searching for potential Saola dung for SWG.

In Vietnam, a pilot hunter-led search for Saola dung and sign survey in Bac Huong Hoa Nature Reserve area, Quang Tri province began in December, led by Vinh. This was followed by a second survey (in 2 phases) from February 23rd to March 4th and from March 6th to March 14th 2020. Two potential Saola dung samples were collected during the first survey and five were collected during the second survey. During the surveys, field observations were noted about footprints, feeding evidence, dung, rubbing marks on trees or any other traces suspected to be from Saola.

In addition to collecting potential Saola dung samples, the team met two people from Ta Pang village (Laos) who were trapping animals. One of them, about 60 years old, said that he had hunted a Saola (60 kg) 10 years ago about 300 meters from this shack. He and two other hunters used a dog to hunt the Saola in a stream area. They drowned the Saola by throwing a heavy trunk at its head which attached to the horn. He also said the area of Cong Troi has Saola. The team also met a 50 year old man living in Ta Pang village, who was returning home from the forest. He also said he had hunted Saola in the past. He said that he hunted 3-4 individuals using only dogs because this species tires easily and tend to run down to the water. When asked if there are Saola in this area currently, he answered that Saola exist in the area. He had what he believed to be a Saola dung sample, but when viewed by the team it was too old and dry to analyse. The team also met a group of 3 hunters from Ta Pang Lao village (about 30-35 years old), who had caught a Serow using dogs. When asked about Saola, one said he had hunted 5 individuals in that area, with the most recent capture in 2018. He believed that Saola were still in the area but it was very difficult to find them because of their very small numbers. . These forest areas are contiguous with KXNM where SWG has been working intensively for a number of years.



Survey team members Po and Thuong (hunter) for the field mission in Cu Bai field



Potential Saola dung sample from Vietnam

By the end of June, 15 samples of potential Saola dung have been collected and are ready to be analysed. Of these, 7 were collected in Vietnam and 8 were collected in Lao PDR.

Integrated detection activities focused on local knowledge-led activities

In Lao PDR, integrated local knowledge-led detection efforts in Bolikhamxai (BKX) 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.

In collaboration with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) to maximise conservation efforts to protect Saola in Phou Sithone Endangered Species Conservation Area (PST ESCA), BKX, an integrated detection survey, supported by provincial government ranger teams has been carried out. 47 cameras were used in the forest for close to a year, and all ranger teams have been trained in dung collection and are carrying dung collection kits.

In Thongmixay village, Viengthong District, following an interview about a potential Saola sighting, 7 camera traps were set in and around the sighting area in July 2019. At the same time as removing the camera traps in February 2020, the Lao field team went to meet the reported observer to further follow up. The 'observer' had in fact found what he believed to be Saola signs, which he said he tracked for some distance. According to the information given to the team, the informant found characteristic

broken stems and other signs including dung and a sleeping site (unfortunately, he did not have a kit to collect the dung). Based on other information from the interview (a three-day process) the team believes him to be a credible observer. This will be followed up using experienced local people to search for Saola dung in July to Sep 2020 (three-month period) in collaboration with the LENS2 project. Further camera trapping work using local knowledge is also planned for the remainder of 2020 with the LENS2/ LENS3 project.

Other achievements:

- The Lao team completed camera trapping guidelines for Laos with the government of Lao PDR (DOF/MAF)
- The Lao field team completed supporting data for updating the wildlife protection list for Laos

Objective 2. Capture wild Saola and Large-antlered Muntjac

There have been limited advances linked to this objective due to impact of coronavirus on fundraising. There will be more information in the annual report.

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. Work has been delayed due to impact of coronavirus and more information will be provided in the annual report.

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 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.

Ostrava Zoo placed a new life-sized sculpture of Saola next to the their Saola Restaurant. It is another Saola conservation education element in their zoo.



The Saola sculpture at Ostrava Zoo

Objective 6. National Capacity Building and Mentoring

Since receiving the first SWG Women For Annamites Conservation Fund, Nguyen Thi Anh Minh (Minh) from Vietnam has changed the focus of her project due to restrictions with permissions to carry out the original work. Her new project is called: 'The snaring disaster and optimistic solutions for in situ wildlife conservation in Vietnam and Laos'. The Critically Endangered Large-antlered muntjac (*Muntiacus vuquangensis*) is one of several threatened endemic species in the Annamites Mountains of Vietnam and Laos. These species are under high pressure from intensive illegal commercial snaring and wildlife trade. *In situ* conservation is failing partly because of uncertainty about threatened species population viability with regard to threshold snare densities resulting in population collapse. It is hoped that the project results will help contribute invaluable knowledge to guide better management strategies and raise awareness for local communities as well as the authorities. Minh will set camera traps in Nakai to monitor the 'fake' snares to determine how real snares impact wildlife populations. It is anticipated that the snares will be monitored in this way for between three and six months. Up to 200 camera-traps will be set up at 50 to 100 fake snare locations chosen by local hunters.

It was planned that in early 2020, Minh would set camera traps in Nakai. This work will be done in collaboration with the Anoulak Association. It is funded by the Annamite grant and NGS Early Career Grant. Minh was also successful in her application for a grant from Conservation Leadership Programme, along with team members Chanthasone (Olay) and Phonesouk (Hamnoy) from the SWG Lao team, to assist her work on snaring in Khoun Xe--Nongma Protected Area (KXNM) and Bidoup – Nui Ba National Park. However, all of her field work has been delayed due to the impact of Coronavirus and is planned to start soon.



SWG organisational structure

Dr Olivia Petre left her role in the SWG as Director of Operations at the end of June. The Governance Body, thank Olivia for all her work for Saola conservation of the last two years and wish her well for the future. She did an excellent job of coordinating field activities and sharing our progress and successes by producing these reports and updates.

The future SWG coordination will be led by two part-time National Coordinators. We are working with partners in Vietnam and Laos to recruit these individuals. This will allow SWG to have greater engagement in both countries as well as further strengthen government relationships. We will also be contacting all in-country implementing partners to update you on these changes and discuss how we can work together in future. We will update you once the new team is in place. If you wish to get in touch please contact James Burton, Chair of the Asian Wild Cattle Specialist Group at saolawg@gmail.com.

Summary

This report highlights the major progress made by SWG in the last 6 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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