

# Race to save the Asian UNICORN: Mythical saola on brink of extinction

THE race is on to save a real-life unicorn that teeters on the brink of extinction in the remote forests of Vietnam.

By **STUART WINTER**

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The mythical saola is one of the rarest animals on the planet

WWF

With its horse-like features and striking horns, the mythical saola has only been seen by a handful of people foraging in impenetrable forest. Such is its elusiveness, it has been dubbed Asian Unicorn by zoologists anxious to stop it slipping into oblivion.

As few as 100 of these antelopes survive, making it arguably the most endangered large mammal on the planet.

Fears that poachers using wire traps will bring about the saola's extinction in the not too distant future has generated a quest to find some of the remaining animals and create a captive breeding programme to safeguard their gene pool.

Today, the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums (BIAZA) said it was joining the fight to save the modern-day unicorn by funding the conservation breeding centre in Vietnam's Bach Ma National Park.

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**The last good  
opportunity to save the  
saola from extinction**  
Barney Long

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The saola was only discovered in 1992 deep in the rugged Annamite Mountain range on the border of Laos and Vietnam and, within little more than a decade, the custodians of the Red List of Threatened Species were setting up a special team to combat the antelope's impending extinction.

Although SWG say efforts to protect the saola habitat are advancing, commercial poaching continues to remain a significant threat, leaving the animal “teetering on the edge of extinction”.

Few Western eyes have seen the animals, apart from images captured on camera-traps put in place to picture passing animals, yet funding from Europe and North America is helping save the species.

To date, 22 different zoos and zoo associations have donated £250,000 towards the project with Global Wildlife Conservation matching the first £180,000 raised.



The saola was discovered in 1992

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BIAZA, whose members include ZSL London Zoo, RZSS Edinburgh Zoo and Chester Zoo, is providing £50,000.

Barney Long, GWC's director of species conservation and chair of the Saola Working Group steering committee, said: "Zoos have been some of the greatest supporters of saola conservation over the years.

"The current effort presents the last good opportunity to save the saola from extinction and zoos are a critical part of this effort, not just from a fundraising point of view, but also from a technical point of view.

BIAZA explained that since the saola was first discovered two decades ago only 10 have been captured in the wild, all by local villagers, but without professional veterinary and husbandry care, the longest any lived was a few months. The last known capture was in 2010.

Bill Robichaud, coordinator of the IUCN Species Survival Commission's Saola Working Group (SWG), said: "BIAZA zoos may not have saolas in their collections, but the UK and Ireland's national zoo association understands the inherent value of this rare species and is demonstrating its clear commitment to wildlife conservation with its donation.

"We are so grateful for the support from the zoo community, which recognises that while the conservation breeding programme is going to be risky, it's the only option left to ensure we don't lose this remarkable animal forever."