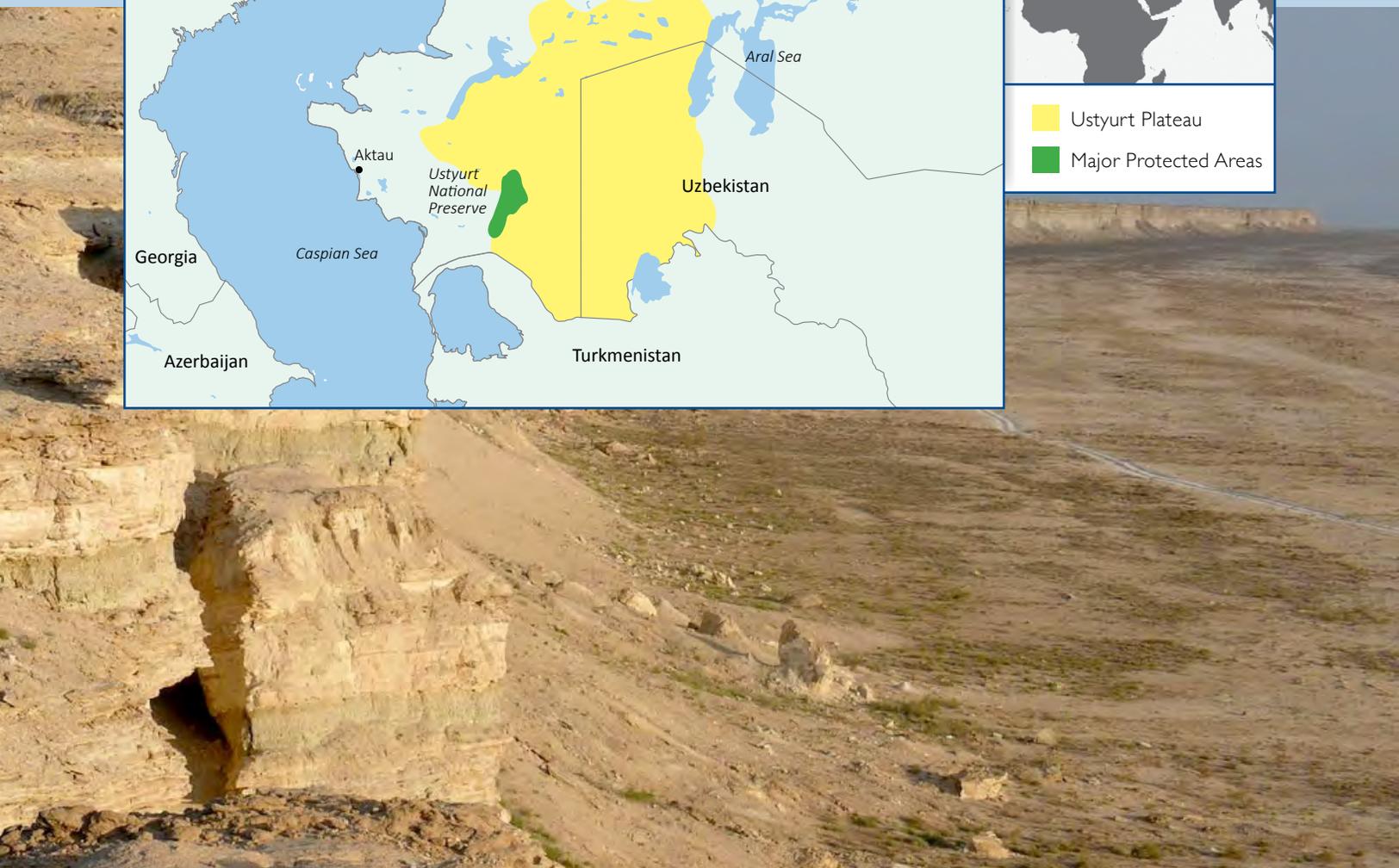




USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

SCAPES LANDSCAPE PROFILE:

THE USTYURT PLATEAU



KAZAKHSTAN AND UZBEKISTAN, 2010: Chink of the Ustyurt Plateau, close to Sarikamysh Lake, near the Turkmen border in Kazakhstan. Photo by Maria Karlstetter for FFI

THE USTYURT LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION INITIATIVE AT A GLANCE

- The Ustyurt plateau, bestriding Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan between the Caspian and Aral Seas, covers 200,000 square kilometers.
- The project was implemented by PACT, Fauna and Flora International, the Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity in Kazakhstan and local organizations.
- The project leveraged non-U.S. government funds from 10 different sources, totaling \$628,265.

THE PLACE AND THE PEOPLE

The Ustyurt Plateau, straddling Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, is an austere temperate desert. Its eroded hills, shallow basins and extensive escarpments feature no permanent streams or open fresh-water sources. It is a vast and harsh terrain, but its age and isolation have blessed it with a spartan beauty where many endemic species thrive. Some 300 vertebrate species — including 30 reptiles and amphibians, 45 mammals and 50 breeding birds — call the plateau home. It also hosts at least 724 species of vascular plants.

Historically, nomadic cattle-breeders were among the few humans to populate the region. Their traditions managed to survive the collectivized agriculture of the Soviet era, but they are now jeopardized by industrial activity such as oil and gas extraction and related infrastructure development.

Since 2000, people have flocked to the Ustyurt in search of work, and it is now one of the fastest-growing regions of Kazakhstan. The construction of road and rail networks, and the building of gas pipelines

bring economic growth, but not enough to generate widespread employment in rural areas, where poverty rates remain high. Economic hardship has driven people to hunt the saiga antelope (*Saiga tatarica*), for its meat and its horns, the latter of which fetches up to \$100 per kilogram on the international black market.

The environmental repercussions of this damage are serious. Animals depend on the integrity of the environment, and the saiga, a critically endangered species, is among the most threatened. As its habitat becomes damaged and fragmented, it suffers from disease, and poaching increases, the chances for the saiga's survival become slim. The saiga's population declined by 95 percent in 20 years (from 250,000 in the mid-1990s to fewer than 2,000 today), one of the most rapid and drastic deteriorations of a mammal ever recorded. As migratory herbivores, the saiga are part of the foundation of a complex food web, providing food sources to animals such as the desert lynx, grey wolf and eagles. Of the 35 endangered species in the Ustyurt, protecting the saiga is a priority.

KAZAKHSTAN AND UZBEKISTAN, 2011: Conducting community needs assessment on the Ustyurt. Photo by Maria Karlstetter for FFI



THE CHALLENGE

The Ustyurt Landscape Conservation Initiative was one of nine transboundary landscape-scale projects under USAID's Sustainable Conservation Approaches in Priority Ecosystems (SCAPES) project. The initiative identified the main environmental threats to the Ustyurt as human impact on saiga mortality (particularly poaching), lack of environmental knowledge and private-sector development.

The Ustyurt Landscape Conservation Initiative devised several strategies to address these threats. One was the creation of the Mobile Environmental Resource Center, a traditional yurt that traveled to five communities in the northeast edge of the Ustyurt, where 75 percent of the Ustyurt's people reside. The resource center helped people to procure low-interest agricultural loans and develop business plans, offered skills training, and aided people in finding work. It also functioned as an information exchange on environmental issues, including by inviting experts to help the community understand the importance of a healthy ecosystem and livelihoods. The resource center was designed to be self-sustaining, beyond the end of the project, by providing fee-based services.

In addition, the Ustyurt Landscape Conservation Initiative conducted media campaigns to expand awareness of conservation issues, including a video for television broadcast, posters and billboards. The project also established eco-clubs for youth, which were mentored by rangers. The eco-clubs received books about natural history, wildlife identification guides, and binoculars. They also held a "saiga day" exchange among villages and applied art lessons to their discussion of the saiga, facilitated by a well-known Kazakh comic-book illustrator. One eco-club teacher, Gulsezim Elubaeva, from Shalkar city school in the Aktobe region, developed a wildlife conservation curriculum that introduces children to Ustyurt ecology, animal habitat and lifecycles. She says, "We are learning more about animals and plants, the environmental situation of the region, and how to preserve and protect the ecological foundation of our native land." This approach builds on the Kazakh

people's heritage as nomadic pastoralists, and their fondness for the landscape and its iconic species.

The Ustyurt Landscape Conservation Initiative trained rangers in map-reading and GPS use, and provided equipment such as spotting scopes, digital cameras, camping supplies and off-road vehicles to enable them to pursue poachers. The rangers attended an international summit to discuss the plight of the saiga — the first of its kind. They also helped the project with satellite collaring to monitor saiga migration patterns. There are five known remaining populations of saiga, and they can cover 40,000 square kilometers in a year, crossing international boundaries in the process. This fact contributed to the Kazakhstan Border Agency's decision to modify 138 kilometers of a recently built border fence to accommodate saiga migration.

To aid in detecting wildlife trafficking, the Ustyurt Landscape Conservation Initiative partnered with a dog-training center in Kazakhstan. Four drug-detection dogs, pre-trained in the United States, were the first to be taught to distinguish saiga horn. The dogs, working with law enforcement and customs teams trained in wildlife trafficking laws and conventions, have led to seizures of saiga horn at border crossings — the first in 15 years.



KAZAKHSTAN AND UZBEKISTAN, 2014: Kazakh Customs Officer and canine 'Artic' search for concealed saiga horn during training. Photo by Kirk Olson for FFI

THE LESSONS

Harsh conditions made field research and community visits difficult. Because winter was both extreme and long, the window to travel to remote locations was as small as four months. As such, all project activities required extensive logistical planning.

Building constituencies takes time. The Ustyurt had a thin history of conservation activity, and the Ustyurt Landscape Conservation Initiative was the first project to specifically target the saiga. Government agents were not accustomed to dealing with international NGOs,

and local staff sometimes lacked skills in international standards due to lack of exposure. In the early stages, the initiative had to gather basic data in lieu of providing services.

Drawing on local pride was vital to promoting saiga conservation. Citizens were engaged through education, which they prize, as well as resources to bolster the local economy and adapt to climate change. These are small, but significant, steps toward more robust civil society engagement in the region.

KAZAKHSTAN AND UZBEKISTAN, 2013: The Ustyurt Plateau North escarpment (locally called chink) in winter.
Photo by Berdiyur Jollibekov for FFI

