

# Introducing the saola (*Pseudoryx nghetinhensis*)...



**Conservation status: Globally Threatened: Endangered**  
**Endemism: Endemic to the Greater Annamites in Vietnam and Lao PDR**

In the early 1990s, the Greater Annamites ecoregion leapt from relative obscurity onto the pages of the world's press with the surprise discovery of the saola. The discovery of the long-horned bovid was a globally significant event in the history of science, as during the last 100 years only five new species of large mammals were discovered around the world before the saola. The saola was first identified by its horns during a joint survey by the Vietnamese Ministry of Forestry and WWF in Vu Quang Nature Reserve in central Vietnam in 1992. Reports and surveys have since confirmed the saola's presence in four provinces in Lao PDR and in six provinces in Vietnam.

The saola has its own genus within the family Bovidae. It is believed that the saola is a relic species that, along with its habitat, was squeezed into its present small range by climatic changes during and following the last Ice Age. While photo traps have recorded the animal, it remains elusive - no scientist has seen a living saola in the wild. As a result population estimates vary widely, from between 70-700 individuals.



© Nguyen Ngoc Chinh

## Fast facts

The saola is so new to science that its basic biology and physiology remains unknown to scientists although many local people are quite knowledgeable. Adult saola probably weigh between 80 and 100kg, and may stand at about 85cm at the shoulder. In 1993 a young saola, believed to be about 4-5 months old, was accidentally caught in a trap. This youngster weighed 18 kg. Its shoulder height was 61cm, and the body length was 103cm. The Saola has very large glands on the side of its head, presumably used for scent marking.

Photo credit, from left to right, top to bottom: WWF/Barney Long; WWF/Barney Long; Andrey Kuznetsov; Andrei Kuznetsov; Howard Buffet; WWF/Toon Fey; WWF/James Hardcastle; WWF/James Hardcastle; Tilo Nadler



## Social or solitary?

Saolas are generally solitary, but small groups are occasionally reported.

## The saola's home

The entire global range of the saola is within a narrow area along the mountain chain and foothills of the northern and central Annamites. The saola has been recorded in Nghe An, Ha Tinh, Quang Binh, Quang Tri, Thua Thien – Hue, and Quang Nam provinces in Vietnam, and Khammouane, Bolikhamsay, Savannakhet, Xe Kong and Xieng Khouang provinces in Lao PDR. Densities are not known, but distribution within these areas is patchy; saola seem to have very specific habitat requirements, and live in only the wettest forests.

The saola is named after a pair of parallel wooden posts that support part of a local spinning wheel (Sao = posts; la = spinning wheel). Indigenous people gave this name to the animal because its long, almost straight horns resemble the tapered posts used in the ethnic villages near the border of Lao PDR and Vietnam where it was first discovered.



© Hoang Ngoc Khanh/Hue FPD

**What's in a name?** The new genus name, *Pseudoryx*, reflects the saola's superficial similarity to the African and Arabian oryxes, and the species name, *nghetinhensis*, was applied provisionally to reflect its origin from the provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh in Vietnam.

## Threats

The principal threat to the saola is hunting. Hunters set fixed snares in the forest, usually for trapping wild boar, sambar or barking deer, which are valued for their meat. But being non-selective the snares also trap saola. Saola are also hunted by people using dogs as trackers. Dogs scare saola and result in



© Nguyen Ngoc Chinh

the saola backing into steep sided stream valleys and defending itself with its horns, a behavioural strategy that may well have defeated predators in the past, but is unsuccessful against humans with guns. Scientists believe that their numbers are declining due to loss of habitat and hunting pressure, and are currently debating whether to change the saola's conservation status to Critically Endangered. Conserving the saola is extremely important; this endangered and unique living species needs urgent conservation action to prevent extinction in Vietnam and in Lao PDR - the saola's home.

## What we are doing

WWF is working with a range of partners to develop and implement saola action plans in both Lao PDR and Vietnam, and is working in key sites for its conservation in Hue and Quang Nam provinces. In 2003, WWF produced a documentary on the plight of the saola, which was shown on Vietnamese television. The film was also selected in the final list of the WildScreen.



for a living planet®

This publication was made possible through support provided by the Office of Environment, Bureau for Economic Growth, Agriculture, and Trade, U.S. Agency for International Development, under the terms of Award No.LAG-A-00-99-00048-00.

Find out more about the saola and the Greater Annamites Ecoregion at: <http://www.wfindochina.org> and [www.panda.org/asiapacific/annamites](http://www.panda.org/asiapacific/annamites)