

SAVE THE WILD

Only 100 Of These Real-Life 'Unicorns' Are Left In The World

People are doing everything they can to save them — even though no one's seen one in five years.

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Deep in the lush Annamite Mountains between Vietnam and Laos roams an extremely rare deer-like creature called the saola— so rare he's become known as the "Asian unicorn."

Discovered by scientists in 1994 (when they found a saola skull, distinguished by the two long straight horns, among a hunter's possessions), the saola is considered critically endangered; just about 100 of them are thought to exist.

Since the saola's discovery, people have been trying figure out how to save this rare creature, which is threatened by snare traps set to catch other kinds of animals in the region. People have also been desperate to see more of this rare creature in the wild, an extremely rare occurrence.



An image caught on a camera trap of a saola in Laos in 1999 |
William Robichaud

No biologist has ever seen a saola in the wild. And one of the only people on the planet to see a saola in person is William Robichaud, coordinator of the Saola Working Group (SWG).

"Given that it was the first (and pretty much still the only) adult saola seen by the outside world, I certainly had a sense of the significance," Robichaud told *The Dodo* about the time he saw a saola who had been captured and spent several days in captivity before passing away. "Awe pretty much took over — she was so beautiful, and possessed of such a calm nature."



A camera trap in central Laos caught this rare image of a wild saola. |
William Robichaud

There are camera traps set up in the forests where the saola live — but the last time a saola image was captured was in 2013.

"We are hopeful that we are not too late to save this species from extinction, and while the IUCN estimates that there are fewer than 750 individuals left in the world, that number may in fact be fewer than 100," Lindsay Renick Mayer, associate director of communications for Global Wildlife Conservation (GWC), told *The Dodo*.

Now people from GWC and the SWG are teaming up in an urgent effort to prevent this very real Asian unicorn from becoming a mere myth. In addition to removing snares from saola habitat to prevent poaching, scientists are trying to find a pair of wild saola strong enough to start a family in a breeding center — the last possible hope to increase the population.

Without such measures, it's possible all we'll have left of this real-life unicorn in a few years are their long, straight horns.



Captive female saola in Laos |
William Robichaud



Patrol team member holding wire snares collected in saola habitat in central Laos. These kinds of snares are killing some of the last saolas left in the world. |
William Robichaud





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William Robichaud with saola horns in Laos. |
William Robichaud