

## **Written evidence submitted by the University of Oxford (ECA0022)**

1. This submission is from Professor E.J. Milner-Gulland (ej.milner-gulland@biology.ox.ac.uk) and Dr Joseph Bull (joseph.bull@biology.ox.ac.uk), who are members of the Department of Biology at the University of Oxford.

2. Professor Milner-Gulland has been working in Central Asia since 1990, and is the founder of the UK-registered NGO the Saiga Conservation Alliance. She has supervised numerous students and research projects in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan since then, and has strong relationships with colleagues in the Academies of Sciences in these countries as well as in-country NGOs and the relevant Wildlife Departments. Her work covers wildlife and livestock disease, pastoralist livelihoods, ecosystem health and restoration, and species conservation. She was recently a member of the Government of Uzbekistan's Advisory Committee on the Sustainable Development of the Aral Sea region, convened by UNDP (one of the few international academics to be part of this process).

3. Dr Bull has been working on Central Asia since 2010, primarily in Uzbekistan. He performed PhD and postdoctoral research activities there in collaboration with the Academy of Science (including supervising other student projects), was contracted as a consultant to both the UNDP and ADB on related projects in the Aral Sea region, and now leads a 3-year Darwin Initiative project focusing on the region. His work throughout has revolved around the environmental impacts of economic development activities (such as natural gas extraction and infrastructure development), especially on wildlife and habitats, and how to work with industry and government to quantify and mitigate those impacts.

4. We submit this evidence in order to highlight the UK's contribution to supporting these two states in their conservation efforts, and the potential for environmental conservation to underpin future relationships between the UK and Central Asian countries.

### **What are the key challenges facing the region and its people in the coming decade and what implications do these have for UK foreign policy?**

5. The region faces both a challenge and an opportunity with regard to its environment. It contains extensive high quality steppe and desert ecosystems, with large populations of important species including the iconic saiga antelope. It also contains some of the most degraded areas on the planet, including the Aral Sea region. The governments of the region are committed to protection and restoration of these environments, and there is a window of opportunity to produce world-leading sustainable landscapes for livelihoods and nature (including pastoralists). This is because large areas of natural habitat remain, with good connectivity, and because laws are still being rewritten in the post-Soviet era.

6. The UK is a long-term supporter of environmental conservation and livelihoods support in the region. The Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative, a collaboration between UK NGOs RSPB, Fauna and Flora International and colleagues including the Kazakhstan government, has just been recognised by the UN as a flagship restoration initiative (<https://www.decadeonrestoration.org/press-release/un-recognizes-vast-grassland-restoration-initiative-kazakhstan-special-award>). The UK-based NGO the Saiga Conservation Alliance, with academics at Oxford University, has worked in the region since 2006, supported by Defra's Darwin Initiative among other UK-based and international funders.

7. In the coming decade, the UK can build on this foundation of environmental support as a strong component of foreign policy in this region - it is a good news story for the Embassies in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in particular.

8. An area of particular current focus for us is Karakalpakstan. This is a sparsely populated autonomous republic within Uzbekistan, with a unique people and culture. It constitutes around 40 percent of Uzbekistan's territory, though its population of 2 million is less than 6 percent of

the country's total population of 34 million. The region is mostly desert now, thanks in large part to the environmental catastrophe that is the Aral Sea which is synonymous with ecological and socio-economic collapse. Regional biodiversity is rapidly declining due to environmental change and poaching (particularly of mammals, birds and reptiles). Unemployment rates are at 40%, incentivising poaching and looting. But it has another distinction besides its harsh climate: the existence of fringe independence movements calling for a true sovereign Karakalpak nation. The last protests broke out here on 1 July 2022 over proposed amendments to the Constitution of Uzbekistan. Our project in Resurrection Island (largely funded by a Darwin Initiative grant from the UK government) addresses unemployment and poaching drivers, and potential industrial infrastructure damage and support protected area designation around the Aral Sea promoting prosperity, peace, security, and openness which are the key aspects of British foreign policy.

### **What are the opportunities and risks of the UK strengthening its partnerships with Central Asian states in areas of mutual interest?**

9. **Opportunities:** to increase cooperation in the field of environmental protection, climate change mitigation, ecotourism, labor market, and trade.

10. On December 16, 2022, according to the [media news](#), at the Uzbek-British political consultations, the parties agreed to expand the range of exported goods from Uzbekistan to the UK and increase trade volumes. The British side also expressed interest in establishing cooperation in the field of labour migration. Taking into account the results of our recent social surveys within our Darwin Initiative project "Resurrection Island: Enterprise, Conservation, and Development around the Aral Sea", Karakalpakstan Republic has the highest registered unemployment rate in Uzbekistan, but most of the participants are interested in taking up an additional job opportunity and are willing to undergo needed skill training. Also, most of the survey participants mentioned a lack of job opportunities in Muynak, Uchsay and Mykoyan. In addition, most respondents reported having the most prior experience in creating handicrafts that could be exported to the British market.

11. The Uzbekistan government has a plan for large-scale industrial and economic development in the area over the next 10 years, including natural gas plants. These developments offer both threats of further ecological destruction, and opportunities for conservation funding, sustainable development and economic regeneration. Investment in a programme to support these developments in a way that leads to Net Gain for biodiversity and local people, based on a solid regulatory foundation, would be a major opportunity.

12. The government of Uzbekistan also wants to expand tourism from the current "extreme" tourism by small groups of European tourists, to include mass-market offerings. Investment into sensitive tourism that respects and enhances local culture and restores natural areas, while also bringing sustainable economic growth, would be a major benefit.

13. Additionally, investment into projects to restore the Aral Sea region in a way that turns it into a nature-based carbon sink that also benefits wildlife recovery (such as the Resurrection Island project) could prove to be flagship projects for international cooperation.

14. Additionally the UK Foreign Office has expressed interest in supporting Uzbekistan to meet its climate change commitments, for example through afforestation of the exposed Aral Sea bed and through implementation of Nature-Based Solutions. This is something that the UK (and in particular Oxford University) has expertise in, and there are opportunities available here.

15. Following on from the Government of Uzbekistan's Advisory Committee on the Sustainable Development of the Aral Sea region, the Government has announced that the Karakalpakstan region (around the Aral Sea) will be a Zone of Ecological Innovation and Technologies. This was approved by the UN General Assembly in 2021, following which UNDP is funding the

development of an integrated roadmap for the region (<https://www.undp.org/uzbekistan/projects/integrated-roadmap-aral-sea-region>). This is a major opportunity to support the recovery of a critically important area for Uzbekistan and for the wider region - given that the Aral Sea straddled both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

16. **Risks:** the language barrier, corruption, unstable economies, political upheaval.

**Where do the relationships between Central Asian states and neighboring countries, including the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, pose challenges for UK foreign policy, and where do they provide opportunities?**

17. Within the framework of environmental protection, Central Asia has world-leading relationships, which the UK is involved in supporting. For example the UK-based Saiga Conservation Alliance, and Prof Milner-Gulland at Oxford, have a role as Technical Advisor and coordinator of the UN Convention on Migratory Species' MoU on saiga antelope conservation and restoration, to which all the relevant range states are signatories (including Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Mongolia, Russia, Turkmenistan, with China as an observer). This is a flagship conservation instrument which has contributed to the dramatic recovery of the species and protection of its habitat, and is seen as a model for species conservation in other parts of the world. The CMS's Central Asian Mammals Initiative is another transboundary instrument to which relevant countries are signed up. In the context of challenging and difficult relationships on the geopolitical side, the environment is an area in which cooperation can take place, and UK-based organisations are playing an important role.

**What is the Government doing to maximise UK soft power influence in Central Asian states?**

18. UK soft power influence in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan comes from funding of projects aiming to support sustainable development of large areas of rangeland, in a way that supports the livelihoods of local people, connectivity for wildlife, and climate change mitigation. This includes the Darwin Initiative funded Resurrection Island project which is developing sustainable income streams (including tourism), enabling residents to benefit, and ensuring that industrial development results in 'no net loss' of biodiversity and brings government, industry and communities together; turning this area from a symbol of despair into one of hope and regeneration.

**What opportunities exist for the UK to work more closely with Central Asian states in multilateral institutions and to foster respect for the rules-based international order?**

19. Building on the cross-border cooperation under the Convention on Migratory Species, a landscape-scale initiative to support restoration of ecosystems (with species such as the saiga as a flagship) could cover several Central Asian states.

20. An area of opportunity is supporting governments in the region to develop environmental policy and legislation that supports robust Environmental Impact Assessments towards No Net Loss of biodiversity from infrastructure projects. Our team (led by Dr Bull) has been working for over a decade in the region to support governments and industry to move towards best practice in this field, including training and capacity-building. We are keen to replicate the success of the COMBO project in Africa (<https://comboprogram.org>) in Central Asia. This is particularly pertinent in the Central Asian region due to the expected influence of the Belt and Road Initiative, which runs across the region and will bring major benefits from infrastructure as well as challenges to the natural environment, as well as geopolitical shifts.

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