

# Developing the Flagship Project for a Saker Falcon Portal and Network

## Report for Year 1

### Foreword by chairs

The proposed solutions for the conservation of wildlife species for which consumptive use is considered a threat to their survival currently fall into two camps: those with protection-based views who believe that strict laws and enhanced enforcement provide the solution, whilst the alternative view is to embrace the use providing that it is properly managed and sustainable. The currently popular protection-based approach seldom considers and often ignores the wishes and concerns of the local people who live with the wildlife, who may also manage the land on which the wildlife depends, and whose own livelihoods may even rely upon the species concerned. With a species such as the Saker Falcon, which is migratory and occurs throughout a vast range covering at least 80 countries, the imposition of regulations and prohibitions on harvesting and use of the species is particularly difficult to implement and enforce. For these reasons, the Saker Falcon Task Force recognized the importance of considering a more holistic conservation strategy that extends beyond strict protection.

Indeed, the situation of the Saker Falcon is unique, in that it is a species which has been harvested sustainably from the wild, without domestication, for possibly 4000 years. Its use for falconry has become embedded in the culture of a number of nations. Falconry itself has been recognized as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO, with the largest number of submitting nations of any single element on the UNESCO list. Interestingly, several of these diverse nations are Saker Falcon range states across Africa and Eurasia, including many which are undergoing dramatic social change. They vary between some of the richest in the world and others that are poor and underdeveloped. To the people in these nations, the Saker Falcon can be considered a valuable natural asset which, if allowed to utilize sustainably, should encourage them to conserve it.

In February 2015, an opportunity arose to present the concept of an Online Saker Portal project to the IUCN Conference – “Beyond Enforcement”. We could convey that this project offered a powerful and possibly unprecedented model for addressing illegal transnational trade of an iconic and high value species. In developing the Portal, we have engaged falconers in a number of countries, including contributing to the translations. The Portal has demonstrably attracted attention from a wide spectrum of people in different countries and language groups. Its success has exceeded our expectations and provides a solid platform to build upon. The Portal offers a unique mechanism to monitor trade but also to change attitudes and practices to promote sustainable use. New features and novel ideas are planned to draw more visitors to the site and to stimulate engagement. One such feature could be real-time tracking of satellite-tagged Saker Falcons, perhaps coupled with a new competition to enhance interest.

The Saker Falcon Task Force, supported by the Coordinating Unit of the CMS Raptors MoU, has brought together government officials from range states with the Sustainable Use Groups of IUCN, falconers, ornithologists and other interested parties. It has fully integrated falconers into the hunt for a solution to the plight of this species. Furthermore, it has opened dialogues between practitioners and authorities in nations such as Afghanistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, and Pakistan, among others. The Portal is the first Flagship Project to emerge from the Task Force. In time we hope that it can be used to develop and monitor sustainable, legal and regulated trade in this species which will benefit local people in the breeding and passaging areas, the end-users, and the Saker Falcon itself.

**Adrian Lombard and Nick P. Williams, Co-Chairs of the Saker Portal Project Steering Group**

## Executive summary

1. A portal system for creating a network of falconers and trappers across was built on schedule in Arabic, Farsi, Pashto and Russian as well as English in a back-office at [www.saker-staging.net](http://www.saker-staging.net).
2. The system went live in April 2015 at [www.sakernet.org](http://www.sakernet.org) and attracted 2000 visitors in 9 months, twice the target; 32% of visits were in English, 31% Russian, 23% Farsi and 12% Arabic; however, most Russian visits were short duration and probably mainly not by practitioners.
3. A survey of falconers and trappers, which went live in May 2015, had 18 of 67 completed responses from Pakistan, a similar number from Central+ Northern Asia, and 4-5 each from North Africa, Iran, India and China. Earlier survey gave 37 Saudi and 10 Emirati responses.
4. The ratio of website visits to completed surveys was high in Saker breeding areas of Central Asia and China, with a ratio approaching 1:1 also in Pakistan; in these areas and Iran, falconers were most trapping and releasing their own Sakers.
5. Many Saudi falconers kept Sakers but fewer trapped them than in more northern areas; like these areas, Saudis kept fewer hybrids than in the Emirates, where fewer falconers had Sakers; in these Arabian Peninsula countries falconers were older than elsewhere.
6. In North Africa, where trapping and keeping Sakers was also popular, and in North Asia where Sakers were much less flown, Saker numbers were deemed to be increasing, unlike elsewhere; in the Peninsula, Iran and Asia, 50-100% of falconers visited falcon clinics.
7. Staff from 9 veterinary establishments were interviewed; all were marking clients' falcons, in 7 cases with AVID microchips to record re-visits; 6 were prepared to provide small feathers for DNA-banking to confirm ownership securely.
8. The 8 public clinics would cooperate with a scheme to monitor wild populations and trade through mark-recapture methods and would welcome an internet system to facilitate this.
9. All veterinarians were interested to know country of origin of birds marked in nests, and to access records through reading chips if not doing so already; a system to distinguish pure species from hybrids was also sought by some clinics and internet presence by others.
10. The project's year-two aims to increase survey samples from countries with few responses, especially where trust is felt to be low, and extension of veterinary survey to all clinics; the science and administration portal needs more work when an STF coordinator is appointed.
11. In order to start monitoring populations and give confidence that trade can be sustainable, it is recommended that tests of a simple liaison system for veterinarians should lead to countries funding (a) delivery of their falcon-clinic internet requirements in exchange for provision of marking data, and (b) a start to marking more young in breeding areas.