

## THIRD MEETING OF SIGNATORIES TO THE MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING ON THE CONSERVATION OF MIGRATORY BIRDS OF PREY IN AFRICA AND EURASIA

*(Dubai, 3-6 July 2023)*

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### REPORT ON IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SAKER FALCON GLOBAL ACTION PLAN (SAKERGAP)

*(Prepared by the Chair of the Saker Falcon Task Force)*

**Summary:** This document summarises the work undertaken by the Saker Falcon Task Force since MOS2.

The Meeting is requested to a) note the key conservation and management issues involved; b) support the draft Resolution, as summarized in Annex 1, to be taken to the CMS Conference of the Parties later this year, and; c) Request that the work of the Saker Falcon Task Force continues to fully develop the Adaptive Management Framework for the species, and to update the Global Action Plan, especially in light of the developing threat to the species from electrocution.

1. CMS Resolution 10.28 established the Saker Falcon Task Force (STF) in 2011, under the auspices of the Coordinating Unit of the Raptors MOU, to develop a coordinated Saker Falcon Global Action Plan (SakerGAP), including a management and monitoring system, to conserve the Saker Falcon.
2. The SakerGAP was developed over three years and adopted at CMS COP11 in 2014 by means of CMS Resolution 11.18. The [SakerGAP](#) was also endorsed by Signatories to the Raptors MOU at the second Meeting of Signatories (MOS2, October 2015, see [UNEP/CMS/Raptors/MOS2/Report/Annex VIII](#)). The SakerGAP has been translated into both Arabic and Russian and published on a dedicated page of the Raptors MOU website<sup>1</sup>.
3. [CMS Resolution 11.18 \(Rev.COP12\)](#) extended the STF's remit to oversee SakerGAP implementation and recognized that the work of the STF had been a unique and productive partnership employing a transparent consensus-building approach, involving a wide range of parties internationally, and asked the STF to report to the next Meeting of Signatories of the Raptors MOU.

### **SakerGAP Implementation**

4. The overall goal of the SakerGAP is to re-establish a healthy and self-sustaining wild Saker Falcon population throughout its range, and to ensure that any use is sustainable, and the plan is envisaged to be implemented over a 10-year period (2015 – 2024). The SakerGAP outlined four Flagship Projects that aimed to fill gaps in knowledge and spur action in key areas to conserve the species. Excellent progress has been made on the four projects, primarily led by collaborating partner organisations, NGOs, and experts.
5. Significant financial support was received from the International Association for Falconry and Conservation of Birds of Prey (IAF) to support the first Flagship Project identified in the SakerGAP, which developed an online information portal (SakerNet) at [www.sakernet.org](http://www.sakernet.org). SakerNet was launched in 2015 in five languages: Arabic, Farsi, Pashto, Russian and English. There has been increasing interest with around 17,000 visits to SakerNet in total and IAF recently upgraded the site to add five additional languages. The site lists falcon hospitals and contact points for falconers and trappers throughout the region. The system is now functioning as a hub, with links to satellite websites from different regions.
6. The second Flagship Project (to deploy one hundred satellite tags on Saker Falcons) has also seen good progress with, based on the latest published data, at least 79 Saker Falcons satellite tagged in Austria, Bulgaria, China, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Mongolia, Romania, the Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine since 2014. The actual number is likely to be close to the target of one hundred tags.
7. With respect to the third Flagship Project (to erect 1,000 artificial nest platforms for the Saker Falcon), a ground-breaking project led by International Wildlife Consultants UK Ltd and supported by Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi created a managed breeding population in Mongolia occupying some of the 5,000 artificial nests installed. By 2015, there was an average of around 600 breeding pairs of Sakers producing ~2,000 chicks each year. According to report from the Emirates Falconers' Club, two hundred closed box design artificial nests have been erected on Qinghai Tibetan Plateau as part of pilot research by Institute of Zoology in Beijing and partners. The project also utilizes data from artificial nests erected by local authorities (ca. 10,000 across the Qinghai Tibetan Plateau). Artificial nest platforms have also been established in Austria,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cms.int/raptors/en/workinggroup/saker-falcon-task-force>

Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, the Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia, and Ukraine.

8. Regarding the fourth Flagship Project (to install or retrofit one million new or existing bird-safe electricity poles), retrofitting of poles and related activities have been undertaken in Bulgaria, China, Hungary, Mongolia, the Russian Federation, Serbia and Slovakia. Designing and applying bird-safe pole configurations and insulation of existing poles are actively ongoing in several Range States. For example, the Mohamed Bin Zayed Raptor Conservation Fund (MBZRCF) is supporting an initiative in Mongolia to remediate up to 34,000 power poles in the steppe zone where nearly 20,000 birds are killed by electrocution annually, including 4,000 Saker Falcons. The initiative has seen impressive results with an expected mortality reduction of 98 percent. As another example, the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB) has insulated more than 4.600 powerlines across Bulgaria, to reduce the number of electrocution-related deaths. The Qatar falconry club has recently indicated its interest in supporting the retrofitting of pylons in Mongolia.
9. Reintroduction programmes are an important part of the effective conservation of the species and there is an ongoing initiative in Bulgaria being supported by the MBZRCF. The breeding population in the Southern Balkans became extinct in the late 20th Century due to habitat degradation and poaching. The Saker Falcon Reintroduction Programme was launched by the Green Balkans Wildlife Rehabilitation and Breeding Centre in 2015 to restore breeding populations in areas of Bulgaria where the species was considered to be extinct. Between 2015-2020, Green Balkans released eighty captive bred Saker Falcons into the wild and one pair has been successfully breeding since 2018.
10. Further significant financial support was provided by the European Commission to reinforce Saker Falcon populations within the European Union, primarily in Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria. Between 2014 and 2022 the Saker Falcon benefitted from the support of at least nine projects funded by the European Union's LIFE programme. Among others, project activities included the restocking of prey species and the conservation of their habitats, satellite tracking, the provision of artificial nest platforms, retrofitting of dangerous medium-voltage power lines, and the awareness raising of key stakeholder groups.
11. The STF is now actively undertaking work in relation to two key aspects of conservation and management action, namely the development of an Adaptive Management Framework (AMF) for the sustainable use of the species and focussing on the impact of electrocution on populations throughout its range. To tackle the top two priority threats (electrocution and unsustainable use) to the Saker Falcon and reach Objectives 1 and 2 of the SakerGAP, the Saker Falcon Task Force formed two thematic Discussion Groups in 2020. The ongoing work is described in Annex 1

**Action requested**

12. The Meeting of Signatories is requested to:
  - (a) Note the key conservation and management issues involved;
  - (b) Support the draft Resolution, as summarized in Annex 1, to be taken to the CMS Conference of the Parties later this year; and
  - (c) Request that the work of the Saker Falcon Task Force continues to fully develop the Adaptive Management Framework for the species, and to update the Global Action Plan, especially in light of the developing threat to the species from electrocution.

## ANNEX 1

### **Current status of the work of the STF toward developing an Adaptive Management Framework for the sustainable use of the Saker Falcon and addressing electrocution in the Saker Falcons Range States**

#### **Background**

This background note is designed to summarise the present work of the Saker Falcon Task Force (STF); to report on progress and to highlight the key issues being tackled at present. It also includes a draft of the Resolution and Decisions relating to the work of the STF being taken to the forthcoming CMS Conference of the Parties later this year.

The views of the participants of the MoS regarding the approaches being developed in the conservation and management of the species would be welcomed.

#### **1. The Saker Falcon**

Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug* (globally Endangered) populations have suffered rapid declines driven by threats including electrocution on powerline poles, unsustainable trapping for falconry purposes and habitat degradation. The species is of considerable conservation and cultural significance in many parts of its range; hence the status of its populations is a key factor in determining how conservation actions should be prioritised and whether any taking from the wild is sustainable.

The species has a wide breeding distribution covering large parts of central Asia, China, and parts of Europe, with seasonal movements into the middle east and Africa. The Saker Falcon is listed on the IUCN Red List: Globally Endangered. It has a global population of 12,200 -29,800 individuals with this population trend listed as “Decreasing”. The global population trend during the 19-year period 2002-2021 equates to a 44.6% decline (based on median estimates), with a minimum-maximum decline of 12-71%.

The species is listed on CMS Appendix I (apart from the population in Mongolia), and on CITES Appendix II. While CMS does not allow the taking of wild Saker Falcons (except in Mongolia), CITES conditionally allows it if it is not detrimental to the survival of the species in the wild.

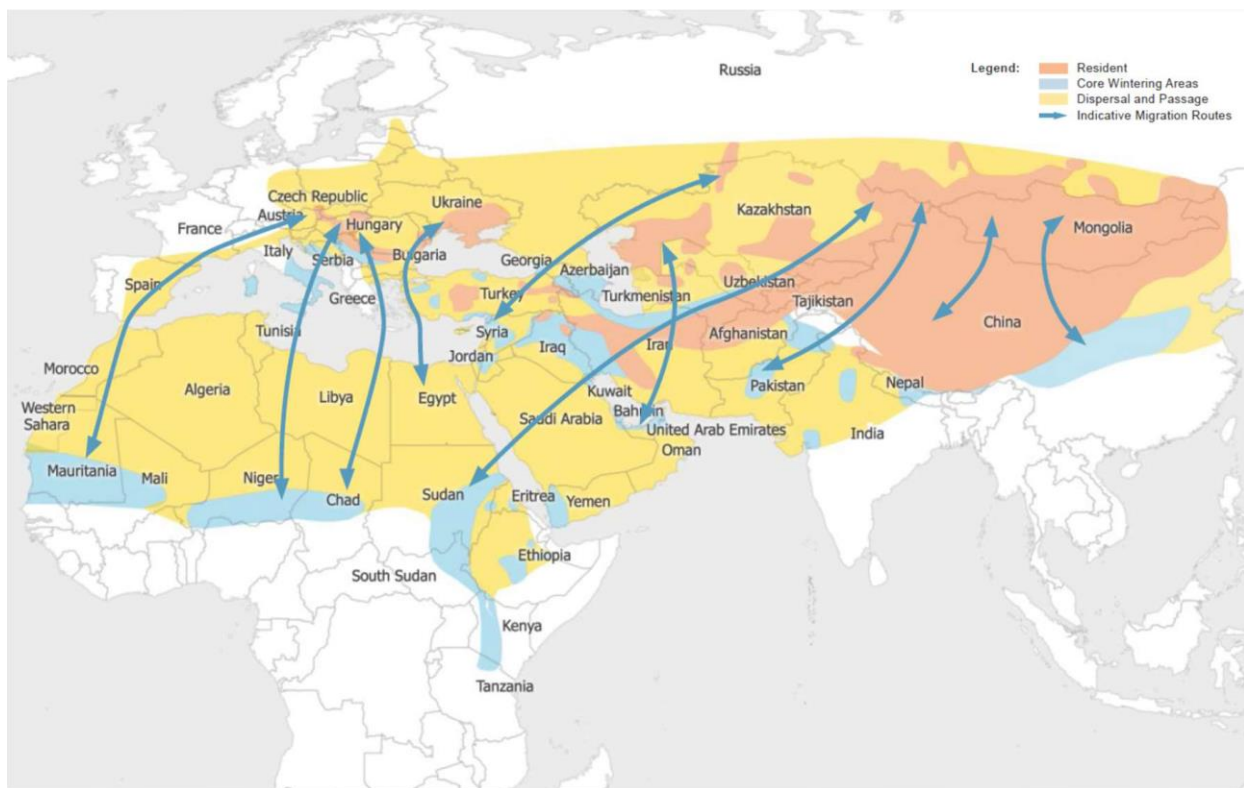


Figure 1. The range and flyways of the Saker Falcon (SakerGAP, 2014)

## 2. The Saker Falcon Task Force and Global Action Plan

The ten-year Saker Falcon Global Action Plan ([SakerGAP](#)), was adopted by CMS Parties in 2014, along with the creation of the Saker Falcon Task Force, (STF), that brought together more than 80 countries, organisations, scientists, falconers and other stakeholders with the shared goal to re-establish a healthy, self-sustaining wild population throughout its range. The [CMS Raptors MOU](#), provide an overview of the Saker Falcon Task Force and the ongoing implementation of the SakerGAP, its opportunities and challenges.

Key to the development of the SakerGAP has been the holistic, inclusive, and multi-level conservation approach, which incorporates the concept of sustainable use for falconry purposes within an Adaptive Management Framework. The SakerGAP was developed through extensive consultation with stakeholders, with shared interests and responsibilities to conserve the species on the breeding grounds and along its flyways.

To gain momentum for implementation, five Flagship Proposals (FP) were initially elaborated and included in the SakerGAP, with the following aims: (1) To create a single Saker Falcon Online Information Portal; (2) To engage 10 Falcon Hospitals and 10 Trappers within a Saker Falcon Network; (3) To deploy 100 satellite tags on Saker Falcons; (4) To erect 1,000 artificial nest platforms for Saker Falcons; and, (5) To install or retro-fit 1,000,000 new or existing ‘bird-safe’ electricity poles. Implementation of these key actions has been progressed by a range of partner organisations since 2014, with implementation being excellent in some areas and limited by resources in others.

The STF is now actively undertaking work in relation to two key aspects of conservation and management action, namely the development of an Adaptive Management Framework for the management of the species and focussing on the impact of electrocution on populations throughout its range.

Looking ahead, there is a need to update and refresh the Global Action Plan in light of developing pressures such as electrocution and the impacts of climate change on habitats.

### **3. Developing an Adaptive Management Framework (AMF) for the sustainable use of the Saker Falcon.**

The key aim of developing an AMF is to explore whether current illegal and probably unsustainable trapping activity can be changed into legal and controlled harvesting that can be carefully monitored, that is sustainable in the long-term and that conforms with requirements under CMS and CITES. To tackle this issue an Adaptive Management Framework Discussion Group (AMF DG) was formed by STF members and observers in 2020. A modular Adaptive Management Framework will be applied as a tool to assist the decision-making of stakeholders, especially of international partners, and Parties' authorities, on the sustainable use of the Saker Falcon.

The objective is to design AMF which integrates nine modules:

- global governance and data management, including effective sustainable use models and a sustainable, international quota scheme,
- internationally harmonized policy and law-making,
- reinforced law enforcement,
- effective awareness raising,
- effective monitoring and research schemes,
- complementary *ex situ* conservation measures,
- *in situ* conservation measures,
- effective stakeholder engagement, cooperation and networking to respond to the socio-economic and cultural drivers of Saker Falcon use, and
- the involvement of rural communities in the conservation management of the Saker Falcon.

Whilst the design of the AMF is still in development, a number of key points are guiding the overall approach. These include:

- Currently, Mongolia is the only Range State where CMS allows the legal taking of the Saker Falcon.
- The overall number (global number) of birds taken from the wild could be decided by a Quota Management System based on regular reports by the Range States involved.
- The Saker Falcon Quota Management System (QMS) would be based on derived monitoring data of five years as a minimum, and re-adjustment of management practices as required.
- The Quota Management System would ideally create financial incentives to manage wild Saker Falcon breeding populations in a sustainable way for those Range States where use may be allowed by safeguards, and conservation funding is currently limited.

### **4. Safety net features of the Adaptive Management Framework for the sustainable use of the Saker Falcon.**

In addition to ten essential and four desirable safeguards set in the SakerGAP additional legal, ecological, and social safeguards would be included in the AMF to ensure the sustainability of any legal use as follows:

- A three-level (international, national, and local) governance and management hierarchy would ensure the collaboration of breeding and non-breeding Range States and stakeholders.
- The Saker Falcon Quota Management System would bring together governments, regulators, conservation organisations and market players instead of separating them.

- Any AMF sustainable use of the Saker Falcon would need to be endorsed by Range States and by CMS and CITES.
- Any AMF is evidence-based, follows available guidance and best practice and takes a precautionary approach with regard to major knowledge gaps.
- Knowledge gaps are actively addressed through targeted research and monitoring that will improve the AMF over time. Legal protection of the Saker Falcon is in place in all Range States and effectively enforced such that illegal take is effectively addressed. National laws ensure any use is managed sustainably through an AMF.
- Any taking of wild Saker Falcons must be traceable. The source population of trapped falcons must be identifiable through individual marking and/or genetic ID.
- Wild falcons would be allowed to be taken only through a clearly defined process of licensing.
- Habitat conservation and management activities are implemented by national governments in line with the SakerGAP.
- Local communities would need to be involved in the implementation of the Adaptive Management Framework for the conservation and sustainable use of the Saker Falcon.

While designing the AMF, the STF is looking at the possibilities to find a balance between the benefits of an internationally coordinated sustainable use framework and its risks.

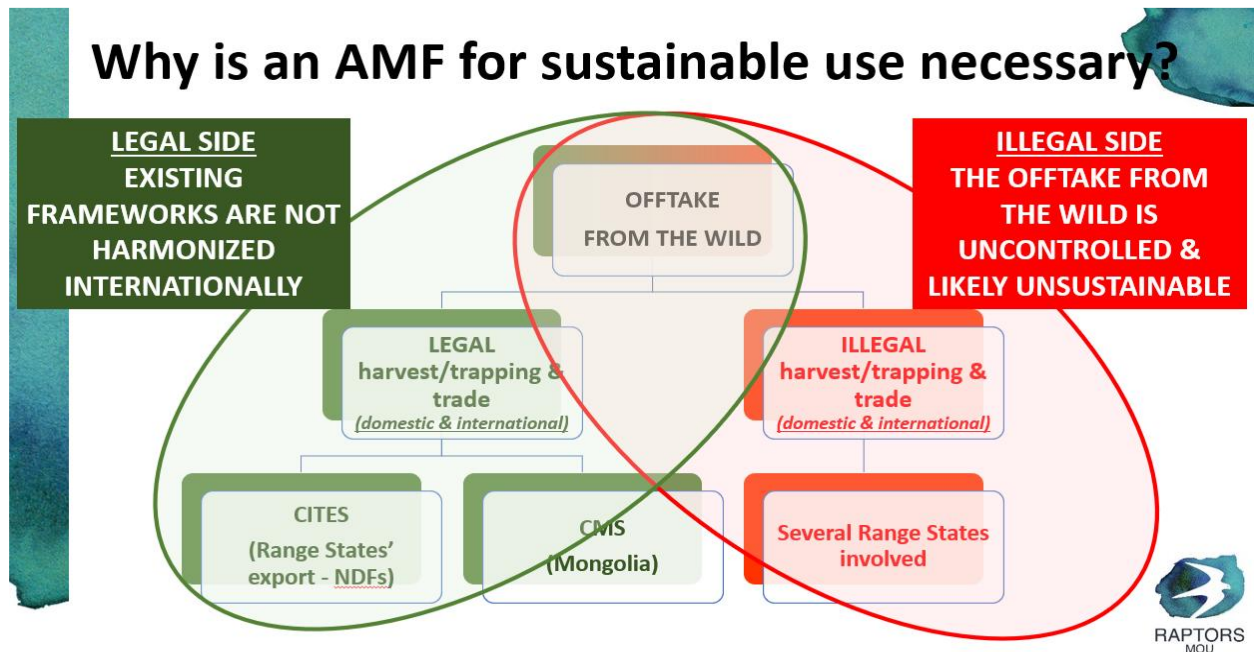


Figure 2. A simplified model of the legal and illegal sides of Saker Falcon off-take from the wild (STF AMF DG, 2023)

**5. Key ecological issues relating to sustainable use.**

The STF is continuing to refine thinking around how an Adaptive Management Framework might be applied in practice. The following diagram illustrates the key ecological issues to consider in terms of what populations could possibly be considered for “use” and what ones could not be considered in this way. Clearly, there is a need for a variety of safeguards to be included in the use of any such system and these are listed in section 3 above.

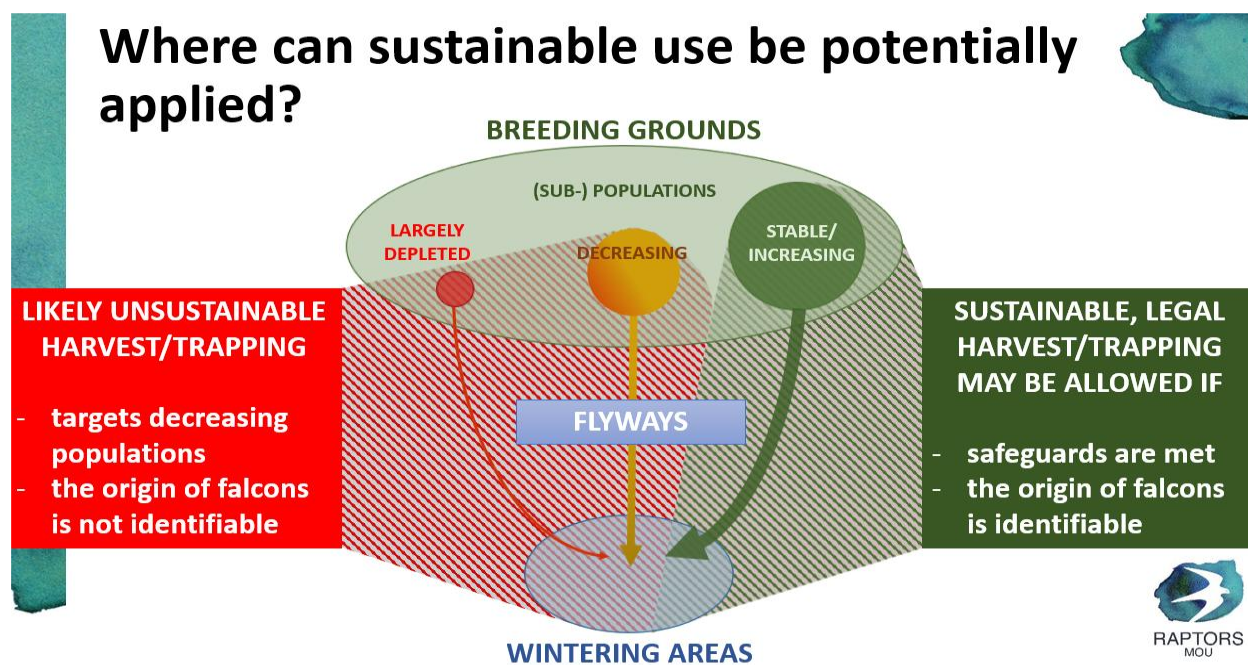


Figure 3. The legal harvest and trapping may conditionally be allowed in larger, stable, and increasing Saker Falcon populations only if safeguards for sustainability are met, and the origin of falcons is identifiable. Depleted and decreasing populations (e.g., in Europe) are not considered for use in this way avoid overharvest (STF AMF DG, 2023)

## 6. Priority work area - Electrocutation

Electrocutation of Saker Falcons on medium-voltage powerlines is identified in the SakerGAP as one of the principal threats that can cause increased mortality. Objective 1 of the Saker GAP is to 'Ensure that the impact of electrocution on the Saker Falcon is reduced significantly, enabling a stable or increasing population trend of the Saker Falcon in key breeding range countries of Central Asia and Europe.

The work on electrocution has focussed on assessing the feasibility of developing a map of dangerous powerlines across the Saker range. No complete dataset exists to develop such a map which is key to identify mitigation of dangerous powerlines in priority areas. The required information is widely dispersed amongst stakeholders at the national level and a questionnaire is in development to help assess the existence and availability of such data.

In addition, a fieldwork approach is being taken in some key areas of the Saker range to identify dangerous powerlines and ownership, and subsequently encourage mitigation.

Combining both fieldwork and questionnaire-based data gathering on the location of dangerous powerlines will be used to help raise awareness of the global issue of electrocution of Saker, birds of prey and other taxa.

It is recognised by the STF that work on electrocution in relation to Saker has overlap with other birds of prey issues and initiatives and collaboration between other working groups (e.g., CMS Energy Task Force), industry stakeholders and national governments is fundamental if we are to make progress.



## 7. Draft Resolution for CMS COP

The STF is finalizing a draft resolution to be taken to the next CMS Conference of the Parties and provides additional context to the work of the STF.

In summary, with the proposed Resolution the Conference of the Parties will:

- Endorse work done to date by the Saker Force
- Confirm that the Global Action Plan for the Saker Falcon should be updated during the coming triennium to assess progress on implementation, update ecological data and address emerging challenges.
- Decide to continue the Concerted Action for the Saker Falcon during the next triennium at least to ensure the continued implementation of the SakerGAP
- Decide to continue the Saker Falcon Task Force, under the auspices of the Coordinating Unit of the CMS Raptors MoU
- Instruct the Task Force to:
  - Actively promote the implementation of the SakerGAP,
  - Further develop, refine, and implement where appropriate an adaptive management and monitoring framework to contribute to improving the present conservation status of the Saker Falcon through, inter alia, regulating any use, and ensuring its sustainability, building on lessons learned, best practice and guidance from other adaptive management processes; and
  - Identify priority areas and promote mitigation measures and bird-safe design of new infrastructure that could reduce the impact of electrocution from power lines and related structures on populations of the Saker Falcon across the full range of the species.
  - In collaboration with others continue to raise awareness of the serious issue of electrocution of Saker Falcon with energy companies and national governments including the need for bird safe energy infrastructure design and planning and mitigation of dangerous power infrastructure.
  - To continue filling key knowledge gaps, which hinder the effective conservation of the Saker Falcon.
- Recommend the Saker Falcon Task Force to:
  - Report to each meeting of the CMS Raptors MoU.
  - Report to the next meeting of the CMS Scientific Council.
  - Review progress on implementing the SakerGAP and report to the 15th Meeting of the CMS Conference of the Parties.
- Urge Parties, Range States, and stakeholders to
  - actively support, the work of the Saker Falcon Task Force; and.
  - to work collaboratively to mobilize the resources required to fully implement the SakerGAP throughout the species' range.
- Instruct the CMS Secretariat to convey this Resolution to the secretariats of the other Multilateral Environmental Agreements, in particular CITES, seeking their support and contributions to the implementation of the SakerGAP.