

“Sacred animals of Ala-Too”

Welcome aboard! The sacred animals of the Ala-Too Mountains can’t wait to share their wisdom and blessings with you—let the adventure begin!

Description:

***Sacred Animals of Ala-Too** is a competitive tabletop game where players race to collect wisdom tokens from each of the sacred animals of Ala-Too Mountains in Kyrgyzstan. To progress, players draw cards from the deck to earn points by either matching informational cards or answering questions created by other players. These points are then combined with the results of six alchiks (or dice) rolls to create specific sums that move players' tokens along designated paths toward each animal's home in the mountains.*

The game narrative integrates elements of both scientific and traditional ecological knowledge, alongside the culture, traditions, and folklore of the Kyrgyz people. In doing so, the game aims to convey a holistic, nomadic worldview, emphasizing the deep interconnection and harmony between humans and nature.



Ala-Too mountain ranges in Kyrgyzstan. Source: Wikipedia

Players: 2-4

Duration: 30-45 minutes

Audience: 9 and over

Game Goal: To collect wisdom tokens from all the sacred animals. **Be the first to collect all the sacred animals' wisdom tokens!**

The game's dynamics offer a mix of chance, strategy, knowledge, and competition.

Games materials:

1. Game board cards;
2. Deck of special cards: standard informational cards, bonus cards, and trap cards;
3. Deck of blank cards;
4. Six traditional 'alchiks'¹ (knucklebones) or six four-sided dice;
5. Player tokens (18 pieces);
6. Wisdom tokens (4 units per animal/ 24 pieces).

Setup:

1. Game board: Solve the puzzle and arrange the mountain cards in front of the players in columns - in an increasing sequence from 6 to 11 , so that animals are at the top;
2. Stack wisdom tokens on each mountain's peak, corresponding to its animals;
3. Give each player their 5 player tokens (if 2 players) or 4 tokens (if 3-4 players);
4. Set aside 6 alchiks or 6 dice;
5. Set aside a deck of special cards.
6. Set aside a deck of blank cards.



¹ Please refer to Table 2 for usage instructions.

Rules and How to Play a Round:

1. Players collectively decide how many questions each person will contribute to the game.
The more questions you add, the more exciting the adventure becomes!
Each player can add between 2 and 8 questions to the deck.

Questions should relate to the game's themes, such as nature and mountainous ecosystems, traditional knowledge and cultural heritage, and climate change. However, you're not limited to these topics. It's your game—decide together as a team what you want to include.

Players may use books, digital tools, and other resources to create their own questions.

Blank cards should be evenly distributed and filled out individually. Choose your question wisely. If it's too easy, your rivals could earn 4 points with the correct answer! But don't make it too specific, leave a chance for others to answer!

2. Add all completed blank cards to the special card deck and shuffle well. Then, set the deck aside.
3. At the start of their turn, a player draws a card and follows the instructions on it, gaining or losing the number of points shown. *Pay attention to the symbols—they're there to guide you!*

If a blank card is drawn by the player who wrote the question, it must be returned to the deck, which is then shuffled, and the player draws a new card.

4. Then, the player rolls six alchiks (or six four-sided dice).
5. A player may choose to use or ignore the points from the drawn card and combine them with their dice rolls to form a total between 7 and 12 within the same turn. Up to two separate sums can be formed using different dice combinations and the card's points, allowing the player to move tokens along two paths simultaneously.
6. A player moves his/her player tokens along the route that matches the grouped numbers.
7. There are 6 animals, 6 routes and 4 player tokens per player (or 5 if just two players). When a player's player token reaches the animal at the top of the mountain, they receive a wisdom token from that animal, *but must wait there until another player arrives at the same spot.* (so once your player token reaches an animal's home, you cannot use it to reach other animals until another player arrives at that same peak).
8. The first player to collect wisdom tokens from all sacred animals by the end of a round—that is, after all players have taken their turns—wins the game. The player who is the last one remaining loses. The game may have more than one winner and could end in a tie.
9. Each player collects a unique wisdom message from the animals.²

Table 1. The deck of special cards includes:

² Please refer to Table 3 for the description of wisdom tokens.

1. **Standard cards I*** - An informational text related to one of the animals featured in the game. **(Read the text aloud and match it to the appropriate animal and put it above that animal. You gain 1 point.)**
2. **Standard cards II*** - Proverbs related to a specific animal of the game, kyrgyz traditional ecological knowledge and folklore **(Read the text aloud and place the card near the animal you consider the priority to protect (a player decides). You gain 1 point)**
3. **Standard cards III*** - Titles and meanings of traditional kyrgyz symbols **(Show the card and read the title to all and place the card near the animal you consider the priority to protect (a player decides). You gain 1 point)**
4. **Bonus cards** - Educational narratives that highlight and encourage the protection of biocultural diversity **(Read the text aloud and place the card near the animal you consider the priority to protect (a player decides). You gain 2 points)**
5. **Trap cards** - Narratives that illustrate the threats to biocultural diversity. **(Read the text aloud and place it aside. You lose -2 points)**
6. **Blank cards with markers.** Players collectively decide how many questions each person will contribute. Each player writes the same number of questions, adds them to the deck, and then the deck is shuffled. These cards are valuable, as they give players the agency to shape the game through their own knowledge. At the same time, players are encouraged to create questions that are thought-provoking —motivating them to deepen their understanding of the topic.

Any player who answers a question correctly on these cards earns 4 points; if not, they earn 0 points. The player who wrote the question determines if the answer is correct or incorrect. If a card is drawn by the player who wrote the question, it must be returned to the deck, which is then shuffled, and the player draws a new card.

Here are some sample questions to give you ideas to start with:

1. What flower is specially adapted to high-altitude conditions?
2. How does climate change affect mountain glaciers?
3. In which countries can snow leopards be found?
4. Which animals' fur is felt mostly made from?
5. What is the main animal featured in *The White Ship* by Chinghiz Aitmatov?
6. Complete the proverb: "If you are kind to the land,..."

*There's no chance of incorrect matching, as each card includes a hint. The goal is to read and learn from the narratives, and to interact with each card—such as by making a match and placement. If there's any confusion, other players may help make the correct match.

**When open-ended questions are added using blank cards, the author must know the correct answer to judge responses. If a player draws their own question, return it to the deck, shuffle, and draw a new one.

*** Randomizers provide a range of 6 to 24 points per turn, with card values of 1, 2, -2, and 4. Bonus cards (2) and Trap cards (-2) are equal in number to ensure balanced point distribution. The standard card offers a neutral value, giving all players the same outcome. The blank card is the most valuable, as it allows a player to influence the outcome using their own knowledge—earning points only if they answer correctly; if incorrect, they earn 0 points.

Table 2. Instructions for using six alchiks:



Photo ³

Title	Aikur	Chik	Bük	Taa
Description	sharp or pointed	narrow and rounded	curved	flat and wide
Points	1 point	3 points	2 points	4 points

Alchik is one of the most ancient and popular traditional games in Kyrgyzstan and is also widely played in other Central Asian countries. These small bone pieces are an integral part of nomadic culture, reflecting the deep bond between the Kyrgyz people and their pastoral traditions.

The player rolls 6 alchiks. Each side of an alchik has its own name and corresponds to a point value listed in Table 2. The player then combines the points to form up to two separate sums.

The maximum number of points a player can earn per turn is 24—the same applies when using six four-sided dice.

Table 3. Description of wisdom tokens.

Ilbirs (Snow Leopard): Strength, Courage, Patience, Resilience

Burkut (Eagle): Freedom, Vision, Focus, Nobility

Taigan (Dog): Loyalty, Bravery, Protection, Faithfulness

Maral (Deer): Grace, Gentleness, Harmony, Balance

Arkhar (Sheep): Endurance, Agility, Courage, Adaptability

Kyrgyz Jylky (Horse): Vitality, Freedom, Partnership, Journey

					
Sheep	Eagle	Dog	Snow leopard	Deer	Horse

Learning Objective:

³ Source https://kgcode.akipress.org/unews/un_post:14595

The game centers on the sacred animals of the Kyrgyz people, with a focus on biodiversity in mountainous ecosystems, folklore, traditional ecological knowledge, and climate change. Each sacred animal embodies a unique story and symbolizes important values within Kyrgyz culture. To support understanding and system thinking, the game narrative integrates elements of both scientific and traditional ecological knowledge, alongside the culture, traditions, and folklore of the Kyrgyz people. In doing so, the game aims to convey a holistic, nomadic worldview, emphasizing the deep interconnection and harmony between humans and nature.

Through a carefully designed deck of special cards, the game introduces players to the biodiversity of Kyrgyzstan, offering insights into Kyrgyz culture and ecological knowledge. These narratives actively influence players' decisions and pathways throughout the game, fostering both engagement and reflection. The player must read the text aloud and take one of the following actions: if it's a bonus card, place it near the animal they believe is the priority to protect; if it's a trap card, set it aside; and if it's an informational card, match it to an animal using the narrative and symbolic hints provided. Blank cards give players the agency to shape the game using their own knowledge. At the same time, creating thought-provoking questions may encourage players to deepen their understanding of the topic by using open resources such as books, digital devices, and other references.

This game can be a valuable resource for teachers of biology, ecology, world languages and cultures, and the Kyrgyz language; for NGOs and institutions promoting Kyrgyz culture and biodiversity; for community libraries serving young readers; and for parents looking to educate and raise awareness about Kyrgyzstan and its traditions.

This tabletop game can also be used by educators to customize special cards and introduce narratives tailored to their students' needs. It is well-suited to naturally incorporate topics such as ecosystem services, herbal plants, environmental issues, and water resources in Central Asia, all of which are closely connected to mountain glaciers.

Debrief:

A facilitator, teacher, or parent can lead the debrief to guide the follow-up discussion.

- 1) *Have you learned more about the endangered animals of the Kyrgyz mountains? Which facts did you find most interesting?*
- 2) *What are some effects of climate change—can you recall any?*
- 3) *How do you think traditional knowledge helps protect the natural environment?*

Materials accessibility:

- 1) The cards and game board can be printed, with PDF files available in both color and black-and-white versions.
- 2) Player tokens can be substituted with any available meeples or small objects.
- 3) Alchiks can be replaced by six four-sided dice.
- 4) If you find it challenging to come up with a question for the blank card, feel free to use your device, books, or other resources to gather information and formulate your question.

Additional notes:

The visual design of the game board cards (included in the attached PDF file) was created using Canva's AI tools.