Joint actions to raise awareness on overexploitation of Danube sturgeons in Romania and Bulgaria

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Sturgeons are some of the oldest living species on Earth – their origin can be traced back almost 200 million years, when there were still dinosaurs roaming the planet. Mountain ranges formed, empires rose and fell, and all the while sturgeons were there in the murky waters of the big rivers, surviving and thriving. There are 27 species of sturgeons that live only in the Northern hemisphere. In the Danube there were once six. Today, due to complex and relentless pressure from human activity, one species has gone extinct from the region, another one is suspected to have met this fate, three are critically endangered and one species is vulnerable. In the past 100 years sturgeons have gone from dominating the Danube to the brink of extinction. This project focused on tackling the issues related to poaching.
MAJOR THREATS TO STURGEONS
Today the migration of sturgeons from the Black Sea is cut off by the Iron Gates Hydropower Complex, between Serbia and Romania, and many of their former spawning sites are lost. Moreover, construction work or dredging for navigation destroys the river bottom where they dwell. In the past 50 years the Danube has lost almost 80% of its riparian forests and flood plains. Among other things, this has led to significant eutrophication and pollution which has devastated many Danube and Black Sea species, including sturgeons.

Several restocking projects have been launched, with hybrid sturgeons or stocks imported from Russia, thus adding yet another threat to the local populations. These individuals mix with native species and compete with them for food.

Overexploitation

Overfishing is the main direct threat to the populations of sturgeons both in the Black Sea and in the Danube. Sturgeon caviar is an extremely expensive commodity. Its price on the black market in the region can reach 500 Euros per kilo, while the Bulgarian and Romanian part of the Danube are some of the poorest regions in the EU. Additionally, sturgeon fishing is traditionally engrained in local culture and often comes in conflict with current legislation.

However, even before strict sturgeon fishing bans were in place, issues of overfishing were quite visible. Official data from Romania shows that between 2002 and 2005 there was a 60% drop in the catch of Beluga Sturgeon, 72.5% drop in the catch of Stellate Sturgeon, and 99% drop in the catch of Russian Sturgeon. These numbers are staggering, especially in combination with the lack of systematic, scientific information and monitoring of the stocks in the Black Sea and in the Danube.

These dramatic declines led to the adoption of a moratorium: in the past 10 years there has been a ban on sturgeon fishing in Romania, and a reciprocal ban was imposed in Bulgaria in 2011. Despite these measures, poaching and illegal trade are still significant problems.

Vesselina Kavrakova, WWF Bulgaria Country Manager

“Obtaining systematic, scientific information is crucial for ensuring adequate measures for sturgeon protection. More importantly, nature has no borders, all states that share this precious resource must take coordinated and targeted action to allow the wild populations of sturgeons to recover, for the good of the ecosystems and the people living on the banks of the Danube.”

Dr. Orieta Hulea, WWF Romania Country Manager

“In the Lower Danube region, fishing for sturgeon used to be a tradition and many locals made a living this way. But now, illegal fishing for caviar is leading the species to extinction despite the full fishing ban in place in both Romania and Bulgaria. However, it is not too late to help sturgeon stocks recover if we all work together.”

Julia Jahn, Project Manager

“Some people think sturgeons are ugly. I can’t understand this. They may not be visually appealing but they are unbelievably fascinating. Adult sturgeons usually live in the sea, but they migrate to fresh water and far up the rivers to spawn. The sturgeons in the Danube used to travel from the Black Sea as far up as Vienna and further up to Germany, covering distances of about 2,000 kilometres! But such migrations have been impossible for a long time now.”

“Assessment of the restoration potential along the Danube and main tributaries” Orieta Hulea, Ulrich Schwarz, Vienna 2010
All sturgeon species are protected by the Convention on International trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), as of 1998. This means that sturgeons and products originating from sturgeons need to be accompanied by CITES documents in international trade, and all caviar must have the CITES labels. Any product that enters the EU market must have CITES labels.

However, these measures are only effective if there are sufficient controls and enforcement.

Sturgeon fishing is also prohibited in the rest of the Black Sea countries. Turkey banned fishing of sturgeons less than 10 kg back in 1958 and in 1996 there was a total ban on sturgeon fishing. The interdiction is in place in Ukraine since 1996 and in Georgia since 1967. Russia imposed a ban on fishing in the Azov Sea for Beluga Sturgeons in 1985, and since 2005 there has been a ban on fishing of all sturgeon species in the Black Sea.

“The illegal caviar trade is not just a wildlife protection issue. It also involves contraband and organized crime, loss of tax revenue for the countries concerned, and there are health and veterinary issues, too.”

TRAFFIC’s Katalin Kecse-Nagy

“A new trend is to package caviar as a work of art – the boxes are painted to make them look like something else.”

Jaap Reijngoud, Expert in CITES and EC Regulations and Trainer for Project Events Targeted Towards Authorities

In both countries the situation with control of the ban and of domestic and international trade is complicated. Many institutions are in charge of different aspects of sturgeon protection. For example, in Bulgaria the National Aquaculture and Fisheries Agencies (NAFA) implements the ban in the river, while control of illegal trade through border crossings is in the jurisdiction of Customs, and traffic of sturgeon products is controlled by Border Police. In the internal market, the Food Safety Agencies are charged with tracing whether the sturgeon products are of illegal origin. In Romania, NAFA and the police (especially Border Police and Transport Police) implement the ban on the river, customs authorities have the prerogative for EU borders, the Environmental Guard is controlling the internal trade of sturgeon products and caviar and the Food Safety Agency is controlling the quality of sturgeon products and caviar.

Before our project, sturgeon protection measures were not very high on the agenda of these institutions, nor did they have good coordination amongst themselves, let alone across the border.
Joint actions to raise awareness on overexploitation of Danube sturgeons in Romania and Bulgaria” or simply “Sturgeons. Protect Danube’s Treasure” was a cooperation between WWF Bulgaria, WWF Romania and WWF Austria. In it we addressed the main issues that prevent adequate protection of sturgeons. The project was financed in equal parts by Life+ and WWF, totalling of 770 836 Euro. Its unique approach of addressing all stakeholders, and specifically tailoring to their interests and needs, assured their involvement within and after the project.

Sturgeon Advocates

Sturgeon Advocates were our most innovative and one of our more successful initiatives. The Sturgeon Advocates are experts, who know and understand the challenges that local communities face, and are tasked with exchanging information about sturgeons, increasing the awareness of the issues they are facing and changing the attitudes of fishing communities towards poaching. They visited fishing villages in the Bulgarian and Romanian part of the Danube and spoke with fishermen. Their mission was to establish reliable connections with these disenfranchised communities, to be a source of information about sturgeon protection and to gather their point of views, concerns and suggestions. Fishermen know the river better than any outsider; many of them inherited this trade from their ancestors, which makes their opinion very valuable. On the other hand, some of them are also involved in poaching.

The Sturgeon Advocates visited 34 fishing villages in Bulgaria and Romania between 2012 and 2015. They met over 500 fishermen. The work was never easy and in some places it started rough. The mistrust towards the WWF teams was significant at first – some fishermen didn’t want to be associated with illegal activity, while others believed we had ulterior motives.

The Sturgeon Advocates did not give up. We contacted fishermen’s associations and local authorities and described the project’s mission – to spread information about sturgeon protection. With help, on both sides of the river, the Sturgeon Advocates were introduced to the communities, and with consistent communication we managed to overcome the initial mistrust.

Moreover, our informational materials – factsheets and fisherman’s manuals, with detailed information about how to recognize the different species and what to do in cases of accidental catch of sturgeons – were well received. The giveaways we offered at the meetings with fishermen helped open the doors.

In the beginning of the project, the knowledge and attitude of fishermen - and other key stakeholders - towards sturgeons and sturgeon conservation measures were gauged by conducting a baseline survey, the results of which we compared with a survey at the final evaluation.

“My role is to go to fishing communities, to gather information about fishing, the problems and the solutions fishermen have for them, and in turn to offer them the latest information in the field. Afterwards, these aspects are presented to the authorities and together we try to find the best solutions for both nature and people. Why do they need me, a Sturgeon Advocate? Because in the last few years the dialogue between fishermen and authorities has not been very effective.”

George Caracas, WWF’s Sturgeon Advocate in Romania

"Sturgeons are so spectacular and it is bittersweet to see how they were once part of life around the Danube. There are few fishermen who don’t dream about catching the big fish, but they are also aware that something’s got to give. Most fishermen want to see the sturgeons return, but they don’t realize how they can be part of the solution.”

Veselin Koev, WWF’s Sturgeon Advocate in Bulgaria
Alternative Income Workshops

Once the connection was established through the Sturgeon Advocates and the interest in sturgeon protection was raised, we needed to present fishermen with something tangible, some solution to their difficult situations and to ensure lasting effects of our efforts. The Danube area is economically underdeveloped and many fishermen need the income from fishing to survive. Catching a sturgeon is like catching the golden fish – it can solve a lot of practical problems. To address the economic situation, we conducted trainings in 14 communities, where we explained what the conditions are to apply for public funds.

In most communities, the interest was large and we had more than 250 total participants. In one instance, in Nikopol, Bulgaria, a new fisherman association was established- as a pre-registered organization is necessary to apply to some funding mechanisms.

However, not everyone thought they could benefit from what was discussed during the workshops and many thought they would need far more assistance in actually setting up proposals or businesses. Some fishermen wanted an opportunity to directly apply what they know about the river and fishing to research. To this end, WWF Bulgaria made a demonstration training in Vetren – fishermen were taught what research methods are in use today and how to monitor sturgeon stocks. The results were threefold – increased capacity of the Vetren fishermen association “Vetren 396”, practical skills acquired which can be marketed to other researchers and institutions, and hands-on-individual involvement of fishermen in sturgeon protection.

It will be interesting to see whether a market will develop for fishermen to utilize their skills as research assistants. Our early indications are that there will be. At the last round table meeting in Bulgaria, when presented with these results, representatives of the institutions, in charge of implementing systematic monitoring of the fish stocks, saw promise in the idea and will discuss adopting it.

“We observed that fishermen would agree with a long term sturgeon fishing ban if they would be rewarded when they accidentally caught a sturgeon and released it and if they would have the possibility to earn their income from other sources.”

Cristina Munteanu, Project Coordinator in Romania

“There are many opportunities for sustainable tourism because the Danube is not yet seen as this beautiful region where one can go and relax. It is a border area. Our goal is to show local communities what opportunities there are and how to use them sustainably.”

Ekaterina Voynova, National Communications Officer, Bulgaria
Working with Law Enforcement Agencies

There is a patchwork of institutions that are involved in regulating sturgeon protection in Romania and Bulgaria, and their challenges are various – from lack of funding, to lack of specialized facilities to test sturgeon or caviar samples. While we could not address the systemic shortages, we managed to achieve a significant increase in knowledge and engagement of institutions and raised the profile of sturgeon protection. For example – when we conducted the baseline evaluation, in Bulgaria in 2013, only 6 representatives of institutions completed our surveys. Only two years later, the final survey was completed by 22 representatives. In Romania, a large police operation resulted in seizures of 80 kg of sturgeon caviar and 4 tons of sturgeon meat. These are some of the many indications of increased involvement and effectiveness of WWF’s work with stakeholders.

In 2014 two major workshops were conducted in Romania and Bulgaria, where 135 representatives of all relevant institutions had the opportunity to meet their counterparts from other authorities and neighbouring countries. Trainings, led by international experts, were conducted with customs and border police officials on how to recognize legal from illegal caviar and with fisheries agencies on how to distinguish sturgeon species.

Institutions were consistently connected and involved with the project, either through round tables, personal meetings, or the Steering Group of the project – which included the National Associations of Fishery and Aquaculture, Customs, Border Police and Food Safety officials, as well as scientists and representatives of fishermen associations. All participants of the Steering group provided invaluable support for and feedback on the activities of the project.

A multi-institutional wildlife crime task force is being discussed in Bulgaria and the project’s experts were invited to provide information for the risk assessment of illegal caviar. If this task force becomes a reality, it will be a significant breakthrough in enhancing controls. During the workshops, the British Interinstitutional Wildlife Crime Task Force was presented as a successful model for addressing these crimes.
Aquaculture companies can be a great solution to the demand for sturgeon products. While some have a murky reputation for poaching sturgeons from the river and “whitewashing” black caviar, others are investing in innovative technologies to try to get the competitive edge. We met several of these companies, discussed the issues of sturgeon protection and drafted a code of conduct for responsible behaviour of the market players. Four companies in Bulgaria and four in Romania signed the document. This document marks the first steps in creating a legal and responsible market for sturgeon products.

The project participated in the Seafood Expo in Brussels – the world’s largest fair for seafood – three years in a row, twice with our own booth. We disseminated information about legal and illegal caviar trade, raised awareness and gathered feedback from producers about their experiences with illegal trade. This was a great opportunity to spread the word about the situation of Danube sturgeons in particular, and also to reach an understanding with companies that it is in everyone’s interest to protect sturgeons and promote CITES labelling regulations to consumers. By the third year of the project’s participation in the Expo, WWF’s booth was well known and sought for its information on sturgeons.

“We still have wild sturgeons in the Danube and we can save these species, there are solutions such as aquaculture to cover the demand for legal and sustainable caviar. But all efforts must be supported by the industry who must be informed. Otherwise, they risk being accomplices to a crime and to contribute, perhaps without knowing, to the extinction of a species that we take pride in.”

Cristina Munteanu, Project Coordinator in Romania

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“Sturgeons. Protect Danube’s Treasure”

Working with Decision Makers

Policy makers are responsible for the legal protection of sturgeons and for the means provided to that end. Therefore, representatives on local, national and regional levels were actively involved in project activities. This started with interviews for the baseline evaluation or the Romanian Delegate Minister participating in the initial press conference, continued with active support for the work with fishermen and enforcement agencies and participation in the project Steering Group and led to presentations of the project to the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, at a DG MARE event at Milan EXPO, and to European Commissioners (DG AGRI and DG MARE) during a visit to the Danube Delta. A high-level meeting of regional decision makers is now scheduled to occur at a Ministerial Meeting of the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River in February 2016 to achieve a stronger impact.

Working with Sturgeon Breeders and Caviar Producers

Romania
SC Pirania SRL, SC PRODACVAS SRL, SC TRAPS SA, SC Năvodul Star SRL

Bulgaria
Bul Aqua Fish LTD, Fish Invest, Aquamash, Aquaculture Varna
In our quest to protect sturgeons, WWF strongly relies on the public’s support to create intolerance for illegal sturgeon products on the market. The project website – danube-sturgeons.org is translated into three languages – English, Romanian and Bulgarian and archives all project materials – manuals, factsheets, graphics, as well as news and videos.

“Our work in Bulgaria and Romania reached millions of people. Inflatable, life-sized sturgeons brought attention to the magnificence of these creatures, a very impressive TV spot showed what a world without sturgeons would look like, and our experts presented lectures to students, in both countries, on the importance of sturgeon protection.

We also organized or took part in different events: our life-size sturgeons went to B’estfest 2013, a music festival in Romania, with close to 60 000 people. We showed kids at the Romanian Natural History Museum how interesting sturgeons can be and celebrated World Fish Migration Day 2014 with them. Also, as a way to reach consumers and retailers, we included information about caviar and CITES labels in our 2013 Retailer Scorecard. In Bulgaria, Earth Hour 2015 brought the giant light sturgeon – the logo of the project – around the world.

We hope that this project will shine a light on sturgeon issues, so there is no allure to illegal activities that damage sturgeon populations. Further work with fishermen will continue even after the project is over, as lasting change can only be accomplished through many years of concentrated efforts.”

Ivan Hristov, Project Coordinator in Bulgaria

“The public may be ancient species, but their story never gets old. And I never get tired of telling it. Seeing people’s reaction when they understand that we’re alike – both humans and sturgeons can live up to 100 years – or that these fish are special, they can be as large as a bus that is something. Getting people to understand, care and then protect these lords of the Danube – that’s what we do.”

Adriana Trocea, National Communications Officer, Romania
Three years are not enough time for sturgeons to recover, as they have a long life cycle and it will take many years of targeted measures before we can see tangible results. Nor is it enough solely to eradicate poaching, especially in poverty stricken areas. The results of the targeted measures that WWF has implemented over the last three years through this project are becoming visible in people’s changing attitude towards sturgeons and sturgeon protection. When we compared the results of the baseline and final evaluations we discovered that:

- More and more fishermen want to get involved in conservation activities and are willing to try to earn different sources of income;
- Their knowledge of sturgeons has increased, both in terms of regulation measures and sturgeons themselves;
- The number of fishermen who think that poaching is a problem has increased significantly: now far more fishermen strongly agree that fishing with illegal hook-lines to catch sturgeons and targeted catching are threats to sturgeons. Also the attitudes to the fishing ban became significantly more positive in both countries;
- The prevailing opinion is that sturgeon poaching occurs as a result of the high price of sturgeon meat and caviar, in addition to the lack of quality control;
- There is an increase in the number of fishermen who express distrust in institutions, but more fishermen say they would assist the authorities if they were convinced control agencies will also comply with the law;
- At the end of the project, fishermen expressed much greater willingness to protect sturgeons in various tangible ways and reduce the negative impact of fishing;
- Responsible law enforcement agencies have a greater interest to work with increased intensity on sturgeon protection, both between agencies as well as with the non-governmental sector;
- Twice as many law enforcement agencies prioritize the need for control of sturgeon fishing now as compared to 2013;
- There is a significant increase in the share of agencies that demonstrate a high level of engagement in the issue of sturgeon preservation.
The foundations for a lasting change in the attitude of fishermen, authorities and aquaculture producers have been laid, and this is the greatest success of the project. However, work must continue to preserve sturgeons. Sturgeon Advocate visits and meetings with institutions are planned to continue, to strengthen relationships and increase engagement even further.

While Bulgaria and Romania are the most important states in the Lower Danube for sturgeon protection, Serbia and Ukraine have essential roles to play as well and need to be included in the process. Moreover, sturgeon stocks in the Black Sea are shared by six riparian states. What WWF learned throughout the project will be shared with other offices and organizations, to increase the effect on the remaining populations of wild sturgeons. Some of the project materials have already been translated and printed in other languages and in countries that are not part of this project.

The project’s website will be regularly updated with latest news on sturgeons and sturgeon protection, in all three project languages.

Media work will be essential to keeping the issue high on the public’s agenda, especially considering the full ban expires in Romania and Bulgaria at the end of 2015 and countries must take further action.

Work with decision makers will intensify, now that the issues covered by this project have gained momentum and publicity. More targeted and adequate measures are needed on the EU and state levels to help sturgeon populations recover to levels suitable for sustainable fishing. This process will take years, if not decades, and WWF will continue to advocate and protect sturgeons, the Lords of the Danube.
DANUBE STURGEONS, IN NUMBERS:

2
Viable wild Danube sturgeon populations can be found only in Romania and Bulgaria.

200 MILLION
Sturgeons appeared over 200 million years ago, when dinosaurs roamed the planet.

100
Sturgeons can live up to 100 years old.

14
In total, 14 seizures of illegally traded caviar from Bulgaria and Romania were reported in the EU between 2000 and 2009.

Why we are here
To stop the degradation of the planet’s natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.
www.panda.org