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Caviar from endangered sturgeon not suitable for Christmas

Vienna — Caviar should be crossed off Christmas gift lists whenever possible to give highly endangered sturgeon a chance to recover in the wild. Sturgeon worldwide are teetering on the brink of extinction because of the persistent trade in their valuable caviar.

Although legal fishing is strictly regulated in most countries, illegal fishing and trade continue. Caviar is considered a delicacy and is one of the world's most expensive wildlife products.

"It's about being aware of what you buy, and the impact it can have on species and the environment," said Jutta Jahrl of WWF, "anyone planning to buy a gift of caviar from wild sturgeon – for example Beluga - should reconsider."

All sturgeon species are protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). At present, international trade in wild caviar from shared stocks - like the Caspian Sea or the Danube - is not allowed.

According to trade statistics, the European Union, the United States and Switzerland are the largest importers of caviar with 81% of all legal caviar imports between 1998 and 2006. France and Germany are the largest importers in Europe.

"One century ago, six species of this ancient fish were native to the Danube, but today five of them are classified as critically endangered. The main reason for this dramatic status is the unsustainable appetite for caviar."

In response to declining numbers, most countries along the Danube and the Black Sea have implemented catch and trade bans. Caviar smugglers using sophisticated methods also pose a dangerous threat to sturgeon populations, making saving sturgeon more than just a wildlife protection issue.

"The catch and trade ban didn't stop the proliferation of illegal trade in caviar", Jahrl said. "Continuing seizures of illegal caviar in Europe indicate that there is a thriving black market in the whole region."

Consumers determined to buy caviar from sturgeon should be cautious and make sure it comes in a tin or jar that is sealed by a non-reusable CITES label. The labelling requirements apply to all caviar - wild caught or from farmed sturgeons.

WWF is working to secure the long-term survival of sturgeon with their high natural and economic value. WWF's EU project "Joint actions to raise awareness on overexploitation of Danube sturgeons in Romania and Bulgaria" (www.danube-sturgeons.org) aims to tackle overfishing and poaching, the main threats to the survival of Danube sturgeon.

In addition to overexploitation, sturgeon populations are adversely affected by the construction of dams, which interrupt their spawning migration, and by habitat changes meant to make the Danube more navigable.

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Notes for editors

- The label for caviar containers must include the following information:



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| STANDARD SPECIES CODE | Three-letter code for the identification of sturgeon species, hybrids and mixed species. BAE for example stands for <i>Acipenser baerii</i> . |
| SOURCE CODE OF THE CAVIAR OR SPECIMEN | W = sturgeon harvested from the wild. C = captive-bred sturgeon. |
| CODE FOR THE COUNTRY OF ORIGIN | ISO two-letter code. |
| YEAR OF HARVEST OR REPACKAGING | The year the sturgeon was caught or the specimens repackaged. |
| OFFICIAL REGISTRATION CODE OF THE PROCESSING OR REPACKAGING PLANT | The code follows the national registration system for processing plants, which countries must establish; or, for repackaging, incorporates the ISO two-letter code of the country of repackaging if different from the country of origin. |
| LOT IDENTIFICATION NUMBER, OR CITES EXPORT PERMIT OR RE-EXPORT CERTIFICATE NUMBER | The code is issued according to the caviar tracking system used by the processing or repackaging plant. |

- Originating 200 million years ago, sturgeons have outlasted the dinosaurs, but today are the most threatened animals on the IUCN red list of threatened species. Overfishing - principally for caviar - is the biggest cause for concern, but cutting off sturgeon migration routes, habitat alteration, and pollution are further contributing causes. However, according to the World Sturgeon Conservation Society, the Danube is the only large river system in Europe where protection of existing but dwindling sturgeon stocks is still possible.
- Due to its high price and rarity, caviar - one of the most expensive wildlife products - is often traded illegally. Among the sturgeon species native to the Danube is the Beluga Sturgeon, famous for its expensive caviar.
- The Black Sea is one of the most important sturgeon fisheries in the world, second only to the Caspian Sea. The Danube, as one of the major feeder rivers and estuaries of the Black Sea, is crucial for sturgeons. Fishing and export of sturgeon and sturgeon products of wild origin was banned in Romania in 2006 and in Bulgaria in 2011. The current ban ends at the end of 2015 in both countries.

For additional information or to request an expert interview, please contact:

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Full report “Illegal Caviar Trade in Bulgaria and Romania”:

http://awsassets.panda.org/downloads/illegal_caviar_trade_in_bulgaria_and_romania.pdf

Full report “Trade in Sturgeon Caviar in Bulgaria and Romania - overview of reported trade in caviar”:

<http://awsassets.panda.org/downloads/wwftrafficcaviartrade.pdf>

About WWF

WWF is one of the world's largest and most respected independent conservation organizations, with over 5 million supporters and a global network active in over 100 countries. WWF's mission is to stop the degradation of the earth's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by conserving the world's biological diversity, ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable, and promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption.