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LIFE FOR DANUBE STURGEONS

danube-sturgeons.org

LIFE FOR DANUBE STURGEONS is the second WWF LIFE project to protect sturgeons in the lower Danube from poaching and illegal wildlife trade. These are the main problems for the four remaining sturgeon species, of which three are Critically Endangered.

The project is implemented by WWF offices in Austria, Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine, the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority in Romania and the Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research in Germany. It started in October 2016 and will continue until the end of 2020.

The project focuses on three key target groups in Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine, who can – positively or negatively – influence the problem:

- Fishermen and fishing communities, including young people
- Law enforcement authorities
- Retailers offering sturgeon meat or caviar

Fishing communities have depended in various degrees on sturgeon fishing, which is now prohibited. The project tackles the key threat – sturgeons being poached or not released as bycatch – but also supports communities in creating alternative means of livelihoods.

“Sturgeon Advocates”

Team members act as mediators and visit targeted communities to communicate with fishermen, raising awareness for the need for sturgeon protection and for observance of legislative measures.

In total, 21 communities along the Danube and the Black Sea are visited repeatedly, and 800 contacts with fishermen were made so far.

Initially, fishermen in the project region were rather negative towards sturgeon conservation, as catch bans were imposed without support to compensate the income losses. Making contacts has therefore been very challenging in several communities.

“Sturgeon Advocates” had to overcome mistrust and tried various formal and informal approaches. Good long-term relations, developed in many visits and months – often years – of work, are necessary to gain responsiveness.

Meanwhile, major achievements were made, and individual fishermen started to release sturgeon bycatch, document this by photo or video and inform project staff or even set the fish free together. Nevertheless, this is only a beginning and the very positive trend needs to be consolidated and spread to all relevant areas.





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Developing alternative livelihood in fishing communities

Poor livelihood in many fishing communities along the Danube and Black Sea is a major driver for illegal fishing. Enhancing the economic situation is therefore a vital part in raising acceptance of sturgeon conservation and reducing fishing pressure.

Based on analyses of socio-economic situation and natural resource availability, diverse business plans have been developed together with community members:

- Small eco-friendly tourist accommodation in the Danube delta (Ukraine),
- Production of cider or water-mint tea from local fruits and plants and support to market them in a national supermarket chain (Ukraine)
- Boat-trips and thematic packages for tourists (Romania, Bulgaria)
- Tasting events and promotion of fish products and dishes (Romania)
- Project development training (Bulgaria)
- Developing sturgeon as a brand for a local initiative, including a visitor centre (Serbia)



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At present, we work to set up at least one concrete business that starts to generate profit and provide jobs to showcase alternative ways to generate income.

Main difficulties encountered are the lack of entrepreneurship and investment capacity in many communities, meaning that intense coaching and financial support are needed. Besides, fishing villages are often in rather remote, economically weak regions with poor infrastructure.

Involving fishermen in sturgeon monitoring

To create marketable skills and long-term ownership for sturgeon conservation, fishermen are actively involved in monitoring and conservation measures. In Bulgaria, fishermen get training in the scientific monitoring of fish stocks, which also increases the knowledge about sturgeons and their key habitats. 24 fishermen have been trained so far, and two of them are already employed in other sturgeon projects and get additional income from these.



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Engagement in communities

A pro-sturgeon atmosphere is reinforced by working with local youth in eco-clubs, schools and special events.

In addition, Danube Days, Fish Migration Days, Sturgeon Moon and other occasions, sport events and festivals are organised to highlight sturgeons and their conservation and develop pride among fishing communities to have these rare species.



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Effective **law enforcement** and a high risk of detection and sanctions of poaching and illegal trade are fundamental to make legal protection of sturgeons work. Capacity and resourcing of authorities is not sufficient and interagency as well as cross-border cooperation are limited.

Tailored activities to raise capacity and cooperation of law enforcement authorities:

- Targeted information packages with information brochures and videos on sturgeon identification, caviar trade regulations, etc. and with regular newsletters
- So far, 28 training courses and study visits to institutions abroad to respond to the needs of individual authorities and enhance expertise and practical skills of more than 570 officials
- Four national workshops to facilitate interagency networking and exchange of experiences of all authorities responsible for implementing regulations concerning sturgeon fishing, aquaculture and trade
- A regional workshop with agencies from neighbouring countries to foster cross-border coordination and collaboration



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Enhanced laws, norms and procedures

Obstacles in implementing the legal protection of sturgeons have been addressed through national surveys of norms and procedures, developing recommendations together with agencies and advocating for their implementation. Significant achievements so far are a catch ban for Sterlet in Serbia – were the species had undergone a severe decline but could still be caught and sold – and a massive legal gap has been closed in Ukraine – Customs is now responsible for CITES checks of wildlife products crossing the borders.

Involving civil society in surveillance of wild sturgeons

Activities to involve civil society in assisting law enforcement agencies have been developed and proved quite successful. In the Ukrainian Danube delta, volunteer “Sturgeon Watchers” join patrols of authorities. This helps protect young sturgeons migrating downstream. In three missions each summer, the volunteers rescued several sturgeons from nets.



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However, a major problem is the severe lack of staff, resources and equipment in many agencies, which makes sufficient controls of large areas impossible.

A pilot scheme with a surveillance camera provided to Border Police in the Ukrainian Danube Delta showed positive results: 24-hour real-time monitoring of illegal fishing activities had a disciplinary effect on fishermen and sturgeon bycatch has been released at this river section.

More modern technology and innovative methods are needed to support understaffed and under-financed authorities and enable an effective control of fishing at the Danube and Black Sea coast.



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The **domestic markets for sturgeon products** have to be investigated to detect illegal activities and retailers need to be informed and made aware of their responsibility to ensure that illegal products will not reach the market.

Surveying markets for sturgeon meat and caviar

The high economic value and continuing demand for caviar and meat from wild sturgeons is a key driver for poaching. Within the project, undercover surveys of shops, markets, restaurants, street vendors in Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine and Serbia were conducted in 2017-2019, and obtained samples of sturgeon meat and caviar were tested for DNA and isotope composition to discover trade in poached sturgeons and other illegal activities. This determined that illegal sturgeon products were sold in all four countries: of 112 samples, 22% were from wild caught sturgeons and thus illegal. Further 12% were found to be sold in violation of CITES and EU Wildlife Trade Regulations (e.g. caviar imported without CITES permits or offered for sale without CITES labels or with incorrect CITES codes). Information has been sent to authorities to start investigations.



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Information work with retailers

Retailers offering sturgeon products are the link between consumers and suppliers and have an important role in information dissemination. Project activities – from personal meetings to information campaigns – raise their awareness and engage them against illegal products reaching the market.



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More on the project, its goals and activities: danube-sturgeons.org