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# An approach to winning fishermen's support for sturgeon conservation in the Lower Danube region: the case of "Sturgeon Advocates"

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## Sturgeons in the Lower Danube region

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In the EU, the Lower Danube region is the only area with **still viable sturgeon populations**

Of 6 native sturgeon species, **5 are Critically Endangered**

**Illegal fishing and trade** are main direct threats

**EU LIFE project 2012-2015** of WWF in Romania and Bulgaria



## Fishing communities – the situation

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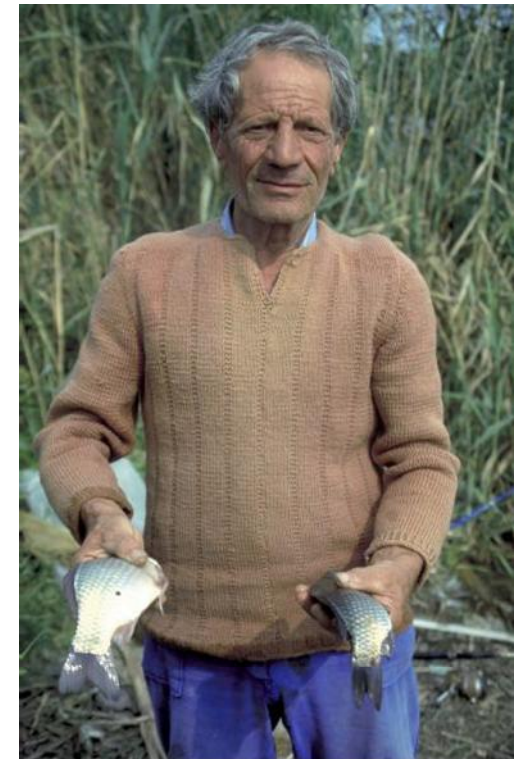
Along the Lower Danube there is a **long tradition** of catching sturgeons

Selling meat and caviar provided **important income**

Collapse of sturgeon stocks led to **fishing bans**

**No compensation or other support** provided to communities

**Hardly any alternative income sources**



## Fishing communities - the starting position

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Support by fishermen is crucial for sturgeon protection, but in many communities, there is **little awareness and acceptance**

Many fishermen feel treated unfairly by state institutions and are **negative towards conservation measures**

**Specific approach** is necessary to raise knowledge, awareness and understanding and win support of fishermen



## Fishing communities – the approach of “Sturgeon Advocates”

Local colleagues act as **personal communicators** to build up relationships with fishermen

**34 villages** along the Lower Danube and its delta in Romania and Bulgaria

**15** of these were **target villages** and **visited 4-10 times**

**750 individual conversations** with app. **500 fishermen**





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## Fishing communities – the approach of “Sturgeon Advocates”

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First visits were very **difficult** (denial, distrust, hostility)

**Various strategies** to get in contact – directly visiting fishing sites, through fishing associations, relevant authorities, etc.

**Repeated visits, consistent interactions & patience** were necessary

**Getting to know problems and knowledge**

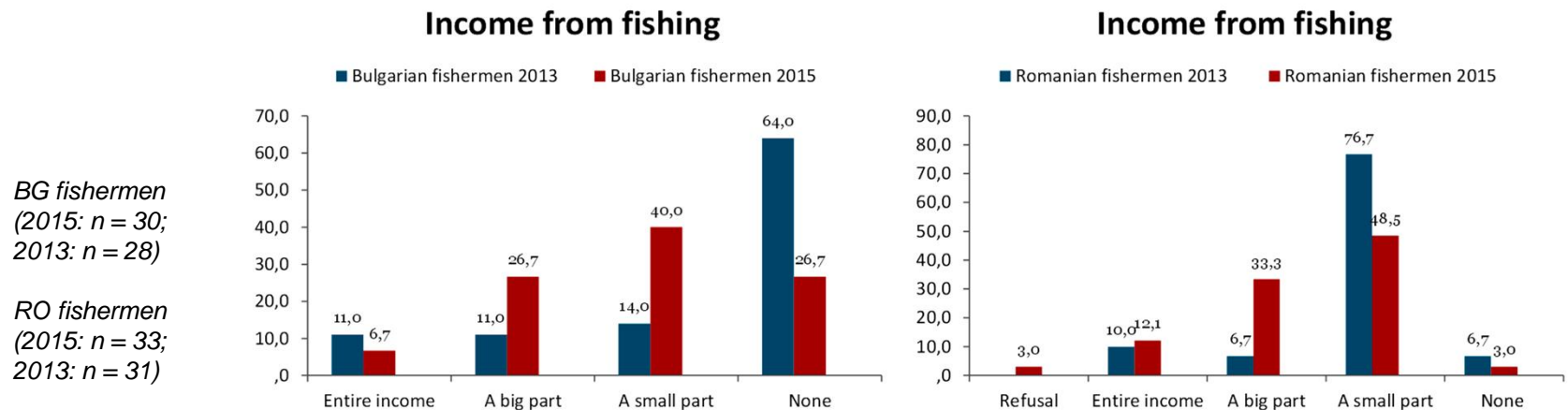
**Active support** (alternative income options; training fishermen in monitoring techniques)



## The results - relevance of fishing

In total, **122 interviews** with fishermen at beginning and end of project

In 2015, **fishing more important for livelihood**, providing a big part of income to 27% in BG (11% in 2013) and 33% in RO (7% in 2013); only 7% in BG and 12% in RO live entirely from fishing





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## The results – knowledge of sturgeons and threats

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The results of the surveys made in 2013 and 2015 show an **almost 200% increase** in correct answers to knowledge questions

**Knowledge of sturgeon species** was rather good and still increased:

- in 2013, most RO fishermen (32%) recognized only 1 species
- in 2015, 65% identified 4 (in 2013 only 3% of RO fishermen identified 4)

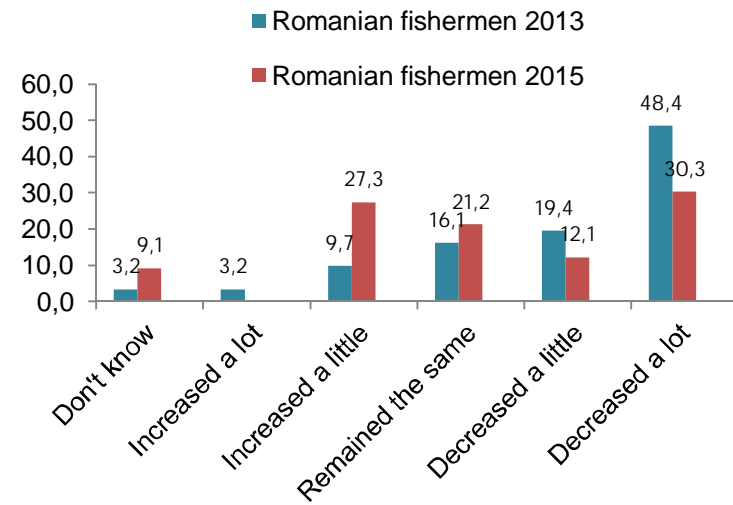
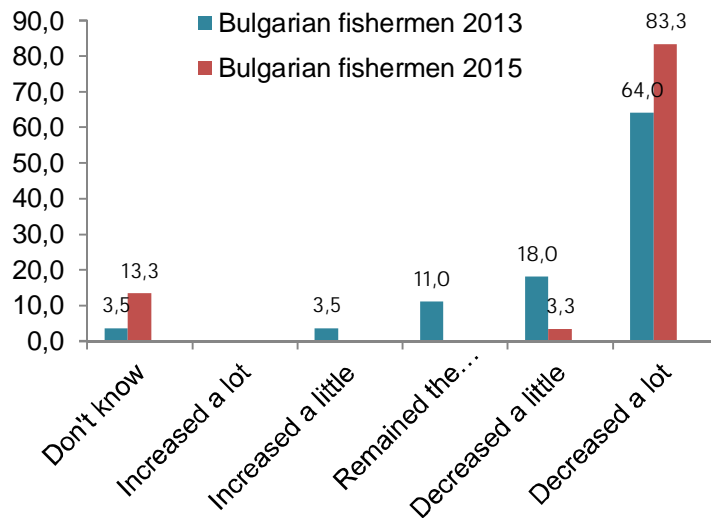
A bigger number of fishermen in both countries managed to indicate the biggest **threats to sturgeons**:

- in 2013, the majority (54% in BG, 90% in RO) listed just 1-3 threats
- in 2015, most of them (60% in BG, 67% in RO) listed 5-6 threats



## The results - awareness of sturgeon status

BG: 83% feel that **sturgeon stocks decreased** a lot in 2015 (64% 2013)  
 RO: less (42%) assume decrease than 2013 (68%)\*

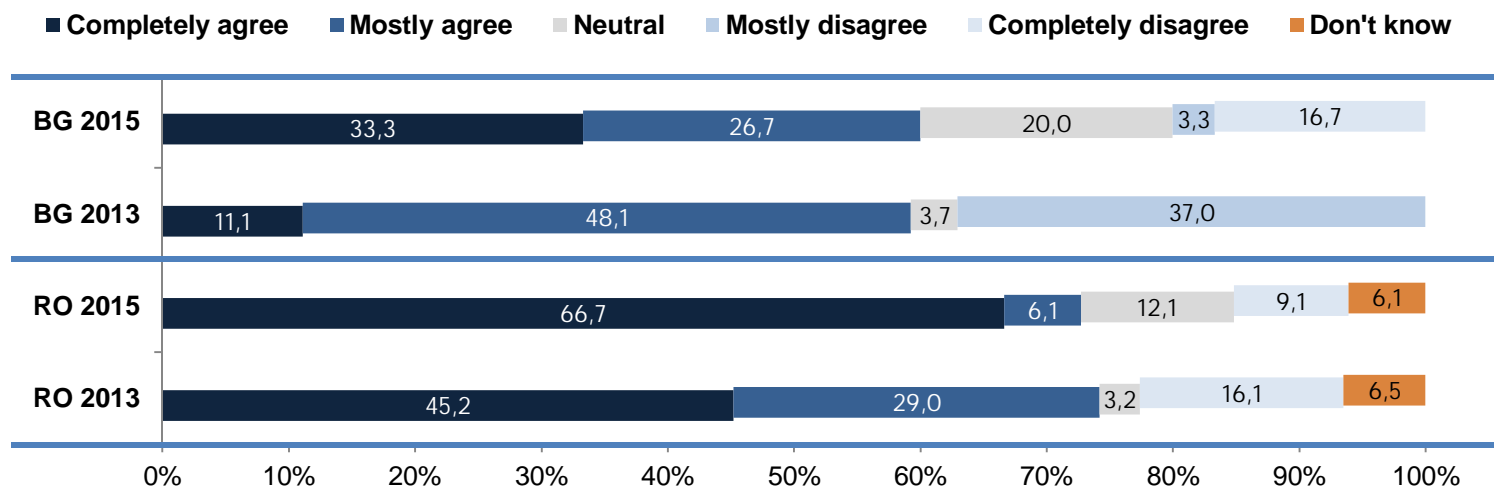


\* many from key sturgeon breeding areas  
 where restocking took place - perception could be influenced by bycatches

## The results - attitude towards sturgeon fishing

More fishermen are categorical that **fishing with karmaci** (illegal hook-lines to catch sturgeons) and targeted fishing are serious threats to sturgeons

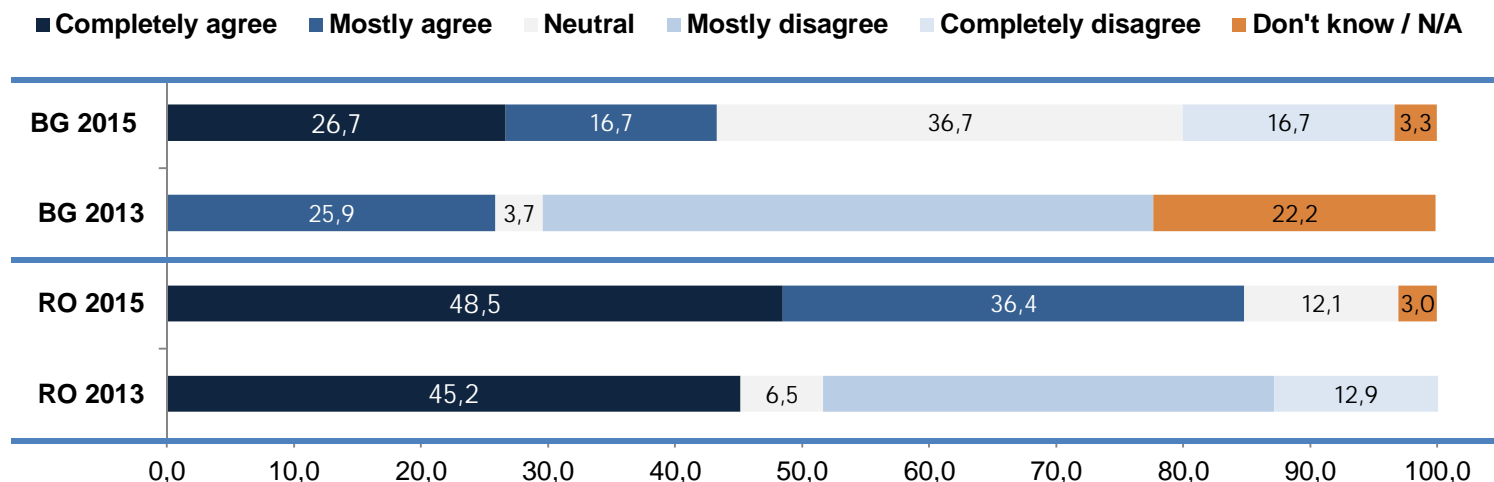
### Fishing with karmaci is a threat to sturgeons



## The results - attitude towards sturgeon fishing

More fishermen are categorical that fishing with karmaci (illegal hook-lines to catch sturgeons) and **targeted fishing** are serious threats to sturgeons

### Targeted fishing is a threat to sturgeons





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## The results - attitude towards sturgeon fishing ban

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The proportion of respondents who viewed the **ban as an effective conservation measure** - if enforced properly - increased from 4% in Bulgaria and 10% in Romania in 2013, to 20% and 39%, respectively, in 2015.

By the end of the project, less fishermen (7% in Bulgaria and 15% in Romania) “completely agreed” with **fishing sturgeons at all costs**, compared with initial attitudes (23% in Bulgaria and 33% in Romania in 2013).



## The results - willingness to protect sturgeons

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At the end of the project, fishermen expressed **much greater willingness to protect sturgeons** in various concrete ways and to reduce the negative impact of fishing activities:

- 63% in Bulgaria and 82% in Romania “completely agreed” **not to catch sturgeons during their spawning migration** (compared to 7% and 33% in 2013)
- 83% in Bulgaria and 91% in Romania “completely agreed” that they would **release immature sturgeons** (compared to 36% and 81% in 2013)
- 63% in Bulgaria and 94% in Romania “completely agreed” **not to use illegal hook lines** (compared to 18% and 65% in 2013)



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## Conclusions

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Due to the work of Sturgeon Advocates, fishermen showed **increased openness and interest towards conservation activities**

Knowledge of sturgeon issues and **understanding of their own responsibility for sturgeon protection** have improved

Much higher awareness of the negative impact of sturgeon fishing and a **40% increase in statements in favour of sturgeon protection**



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## Outlook

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**Expansion to larger area** – Lower Danube and Black Sea coast (Serbia, Bulgaria, Romanian Ukraine) in new EU project (LIFE FOR DANUBE STURGEONS, 2016-2020)

Many important **lessons-learnt are shared and applied**

**Longer-term commitment:** Several communities still very cooperative, in challenging areas (especially Danube delta) considerable progress, in some the cooperation is not yet stable enough

Stronger focus on **development of alternative income in fishing communities**



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Thank you!

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[www.danube-sturgeons.org](http://www.danube-sturgeons.org)

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TREASURE**

