



2018

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LIFE for Danube Sturgeons Project Newsletter #2 January 2018



Photo: Sterlet © WWF Bulgaria

Our first LIFE FOR DANUBE STURGEONS year in review (October '16-'17)

In 2017, we embarked on an inspiring journey to understand the socioeconomic conditions and natural resources base in the target communities along the Lower Danube region in the four countries (Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine). This has been a stepping stone to the mapping and development of nature-based income opportunities that can replace sturgeon fishing in these areas.



Photo: Theoretical training with fishermen in Vetren, Bulgaria © WWF Bulgaria

For the Ukrainian State Border Guard Service, the Christmas spirit settled in already in September, as a full HD surveillance camera was donated through our Project to support efforts for preventing illegal sturgeon fishing in the area. The camera was installed on the poachers' favourite spot in the Danube Delta, where cases of illegal sturgeon fishing had previously been documented. [Read more >>](#)



Photo: Border guard staff with the camera (left) and camera footage (right) © WWF Ukraine

Together with legal experts, we conducted studies on law enforcement and norms and procedures for the control of sturgeon fishing, aquaculture and trade in Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine. This will form the basis for further dialogue and work with authorities on improving norms enforcement.

Good news also came from the region this autumn, as Romanian and Ukrainian authorities started close cross-border cooperation on sturgeon protection. Their commitment to synchronize 2018 fishing ban periods in the two countries is the fruit of the first meeting carried out between Romanian and Ukrainian authorities in May 2017, as part of the "LIFE for Danube Sturgeons" Project. [Read more >>](#)



Photo: Romania-Ukraine workshop in Odesa © M.Arseniuk

Members of the "LIFE for Danube Sturgeons" crew travelled to Vienna in September 2017, to spread the word about their work with fishing communities and caviar trade, in the framework of the eighth International Symposium on Sturgeons (ISS8).



Photo: ISS8: Project team © E.Voynova

ISS8 is one of the most significant events gathering experts from all over the world to catch up on the developments in conservation of sturgeon populations and to discuss old and new challenges that threat sturgeon stocks worldwide.

[Read more >>](#)



Photo: ISS8: LIFE Project Info booth © R.Peneva

In Serbia, WWF colleagues and the national sturgeon advocate built up trustworthy relationships with the few remaining fishermen at the Danube below the Iron Gates dam and have got a good understanding of their situation and conditions in the region in general.



Photo: visit to a retired fisherman in Serbia © WWF in Serbia

In Bulgaria, eight fishermen in Belene and Vetren benefited from theoretical and practical trainings on methods for sturgeon monitoring. It was a two-way learning process, as fishermen learned how to conduct a monitoring of the river (which can later bring an alternative income for them), while sharing useful knowledge on rivers and fishing. Over the next years, more fishermen in Bulgaria will benefit from such trainings, as part of the “LIFE for Danube Sturgeons” Project.



Photo: Sturgeon monitoring training in Vetren, Bulgaria © WWF Bulgaria

Representatives of the Romanian Police, Border Police and the General Directorate of Customs met colleagues from WWF Romania and the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority (DDBRA) in June 2017 to discuss the existing legal framework around sturgeon fishing in Romania, as well as challenges they face in their mandates and activities to protect and conserve Danube sturgeons.

[Read more >>](#)



Photo: Law enforcement workshop in Romania © G.Caracas

Nine university students in Ukraine embarked on a five-day sturgeon watchers mission in June 2017, to dive into the theory and practice of sturgeon conservation and get active to protect sturgeons. Among others, they patrolled on Danube waters together with Fishery Patrol inspectors and guards of the State Border Guard Service. This resulted in the release of a Stellate sturgeon that they found caught as bycatch. [Read more >>](#)



Photos:
Sturgeon watchers on the water mission (left)
© M. Nikitina; release of Stellate sturgeon (right)
© O. Pavlenko



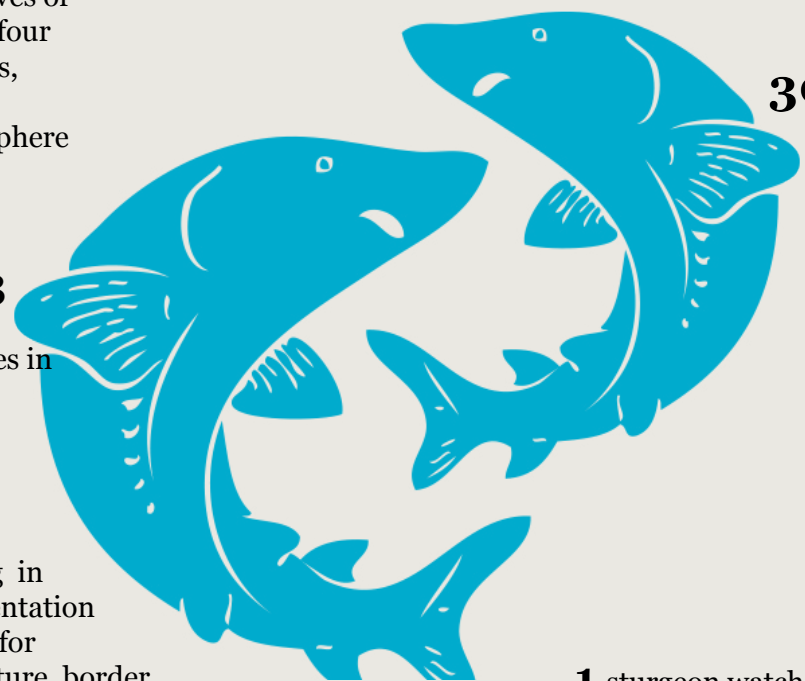
At a higher level, this initiative was an important contribution to the efforts of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve (DDBR) to advocate for improved laws and norms regarding fishing in Ukraine. Subsequently, the National Fish Agency (NAFA) banned the use of the thick threads and are now working on prohibiting unaccompanied fishing nets in marine areas.

Our work in numbers

28 personal meetings with **36** representatives of key institutions in the four countries (fish agencies, police, border police, customs, Danube Biosphere Authority, etc.)

7 visits of authorities in the communities in Bulgaria and Serbia, to strengthen understanding and cooperation between fishermen and agencies

9 trainings with **163** representatives of law enforcement authorities in Ukraine (fish patrols, fish agency)



30 visits to **25** communities, engaging approx.

200 community members, **70%** of which are active fishermen

3 theoretical and practical trainings on sturgeon monitoring methods with

8 fishermen in Belene and Vetren (Bulgaria)

1 stakeholder meeting in Romania, with representation from National Agency for Fisheries and Aquaculture, border police, and the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority.

1 sturgeon watchers' mission on the Ukrainian Danube, with **9** participants (students)

Stories from the field

BULGARIA

While engaging with fishing community members can initially seem an uphill battle, there's much about this work that makes it enriching and gratifying. For most fishermen in Bulgaria, the trust in authorities' capacity to fight against illegal fishing and commercialization is very limited. But there is hope too; some fishermen believe that change takes place from the bottom up. We asked Emil Milev, chairman of the fishing association “Black Sea Sunrise” to imagine the future of fishermen and fishing in Bulgaria. “We have to practice responsible fishing and to be a good role-model for others”, says Emil. He has been an active fisherman for more than 20 years now and has seen many good and bad days at sea. Emil hopes to pass on his profession to his children, who would then inspire the next generations. The experienced fisherman voices his worries about water pollution, extinction or significant decline of fish species, the need for better regulations in the industry and stronger enforcement of existing laws. As his colleagues, he believes their future starts today, with fishermen recording themselves while releasing sturgeon bycatch back into the water and sharing the video on social media. They, thinks he, want to lead by example.



UKRAINE

It took us a year of very intense work until, finally, a very important door in Vylkove was opened to us in December 2017, when Kostyantyn Balatsky (sturgeon advocate) and and Sergei Bushuyev (scientific expert), met 18 fishermen in the Krystal Pivden fishing point. Most of them engage in herring catching in the Danube, while the foremost leader of this group is also the pastor of the Baptist community in Vylkove. None of these fishermen would take randomly caught sturgeon individuals as a serious crime. However, opinions clash slightly when it comes to the sturgeon stocks. Some of the fishermen do understand that incidental capture (bycatch) and poaching put sturgeon stocks in danger, believing this situation needs to change. Laws and norms, they say, are known to the people, but their enforcement is highly ineffective and corrupt, especially when it comes to controls and inspections. Other fishermen (with little work experience) do not notice negative changes in sturgeon stocks and firmly oppose those conservation measures that bring additional burden on their shoulders, making their fishing activities more difficult. In their view, the only effective way to ensure well-being, to promote tradition and reduce social tensions in the community is to grant inhabitants a sort of “Danubian indigenous” status, which authorizes the legal capture of 1-2 adult sturgeon specimens every year, like in the case of American Indians or Canadian Eskimos. All in all, our experience with this particular group in Vylkove is both revelatory and slightly disquieting, emphasizing, yet again, the importance of continuing our awareness-raising activities in the communities, but also our efforts to build trust among societal actors and to contribute to improved law enforcement for sturgeon protection.

ROMANIA

Working in Romania's fishing villages has unveiled yet another truth: while the socioeconomic structure may be very similar, access to productive resources varies significantly across communities, even when these are kilometers away from each other. Fetesti is a 35,000-people municipality on the west bank of the Danube's Borcea branch; Sfantu Gheorghe, located at the end of the southern arm of the Danube, near the Black Sea) is an isolated, 800-inhabitants community, accessible only by boat. In both areas, living standards are low (less than half of the people have access to sewage systems), social capital is weak (fishermen hardly cooperate, via associations or informal groups) and current laws hardly encourage local use of natural resources. The development vision, however, seems to vary significantly: Sfantu Gheorghe can tap into its fishing and tourism potential (due to an existing, yet rogue infrastructure); for fishermen in Fetesti, agriculture seems to be the only viable income-generating option, due to its vast arable area. The question then, remains: is there room for a common vision of sustainable development for this part of the Danube? There is obviously no easy answer for this. What we know for sure is that there is no one-size-fits-all solution and any effort to support the development of nature-based income options in the region need to be reflective of this complex, colorful landscape.



SERBIA

Prahovo and Radujevac are small Vlach communities situated along Serbia's part of the Danube, just below the Iron Gates II Dam. Most experts claim that this is the furthest point for Danube sturgeons' upstream migration. The two communities are relatively low populated - 600 and 400 people, respectively, statistics say. However, in reality, most people - especially young ones - live and work abroad, mostly in Austria and Germany. Those who remained are either retired or work in agriculture or in Prahovo's chemical industry. Images of monumental sturgeon catches remains fresh in elderly's memory, even if this was long ago. The highest rate of legal sturgeon fishing in the region (mostly Beluga) used to be registered between the 1980s (after the dam was built) and 2005 (when the fishing ban was introduced). Rumor has it, centuries ago, caviar from Kladovo used to be more expensive than the Russian or Iranian one, reaching the wealthy tables on the famous Titanic ship. Today, however, the youth in the area doesn't feel as connected to the Danube and the sturgeons, as their ascendants do. The socio-economic hardships in the villages has wiped out almost entirely the once flourishing commercial fishing activities, forcing many people's way into more productive sectors and centers. Only two registered commercial fishermen in the region still ride Danube's waters. While this may seem an overall bleak picture, our journey in these communities will not stop here; together with some of the remaining inhabitants, we will continue to seek ways of bringing the Danube river's richness back into people's lives and minds.

Our media and social presence

We launched a dynamic **website**, with information in the five project languages.

17 news articles in English,
3 in Bulgarian, 10 in Romanian,
3 in Serbian and 10 in Ukrainian.

<https://danube-sturgeons.org>



We discussed the state of sturgeon conservation in **18 press releases** and **18 radio and TV interviews**.



We organized **21 sturgeon-related events** and reached more than **15.000 people** in the four countries, via info factsheets & brochures, banners & info boards, videos & documentaries, interactive thematic games, education materials, and branded gadgets (First Aid kits, notebooks, pens, stickers, t-shirts, caps, headlights, measuring tapes, etc.)

Messages and topics most covered by standard media (newspapers, magazines, news websites, TV and radio stations) (selection):

“Critically endangered sturgeon with caviar was found in the Bulgarian part of the Danube river” ||| “Ukraine and Romania have teamed up in sturgeon’s rescue” ||| “Environmental crime threatens Europe’s last pristine forests and iconic wildlife” ||| “Observation of sturgeon poaching in Ukraine is no longer mission impossible” ||| “First Romanian and Ukrainian fisheries cooperation in the Danube delta, a workshop in Odessa” ||| “Danube Day celebrations and status of sturgeon populations in the Danube river” ||| “WWF in Serbia held a workshop: Survival of the wild Danube sturgeon – a development opportunity for the community in Negotin”.



Key events (2017) (selection)

"Draw the Danube River" (Bulgaria, June)
"Celebrating Danube Day" (Bulgaria, Serbia & Ukraine, June)
"Sturgeon Moon in Balchik" (Bulgaria, August)
"Round Table with Seafood Retailers" (Romania, May)
"Sturgeon Watchers" (Ukraine, June)
"The First Romanian & Ukrainian Fisheries Cooperation in Danube Delta Workshop in Odesa" (Odesa, May)
"Workshop: Survival of the Wild Danube Sturgeon—a Development Opportunity for Our Community" (Serbia, October)

Key upcoming events and milestones in 2018



National-level workshops with key law enforcement authorities in each country (border police, police, customs, fish agencies, etc.) to discuss enforcement challenges and create joint recommendations for more effective enforcement approaches for sturgeon conservation (spring-summer)



Sharing of results of socio-economic studies with the fishing communities and start **planning for alternative income options together** with interested members (spring).

Launch of **Actionez.ro in Romania**, an online tool to communicate illegal environmental activities, including sturgeon fishing (spring). [See trial here >>](#)

Continuation of **fishermen’ trainings on participatory monitoring of sturgeons in Bulgaria** (summer).

Continuation of sturgeon advocates’ work to **win fishermen’s trust for sturgeon protection in Serbia** (throughout the year)

Continuation of the **Sturgeon Watchers programme** in the main sturgeon spawning season in **Ukraine**, with a new cohort of students (summer)



Launch of **several topnotch educational materials** aimed primarily at children and students interested in learning more about sturgeons, their habitats and how they can help conserve the fish in order to build up strong local support for sturgeon conservation (summer)



Regional workshop with key law enforcement authorities from the project target countries and neighbours (Georgia, Turkey) to facilitate the sharing of experiences and recommendations on successful enforcement measures to control sturgeon fishing, conservation and trade (autumn, Romania)



WWF and project partners gratefully acknowledge funding support from the European Commission. All content and opinions expressed in this publication are solely those of WWF and project partners.

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