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STURGEONS PROTECT DANUBE'S TREASURE

DANUBE DELTA BIOSPHERE RESERVE TULCEA - ROMANIA

Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research
IN THE FORSCHUNGSVERBUND BERLIN E.V.

Life

STURGEONS AND CAVIAR

The basics of the legal caviar trade and caviar labelling

together possible

This brochure is not an official statement of the law and is provided for guidance only.

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STURGEONS AND THEIR CAVIAR: AN ENDANGERED TREASURE IN TRADE

Sturgeons are an ancient and fascinating group of fish and are highly endangered. Until a few decades ago, they were still numerous and an important mainstay for many fishing communities. But those days are over. Sturgeons are on the brink of extinction due to persistent overfishing. The main reason for this dramatic situation is the demand for their caviar, which is their salted roe, prized by gourmets around the world and the epitome of luxury food. Beluga, Oscietra, Sevruga and other types of caviar rank among the most expensive wildlife products, fetching very high prices.

Despite strict legal protection of sturgeons in the wild and increasing production from aquaculture, the demand for caviar has led to the proliferation of an illegal caviar trade. Continuing seizures of caviar indicate that there is a thriving black market. The illegal caviar trade is considered to be well-organised and to have strong links with organised crime.

The law enforcement authorities have the power to ensure compliance with legal provisions, such as the mandatory CITES caviar labelling requirements. The damage to the last surviving wild sturgeons can only be eliminated if caviar and other sturgeon products are legally sourced and traded.

What is so special about sturgeons

- Sturgeons originated about 200 million years ago and are as ancient as the dinosaurs
- Sturgeons can live more than 100 years and grow more than 7 metres long
- Sturgeons reach their reproductive ages at 3-20 years and most species do not spawn annually. This makes them especially vulnerable to overfishing. Sturgeon stocks take many years to recover
- The Lower Danube and a few other rivers draining into the Black Sea are among the last remaining spawning grounds in the world
- Despite strict international and domestic regulations, illegal fishing and trading in caviar and meat from wild sturgeons are still major threats to the survival of sturgeons

1. REGULATIONS FOR TRADE IN STURGEONS AND THEIR PRODUCTS

As an important step to protect sturgeons in the wild from overfishing and unsustainable trade, **all species of sturgeons and the closely related paddlefish have been listed under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and the EU Wildlife Trade Regulations** (implementing CITES in the EU).

CITES is an international agreement between governments that aims to ensure that international trade in animals and plants does not threaten their survival in the wild. For this reason, the international trade in selected species (such as sturgeons, including their caviar, meat and other products) is subject to certain controls and specific requirements.

1.1 CITES documents

Regardless of whether sturgeons are caught in the wild or bred in captivity, international trade is based on a compulsory system of CITES documents. This covers live and dead specimens as well as all their parts and products including caviar, meat, fingerlings, fertilised eggs, etc.

Any international shipment of any sturgeon or sturgeon product must always be accompanied by the appropriate CITES permits or certificates[1] issued by the relevant national CITES Management Authorities.

In general, importing or (re)exporting any sturgeon or sturgeon product without a valid CITES permit is an offence.

[1] CITES: Resolution Conf. 12.3 (Rev. CoP17) Permits and certificates https://www.cites.org/sites/default/files/document/E-Res-12-03-R17.pdf; EU Wildlife Trade Regulations: Permits, Certificates and Notifications http://ec.europa.eu/environment/cites/info_permits_en.htm

1.1.1 Trade within the EU

Shipments of sturgeons, caviar and other sturgeon products produced or transferred within the EU do not require CITES permits or certificates as the EU is a common market and trade is therefore considered as domestic. However, sturgeon caviar does require CITES labels (see 1.2) and business operators must be able to prove that a product is lawfully acquired (through invoice or delivery receipt containing the relevant information, copy of CITES import documentation or adequate bookkeeping and recording).

1.1.2 Exemption for personal effects[2]

The only exception from the obligatory provision of CITES permits in the international sturgeon trade is the import of up to 125 grams of sturgeon caviar per person if the caviar is:

- legally acquired and bears the mandatory CITES label,
- carried in personal baggage and
- personally owned for non-commercial purposes.

1.2 The CITES caviar labelling system

CITES sets highly specific requirements for the conservation of and trade in sturgeons and paddlefish[3]. Annexes 1 and 2 of CITES Resolution Conf. 12.3 outline the universal labelling system for caviar.

Since the year 2000, an obligatory caviar labelling system has been introduced to allow a more effective control of the caviar trade and to help the authorities, traders and consumers to distinguish legal from illegal caviar. The purpose of the labelling system is to ensure that all caviar entering the market is from legal sources. The labels and the defined codes enable the responsible agencies to trace the origin of the caviar and, together with bookkeeping and reporting obligations[4], are a legal requirement for the caviar industry.

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[2] CITES: Resolution Conf. 13.7 (Rev. CoP17) Control of trade in personal and household effects
https://www.cites.org/sites/default/files/document/E-Res-13-07-R17.pdf;
EU Wildlife Trade Regulations: COMMISSION REGULATION (EC) No 865/2006, Article 57, amended by COMMISSION REGULATION (EC) No 100/2008, 16
https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32006R0865&from=EN
https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32008R0100&from=EN

[3] CITES: Resolution Conf. 12.7 (Rev. CoP17) Conservation of and trade in sturgeons and paddlefish
https://cites.org/sites/default/files/document/E-Res-12-07-R17.pdf

[4] EU Wildlife Trade Regulations: Licensed processing and (re-)packaging plants shall be required to maintain adequate records of the quantities of caviar imported, exported, re-exported, produced in situ or stored, as appropriate. These records must be available for inspection by the management authority in the relevant Member State - see COMMISSION REGULATION (EC) No 865/2006, Article 66(7), amended by COMMISSION REGULATION (EC) No 100/2008, 18.

Importing countries should not accept shipments of caviar unless they comply with these provisions.

All primary sturgeon caviar containers (containers in direct contact with the caviar, such as tins, jars or boxes), regardless of their size, have to bear a CITES label with details of the source of the caviar. This applies to packaging and re-packaging caviar

- from all sturgeon species (including hybrids)
- of wild and farmed origin
- for both commercial and non-commercial purposes and
- to domestic and international trade.

The non-reusable label should be affixed by a registered processing or (re-) packaging plant (see 1.3). The label must either seal the container or the caviar must be packaged in such a manner as to permit visual evidence of any opening of the container. It must not be possible to remove it undamaged or transfer it to another container.

There are no specifications for the visual appearance of the labels, but they must conform to the above requirements and contain the information set out below.

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

1. **STANDARD SPECIES CODE:** a three-letter code for identifying sturgeon species, hybrids and mixed species (see table below)
2. **SOURCE CODE OF THE CAVIAR OR SPECIMEN:**
   "W" for caviar from sturgeon harvested from the wild;
   "C" for caviar from sturgeon bred in captivity;
   "F" for caviar produced from a female born in captivity and where at least one parent originated in the wild;
   "I" for confiscated or seized caviar;
3. **CODE FOR THE COUNTRY OF ORIGIN:** ISO two-letter code

4 **YEAR OF HARVEST OR REPACKAGING**

5 **OFFICIAL REGISTRATION CODE OF THE PROCESSING OR RE-PACKAGING PLANT:** issued by the national CITES Management Authority (see 1.3); for repackaging, this code incorporates the ISO two-letter code of the country of repackaging if different from the country of origin

6 **LOT IDENTIFICATION NUMBER:** caviar tracking system used by the processing or (re-)packaging plant, or CITES export permit or re-export certificate number

1.2.1 CITES species codes for all sturgeon species

CITES species code	Scientific name	English name
BAE	*Acipenser baerii*	Siberian sturgeon
BAI	*Acipenser baerii baicalensis*	Baikal sturgeon
BVI	*Acipenser brevirostrum*	Shortnose Sturgeon
DAB	*Acipenser dabryanus*	Yangtze Sturgeon
FUL	*Acipenser fulvescens*	Lake Sturgeon
GUE	*Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*	Russian Sturgeon
MED	*Acipenser medirostris*	Green Sturgeon
MIK	*Acipenser mikadoi*	Sakhalin Sturgeon
NAC	*Acipenser naccarii*	Adriatic Sturgeon
NUD	*Acipenser nudiventris*	Ship Sturgeon
OXY	*Acipenser oxyrhynchus*	Atlantic Sturgeon
DES	*Acipenser oxyrhynchus desotoi*	Gulf Sturgeon
PER	*Acipenser persicus*	Persian Sturgeon
RUT	*Acipenser ruthenus*	Sterlet
SCH	*Acipenser schrenckii*	Amur Sturgeon
SIN	*Acipenser sinensis*	Chinese Sturgeon
STE	*Acipenser stellatus*	Stellate Sturgeon
STU	*Acipenser sturio*	European Sturgeon
TRA	*Acipenser transmontanus*	White Sturgeon
DAU	*Huso dauricus*	Kaluga Sturgeon
HUS	*Huso huso*	Beluga Sturgeon
SPA	*Polyodon spathula*	American Paddlefish
GLA	*Psephurus gladius*	Chinese Paddlefish
FED	*Pseudoscaphirhynchus fedtschenkoi*	Syr-darya Shovelnose Sturgeon
HER	*Pseudoscaphirhynchus hermanni*	Small Amu-dar Shovelnose or Dwarf Sturgeon
KAU	*Pseudoscaphirhynchus kaufmanni*	Large Amu-dar or False Shovelnose Sturgeon
ALB	*Scaphirhynchus albus*	Pallid Sturgeon
PLA	*Scaphirhynchus platorynchus*	Shovelnose Sturgeon
SUS	*Scaphirhynchus suttkusi*	Alabama Sturgeon
MIX	Mixed species (for 'pressed' caviar exclusively)	
YYYxXXX	Hybrid specimens: code for the species of the male x code for the species of the female	

1.2.2 Infringements of CITES caviar labelling requirements

If a primary container of sturgeon caviar does not bear a CITES label or if the label does not comply with all CITES labelling requirements or does not contain the above information, the caviar is illegal according to CITES and EU Wildlife Trade Regulations and may be seized by the relevant law enforcement authorities.

There are indications from seizures and market surveys[5] that **CITES labelling requirements** (non-reusable; sealing the container or permitting visual evidence of any opening) **are not always met** or **codes are incomplete**, which impedes the intended traceability.

The use of genetic and isotope analysis has shown that considerable amounts of **mislabelled caviar** are available for purchase[6, 7, 8]. This means for example that the caviar is from a species different from that indicated by the standard species code on the CITES label or that the species are mixed (which is not allowed for regular caviar - see 2.1.2), or that the caviar comes from regions of origin other than those indicated by the code for the country of origin. Cheaper caviar is often fraudulently sold as higher-quality caviar, but also higher-priced caviar (such as Beluga) has been found sold as a lower-quality product (such as from American Paddlefish caviar)[9], which can be an indication of illegal trade in poached caviar.

Cases of **forged labels** have also been reported. These are used to sell poached or otherwise illegally obtained or imported caviar falsely as a legal product from aquaculture. Organised crime investigations in Germany found that caviar labelled as originating from Bulgarian aquaculture had actually originated from the Caspian Sea.

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→ All the above are violations of legal obligations and should be investigated.

5 Harris, L. and Shiraishi. H. (2018). Understanding the global caviar market. Results of a rapid assessment of trade in sturgeon caviar. TRAFFIC and WWF joint report. ISSN 0267-4297 ISBN no: 978-1-85850-436-0 https://www.traffic.org/publications/reports/understanding-the-global-caviar-market

6 Doukakis, P., Pikitch, E.K., Rothschild, A., DeSalle, R., Amato, G., Kolokotronis, S.-O. (2012). Testing the effectiveness of an international conservation agreement: Marketplace forensics and CITES Caviar trade regulation, PLoS ONE, 7(7): 1-9. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0040907 https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0040907

7 Fain, S.R., Straughan, D. J., Hamlin, B. C., Hoesch, R. M., LeMay, J.P. (2013). Forensic genetic identification of sturgeon caviars traveling in world trade. Conserv Genet (2013) 14: 855-874.

8 Jahrl, J. (2013). Illegal caviar trade in Bulgaria and Romania: Results of a market survey on trade in caviar from sturgeons (Acipenseridae). Vienna, Austria. http://awsassets.panda.org/downloads/illegal_caviar_trade_in_bulgaria_and_romania.pdf

9 Birstein, V.J., Doukakis, P., Sorkin, B., DeSalle, R. (1998). Population aggregation analysis of caviar producing species of sturgeon and implications for diagnosis of black caviar. Conserv Biol 12: 766–775.

1.3 Production, processing, (re-)packaging and export

All caviar exporters and processing and (re-)packaging plants, including aquaculture operations that produce caviar, must be licensed by the management authorities of CITES member countries in order to be allowed to process, (re-)package or export caviar[10]. A unique registration code must be attributed to each processing or (re-)packaging plant by that management authority. This registration code must be shown on the mandatory CITES caviar labels. Licensed companies are required to keep adequate records of the quantities of caviar imported, exported, produced, stored, etc.

A register of all licensed exporters and of processing and repackaging plants for specimens of sturgeon and paddlefish species is maintained on the CITES website: www.cites.org

For example, the direct link for Bulgaria is:

www.cites.org/eng/common/reg/ce/BG

For other countries, insert the ISO two-letter country code at the end of this link (e.g. DE for Germany instead of BG).

[10] COMMISSION REGULATION (EC) No 865/2006, Article 66(7), amended by COMMISSION REGULATION (EC) No 100/2008, 18

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2. CAVIAR AND OTHER STURGEON PRODUCTS IN TRADE

2.1 Caviar

Caviar is the unfertilised roe of sturgeons. It is usually harvested from freshly killed female sturgeons before the eggs mature.

It is almost impossible to determine the species of origin simply by looking at the caviar, as grain sizes and colours vary with age and within species. DNA analysis is required to determine the species. This method can establish whether there are discrepancies between the species indicated on the label on the container and that of the caviar in the container or if the caviar has been mixed from different sturgeon species, which is against CITES and EU Wildlife Trade Regulations. To determine the source of the caviar, isotope analysis can establish from which region the caviar originates and even distinguish between caviar from fish caught in the wild and caviar originating from aquaculture.

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2.1.1 Ovulated caviar

Some sturgeon farms (especially in Russia but also in other countries) produce caviar from ovulated eggs, the advantage being that the sturgeon stays alive and the caviar can be harvested repeatedly (although the product is not actual caviar according to the Codex Alimentarius definition). The eggs are harvested by stripping the mature females. Subsequent processing ensures that the harvested eggs survive without bursting, which would adversely affect the quality of the product. High-quality microscopes, ideally electron microscopes, can be used to determine whether a caviar sample derives from ovulated eggs (which is usually an indicator of caviar from farmed sturgeons). For ovulated caviar, the same CITES regulations apply as for traditional caviar.

2.1.2 Mixing of caviar from different species

CITES stipulates that caviar from different sturgeon species may not be mixed into a primary container, except in the case of "pressed caviar" (a dense salty paste composed of damaged sturgeon roe).

2.1.3 Caviar substitutes and imitations

Eggs from other fish species (lumpfish, salmon, herring, etc.) are often sold as "caviar". As this **substitute caviar** derives from species not listed in CITES it is not subject to wildlife trade regulations.

Imitation caviar is made from other biological substances (such as sturgeon waste products, oil or seaweed), resembling caviar in appearance and taste.

Caviar substitutes or imitations are often fraudulently sold as originating from sturgeons, deceiving customers.

Counterfeit caviar is usually dyed, which means that it loses colour (e.g. when rubbed between the fingertips).

DNA tested. Result: synthetic caviar ▲

2.2 Other sturgeon products

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2.2.1 Sturgeon meat

Sturgeon meat is sold fresh, smoked, frozen or dried, as a whole fish or in parts, filleted or in terrines, cans, etc.

Sturgeon meat is firm, dense and veal-like and has a white-yellow-rose colouring when raw. The skin is coarse, elastic and free of scales. When the meat is round-cut, the traces of the removed bone shields can be observed on the top and sides. Sturgeons do not have bones but cartilage.

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Sturgeon meat most probably from the wild ▲

© WWF ROMANIA

Sturgeon meat most probably from aquaculture ▲

In the case of wild specimens, fat deposits are in scant amounts located near the cartilage backbone and along the top of the fish. At most, the deposits are the size of a thumbnail or smaller. In farmed sturgeons, the deposits can be found throughout the fillets and can reach the length and twice the girth of a whole thumb.

In restaurants, the meat can be barbecued, fried, smoked, contained in fish soup, etc.

2.2.2 Live sturgeons

Live specimens are also traded, both for aquaculture (mainly fingerlings and fertilised eggs) and for ornamental purposes.

2.2.3 Other products

Other traded sturgeon products include skins and handicraft products made from sturgeon leather, glue made from swim bladders ("isinglass"), stuffed specimens or caviar extract for luxury facial creams.

All products derived from sturgeons are subject to CITES.

2.3 Caviar from sturgeon in aquaculture

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Since trading in caviar from sturgeons caught in the wild is not allowed for most areas of origin[11], more than 95% of caviar in legal international trade originates from aquaculture. Sturgeon farming is a fast-growing sector in global aquaculture. In 2016, about 48 countries with about 2200 aquaculture plants were involved in sturgeon farming, both for meat and caviar. The caviar volume produced globally is estimated to have reached more than 350 tonnes. The biggest producer countries with many productive aquaculture facilities are China, EU Member States (e.g. Italy, France, Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Bulgaria), the USA, Russia, Israel, Uruguay, etc.[12]

Operating in accordance with nature conservation principles, this industry can be very positive both for wild sturgeons, as it can satisfy the demand for caviar and sturgeon meat without further depleting the natural stocks, and for the local economy.

Yet the aquaculture industry may also pose risks to wild sturgeons. Concerns have been expressed that aquaculture operations may be involved in "laundering" wild sturgeons and caviar. Several cases and criminal investigations prove that this has been happening, e.g. in Germany and in the USA. It is technically possible to distinguish between caviar from wild and from farmed sturgeons (especially by determining stable isotope compositions).

[11] The only country with legal export of caviar from the wild is the USA, where strict protection measures have been successful enough that some sturgeon stocks can be harvested sustainably again.

[12] Bronzi, P., Gessner, J., Rosenthal, H. (2017): An update to 2016 of sturgeon and caviar global scenario. Abstracts 8th International Symposium on Sturgeons, Vienna, September 10th to 16th, 2017

3. PRACTICAL SECTION

3.1 Examples of CITES caviar labels and codes

Despite the universal caviar labelling requirements, it is not always easy to determine whether a caviar container is actually labelled correctly. Try it yourself and compare your answers with the correct answers in the last chapter of this brochure. More information can also be found under “Project Materials” on danube-sturgeons.org

1. **Are the following caviar containers labelled according to CITES requirements? If not, why not?**
2. **Is the code on the label correct?**
3. **From which sturgeon species is the caviar? Does it come from sturgeon caught in the wild or from sturgeon bred in captivity?**
4. **What is the country of origin? Where was the caviar repackaged?**

Example 1

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Example 2

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Example 3

© WWF AUSTRIA / HANNES GREBER

Example 4

© WWF AUSTRIA / HANNES GREBER

Example 5

© WWF / DAVID AYKLER

Example 6

© WWF ROMANIA

Example 7

© WWF AUSTRIA / HANNES GREBER

Example 8

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3.2 Checklist for caviar shipments in EU countries

Is it actually sturgeon caviar?

Check for indication on package and inspect content visually, if possible

YES

NO — Eggs are not black or grey, lose colour, are much smaller or larger than 2-3 mm → Not subject to CITES

Is the caviar container labelled correctly (see 1.2)?

YES

NO → Seize and contact relevant authority

Is this caviar commercially traded?

YES

NO — Is the correctly labelled caviar up to 125 grams and personally owned for non-commercial purposes carried in personal baggage?

NO

YES — Personal effects, see 1.1.2 → Allow entry

Does this caviar originate from a non-EU-country?

YES

NO → Check invoice and CITES label:

- The trade name on the invoice is consistent with the species code on the label.
- The lot number on the invoice is identical to that on the label.
- The amount of caviar on the invoice is identical to the actual amount.

NO → Seize and contact relevant authority

Are correct CITES permits* produced?

Are they valid and in compliance with e.g. the volume of the shipment and the CITES code(s) on the label(s)?

YES → Allow entry

NO → Seize and contact relevant authority

* <u>Caviar directly from a non-EU-country:</u>

- original export permit +
- valid original import permit

<u>Caviar from a non-EU-country but already cleared through Customs:</u>

- yellow copy of import permit

3.3 Answers to the Practical Examples in 3.1

1. **Are the following caviar containers labelled according to CITES requirements? If not, why not?**
2. **Is the code on the label correct?**
3. **From which sturgeon species is the caviar? Does it come from sturgeon caught in the wild or from sturgeon bred in captivity?**
4. **What is the country of origin? Where was the caviar repackaged?**

Example 1:

1. **yes** - the label with the code seals the container and cannot be removed undamaged
2. **yes**
3. **species:** Russian Sturgeon (GUE - *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*)
   source: sturgeon bred in captivity (C)
4. **country of origin:** Romania (RO)
   country of repackaging: not repackaged

Example 2:

1. **no** - the label with the code does not seal the container or permit visual evidence of opening
2. **no** - the lot identification number is missing
3. **species:** Siberian Sturgeon (BAE - *Acipenser baerii*)
   source: sturgeon bred in captivity (C)
4. **country of origin:** Italy (IT)
   country of repackaging: France (FR)

Example 3:

1. **yes** - the label with the code seals the container and cannot be removed undamaged
2. **yes**
3. **species:** Russian Sturgeon (GUE - *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*)
   source: sturgeon bred in captivity (C)
4. **country of origin:** China (CN)
   country of repackaging: Germany (DE)

Example 4:

1. **yes** - the label with the code cannot be removed undamaged and is fixed on a banderol that seals the container and permit visual evidence of any opening
2. **yes**
3. **species:** Russian Sturgeon (GUE - *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*)
   source: sturgeon bred in captivity (C)
4. **country of origin:** Uruguay (UY)
   country of repackaging: France (FR)

Example 5:

1. **no -** the label with the code does not seal the container or permit visual evidence of opening
2. **yes**
3. **species:** Beluga Sturgeon (HUS - *Huso huso*)
   source: wild caught sturgeon (W)
4. **country of origin:** Bulgaria (BG)
   country of repackaging: Germany (DE)

Example 6:

1. **no** - the label with the code does not seal the container or permit visual evidence of opening
2. **yes** (though in poor-quality print)
3. **species:** Russian Sturgeon (*Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*) - although sold as Beluga
   source: sturgeon bred in captivity (C)
4. **country of origin:** Romania (RO)
   country of repackaging: not repackaged

Example 7:

1. **yes** - the label with the code cannot be removed undamaged and is fixed on a banderol that seals the container and permits visual evidence of any opening
2. **yes**
3. **species:** Russian Sturgeon (GUE - *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*)
   source: sturgeon bred in captivity (C)
4. **country of origin:** Bulgaria (BG)
   country of repackaging: Switzerland (CH)

Example 8:

1. **yes** - the label with the code seals the container and cannot be removed undamaged
2. **yes**
3. **species:** Sterlet (RUT - *Acipenser ruthenus*)
   source: sturgeon bred in captivity (C)
4. **country of origin:** Ukraine (UA)
   country of repackaging: not repackaged

3.4 Useful links and contacts

CITES website: www.cites.org
EU Wildlife Trade Regulations: www.eu-wildlifetrade.org
Information portal Species+: www.speciesplus.net
CITES Trade Database: www.trade.cites.org

STURGEONS AND CAVIAR LABELLING

200 million

Sturgeons originated about 200 million years ago

+100

Sturgeons can live more than 100 years

1998

All species of sturgeon and paddlefish have been listed under CITES

2000

Since the year 2000, an obligatory CITES caviar labelling system has been introduced

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