



2018

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Find out which
sturgeon or hybrid this is -
check the identification videos (page 4)

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Project Newsletter #3

October 2017- December 2018

LIFE for Danube Sturgeons

Sturgeons are the most endangered group of species worldwide, with few natural habitats left for them to call home.

The project "LIFE for Danube Sturgeons" focuses on saving the last viable sturgeon populations in the Lower Danube and the North-Western Black Sea.

On our message board:

"In this EU project, committed to protecting sturgeons, we work directly with fishing communities in the Danube region who have depended on sturgeons for generations. We talk with the fishermen to understand their needs and look into alternative livelihoods such as tourism or manufacturing local products to reduce pressure on the last wild sturgeons."

Jutta Jahrl, WWF Austria, Project Manager "LIFE for Danube Sturgeons"

"Through this project, we've developed an educational kit for young people. It provides information about the Danube and its sturgeons. This is about more than just education, and it applies beyond Romania: we try to prepare people in the Danube region to create revenue in their communities without harm to nature as well as cultivate a respect for their surroundings."

Cristina Munteanu, WWF Romania, Project Coordinator "LIFE for Danube Sturgeons"

"Bulgaria is a major producer of legal caviar worldwide. Because of the high-end status of their eggs, wild sturgeons are still falling prey to poachers in the illegal caviar trade. We work with Bulgarian, Romanian, Ukrainian and Serbian law enforcement officers to protect wild sturgeons along the whole Lower Danube, from the Iron Gates all the way to the Black Sea."

Ekaterina Voynova, WWF Bulgaria, Project Coordinator "LIFE for Danube Sturgeons"

"We had an intensive and very successful campaign for introducing a ban on fishing Sterlet in Serbia. Only by applying strict protection measures we can secure the recovery of stocks and the survival of Sterlet in the Danube. The fishing ban in Serbia will be in force from 1st of January 2019. Now all native sturgeon species are protected in the whole Lower Danube region."

Vesna Maksimovic, WWF Serbia, Project Coordinator "LIFE for Danube Sturgeons"

"Our volunteer programme "Sturgeon Watchers" in Ukraine is quite unique for the Danube. The aim is to include the public in the protection of the endangered wild sturgeons. We train volunteers in the monitoring of sturgeons' feeding and spawning sites on the Danube River."

Inna Hoch, WWF Ukraine, Project Coordinator "LIFE for Danube Sturgeons"

Assessment of the socio-economic situation of the fishing communities

During the reported period all project partners in Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine conducted an **analysis of the socio-economic situation of fishermen, natural resource availability and potential partners and funding options**. Most of the 15 analysed communities have rather low living standards, elderly populations with lower education, limited social capacity and entrepreneurship skills. The results were firstly discussed with experts for feedback and expert input, and later on the results were shared with the involved fishing communities in all project countries.

Next steps: Business plans and concrete business cases will be developed to provide examples for alternative income sources in major fishing communities.

Sturgeon Advocates

The work of the Sturgeon Advocates was intensified in all project countries. Sturgeon Advocates are the live connection between local fishermen and sturgeon conservation. Sturgeon Advocates are appointed in all project countries: Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia and Ukraine. They work along the Danube and the Black Sea.

An interview with one of the Sturgeon Advocates: [George Caracas from Romania](#)



*Scope of work: **Serbia:** Prahovo, Radujevac, Negotin; **Bulgaria-Danube:** Vidin-Novo Selo, Lom, Dolni Tsibar, Kozloduy, Nikopol, Belene, Tutrakan, Vetren; **Bulgaria-Black Sea:** Krapec/ Durankulak, Kavarna, Balchik, Varna, Byala/ Nesebar, Chernomomoretz/Kraimorie-Bourgas; **Romania:** Borcea, Fetesti, Giurgeni-Vadu Oii, Galati, Isaccea, Sfantu Gheorghe, Jurilovca; **Ukraine:** Vylkove, Prymorske, Lisky.*

Fishermen and sturgeon conservation

Positive examples of fishermen releasing sturgeons have been reported on numerous occasions. In April, six fishermen from Balchik on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast contacted the Sturgeon Advocate because two Stellate Sturgeons were caught in their nets. The animals were later tagged and released back into the water. In June, a fisherman from Belene on the Danube river contacted WWF Bulgaria with the news that a young sturgeon was caught in his nets. [Rare Russian Sturgeon caught and safely released](#)

In Ukraine, the Sturgeon Advocate was very active in Vylkove, the community in the project area with the biggest number of active fishermen - 600 are registered. The fishermen understand that there is a decline of sturgeon stocks and the harm caused by overfishing. Most of them show readiness to act and reduce by-catch of young sturgeons, but by-catch of bigger individuals is still considered a "lucky chance". In 2000, Ukraine became the first country in the region to ban fishing sturgeons.



Analysis of the national laws, norms and procedures

Studies on the current legal norms and procedures for the control of sturgeon fishing, aquaculture and trade were conducted in Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine. Several inadequacies, gaps and overlaps were identified which became the basis for the development of recommendations for improvements and for discussions in national workshops for law enforcement authorities in all project countries.

Ukraine, on 10 May 2018 in Kiev, more than thirty representatives of key law enforcement agencies, scientific institutions and other important stakeholders joined at a national workshop. WWF Ukraine presented the results of the analysis of the national law and enforcement procedures and discussed with the attending experts the problems and need for changes in the law and its implementation for sturgeon conservation in Ukraine. [Link to the article](#)



National workshops for law enforcement authorities



Bulgaria, on 26 - 27 September 2018 in Sofia, over forty representatives of national law enforcement agencies took part in a two-day workshop. Apart from a session on the analysis of the Bulgarian legislation regarding sturgeon protection, participants showed a lot of interest in the newly developed training material and used the opportunity to exchange experiences with colleagues from other agencies. [Link to the article](#)

Romania, on 30 - 31 October 2018 in Tulcea, the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority (DDBRA) together with WWF Romania gathered fifty representatives of different institutions, universities and NGOs. Discussed were the use of modern technology for better control and prevention of illegal sturgeon fishing, the need for stricter controls and serious punishments for those involved in illegal sturgeon fishing and trade, and about improving the information flow and collaboration between relevant institutions.

[Link to the article](#)



Serbia, on 30 October 2018 in Belgrade, WWF Serbia with the support of the Ministry of Environmental Protection held a one-day workshop: „Improving the implementation of the national laws for protection and conservation of sturgeon species“. Among the leading topics discussed were: gaps in the national legislation, CITES regulations and requirements for cross-border trade in sturgeon products, such as meat and caviar, and the initiative of WWF Serbia for introducing a five-year ban on fishing Sterlet. [Link to the article.](#)

New training materials for law enforcement authorities

To assist the law enforcement authorities in Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine in combating sturgeon poaching and illegal trade, specialised information and training materials have been developed.

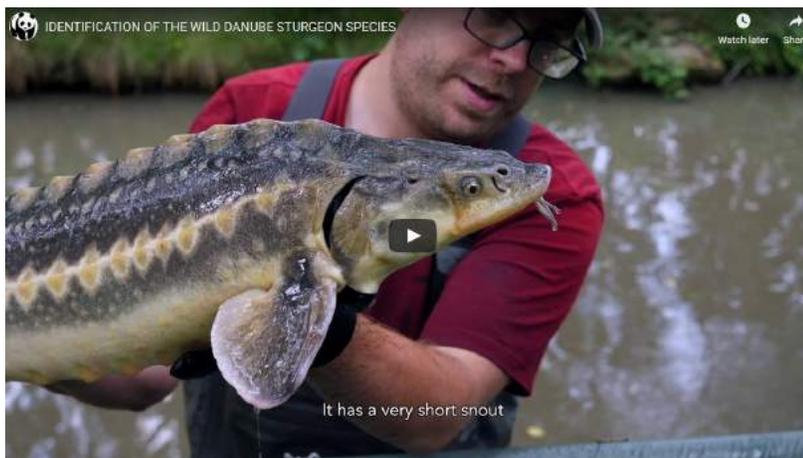
Two sturgeon identification videos were produced in 2018 with the support of Thomas Friedrich and LIFE Sterlet:

[“Identification of the Wild Danube Sturgeon Species”](#) and

[“Exotic Sturgeon Species and Hybrids”](#)

A video and a brochure on the mandatory [CITES labelling requirements](#) were produced to help authorities and consumers to distinguish legal from illegal caviar.

The videos can be watched in English and with subtitles in Bulgarian, Romanian, Serbian and Ukrainian.



Visit www.danube-sturgeons.org -> Project Materials -> Video gallery



[Link to “Sturgeons and Caviar” brochure in English](#)



Educational materials for youth

To stimulate communities and their young members to take up on the ownership of sturgeon conservation, we have developed targeted educational materials, specific for each project country.

Romania: Toolkit of 160 pages for high schools, basis for an educational programme of 1.5 years

Ukraine: “Sturgeon Ranger” package of a workbook for pupils and guidebook for teachers with a pin and a certificate

Serbia: Interactive educational game “Save the Sturgeon” and a Sturgeon Quiz

Bulgaria: PowerPoint presentation on the Danube sturgeons for schools



Highlights from Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, as part of the project activities, WWF Bulgaria provides theoretical and practical trainings for fishermen on methods for sturgeon monitoring. Since the start of the project, a total of 27 fishermen have been trained in Vetren, Belene and Novo Selo - all situated on the Danube River. Six mobile phones have been distributed among fishermen to report by-catch - three in the Danube region, three at the Black Sea.

In the summer of 2018, [a swarm of juvenile Sterlet was found by WWF Bulgaria during a monitoring expedition.](#)



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WWF Bulgaria and the Sturgeon Advocates had more than 190 meetings with fishermen during 46 visits to 16 villages and fishing communities along the Danube River and the Black Sea.

In April 2018, over 40 participants from Nikopol and Belene took part in a workshop on finding alternatives to fishing and on fishing regulations, such as seasonal and complete bans. It was a challenging engagement, as fishermen are very much culturally and emotionally connected to fishing and their willingness to engage with other economic activities is limited.

In November 2018, WWF Bulgaria organised a conference on the future of the fishing communities in the region and on the possibilities for finding new business opportunities. Among the ideas discussed were the development of eco-tourism and improvement of the existing infrastructure, to focus on local products, authentic food and hospitality.

[Link to the article](#)

Highlights from Romania

In June 2018, WWF Romania launched an online platform [Actionez.ro](#) for citizens to report on wildlife crime.

This will help competent law enforcement agencies to take action as quickly and efficiently as possible.

[Link to the article](#)

A very successful second National Stakeholders Committee meeting was held in April 2018 in Bucharest, with representatives of the project partners - WWF Romania and the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority - of key law enforcement agencies and of the Lower Danube University in Galati. The team presented the project's progress and outlined future activities. At the center of the discussions were the results of the study dedicated to the gaps in the national legislation on sturgeon protection. [Link to the article](#)



© WWF Romania

In September 2018, WWF Romania participated in Sfantu Gheorghe in an international workshop “Danube sturgeons, where to go” organised by the Lower Danube University Galati. Discussed were the results of the last 4 years of sturgeon monitoring in the area and the possibility of establishing an ex-situ conservation facility in Sfantu Gheorghe.

WWF Romania introduced an “Active Youth Academy” in fishing communities. Four eco-clubs have been set up in different fishing communities and will follow a joint educational programme for 1.5 years. The young people will be educated and involved in nature conservation and most importantly – in the protection of the Danube and its sturgeons. [Link to the article](#)

Highlights from Serbia

As of 1st of January 2019 fishing Sterlet in Serbia will be officially banned!



WWF Serbia mobilised media, scientists, activists and fishermen to save the endangered wild Sterlet (*Acipenser ruthenus*) in Serbia. Serbia together with Bulgaria, Romania and Ukraine share the same sturgeon stocks and Sterlet has been under strict legal protection in all other Lower Danube countries. In Serbia, fishing Sterlet was partially prohibited - during the spawning season and if the fish was under 40 cm. Unfortunately, these regulations have been systematically violated.

In June 2018, an assessment of the status of Sterlet in Serbia was prepared by WWF Serbia. This study was sent to the Ministry of Environmental Protection together with the official request for a 5-year Sterlet fishing ban, signed by WWF Serbia, the United Anglers of Serbia, the Association of Commercial Fishermen of Serbia.

[Link to the article](#)

Highlights from Ukraine

A crucial legal gap was identified and closed: Customs in Ukraine are now responsible for enforcing CITES requirements and for combating illegal wildlife trade crossing the Ukrainian borders.

As sturgeon products, such as meat or caviar, are frequently sold on the Volodymyrsky market in Kiev, in March 2018 an official meeting was held between WWF Ukraine and the market staff. WWF Ukraine presented the existing regulations on sturgeons and caviar trade and discussed with the staff the usual market practices. An agreement for cooperation and exchange of information was established between the market's administration and WWF Ukraine.

Three young Sterlets and a Beluga were registered during the second "Sturgeon Watchers" mission in Ukraine.

In June 2018, in Vylkove, 11 highly motivated activists joined the Sturgeon Watchers team. Before the mission, participants went through theoretical training on the WWF Ukraine work in the Danube Delta, on legal regulations for sturgeon protection and sturgeon identification. At the practical part, the volunteers joined planned patrols with the Fish Inspectors and Border Police.



© WWF Ukraine

In September 2018 in Estonia, WWF Ukraine participated in a LIFE platform meeting: "Volunteering for Nature Conservation". Inna Hoch presented the work with volunteers in the two missions held in 2017 and 2018.

[Link to the article](#)

Key numbers

2.3 million people reached via Social Media in all four project countries

450 publications (online and print)

150 article on the project website danube-sturgeons.org

More than 20 TV interviews and more than 15 radio interviews

Events

Serbia: A contest “Together for sturgeons” was organised for pupils in two schools in the fishing communities below the Iron Gates dam. The children had to search for information on sturgeons, look for unique archive photos, study materials and thus increase their knowledge on the importance of the Danube sturgeons for the river and for the people. [Link to the article](#)

Bulgaria: Danube Day was celebrated with a 3D mapping of the Danube River in the capital Sofia, and an interactive event was organised for the children from the fishing community in Belene.

Romania: The sturgeon team participated in Arkadia Film Festival in Constanța County and Rowmania Fest in Tulcea. They talked to locals, fishermen and tourists about sturgeons, the “LIFE for Danube Sturgeons” project and promoted the online alert system Actionez.ro



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Ukraine: In June 2018, a celebration of the Danube Day was organised for the children in Vylkove. The young members of the fishing community were engaged in an interactive sturgeon quest - "The Elusive Sturgeon".

Our project was featured in the “LIFE & Wildlife Crime” publication and the campaign EU PROTECTS

The aim of the brochure “LIFE & Wildlife Crime” is not only to highlight the actions of specific projects in each of these areas but also to provide a set of lessons and best practices that will be of use to all those interested in tackling wildlife crime.

Our project was also presented on the website [EU PROTECTS](#) among the heroes protecting the environment.

Visibility materials

Sturgeon tattoos in Tulcea (Romania), info board in Vylkove (Ukraine), visualization at event in Sofia (Bulgaria)



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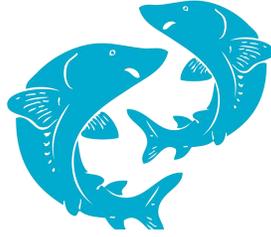
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Our work in numbers since the start of the project

78 personal meetings with **89** representatives of key institutions in the four countries (fish agencies, police, border police, customs, etc.)



90 visits to

26 fishing communities

380 engagements with fishermen

9 trainings with more than **170** representatives of law enforcement authorities in Ukraine (fish patrols, fish agency)

4 national workshops with more than **140** representative of law enforcement authorities in the four project countries



Recognition - LIFE Award

In May 2018, during the EU Green Week, our previous LIFE project “Joint actions to raise awareness on overexploitation of Danube sturgeons in Romania and Bulgaria”, or “**Saving Danube Sturgeons**” (2012-2015) was among the 62 finalists and was awarded the title “Best LIFE Nature Project” in the category “Nature and Biodiversity”. [Read the whole article on our website.](#)

Networking beyond the region

- * Workshop on corruption and caviar trade in Norway - 18 April 2018
- * Personal meeting with EC representatives of DG Environment to stress the importance of sturgeon conservation as part of the EU Wildlife Trafficking Action Plan - 22 May 2018
- * Advocating for better caviar labelling requirement at CITES Animals Committee meeting in Geneva - 16-19 July 2018
- * Presentation of illegal sturgeon fishing and trade at annual meeting of EnviCrimeNet in Vienna - 8 November 2018
- * Presentation on illegal caviar trade to international sturgeon breeders and caviar producers at 9th International Sturgeon Conference in Warsaw - 21 November 2018



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All content and opinions expressed in this publication are solely those of WWF and project partners.

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