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LIFE FOR DANUBE STURGEONS

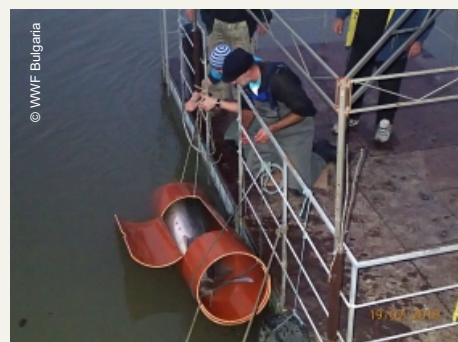
NEWS FROM 2019

Sterlet Fishing Ban in Serbia

2019 started off with a major success for the WWF team in Serbia due to the implementation of the Sterlet fishing ban by the Ministry of Environmental Protection. As a result of heavily depleted stocks and an [award-winning joint campaign](#) by WWF, fishermen and anglers, a total [ban on Sterlet](#) fishing in Serbia came into force as of 1 January 2019. Now all sturgeon species along the Lower Danube are under legal protection.

A Rescue Operation in Bulgaria

In February 2019, a large female Beluga, more than two meters long, was rescued near Silistra (Bulgaria). It was confiscated by fishery inspectors of the National Agency for Fisheries and Aquaculture (NAFA) after being caught by poachers in the Danube River near Aydemir village. The project team of experts of WWF Bulgaria arrived on the spot and took care of the female Beluga. The Beluga, named Silvia, bore a large amount of caviar that was most likely to be sold on the black market. After the conservation experts treated its wounds, the fish was tagged with a tracking marker and released back into the river. It was in good condition, despite the tremendous stress after being caught and



Stoyan Mihov working to release Silvia back into the Danube

pulled on land by the poachers.

[Read more on the project's website](#) and in [LA Times](#), where the story of the poached sturgeon was investigated further.

Closer to Effective Cross-border Cooperation



In March 2019, regional law enforcement representatives concerned with Danube sturgeon conservation and WWF sturgeon experts from Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine participated in the first regional workshop that aimed to help share experience and build bridges between countries to save the Danube's iconic species. The special guest - Paul Meuleneire, Customs Investigation Officer from Brussels Airport - spoke about the challenges of

wildlife crime and presented tools used by his team in Brussels such as EU-TWIX to ease its work combating illegal wildlife activities, data collection and sharing. The importance of international cooperation was emphasised by all participants, and as a result of the workshop, a general intention to work towards deeper collaboration was expressed. Romania and Bulgaria have already implemented collaborative protocols, joint actions and various cross-border activities between the relevant national institutions. In the case of Serbia and Ukraine, the first necessary steps have been made and there is an emerging tendency towards better partnerships with neighbouring countries in the future.

[Read more](#)

Earth Hour and other activities with the TADS Eco-clubs in Romania



The past year was particularly successful for the TADS (Tineri Activi pentru Dunăre și Sturioni = Active Youths for Danube and Sturgeons) eco-clubs, set up in four fishing communities in Romania. The clubs are implementing a programme called “Explorer of Danube and Danube sturgeons”, specifically tailored by WWF Romania with the goal of educating young people in nature conservation. The main aim of the programme is to introduce meaningful changes in the local communities through fostering awareness for the protection of sturgeons. The students and their teachers organised various events, including [Earth Hour](#) in Galati and Jurilovca as well as a [summer camp](#) with multiple activities.

COLLABORATING WITH FISHERMEN

One of the main threats to the sturgeons inhabiting the Lower Danube and Black Sea is that they continue to be incidentally captured along with other fish. This is not only a problem caused by fishing in the river but also by vessels – especially larger ones – that fish in the sea. Captains and fishing industry leaders have demonstrated that they are well aware of the problem and are willing to take measures in order to reduce the bycatch of endangered fish species. Such initiatives have often come from fishers themselves, and they undoubtedly demonstrate that the fishermen are actually proud to get involved in the protection of the Danube and Black Sea’s flagship species.

Collaboration between local fishermen and WWF Bulgaria is crucial for learning more about some of the most mysterious

inhabitants of the Danube and the Black Sea – the sturgeons. By collecting data on sturgeon, WWF’s experts will be able to map out potential spawning sites, migration routes and will get to know more about sturgeon behaviour. Tracking the journey of 20,000 young Russian Sturgeons (*Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*) released by WWF Bulgaria in June 2019 has been a huge success. Several fishermen and ichthyologists from Bulgaria, Romania and Ukraine got in touch with WWF to share information on the sturgeons they had caught, measured and released back into the sea. Later reports came in from fishermen in Krapets and Balchik (Bulgaria) that showed photos of the already not so small Russian Sturgeons – grown from roughly 10 to 45 cm – proving that the fish made it into the Black Sea and are in good health.

CELEBRATIONS FOR DANUBE DAY AND OTHER EVENTS

As every year, WWF celebrated Danube Day with local fishing communities and other stakeholders. Various events were organised throughout **the whole month of June**, starting with [the Serbian Republican Water Directorate’s festival at Zemun Quay, Belgrade](#), that took place on the 15th of June. Two weeks later, on the 29th of June, WWF Adria organised the children activity “Water quiz” in Zemun (Serbia), which was well received not only by the kids, but by their parents as well. The quiz reveals fun and educational facts about water resources, the Water Footprint we all have, and participants are usually shocked to discover how much water they use on a daily basis and often waste. The WWF team did not miss the perfect opportunity to talk with people about the sustainable ways to use fish stocks and consume fish products without contributing any further to the already critical situation of fish in seas and



oceans. Zemun Municipality, the EU office in Serbia, Public Enterprise „Voda Vojvodine“, „Jaroslav Černi“ Institute for Water Management were among the other organisations that held educational and creative games for the young visitors.

Danube Day was also celebrated in the Ukrainian towns Vylkove and Kiliya - WWF Ukraine assisted in organising a number of educational and fun activities throughout the day for residents and visitors of all ages.

Natural Triathlon "Free Danube"

At the end of June, nearly 70 people – residents and guests of Ruse (Bulgaria) – participated in the unique [Natural Triathlon "Free Danube"](#), organised by WWF. In this way, the conservation organisation drew public attention to the little known wealth of the most emblematic European river. With bikes, kayaks and running, the competitors overcame the challenging 70 km distance and also gained useful knowledge of poorly known animal species such as sturgeons – survived since the dinosaur era. During the competition, the participants faced different obstacles that told them the story of the river and its inhabitants as well as of WWF's long-standing environmental work.



Danube Delta Rangers Gathered Forces

In the beginning of July 2019, the [Romanian Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority](#) delivered the first training to 10 rangers from the Delta Biosphere Reserve in Ukraine. The agenda included theoretical and practical components, with rangers patrolling in the Danube delta, in an attempt to demonstrate the importance of patrolling to the Ukrainian rangers. The WWF Ukraine team hopes that such trainings will boost control activities and as a consequence will lead to an increase in registered violations, including poaching, so that more wildlife crime cases will go under legal prosecution and, ultimately, go to trial.

Business Plans for Alternative Income Outlined

Alternative income business plans for traditional fishermen from the local communities are being developed in all project countries with the support of experts in eco tourism and sustainable business practices. In July 2019, at the information center in Vylkove (Ukraine), the WWF team held an open discussion and presented three business plans to local businessmen, authorities and stakeholders, based on the preparatory evaluation of the socioeconomic situation and the availability of natural resources: Small Green Hotel “Danube soul”, “Danube Cider Production” and “Frog Farm in the Danube Delta” (traditional for the region of Odessa). After opinions were shared and valuable recommendations received, the team will most likely focus on the development of the cider production, which has been met by serious interest from local businessmen.

STURGEON WATCHERS IN UKRAINE SAVED 5 STURGEONS

The third “Sturgeon Watchers” mission was completed in Ukraine in **July 2019**, this time made up of two groups of volunteers that were active over a period of two weeks during the downstream migration of sturgeons - a time when sturgeons are very vulnerable to getting caught. While patrolling the delta with Fishery Patrol inspectors, the team helped check fish catches. Three out of ten catches included sturgeons. Five adult Stellate Sturgeons (*Acipenser stellatus*) were freed from fishermen’s nets. The high percentage of sturgeon found during this short period confirms the assumption that bycatch is still a serious threat to migrating sturgeons. Also, several information boards were installed in Vylkovo on key spots where fishermen as well as tourists will be able to learn more about sturgeons and the LIFE FOR DANUBE STURGEONS project.

[Read more](#)



Sturgeon Watchers



On patrol in the Vylkovo District (Odessa Region)

IMPROVED LEGAL BASIS IN UKRAINE

Legal conditions to protect sturgeons have been significantly upgraded in Ukraine. Ukrainian Customs services are now legally responsible for the control of products from [CITES](#)-listed species (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora). Until last year, a loophole allowed caviar and sturgeon meat, and surely many other products from protected species, to pass rather easily through Ukraine. Moreover, the Pan-European Sturgeon Action Plan was translated into Ukrainian and forwarded to the Ministry of Energy and Environment in Ukraine

and the National Agency for Fisheries and Aquaculture (NAFA). What is more, during a follow up meeting between the WWF Ukraine team and the Head of NAFA, an agreement was reached for the inclusion of changes into the local legislation, known in Ukraine as “Fishing regime in Black Sea”. The drafted amendments to the existing law plan to forbid Pontic shad’s nets sized between 28 to 31 mm for commercial use (particularly dangerous for sturgeon by-catch) and to increase the amounts of the respective fines.

WORKING ON THE STURGEON BRAND IN NEGOTIN (SERBIA)

WWF Adria, together with local partners, has facilitated the establishment of an informal group of citizens in Negotin (soon to be registered as an NGO) who aim to make sturgeons the focus of a brand for local tourism in this part of Serbia. Sturgeons were once a natural and cultural heritage of East Serbia, where sturgeon fishing was the main source of income for the residents, but with the decline of fish stocks and legal protection, sturgeon fishing has become illegal. The groups’ founders believe that by developing business opportunities, they will create a strong stimulus for young entrepreneurs and local talent to return back to their native

cities and contribute to the growth of the local economy.

Milorad Grbovic, Director of the Dositej Obradovic Library in Negotin, was appointed coordinator of the newly formed center and he will be supported by representatives of WWF Adria, the consultancy partner Institute for Development of Local Potentials (ISKRIVA), Krajina Museum and a local environmental NGO. The greatest challenge for 2020 will be to find donors and sufficient funding to implement the sturgeons brand activities.

[Read more](#)

Dragan Gmizić's new short movie „Grabbers“



Despite the existing ban, overfishing and fish theft continue to pose serious problems and further support from the public was sought through the production of the movie “Grabbers”, which premiered in November 2019 in Belgrade, Serbia. The documentary of Dragan Gmizic reveals the extent to which fish species (especially sturgeons) are endangered, by presenting interviews with experts and explicit footage that proves the lack of market control by the respective inspecting authorities as well as the daily violations of the fishing ban by poachers and restaurants selling wild-caught Sterlet.

After the movie's launch, WWF Adria-Serbia organised a discussion on how to tackle illegal fishing in Serbia and related issues, such as the negative impact on Serbia's unique ecosystems and the need to find alternative sources of income for local communities. Among the panelists were Dusan Ognjanovic - Head of the Department for the Protection and Sustainable Use of the Fisheries Fund at the Ministry of Environment Protection, Nemanja Ivanovic - Head of the Department for Control, Protection and Use of Natural Resources and Fisheries in the AP Vojvodina, Dragan Gmizic - the author of the film and Ljubomir Pejic, WWF Sturgeon advocate and representative of the Vojvodina Fishing Association.

[Read more](#)

STURGEONS - AN INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENT



© Research Centre for Sturgeon Aquatic Habitats and Biodiversity

Members of the project team together with 120 delegates from the scientific community, fisheries, water and environmental administrations and civil society representatives from 22 countries attended the biggest discussion for the past 30 years on sturgeon conservation in the Danube Basin and the Black Sea, organised by the University of Galati at the end of October 2019. The Conference's key objective was to support the concrete implementation of the Pan-European Action Plan for Sturgeons (PANEUAP) and resulted in the [Galati Declaration](#) on Sturgeon Conservation in the Danube Basin and Black Sea, which outlines key messages to decision-makers from all relevant

institutions for the way forward to save sturgeons from extinction. Regional collaboration on a long-term fishing ban, effective measures against poaching, limiting bycatch in commercial fisheries, protection and restoration of key habitats and migration corridors, improved institutional capacity and raising awareness of consumers and fishermen are among the most important steps required by the Conference's participants. The WWF experts from Bulgaria and Romania warned that extending the ban on sturgeon fishing is extremely important for conserving the species on the territory of the EU.

[Read more](#)

St. Nicholas Campaign in Serbia

The campaign was launched ahead of **the day of St. Nicholas** (usually celebrated on the 6th of December), when people traditionally consume fish. It reminded the public not to buy illegally caught fish and to report any suspicious restaurant, market or seller they come across.

The goal of the campaign was to bring the public's attention to the fact that Serbia's fish stock is endangered, primarily due to overfishing. The lack of inspectors prevents the national institutions from establishing strict control over fish markets and restaurants in Serbia and contributes to the ongoing issue of disappearing wildlife species. WWF will continue to work with the law enforcement authorities in the country and, in parallel, has started a campaign to discourage citizens from buying illegally caught fish, hoping thus to decrease the supply of wild-caught sturgeons and other protected fish species at fish markets. Also, people were advised that they should not buy fish that is sold in crates or under other dubious circumstances, because most likely that fish has not undergone the necessary sanitary controls, which makes it a potential health hazard.

[Read more](#)

Documentary on Sturgeons in Romania on Spanish TV



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WWF Romania continues with their efforts to collaborate with fishing communities located along the Danube river and at its delta, where the local economy largely depends on fishing. The WWF team recognises that imposing fishing bans is not enough to save endangered species, because the human factor remains neglected, therefore, they are determined to assist traditional fishermen to find alternative business opportunities while the sturgeon populations take their time to stabilise. As the importance of such activities is getting more and more recognised, Cristina Munteanu and George Caracas were approached by the Spanish broadcasting television RTVE to share their experience, struggles and main messages of what it takes to protect ancient species in the two-part documentary '[Esturión de Vuelta](#)'.

Holiday Season Sturgeon Awareness Campaign in Ukraine

Among the achievements of the team in Ukraine was the launch of their retailers campaign, launched in cooperation with one of the biggest industrial trade groups that has over 500 supermarkets all around the country – Fozzy Group. Representatives of Fozzy Group provided the team with key information about the average caviar buying patterns in their supermarkets. WWF Ukraine and “Silpo” supermarkets, part of Fozzy Group, signed a cooperation agreement shortly before the end of 2019. The [Information campaign](#) on caviar and sturgeon meat from aquaculture was launched before Christmas when people tend to buy caviar as a treat or a luxurious gift. That came in response to the numerous reported cases of illegal sturgeon trade. The first check of Odesa market was conducted by the Ukrainian Fish Patrol – 3 cases of illegally sold sturgeons were reported and 30 kilograms of sturgeon meat confiscated.



OUR MEDIA AND SOCIAL PRESENCE AND NEW INFORMATION MATERIAL

We continue to communicate sturgeon news through our dynamic website, with information in the five project languages. By the end of 2019, we had **86 news articles in English, 40 in Bulgarian, 51 in Romanian, 26 in Serbian and 48 in Ukrainian.**

WWW.DANUBE-STURGEONS.ORG

Discussing the state of sturgeon conservation

We discussed the state of sturgeon conservation in **39 press releases, 30 radio and 48 TV interviews.**

In 2019 we organised and participated in numerous sturgeon-related public events, some of which were:

- “**Earth Hour**” with the scouts in Bulgaria and the TADS members in Romania (March)
- “**Celebrating Danube Day**” (Bulgaria, Serbia & Ukraine, June)
- “**Sturgeon Watchers III**” (Ukraine, June)
- “**Sturgeon Moon in Varna**” (Bulgaria, August)
- “**International Kite Fest**” (Bulgaria, August)
- “**TADS academy**” (Romania, August)
- “**Grabbers Movie Premiere**” (Serbia, November)

NEW PROJECT TRAINING, COMMUNICATION AND VISIBILITY MATERIALS, PRODUCED IN 2019:

EU-TWIX brochures for all target countries, produced with the kind permission and contribution of TRAFFIC. EU-TWIX (Trade in Wildlife Information eXchange) is an internet tool created to assist the EU and law enforcement officials in Europe in the fight against wildlife crime.



[Sturgeons and Caviar - The basics of the legal caviar trade and caviar labelling](#) brochure was produced in all 5 languages to support the implementation of the CITES regulations.

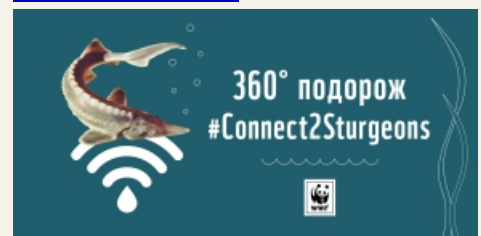
3-D-sturgeon in Vylkove:



2 videos for media and communication purposes were made available - [one on the Silvia case](#) from Bulgaria, where the WWF sturgeon experts got involved in the Beluga’s survival, and another [one on the release of 20.000 young Russian sturgeons into the Danube river.](#)



Virtual trip to [the world of sturgeons in the Danube Delta](#)



OUR WORK IN NUMBERS

121 meetings

with 283 representatives of key law enforcement institutions in Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine (fish agencies, police, border police, customs, etc.) by October 2019.

21 trainings

were organised for 13 law enforcement authorities in our project area until December 2019. That resulted in more than 400 trained law enforcement representatives in total within the project.



Approx. 160 visits

of the project's Sturgeon Advocates (local project members acting as intermediaries between fishermen and sturgeon conservation) to fishing communities and engagement with more than 900 adult members and 750 young people of these communities by December 2019.

20 collaborative

visits of law enforcement officials and Sturgeon Advocates to fishing communities in Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine and Serbia.

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