1. THE EXPLORATION PHASE defined: the target area — around Vylkove, where most poaching was expected to take place; the partners — initially the Danube Biosphere Reserve (DBR), the State Border Guard Service and the Odessa Fish Patrol; the implementers — initially fishery and agriculture students from Kherson State Agrarian University and Odessa State Ecological University.

2. THE IMPLEMENTATION PHASE: Three missions took place between June 2017 and July 2019, with volunteers accompanying partner agencies in their enforcement activities, and assisting DBR scientists in monitoring natural reproduction of sturgeons.

With each mission, the means of meeting the aims were continuously improved:

• Recruitment criteria. From the 2nd Mission onwards, the volunteering scheme included highly motivated people from various fields. Volunteers were screened more thoroughly to assess experience and personal motivation.

• Training procedures. These were elaborated from on-site training (1st Mission) to tailor-made online training videos and presentations.

• Length of patrols. Missions were generally five-day patrols. Due to the high number of applicants, the 3rd Mission was implemented as two consecutive five-day patrols, to cover the entire migration period of young sturgeons.

'Sturgeon Watchers' was undertaken in the Ukrainian Danube Delta from 2017 to 2020 as a network of volunteers, able to support enforcement agencies in their activities protecting migrating sturgeons. The volunteers received theoretical and practical training and attended field missions to protect sturgeons on their migration routes.

The main objectives were: (1) to discourage sturgeon poaching; (2) to increase awareness among the local fishermen regarding sturgeon; (3) to monitor and ensure the safe migration of young sturgeon downstream to the Black Sea.
Partners. Besides those listed at the exploration phase, the Black Sea Fish Patrol started supporting the activity from 2019. Scientists from the South Institute of Marine Ecology and Oceanography supported the scientific monitoring.

Awareness-raising. Volunteers also participated in the celebration of Danube Day (29th June), taking part in education activities. This created goodwill with local inhabitants and raised awareness of sturgeon.

3. THE HANDOVER PHASE: One unexpected outcome of the first three missions was the high level of interest shown by DBR, which agreed to gradually take over the scheme. In July 2020, DBR jointly organized the 4th Mission with WWF. The 5th Mission (in 2021) is to be organized solely by DBR.

RESULTS

Creating interest among civil society to support sturgeon conservation. Information work with the partner universities raised interest among students in relevant fields. Additionally, the social media posts of a famous journalist and blogger who attended the 2nd Mission helped raise awareness and contributed to the high number of applications for the 3rd selection (96 applications).

Volunteers bring added value to the authorities. Selection and training were improved from mission to mission to ensure that volunteers had the necessary background information and the required skills and motivation.

Raising motivation and engagement among enforcement authorities. The motivation of law enforcement agencies for joint patrols and also for sturgeon protection increased considerably. Because several enforcement and monitoring bodies are involved in the training and field work, the ‘Sturgeon Watchers’ also contributed to improving inter-agency cooperation. This, in turn, has enhanced the control of poaching.

Illegal fishing prevented due to volunteer missions. In the 1st Mission, a stellate sturgeon (Acipenser stellatus) was freed from a fisherman’s net and released back into the Danube. In addition, increased awareness of sturgeon protection led to the resignation of the head of a local fishing company, who was suspected of involvement in poaching. In the 2nd Mission, joint monitoring resulted in the stop of the herring fishing season to protect sturgeons on their downstream migration. In the 3rd Mission, 3 out of 10 fishermen’s catches that were controlled by the joint patrols included sturgeons, and 5 adult stellate sturgeons were released.

DBR taking over the volunteering scheme. One especially positive response from a partner agency was that of DBR, who agreed to take over the volunteering scheme.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Awareness-raising and volunteers can support the protection of sturgeon. Young sturgeons have a rather low market value and are caught only as bycatch. Therefore, awareness-raising and soft pressure through the volunteers were enough to obtain results.

Participation of civil society can have a positive influence on law enforcement. Initially, most Ukrainian authorities did not cooperate on patrolling and monitoring. One outcome of the project is the increased cooperation in the missions and that agencies now work more closely together.

Transfer of ownership must be ensured to achieve long-term commitment. The transfer of responsibility from WWF to DBR points to a success in ensuring the sustainability of the project.

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