



WWF

FACTSHEET

WWF Bulgaria's Sturgeon Conservation



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Main Areas of Work and Results Until the End of 2015

Focal species:

Beluga (*Huso huso*),

Stellate Sturgeon (*Acipenser stellatus*),

Russian Sturgeon (*Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*),

Sterlet (*Acipenser ruthenus*).

Geographical area:

Bulgarian Section of the Lower Danube (from 834 river km to 396 river km)

Sturgeon research

In 2013, 2014 and 2015 WWF stationed research teams on all of the Bulgarian section of the Danube. The goal was to catch eggs, newly hatched larvae and young of the year from different sturgeon species. To this end, WWF created and tested a methodology for sturgeon spawning habitat research which was fine-tuned in consultation with the Steering Committee and submitted to authorities for further application.

Special bottom nets were used to catch caviar eggs and larvae. Bottom driftnets were used for young sturgeons. Altogether the experts spent 420 days in the field.

On Danube day in 2014 our team caught a young Beluga Sturgeon in the Vetren area. We calculated that it hatched in April near Oryahovo. A year later another young Stellate Sturgeon and a Sterlet were caught. Their spawning site has not yet been located, but the research continues.

Detailed scientific reports along with GIS data and maps are available upon request.

Restocking of the Danube River with Young Sturgeons of Proven Danube Origin

The main goal was to develop, test and apply a scientifically sound methodology to produce young sturgeons of proven Danube origin, bred in a way to be best prepared to survive natural conditions in the Danube River.



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2014

Belene - 11 000 young Sterlets in the waters of Persina Nature park.

2015

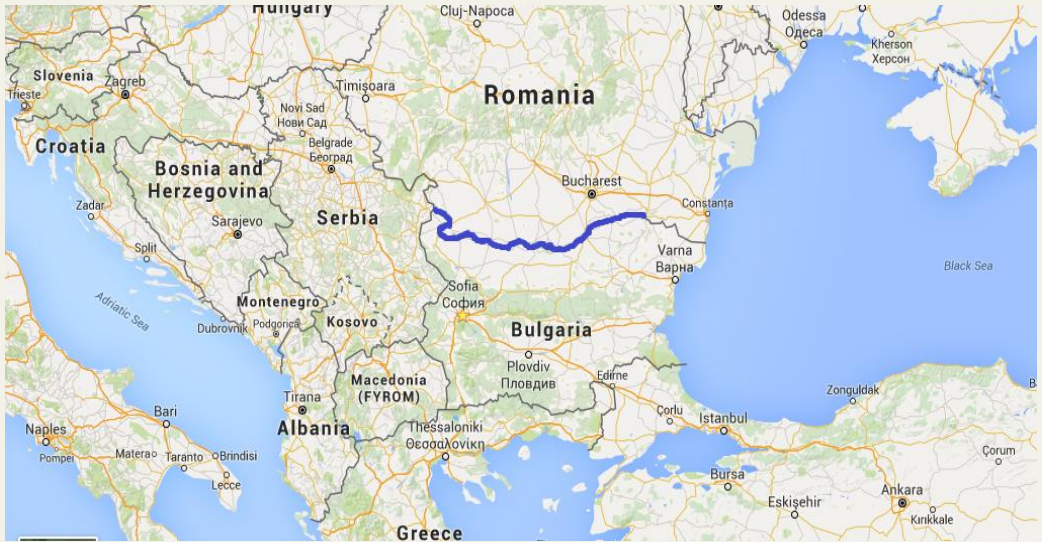
Lom and Vetren - 40 000 young Sterlets

The methodology is an official result of the project and is submitted to the Bulgarian Ministry of Environment and Water as well as other related institutions for future application in similar restocking initiatives or programs.

The challenges with breeding and protecting endangered species are often unpredictable, especially if the restocking has to take place within a limited timeframe and in a pioneer manner. Take Danube's temperature for example – 2013 was the coldest year in the last 100, and 2014 was the warmest. This changed the behaviour of the fish and made the catch of the parent fish very difficult. We managed to obtain mature producers of two species – Stellate Sturgeon and Sterlets. Only the production of Sterlets was successful in the end and the fertilized caviar hatched. After a certain period in the artificial fishponds, the fishlings were moved to earthen pools, to simulate natural conditions. Genetic research was carried out on a sample to prove the heterogeneous origin of the offspring. Before release, each Sterlet was tagged using the Coded Wire Tagging technique applied also by our Romanian colleagues in the Danube delta.

For WWF it is of great importance that all sturgeon releases are as transparent as possible, so the restocking events were public. To this end there were many journalists, representatives of institutions and local people present at each event, and participants had the opportunity to release a baby sturgeon into the river.

The first restockings happened in November 2014. Near Belene, in the waters of Persina Nature park, we released 11 thousand young Sterlets. In the spring of 2015 we released another 40 thousand Sterlets near Lom and Vetren, Silistra, and like that we covered the upper, middle and lower part of the Bulgarian Danube.



Community outreach

WWF representatives, called Sturgeon Advocates, visited 13 fishing villages in Bulgaria and met over 210 fishermen over a period of 3 years. With the help of local authorities and fishermen associations, the initial mistrust was overcome and the fishermen started sharing their experience, opinion and knowledge of sturgeons and sometimes even sturgeon poaching. A great effort was made to educate them on the benefits and necessity of releasing sturgeon bycatch.

Focal points were established in key communities - Belene and Vetren.

Eight alternative income workshops were conducted with over 170 participants. As a result and with our assistance, a fishermen association was established in Nikopol, a prerequisite for application for public financing.

We also conducted a pilot practical training of fishermen in research methods for monitoring of sturgeon stocks in Vetren in the summer of 2015, where 6 fishermen were trained to assist research teams.

Stakeholder outreach

There is a patchwork of institutions that are involved in regulating sturgeon protection in Bulgaria and their challenges are various – from lack of funding, lack of capacity and knowledge, to lack of specialized facilities to test sturgeon or caviar samples.

WWF organized a major workshop in 2014 to bridge the gap between the different institutions, allow for their experts to meet each other and coordinate actions. Trainings, led by international experts, were conducted with customs and border police officials on how to recognize legal from illegal caviar and with fisheries agencies on how to distinguish sturgeon species.

Thirteen fishing villages visited regularly

Eight alternative income workshops conducted

Training in research methods for fishermen



A multi-institutional wildlife crime task force is being discussed in Bulgaria and the project's experts were invited to provide information for the risk assessment of illegal caviar. If this task force becomes reality, it will be a significant breakthrough in enhancing controls.

Institutions were consistently updated and involved in sturgeon conservation work, either through round tables, personal meetings, or projects' Steering Groups. These included 40+ representatives of stakeholders such as national, regional and local authorities, National Associations of Fishery and Aquaculture, Customs, Border Police and Food Safety officials, as well as scientists and representatives of fishermen associations. In response to WWF's activities, authorities have initiated controls, which lead to seizures of illegal caviar, meat and fishing equipment. There has been a complete ban on sturgeon fishing in Bulgaria since 2012, which was expanded in the beginning of 2016 for five more years.

The first online portal on sturgeons was created to bring together in a user-friendly and handy format and all available information on sturgeons (legislation, strategies, action plans, scientific publications, presentations, etc.) for the use of different interested stakeholder groups.

Legislation and other analysis

As part of the sturgeon conservation work we looked into the regulatory and strategic framework. An overview of the sturgeon conservation regulatory framework was carried out and recommendations for achieving better coherence and revision were prepared for the authorities. An analysis of the current Bulgarian National Action on Sturgeons was also carried out. Recommendations for the next planning period were prepared in consultation with stakeholders. An analysis of the Natura 2000 and protected area network in the Bulgarian section of the Lower Danube was prepared in respect of sufficiency of the network to provide real and efficient protection of key sturgeon conservation sites. Recommendations for improving of the network were formulated.

Online portal for
legislation and
research on
sturgeons at:

www.wwf.bg/esetri



Approaching the market

The light sturgeon picture from Earth Hour 2015 in Sofia made headlines around the world.

While some companies have a murky reputation for poaching sturgeons from the river and “whitewashing” black caviar, others are investing in innovative technologies to try to get the competitive edge. We met several of these companies, discussed the issues of sturgeon protection and drafted a Code of conduct for responsible behaviour of the market players. Four companies in Bulgaria and four in Romania signed the document. This document marks the first steps in creating self-regulating mechanism and responsible market for sturgeon products.

Reaching the public

All results were communicated in through traditional and new media, with Facebook posts for example reaching over 1 mln people, hundreds of media publications and specialized materials (brochures, films, clips, multi-media presentations, stickers, calendars, etc). Public polling was done to gain understanding about the knowledge and perception on the issue of the general public and specialized focal groups.

More information at <http://danube-sturgeons.org> and www.wwf.bg/esetri

Contacts for further information

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