



LOWER DANUBE STURGEONS



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Acipenser gueldenstaedtii

WHY SHOULD WE SAVE STURGEON?

Sturgeon have existed almost unchanged for 200 million years. **Among the largest and most iconic freshwater fish**, sturgeon can live for 100 years, growing up to 7m long and weighing up to 1.5 tonnes. Or they could. Large sturgeon are now very few and far between. Having survived the extinction of the dinosaurs, sturgeon today are **the most endangered group of species globally**. Once widespread across the Northern hemisphere, the damming of rivers that blocked their migration routes coupled with growing demand for caviar wiped out many sturgeon populations, eradicating them from most rivers. But together, we can save sturgeon from extinction and invest in a nature-positive future.

THE LOWER DANUBE

The Danube is one of the last **European Rivers where sturgeons still reproduce naturally** so it is a regional and global hotspot for sturgeon conservation. Until the 19th century, giant sturgeon migrated up the Danube as far as Germany and were important mainstays for many fishing communities. But the construction of the Iron Gate hydropower dams between Romania and Serbia cut off a vast region and blocked critically important spawning sites. Yet more than 800km remain free flowing and the **Lower Danube, its delta and the North-Western Black Sea** still sustain important habitats and are home to the last naturally reproducing sturgeon populations in the EU. The populations of the remaining 4 species are shared by Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine.

WHY ARE THE LOWER DANUBE STURGEON THREATENED?

Historically, the construction of **hydropower dams** and **massive overfishing** led to the collapse of sturgeon populations in the Danube. Today, despite the imposition of fishing bans, poaching, by-catch and the illegal trade in wild caviar and meat still threaten their survival. Continuous **modifications of the river** for navigation and for dredging destroy important spawning or feeding habitats for sturgeon, or block their migration routes to upper parts of the river.

WHAT MUST BE DONE?

More sturgeon species will disappear from the Danube without urgent, concerted conservation efforts. These must be implemented across national boundaries, across ecosystems from the Danube to the Black Sea, across sectors, and across economic stakeholders who exploit the river's resources, such as fisheries, navigation, hydropower or gravel mining. Collaboratively stakeholders must become stewards of sturgeon to restore and revive their populations and habitats. We must **act together for a nature-positive future**, as no country can save sturgeon alone.

NOT ON OUR WATCH!

- **Last Call** – All European sturgeon species are threatened with extinction. A Pan-European Action Plan for sturgeon has been agreed by European states, which stresses the need for swift and concerted conservation actions.
- **A Warning to Freshwater Species** – Sturgeon are iconic fish of ancient origin and have become symbols of healthy and free flowing river systems connected to the sea. If we cannot save a flagship species, chances are that other freshwater species will go extinct unnoticed!
- **Reintroduction is a last resort** – Reintroducing a species that has gone extinct in the wild is sometimes possible if captive stocks are available but saving remaining populations is far more cost effective.
- **High Commercial and Cultural Value** – Sturgeon provide an economic and cultural value to many rivers in the Northern hemisphere. If we bring back sturgeon populations and if fishers catch them sustainably, then we can boost local economies and create long term incomes for families.



Wildlife crime: Authorities record approx. 60 cases per year, including illegal fishing and trade.
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THE FIGHT FOR THE GIANTS OF THE DANUBE

LOWER DANUBE COUNTRIES SHARING STURGEON POPULATIONS



Part of the problem - part of the solution: WWF works with fishing communities along the Lower Danube and Black Sea coast to engage in sturgeon conservation

WHAT IS WWF DOING?

WWF is committed to halting the extinction of sturgeon species and ensuring that "By 2030, populations of native species of sturgeons are stable or recovering in the Danube River Basin". Globally we work along 4 Strategies to:

Halt Overexploitation through By-Catch, Illegal Fishing and Trade - In the Lower Danube we work with enforcement authorities to stop illegal catches and build conservation stewardship, by engaging fishers and their communities.

Protect and Restore Resilient Habitats & Migration Corridors - In the Lower Danube we support the identification of sturgeon habitats, we fight to stop the degradation of spawning places from dredging activities or navigation projects and we advocate for the restoration of their migration routes.

Conservation Breeding and Release Programs - Populations have decreased to an extent where we need to engage in such last resort conservation measures. WWF supports the setup of breeding facilities for conservation purposes and organises releases of juveniles. We also engage in sturgeon monitoring activities to provide the critical basis for any conservation intervention.

Raise Public Awareness and Political Will to Support Implementation - We work with all stakeholders from conservation, water and fisheries management, enforcement authorities like police and trade inspectors, navigation companies and many more. We raise our voice in public in defence of sturgeon and most importantly, we remain committed to working closely with fishing communities.



SPECIES INFORMATION

Beluga (*Huso huso*)

- Among the biggest freshwater fish in the world - up to 1.5 tonnes and 7 m long, can live > 100 years
- Migrates further upstream than other species
- Source of famous Beluga caviar
- Status: Critically Endangered

Russian sturgeon (*Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*)

- Formerly the most widely distributed in the Danube River, as far as Bratislava
- Very rare in the Black Sea basin
- Source of Ossetra caviar
- Status: Critically Endangered – believed to be on the verge of extinction in the Danube

Stellate sturgeon (*Acipenser stellatus*)

- Distinctive star-shaped bone plates on its body
- Migrates upstream at higher temperatures and therefore later than other sturgeons
- Source of Sevruga caviar
- Status: Critically Endangered

Sterlet (*Acipenser ruthenus*)

- Lives entirely in freshwater and can still be found in the Middle and Upper Danube
- Migrates only shorter distances
- Status: Endangered

Ship Sturgeon (*Acipenser nudiventris*)

- Last confirmed catch in the Danube was in 2009
- Status: Extinct in the Danube

European Sturgeon (*Acipenser sturio*)

- Status: Extinct in the Danube

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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