

# Wild Caviar: Only in our Dreams?

## Recommendations for Strengthening Sturgeon Conservation

Sturgeons (acipenseriformes) have roamed our seas for nearly 200 million years, but overfishing to supply the global caviar trade has nearly wiped these living fossils off the face of the planet in just the past few decades. Many North American and European sturgeons, once plentiful, were fished to commercial extinction in the 20th century. Today most wild caviar comes from the Caspian Sea, but sturgeon populations there are collapsing.



*"Sturgeon resources are in a precarious condition. Without taking effective measures, a moratorium on sturgeon fishing is inevitable. The lives of many generations in the nations that live around the Caspian Sea are closely connected to the fate of the sea. Our main task is to preserve these resources for future generations."*

*Biological Resources of the Caspian Sea*  
By Dr. Vladimir Ivanov, Former Director  
Russia's Caspian Fisheries Research Institute

## Downward Spiral

Caspian sturgeon populations have plummeted in recent decades. The stellate sturgeon population is just 10 percent of what it was in 1978, while 2005 assessments for Russian sturgeon indicate a 50 percent decline since 1978. Numbers of beluga sturgeon, the rarest and most valuable species, dropped by 45 percent in just one year from 2004 to 2005.

Overfishing, ineffective management regimes and lack of consistent trade controls are all to blame. Resolution 12.7 currently governs the trade in sturgeons and caviar. It is vital that the international community strengthen this resolution to ensure that trade does not continue to be detrimental to the species' survival. But given that this downward spiral continues, it also seems necessary for the Conference of Parties to consider another Significant Trade Review for sturgeons, with serious consideration given to an uplisting to Appendix I for one or more species.

## Recommendations

### *Increase Transparency and Scrutiny of Quota Setting Process*

Export quotas from shared sturgeon populations are mandated by the Parties. Because of this, the process requires scrutiny beyond what is normally required for voluntary quotas. To date, the quota-setting process has not resulted in sustainable trade of sturgeon products, and some range states are faced with fishing moratoriums as the only option.

Romania has declared a 10-year moratorium on all commercial sturgeon fishing, and the Black Sea states requested zero caviar export quotas for 2007. Before it is too late for Caspian sturgeons, steps must be taken to increase the transparency and scrutiny of the quota-setting process:

- **The power to publish export quotas, and to refuse them if all conditions are not met, must remain with the Secretariat.**
- **Export quotas should be subjected to an additional level of scrutiny, such as review by the Chairperson of the Animals Committee, before being published.**
- **The information on which the export quotas are based should be made available upon request.**

*"For the entire time [fishing today], we did not get a single beluga fish. Last year, we also did not have them. There has to be a five-year moratorium on fishing here. We need a complete embargo, and then everything will be reestablished."*

Igor, Fishing Brigade Captain  
Astrakhan, Russia



Hatchery produced sturgeon fingerlings

*"Sturgeon were once plentiful in the Black Sea but poaching, overfishing and mismanagement have taken their toll on this prehistoric fish. Romania realised that decisive action was needed to prevent the complete disappearance of this fish from its waters, and implemented a 10-year ban on all sturgeon fishing in May 2006. We urge other sturgeon range states, particularly in the Caspian Sea, to consider similar actions. These moratoriums may be the only chance the sturgeons have for survival and recovery in their native waters."*

Dr. Radu Suci  
Head, Sturgeon Research Group  
Danube Delta National Institute, Romania



## Ensure Effective Conservation Strategy

Resolution 12.7 requires that catch quotas be based on an appropriate regional conservation strategy and management regime. The management plan established in the Caspian Sea is not preventing serious population declines. The process for evaluating the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of the regional conservation strategy must be rigorous:

- **The range states should continue to seek advice from FAO to ensure the conservation strategy is adequate by international standards and should be required to submit funding proposals to GEF or other appropriate donors for the rehabilitation of sturgeon stocks, hatchery programs, and enforcement.**
- **The strategy should be more frequently evaluated, at least every two years, and independent scientific experts should be called upon to aid in such an assessment.**
- **Importers could require range states to demonstrate that trade is not detrimental to the survival of the species.**

## Combat Illegal Fishing

The illegal caviar market is thriving, despite efforts by the EU to implement the CITES' labelling scheme to make contraband caviar more visible to customs' officials and purveyors, and the United States' advances in DNA testing. TRAFFIC estimates that nearly 12 tonnes of caviar was seized in the EU and Switzerland between 2000 and 2005. Measures should be approved to reduce the amount of illegal caviar that finds its way onto the market:

- **Importing countries must make a concerted effort to tackle the illegal caviar trade, putting in place consistent labelling schemes as recommended by Resolution 12.7.**
- **All original packaging of caviar should be exported by the end of the year in which it was harvested.**
- **The timeframe for re-exports of caviar should be reduced from 18 to 12 months.**

*"Waitrose stopped selling Beluga, Oscietra and Sevruga caviar in 1996 due to sustainability concerns around overfishing and illegal fishing occurring in the Caspian region. Whilst our customers were still asking for Caspian caviar at this time, we felt that the problems associated with this fishery were not in line with Waitrose's sustainable seafood policy. Unfortunately, these problems have yet to be effectively addressed and wild sturgeon populations continue to decline. We support stronger trade protection for the sturgeon through CITES, in the hopes that these magnificent fish can be saved."*

Jeremy Ryland Langley, Specialist Buyer Fish  
Waitrose, UK retailer



*"The sturgeon's enemies are legion, but poachers may be taking the heaviest toll."*  
Science magazine, January 2002.

## Caviar Trade Policy Timeline

- 1997 – All sturgeons listed under CITES
- 2001 – Six month Caspian fishing ban
- 2002 – Beluga exports temporarily halted
- 2005 – US bans beluga caviar imports
- 2006 – CITES bans wild caviar trade
- 2006 – Romania bans fishing for 10 years
- 2007 – Black Sea halts exports, Caspian reopens

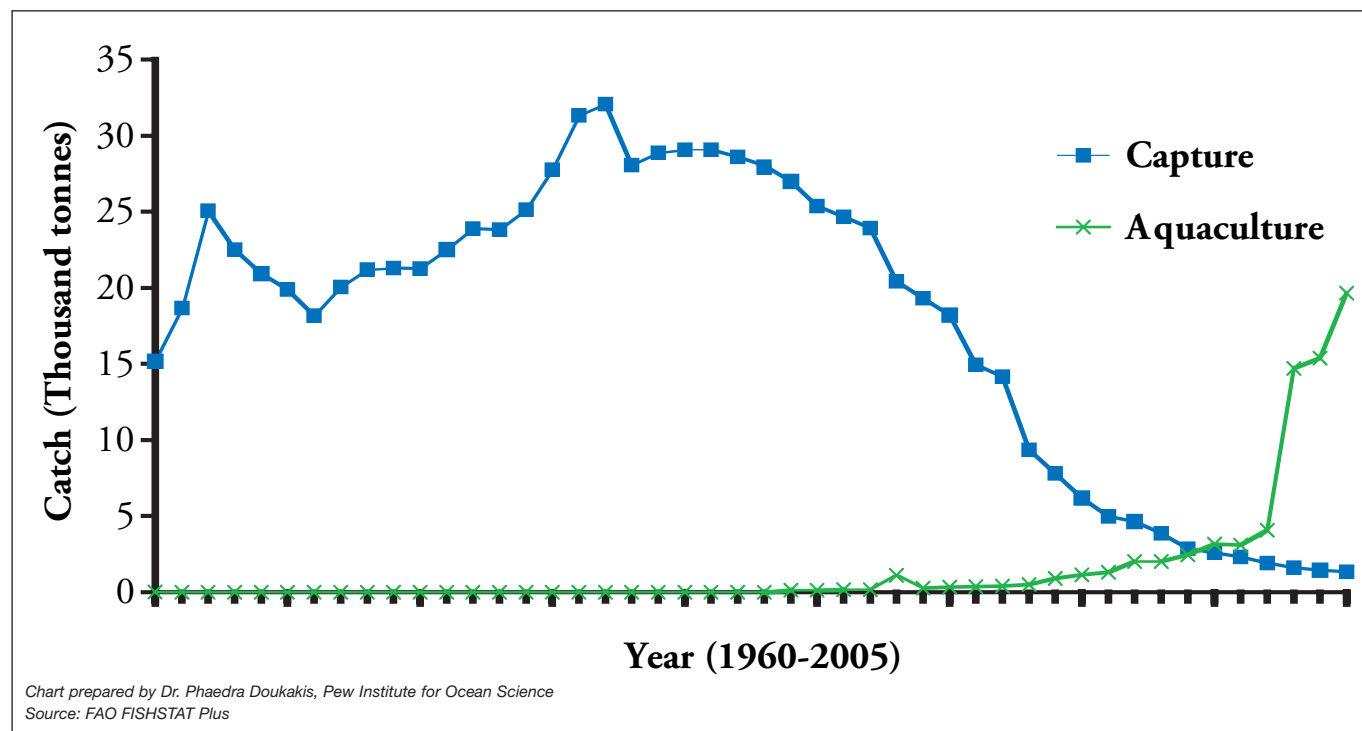
*"In 2004 Lufthansa replaced all wild caviar served on board with farmed, based on an initiative of LSG Sky Chefs. Increased concerns over illegal fishing, poor management and unsustainable quotas for sturgeon meant Caspian caviar did not meet Lufthansa's requirements for sustainable sourcing. We urge CITES delegates to implement increased protection for the sturgeon at the 14th CoP so this precious resource can be saved."*

Gino Gartmann, Director, Strategic Sourcing and Supply Chain, LSG Sky Chefs

## Immediate Action Needed to Save Wild Sturgeon

If drastic action to protect wild sturgeon is not soon taken, caviar produced by aquaculture may be the only choice consumers have. Catches of wild sturgeon and paddlefish for caviar and meat are at their lowest in decades. Increasingly, farmed sturgeon are meeting the global demand for caviar. The year 2000 marked the first time that the total weight of sturgeon in aquaculture facilities exceeded that of sturgeon caught in the wild. Scientists say immediate measures for sturgeon conservation are needed if the species is to survive.

### Wild Catch Versus Aquaculture Production of Sturgeon and Paddlefish



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Caviar Emptor is a joint program of the Pew Institute for Ocean Science and SeaWeb, and its goal is to protect and restore endangered Caspian Sea sturgeon. For over six years (including four in the Caspian region) Caviar Emptor has campaigned for stronger trade protection for wild sturgeon through CITES and within key caviar consuming countries such as the United States. The campaign also works with leading chefs and restaurateurs by encouraging a growing market for sustainable, farmed caviars that will provide relief to endangered wild sturgeon. [www.caviaremtor.org](http://www.caviaremtor.org)



L'Autre Caviar ("The Other Caviar") is a program of SeaWeb active in French-speaking Europe, the second largest consumer market for wild caviar after the United States, and one of the world's leading producers of farmed caviar. It encourages chefs, restaurateurs and consumers to switch from Caspian caviar to environmentally friendly European farmed caviars. [www.seaweb.org/fr](http://www.seaweb.org/fr)

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