



Sturgeons in Central and Eastern Europe

BRIEFING • JULY 2020

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A Green Recovery for CEE Sturgeons

At 250 million years old, sturgeons are among the oldest species of fish on Earth and have outlasted the dinosaurs. Not long ago, magnificent, 7-meter long beluga sturgeons migrated up the Danube as far as Germany and provided livelihoods for numerous fishing communities. No longer. Twenty-seven different species of sturgeon are known across the northern hemisphere. Of the formerly six species native to the Danube River Basin, one is extinct and another functionally extinct.¹ The Lower Danube is the only river in the EU that still contains naturally reproducing populations of sturgeon, but their status is critical. **Human impact has made sturgeons the most endangered group of species on the planet.**

Historically, overexploitation and blockage of migration routes led to the collapse of sturgeon populations. Today, the main threat facing dwindling sturgeon populations is illegal fishing, primarily for their caviar, but also for their meat.

Further degradation of remaining habitats and infrastructure blocking access to their spawning sites also pose major problems. Dams represent insurmountable barriers along migration routes, and diking and draining of 80% of the Danube's former floodplains has caused important feeding and spawning areas to vanish. Since sturgeons are naturally long-lived (some growing to be 100 years old), they start reproducing late (15-20 years). Combined with the fact that they do not spawn annually, their populations are particularly vulnerable and will require decades to recover.

What we mean by Green Recovery

The **Covid-19 pandemic** and its immediate health, social and economic impacts require an urgent response. Beyond this, however, public stimulus packages to relaunch the economy are already being developed, requiring crucial decisions on where these substantial financial flows should be directed or through which channels and vehicles, in order to bring most benefits.

Badly designed recovery plans in response to the Covid-19 outbreak risk exacerbating the social inequalities and environmental crisis. Instead, **governments must draw up their plans in a way that helps tackle social inequalities, climate and environmental breakdown, and the need to improve long-term resilience**, by taking a consistent approach across the board, and aiming clearly at a green, equitable and resilient recovery.

WWF is calling on the European Union and its governments to demonstrate leadership and foresight by continuing to follow, and reinforcing, a trajectory towards a resilient, sustainable and just economy and society, **in line with the European Green Deal, the Paris climate agreement, biodiversity goals and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).**

¹ A species that is 'functionally extinct' no longer has enough individual members to produce future generations or play a role in the ecosystem.



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Furthermore, sturgeons are also threatened by genetic changes such as the introduction of exotic species, inbreeding due to habitat loss, genetic bottlenecks (sharp reduction in numbers), and the Allee Effect (the reduced probability that the late maturing fish will find reproductive partners) dramatically reduce their chances for reproductive success.

Saving sturgeon from extinction is a complex undertaking and can only be achieved through cross-sectoral and cross-border cooperation, and a strong political will. Sectors and institutions needed to cooperate towards sturgeon conservation include fishery authorities responsible for enforcing fishing bans, ministries for water and environment responsible for securing sturgeon spawning habitats or monitoring (as obliged under Art. 17 of the [Habitats Directive](#)), and navigation and dredging companies which can either threaten or spare these habitats.

No country can save sturgeons alone! Therefore, we call on Central and Eastern European Heads of State/Government to focus much needed attention to the plight of these magnificent surviving fish by securing cross-sectoral and cross-border cooperation.

What we need to do

We call on Danube-Carpathian Governments to implement the [Pan-European Action Plan for Sturgeons](#) (PANEUAP) adopted by 50 states (including all Danube countries) under the [Bern Convention](#) in November 2018. The PANEUAP was further endorsed for implementation by EU countries under the [Habitats Directive](#) in May 2019, and most recently supported by the [Galati Declaration on Sturgeon Conservation in the Danube Basin and Black Sea](#) at the *International Conservation of Danube Sturgeons Conference* in October 2019 in Galati, Romania. The PANEUAP calls for swift adoption of concrete measures, including making hydropower dams passable for sturgeons, reducing bycatch, establishing breeding facilities, habitat protection and restoration, and combating illegal trade in sturgeon products.

Effective implementation of the PANEUAP first requires that **each national government nominate a national sturgeon conservation focal point** as mandated by the Secretariat of the Bern Convention and by DG Environment of the European Commission. Their role will be to coordinate the implementation at the national level.

Timeline

September 2020	WWF Living Planet Report
22.09-23.09.2020	UN Biodiversity Summit New York
20.10-22.10.2020	EU Green Week and launch of the EU State of Nature Report
23.10.2020	EU Environment Council conclusions on EU Biodiversity Strategy
10.-11.12.2020	European Council meeting and adoption of the 2021-2027 EU budget
07.01-15.01.2021	IUCN World Conservation Congress
21.01-26.02.2021	World Economic Forum
17-30 May 2021	COP 15 - Convention of Biological Diversity

IN THE FACE OF THE
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LOSS, AS THE
DOMINANT SPECIES ON THE PLANET
WE HAVE THE MORAL
RESPONSIBILITY
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LIFE ON EARTH.



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The focal points will contribute to monitoring progress at the pan-European level by developing a reporting mechanism, compiling national reports, and attending meetings of a dedicated working group in order to clarify the responsibilities in every country.²

Secondly, to **strengthen inter-agency and inter-sectoral cooperation**, river basin and regional sea authorities, nature conservation and fisheries agencies must increase the exchange between relevant stakeholders and develop a common approach towards sturgeon conservation.³

Thirdly, adequate funding instruments must be put in place for long-term conservation actions.⁴ This includes a funding plan outlining national and international, private and government funding options, and a strategy for national programming of EU funds to supply part of these resources.

The **Conference of Parties (COP15) of the Convention of Biological Diversity in October 2020 is critical for creating the long-term enabling framework for sturgeon conservation.**

Therefore, Heads of Government/State from the CEE Region should join other world leaders in pledging support for WWF's New Deal for Nature and People by signing the Heads of State Declaration supporting the adoption of an ambitious and impactful Global Biodiversity Framework. This framework should boast an **ambitious mission in line with WWF's "0-half-0" vision** (0 habitat loss; halving of our human footprint; 0 human-induced extinction) and global targets which address the direct and indirect drivers of biodiversity loss. For these goals to be met, the post-2020 framework must be equipped with a **strengthened implementation and accountability mechanism, dramatically increased financial flows, and improve engagement of stakeholders, rights-holders and relevant sectors.**

Key facts & figures

- Sturgeons are among the largest freshwater fish on Earth. They can reach 8 metres in length and weigh up to 1.5 tons;
- According to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), they are the most endangered group of species on Earth. Up to 23 of 27 sturgeon species are on the brink of extinction, and four species are possibly already extinct;
- Sturgeons can live for over 100 years and take at least 15 years to mature. They migrate up to 3000 km to spawn; and
- Sturgeons have very high commercial and cultural value. They are often alluded to in culture and history, and caviar imports into the EU in 2013 were worth €22.7 million.⁵

Current trends can still be reversed if transformative changes are implemented that address the root causes of nature deterioration.

For more information

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² corresponding to Action 9.1.1 of the PANEUAP

³ corresponding to action 8.2.1 of the PANEUAP

⁴ according to Action 7.1.1 and 7.1.2 of the PANEUAP

⁵ UNEP-WCMC, *EU Wildlife Trade 2013* (2015), available at:

http://euanalysis2013.unep-wcmc.org/files/2015/11/Analysis-of-EU-Annual-Reports-2013_Public1.pdf



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