NO The European sturgeon must not become extinct

Information and awareness-raising campaign on the risks related to accidental bycatch of European sturgeon International action plan for the protection and restoration of the European sturgeon

The European sturgeon (*Acipenser sturio*), the indigenous sturgeon of the North-East Atlantic, is a critically endangered species. Each year, the bycatch at sea diminishes the low population size even further. The sturgeon is considered to be the largest migratory fish in western Europe. As a protected species both nationally and internationally, it is strictly prohibited to catch, transport or sell these fish. Important initiatives are underway to restore the species in European waters. Involving fisheries across the EU is a decisive factor for the success of these initiatives as each catch has an adverse impact on the species' future.
Professional fisheries in France are taking a proactive part in conservation actions, in partnership with WWF France, which in turn will improve the profession's image.

SAVE OUR STURGEON

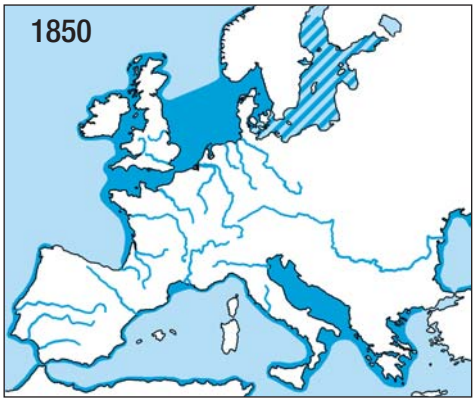
Take the right actions to save the last specimens

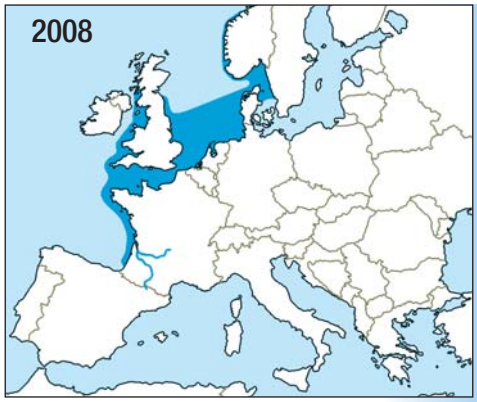
Know/Protect/Inform/Raise awareness • Record/Release/Declare
A recognised challenge and essential commitment on a European scale to save the European sturgeon

Background, status and dangers

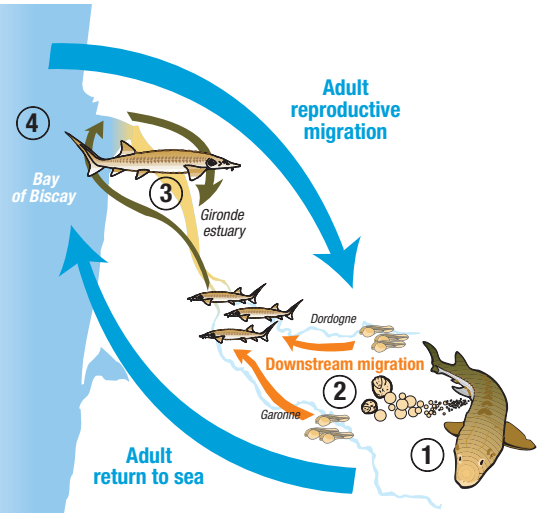
Twenty-seven species of sturgeon have been recorded across the world, and most are currently endangered. While some species are reared for their caviar and meat, commercial farming does not involve the European sturgeon (*Acipenser sturio*), the migratory wild species of the North-East Atlantic.

Changes in the European sturgeon's distribution area and lifecycle





Dordogne river



① In spring, adults start to move up the estuary and rivers to the spawning sites where they reproduce in May and June before returning to sea. They subsequently only return to rivers to spawn again every two to four years.

② The larvae and alevins stay in the river throughout the summer. Rapidly growing, the young sturgeons move downstream into the brackish waters of estuaries during their first winter. It takes them until their third summer to reach the sea.

③ Between the ages of three and eight juveniles make seasonal return journeys between estuaries and shallow coastal waters. They stay in estuaries during the summer and return to the sea in winter.

④ Between the ages of eight to ten sturgeons leave the estuaries completely. They spread out over the marine Continental Shelf, most often in shallow water less than 40m deep. They only return to their river of origin when mature.

The European sturgeon can easily live up to 60 years and reach the impressive length of 3.5m and weigh over 300kg.

Multiple dangers:

Male European sturgeons do not become mature until about ten years of age. Females become mature even later, at about fifteen years of age. Before reproducing for the first time, sturgeons must therefore spend many years as juveniles in rivers, estuaries and shallow seas where they are subjected to intensive pressure including pollution, urban development, dredging and fishing. The destruction of its essential habitats (spawning sites, nurseries, etc.) and the increasing obstacles to migration played a major part in exterminating the species in most large catchment areas in Europe over the 19th and 20th centuries.

Maximum protection:

The European sturgeon is now one of the most endangered species in Europe according to the major international conventions on the protection of the environment and species (CITES, the Bonn Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species, Bern Convention, the OSPAR Convention for the protection of the marine environment of the North-East Atlantic). Furthermore, the European sturgeon is a registered priority species in terms of urgency to implement restoration measures by the European Union (Habitats Directive). It has been strictly protected since 1998. France has defined it as one of the main priorities in its biodiversity conservation strategy. Legislation in the other major countries concerned (the UK, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Spain, etc.) also strictly prohibits the fishing and sale of this species.

Acipenser sturio – a highly endangered species:

In the past, European sturgeon were plentiful in the coastal waters and in most of the major rivers of Europe. Today, there is only one single wild population and the numbers at sea are continuously declining. The species can still be found in the Bay of Biscay, the Channel, the Celtic Sea, the Irish Sea and the North Sea. The last remaining sites for reproduction are located in the Garonne and Dordogne rivers in France.

Accidental catches at sea and involvement of the fisheries sector: act responsibly!

Over the last century, the European sturgeon was widely sought after for its meat as well as for the roe from which caviar was made. Today, sturgeon are no longer part of managed catches and no commercial production has been in place for decades.

There are still, however, significant risks of accidental catches at sea as part of legal activities targeting other species in the shallow coastal waters where sturgeons are found. Due to their behaviour as a benthic species, sturgeon are very vulnerable to demersal fishing gears such as trawl nets and gill nets. The mortality resulting from these accidental catches is one of the main dangers for the species today. However, it can be avoided. In over 70% of cases (regardless of fishing gear), sturgeon are alive when brought onboard vessels. The fisherman's reaction and decision are therefore decisive. Catching a sturgeon is generally a rare occurrence. However, given the low numbers left in natural habitats (estimated at a few hundred), the survival of each specimen counts. These fish must not be sold. Fishermen must do all they can to help the animal survive; and they should release it and report the catch.

In France and Belgium professional and amateur fishermen have become involved in protecting the European sturgeon. However, year after year, several fish caught accidentally have been lost because the fishermen were not aware of the species' legal status nor what they must do when a sturgeon is caught.

Fishermen operating throughout the species' entire distribution area therefore have a crucial role in protecting sturgeon, whose future could depend on their awareness and involvement. The commitment of fishermen to this conservation issue is definitely a positive way of raising the profession's profile, showing a responsible attitude towards the management of marine resources.

Trawlers and netters mainly concerned

Sturgeon released alive, France 2005

Sturgeon released alive, Belgium 2007

Take the right actions

Instructions to be followed in the event of an accidental catch:

1. **Note** the date of the catch, the size and weight of the fish and the location (GPS or zone);
2. **If it has a marking,** leave it there and note the number;
3. **Release it with care;**
4. **Report the accidental catch**
   - by letter, by completing and sending the declaration slip below (contact details overleaf).
   - by contacting your regional centre:
     jim.ellis@cefas.co.uk
     sturio@cemagref.fr

Accidental catch declaration slip

Date..... Time..... Zone (GPS or site)..... Depth.....

Size..... Weight..... Marking no ☐ yes ☐ Number..... Photos ☐

Returned to the water alive ☐ dead ☐ injured ☐ uninjured ☐

Vessel and gear: Name of the vessel..... Port of operation.....

Gear used..... Mesh size..... Species targeted.....

Fisherman's details (confidential): Surname - first name.....

Home address..... Country.....

Telephone number..... Other observations:.....

Information and declaration slips can be downloaded from the Internet at the following address:

http://www.comite-peches.fr/sturio-en.htm

All information, even sketchy details, may help us to understand this migratory fish's marine biology (depth, fishing vessel and gear, general condition of the fish, observations, etc.). Do not hesitate to take photos of the specimen, if you can, before releasing it. Declarations are monitored and personalised gifts will be sent to fishermen taking part in this work. We thank you for your cooperation.

Personal information is collected with only one purpose in mind: to contact you to thank you for providing additional information on the sturgeon caught.

Initiatives underway

European sturgeon alevins

Experience in France

Initiatives have been conducted in France since the 1970s, when professional fishermen in the Gironde area attempted to raise awareness of the need to protect the European sturgeon. Scientific studies conducted in the early 1980s, and two European programmes between 1994 and 2001, have brought about a wider and better understanding of the sturgeon's biology. They have also helped to define appropriate management measures to effectively protect the species, and to develop up basic tools for a future European programme for rebuilding sturgeon populations.

Several communication campaigns aimed at the marine fishery sector have been launched around the French coast over the last few decades. Since this work was taken over in 2006 by the CNPMEM, with the support of WWF France, these initiatives have been extended to the species' entire distribution area. However, due to the migrations patterns of sturgeon and its reintroduction prospects, the protection of the species requires the involvement of Europe-wide fisheries.

Biological station, CEMAGREF institute, France

Sturgeon at the IGB station, Germany

Almost 100 adult or almost mature specimens, intended to take part in artificial reproduction schemes, are currently being held in farms belonging to the CEMAGREF research institute in France and the IGB research institute in Germany. The first artificial reproduction using seed fish reared in captivity was conducted in June 2007. Several thousand alevins were released some months later near the natural spawning sites in the Garonne and Dordogne rivers in France. Previous similar attempts date back to 1994 and 1995. Now there is renewed hope for this species, and more artificial reproduction attempts are expected in the coming years.

Committed Europe

The Standing Committee of the Bern Convention adopted an international action plan for the restoration of European sturgeon in November 2007. The plan hinges on four priority areas:

- the conservation and reproduction of sturgeon in captivity, leading to their gradual reintroduction into the traditional distribution area of the species;
- the conservation of the species in its natural habitat, particularly at sea, with the proactive assistance of fisheries;
- the protection and restoration of the basic habitats of sturgeon, particularly in fresh and brackish water;
- international cooperation that supports the coordination of various national initiatives.

For further information: www.comite-peches.fr/sturio-en.htm • www.cefas.co.uk/sturgeon • www.wscs.info

Report an accidental catch and your details to one of the following contacts (send the declaration slip or contact us directly by email or telephone):

Jim Ellis
Centre for Environment, Fisheries & Aquaculture Science
Pakefield Road - Lowestoft
Suffolk NR33 0HT - United Kingdom
Telephone: +44 (0)1502 524300 (direct) / +44 (0)1502 562244 (switchboard)
Email: jim.ellis@cefas.co.uk

If your organisation would like to take part and become a contact for this communication campaign, note your full contact details here.

Thank you for your cooperation

Our partners:

Design: Sambou-Dubois.