

PROPOSAL FOR INCLUSION OF SPECIES ON THE APPENDICES OF THE CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF MIGRATORY SPECIES OF WILD ANIMALS

A. PROPOSAL: Inclusion of the following species of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* in **Appendix II** of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals:

B. **PROPONENT: Federal Republic of Germany**

C. SUPPORTING STATEMENT

1. Taxon

1.1_	Classis:	Actinopterygii
1.2	Ordo:	Acipenseriformes
1.3	Familia:	Acipenseridae
1.4	Species:	<i>Acipenser gueldenstaedtii</i> Brandt, 1833
1.5	Common names:	Bulgarian: Ruska esetra Croat: Obièna jesetra English: Russian sturgeon, Ossetra Finnish: Venäjäsampi French: German: Waxdick Polish: Jesiotr kolchidzki, Jesiotr rosyjski Russian: Russkiî osetr Romanian: Nisetru Slovak: Jeseter ruský Spanish: Esturión ruso Turkish: Karaca

Name of caviar: osietra, asetra, oscietre, osetrovaya

2. Biological data

2.1 Distribution

Acipenser gueldenstaedtii inhabits the Caspian Sea basin, the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov basins as well as the large tributaries which enter these basins (Vlasenko et al., 1989).

In the Caspian Sea, the most important river is the Volga but the species also migrates into the Ural River in Kazakhstan (Vlasenko et al., 1989). Only few individuals of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* are encountered in rivers along the southern and south-eastern coast of the Caspian Sea, such as the Samur, Kura, Lenkoranka and Astara (Vlasenko et al., 1989). The taxonomic status of the sturgeon species in the Iranian Caspian region, where it is reported from the Sefid-Rud, Gorgan and Babol´ Rivers, requires precise investigations according to Vlasenko et al. (1989) because mainly the Persian sturgeon, *Acipenser persicus*, occurs in this region and is not precisely distinguished from *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*.

In the Sea of Azov basin, the main rivers where the species occurs are the Don and Kuban. In the Black Sea basin *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* mainly enters the Danube and to a smaller degree the Dnjepr. The species is very rarely encountered in Hungary and inhabits the Danube and Tisza Rivers.

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2.2 Population

There is no information about the total size of the population.

The largest population of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* is believed to live in the Volga-Caspian region which produces up to 80 percent of the world sturgeon catch (Vlasenko, 1990; Khodorevskaya et al., 1997). Levin (1997) estimated that the spawning population that entered the Volga River in recent years constituted of about 120,000 to 150,000 mature individuals, ranging between 8 and 25 years old with fish older than 28 years being extremely rare. In the early 1990s, the natural reproduction of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* within this region decreased to 830 metric tons because of the low number of sturgeons reaching the spawning grounds (Khodorevskaya et al., 1997). Vlasenko et al. (1989), Vlasenko (1990), Levin (1997) and Khodorevskaya et al. (1997) conclude that the size of the spawning populations of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* in the other rivers of the Caspian Sea basin became minimal.

In the Black Sea and Sea of Azov, the populations of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* are believed to be less abundant than in the Caspian Sea (Vlasenko et al., 1989). There are no recent estimates about the total size of the populations inhabiting these basins. Volovik et al. (1993) estimated that the total stock biomass of all sturgeons living in the Sea of Azov was about 59,000 metric tons in the mid 1980s, with *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* accounting for 76% of the total sturgeon biomass (44.840 metric tons). However, in 1990, a mass death of sturgeon occurred in this watersheds and approximately 55,000 sturgeon individuals were found dead on the shore. Ever since, no estimation of the population size has been made.

Holcik (1996) indicates that the anadromous form of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* became extinct from Slovakia since 1967. Only a resident form is still existing in Slovakia which is extremely rare and considered as Critically Endangered.

IUCN (1996) classifies the status of the populations of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* in the Caspian Sea (Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Iran), in the Sea of Azov (Russia) and in the Black Sea (Ukraine, Romania, Hungary, Serbia) as Endangered.

The decline of the official commercial catches of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* reflects a decline in the size of the population. In the Volga-Caspian region, where the species is most abundant, the legal catches declined from 13,400 metric tons in 1981 to 4,150 metric tons in 1992 (Levin, 1995). Levin (1997) estimated that the largest spawning population, the one which enters the Volga River for spawning, decreased in recent years from about 500,000-600,000 individuals to 120,000-150,000 individuals. According to Artyukhin (1997) the decrease in the Russian sturgeon catch was mainly caused by inadequate fishing regulations. Most of the migrating fish were harvested before spawning, and only very few individuals could reach the spawning grounds. As a result, natural reproduction of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* decreased drastically.

The most alarming fact was the decrease of natural reproduction of the species which already began with the construction of the Volgograd Dam in the 1960s but still worsened within the last years due to the high pollution level in almost all spawning rivers. Although *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* was subject to a large-scale ranching programme within the Russian Federation and Iran, the stocks further declined. Barannikova (1995) estimates that about 36-40% of the sturgeon catch within the Russian part of the Caspian Sea originated from artificially propagated fish in 1993. In the Sea of Azov and Black Sea region, the situation is even worse: in 1993 more than 60% of Russian sturgeons within these basins came from hatchery-released juveniles (Barannikova et al., 1995).

Due to bad environmental conditions during the last decades, the reproductive system of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* females showed an increasing degeneration and several anomalies in the gameto- and gonadogenesis (Shagaeva et al., 1993). In 1990, 100% of the eggs taken from

Acipenser gueldenstaedtii females caught in the lower Volga River showed anomalies and 100% of the larvae (both from hatcheries and natural environment) were not viable.

In the Sea of Azov and Black Sea, a mass death of sturgeons was observed in 1990, which was undoubtedly caused by disastrous environmental conditions which may also have their effect on the remaining small population of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*.

Considering these evident signs of a sharp decrease in natural reproduction, several experts fear a further reduction of the population of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* within its entire range. Levin (1995) states that artificial propagation techniques, although they contribute to a high amount to the maintaining of the stocks, cannot compensate for the damage caused to natural reproduction.

2.3 Habitat

During the period of life in the sea, the Russian sturgeon inhabits shallow waters in the region of the continental shelf, staying mainly in brackish water, where the concentration of its usual food organisms (such as invertebrates, mainly molluscs, and small fish, mainly gobiids) is very high (Vlasenko et al., 1989). According to the season, these sturgeon remain at depths from 2 to 100 m, occasionally even deeper. The young sturgeons are most abundant in the Northern Caspian Sea where the main feeding grounds are located. They spend the summer in this region in waters 2 to 5 m deep, mainly above sandy bottoms. During the night, they frequently move out of their daytime habitat and ascend to the upper water layers (Levin 1981 cited in Vlasenko et al., 1989).

In the rivers, *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* remains at depths from 2 to 30 m. The larvae are found at considerable depths and in rapid currents, which contribute to their rapid downstream movement (Vlasenko et al., 1989). As growth progresses, the young sturgeon move from deeper to shallow stretches in the rivers where the concentration of food is higher.

2.4 Migrations

Acipenser gueldenstaedtii is a typical anadromous species which means that mature adults migrate from the Sea to the rivers for spawning and return to their feeding grounds in the Sea after spawning. The juveniles that are hatching in the rivers also return to the Sea for feeding and stay here until maturity.

Several authors (summary in Vlasenko et al., 1989) also mention a non-anadromous and freshwater-resident form of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* which according to Birstein (1993) is believed to be Extinct. According to Holcik (1995) and Hensel and Holcik (1997) the freshwater resident form still occurs in the Danube River and is occasionally caught in the Slovak and Hungarian stretch of the river.

The anadromous migrations of the species in the Caspian and Black Sea basins are very similar. According to the time of the migration, there is a distinction between a spring race and a winter race (Vlasenko et al., 1989). The spring race begins the spawning run into the rivers in early spring, in the mid or late summer the run reaches a peak and finally ceases in late autumn. The so-called winter race generally does not spawn the same year they enter the river. These fish hibernate in the rivers and reproduce the following year.

The juvenile sturgeons migrate downstream the rivers to feeding grounds in the sea. In the Caspian Sea, the main feeding grounds are located in the northern part, whereas for the Sea of Azov and Black Sea basin the main feeding grounds are not sufficiently described.

Within the Caspian Sea there is also a seasonal migration: in spring and summer most of the specimens are encountered in the northern part of the Sea on the main feeding grounds, while in

autumn and winter a migration to the central and southern part of the sea has been observed (Barannikova et al., 1995).

Although there is no information about a seasonal migration in the Sea of Azov and Black Sea basin, it can be concluded that *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* also undertakes long-distance migrations within these basins.

3. Threat data

3.1 Direct threat of the population

The main threats to the species are the legal and illegal overfishing mainly during the spawning migration, the loss of critical habitat such as spawning grounds due to dam constructions (described in 3.2 Habitat destruction) and the high level of pollution in almost all rivers within its range.

Actually, the main threat to the survival of the Russian sturgeon is the legal and especially illegal overfishing stimulated by the high demand for black caviar on the international market. After the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, besides Russia and Iran three new states (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) and two autonomous Russian Republics (Dagestan and Kalmykia) started the harvest of sturgeons (Ivanov et al., 1995a). Until the end of 1998, there has been no agreement between these countries bordering the Caspian Sea concerning a sustainable sturgeon fishery and adequate international fishing rules. Fishing in the open sea, which was completely prohibited by Soviet laws for a long period, was started mainly by Azerbaijan. As a consequence, mainly young and immature sturgeon were caught and the harvest in the open sea destroyed a major part of the future sturgeon stocks (Luk'yanenko et al., 1994). Additionally, inadequate fishing regulations, which allowed the catch during the summer season when the winter race (85% of the whole population of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* in the Volga-Caspian Sea basin) migrated into the river, drastically reduced the spawning population of this predominant race and hence of the major part of the population (Artyukhin, 1997). Subsequently, the natural reproduction of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* dropped drastically during the last years.

The situation was so critical that the Russian experts discussed the need to completely prohibit the legal commercial catch of sturgeons in the Caspian Sea for one to two years (Ivanov et al., 1995a).

The decline of the populations of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* in the Caspian and Black Sea basins during the last years was mainly caused by the enormously high level of poaching (Artyukhin, 1997; Birstein, 1996; Zoltarev et al., 1996; Khodorevskaya et al., 1997). According to the opinion of experts, the size of the illegal catch is equal to or even higher than the legal catch. Poaching is common in almost all countries of the area: in Russia (with Dagestan and Kalmykia), Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and even Iran. In the Volga River, during the last years practically all spawning fish have been caught by poachers before they could reach the spawning grounds below the Volgograd Dam (Artyukhin, 1997). The subsequent lack of mature fish even affected the work of the hatcheries near the Volgograd dam since it was not possible to catch enough mature Russian sturgeon for artificial breeding (Artyukhin, 1997). The high level of poaching hence affects not only the natural reproduction of the species but also the artificial propagation, and therefore represents the main threat to the survival of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*.

Illegal catch in the north-western part of the Black Sea (Ukrainian waters), especially trawling, caused a considerable decrease in the size of this population of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* in 1993-1994 as compared to 1991-1992 (Zolotarev et al., 1996). Poaching also affects the Danubian populations of the Russian sturgeon (Birstein, 1996b).

A further threat to the survival of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* is represented by the high level of

pollution in the Caspian and Black Sea basins. During the period from the beginning 1970s until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the level of pollution increased dramatically in almost all rivers entering the Caspian Sea, the main sources being oil and other industrial sewage (Vlasenko, 1990; Dumont, 1995; Khodorevskaya et al., 1997). In the Volga River, for example, the concentrations of heavy metals, mercury, phenols, surface-active agents, pesticides and oil products by far exceeded the maximum permissible concentration within this period (Romanov and Altuf'yev, 1993). Considerable concentrations of these pollutants were also found in the northern part of the Caspian Sea (Romanov and Altuf'yev, 1993). Several authors (Altuf'yev et al., 1992; Romanov and Altuf'yev, 1991 and 1993; Romanov and Sheveleva, 1993; Kuz'mina et al. 1993; Altuf'yev, 1994; Shagaeva et al., 1993; Shagaeva et al., 1995) have investigated the influence of the very high level of pollution in the Caspian Sea and studied the effect of the various toxins on sturgeons. The studies revealed that environmental pollution caused considerable changes in hormonal balance, in the blood system, and in protein and carbohydrate metabolism, marked disturbances in the genesis of organs (liver, gonads) and tissues (skeletal muscles, heart) and the appearance of neoplasm in liver, gonads and sex cells. General weakening of the fish as a result of toxins, disturbed metabolism and hormonal imbalance led to a number of disturbances in sturgeon gonadogenesis, e.g. the increase in number of hermaphroditic specimens, ovotestis and tumours, and to the appearance of new differentiation such as striated muscle tissue and fascicles of dense connective tissue formations which are normally absent in healthy fishes. A tendency was noted towards an increase in the number of aberrations, especially in the gameto- and gonadogenesis (see also 3.3).

All these effects on sturgeons were clearly seen from 1986 until 1992 and were presumably caused by a release of toxic waste from one of the heavy industry plants located on the shores of the Volga River in the middle of the 1980s. Since the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, the production of the heavy industry drastically decreased which resulted in an improving water quality in the Volga-Caspian region. Thus, in the early 1990s, the number of sturgeons with a pronounced muscle dystrophy disease dropped significantly.

However, there is a threat of increasing pollution in the whole Caspian Sea in the near future. The fast raise of the sea water level - from 1993 to 1997 it increased in 2,15m (Radionov, 1994) - will result in covering "lakes" of deposited wasted oil and associated pollutants from industrial sewage along the shore. Such "lakes" are already located in all industrial parts of Azerbaijan along the coast (Dumont, 1995) and their number will increase with the raising sea level. Sturgeons are especially threatened by the pollution in this region, because the waters of Azerbaijan represent important feeding grounds for the fish during the winter. A further near future threat for the northern part of the Caspian Sea is the fast development of oil fields, especially the Tengiz oil field, in Kazakhstan (Sagers, 1994). Sturgeons will be especially affected by pollutants from this developing industry because their main spawning and feeding grounds are located in the region of the northern Caspian Sea. Moreover, the central part of the Caspian Sea is threatened by radioactive contamination from the Gur'evskaya nuclear reactor near Akatai, Kazakhstan (Dumont, 1995).

In the Black-Azov Sea basin the situation of pollution is almost the same (Volovik et al., 1993). The Danubian and Dniester sturgeon populations are mainly threatened by the pollution of the rivers and the sea, and by the eutrophication of coastal waters which results in the appearance of temporary hypoxic areas on the Black Sea shelf. Chronic toxicosis with poisonous substances led to a mass death of fishes and in summer 1990 about 55,000 sturgeon individuals were found dead on the shore (Volovik et al., 1993).

Moreover, the introduction of the ctenophore *Mnemiopsis leydyi* into the Black Sea in the 1980s resulted in a destruction of the local pelagic food and thus affected the main feeding source of sturgeons (Dumont, 1995; Khodorevskaya et al., 1997).

3.2 Habitat destruction

The construction of hydroelectric power stations as well as of water reservoirs in most of the rivers where the species spawned historically led to a sharp reduction of available spawning grounds and subsequently threatens the natural reproduction. The winter race of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* was more affected by these dam constructions than the spring race, because it migrated to spawning grounds that were located far upstream, while the spring race generally ascended only 100 to 300 km upstream the mouth of the river.

In the Caspian Sea basin, the Russian sturgeon lost approximately 70% of all spawning grounds (Barannikova et al., 1995). In the main spawning river, the Volga, there remained only 430 ha of the total 3,600 ha after the damming of the river by the Volgograd Dam. The area of the natural spawning grounds in the Kura River has been reduced by dam constructions to about 160 ha, in the Terek River to 132 ha and in the Sulak River to 201.6 ha (Vlasenko, 1990). The only unregulated river flowing into the Northern Caspian Sea is the Ural which still provides an area of 1,400 ha for sturgeon spawning. There is no precise information about the loss of spawning grounds in rivers that enter the Southern Caspian Sea along the Iranian coast (Sefid-Rud, etc.).

In the Black Sea and Sea of Azov, the situation is almost the same. Almost all rivers that enter these seas and are used by the anadromous sturgeons for spawning, have been blocked by dam constructions either of hydroelectric power stations or of irrigation systems. For example the regulation of the Kuban River flow resulted in the loss of approximately 140,000 ha of estuarine breeding grounds for all fluvial anadromous fish (Volovik et al., 1993). The construction of the Tsymlyansk reservoir on the Don River in 1952 resulted in an average loss of about 68,000 ha of spawning grounds for all fluvial anadromous fishes (Volovik et al., 1993). The Danube River has been blocked by the construction of the insurmountable dams Djerdap I and II ("Iron Gate") which prevented all anadromous fish species from an upstream migration to the spawning grounds located above the first dam (Bacalbasa-Dobrovici, 1997).

The reduction of available natural spawning grounds due to river flow regulations subsequently led to a reduction of the natural reproduction and the stock of the species is maintained to a high extent by artificial propagation. In 1993, about 80-95% of each generation of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* in the Sea of Azov consisted of artificially propagated fish (Volovik et al., 1993), while in the Caspian Sea about 30% originates from hatcheries (Barannikova, 1995).

Hydroelectric power station dams not only cut off sturgeons from their main spawning sites, but also change the flow of the rivers, and consequently the opportunity of spawners to use the spawning grounds that are still left intact. Alterations of the Volga River flow as well as of other spawning rivers allow fewer Russian sturgeon to reach their spawning sites (Veshchev, 1995). The altered flow also affects the migration to the sea of juveniles either released from hatcheries or naturally hatched (Raspopov et al., 1995).

3.3 Indirect threat

The high pollution level in the Caspian and Black Sea basins (described in 3.1) also represents an indirect threat to the survival of the species because the breeding success is sharply reduced by environmental contaminants. Thus, at the beginning of the 1990s, an increased number of aberrations especially in the gameto- and gonadogenesis was noticed. In 1990, 100% of mature eggs taken from various sturgeon females showed various pathological anomalies suggesting the loss of viability. Moreover, in 1989 and 1990, a mass death of

sturgeon larvae was observed caused by hatching aberrations and anomalous development such as defects in the fin fold and underdevelopment of the heart, both leading inevitably to death at early stages of development. In 1990, 100% of all investigated larvae (*Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*, *Acipenser stellatus*) showed such anomalous development which was caused by environmental toxins. The anomalies in larval structure took place both in nature and in the hatchery.

During the last years, the water quality especially in the Volga-Caspian region has improved and some signs of degeneration disappeared. However, there is a threat of increasing pollution in the whole Caspian Sea basin in the near future with the sea level still raising and the oil industry especially in Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan developing.

3.4 Threat connected especially with migrations

The migration pattern of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* (anadromous spawning migration and seasonal migration in the sea basins) makes the species especially vulnerable to overfishing because several national boundaries are cyclically passed and several range states are fishing for sturgeons in the Caspian and Black Sea basin. Only international agreements between the range states concerning the sturgeon fishery, a ban on the fishery in the open sea (protection for juveniles and immature fish) and a setting of sustainable quotas can help to stop the further decline of the species.

Especially in the Caspian Sea where the species is most abundant and the commercial exploitation is highest such an agreement between Azerbaijan, the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran is strongly needed. Although the international trade of all sturgeon products, especially of the highly priced caviar, is controlled by CITES regulations since April 1998 and poaching is consequently hoped to cease, further action for the conservation of the sturgeon species is required.

Despite the fact that the five range states of the Caspian Sea has set up a *Committee for the Conservation and Use of the Biological Resources in the Caspian Sea* during the last years, the proposed international agreement governing Caspian sturgeon catch and drawn up by this Committee has not been signed so far (till the end of 1998).

3.5 National and international utilization

Acipenser gueldenstaedtii is considered to be a valuable and delicious fish (Vlasenko et al., 1989). The edible part averages 64% of the total weight. Its dry-smoked flesh (balyk) is especially prized in the range states. A preserve made of the testes is used as medicine in the treatment of burns. The dried swim bladders (isinglass) are used to produce a strong glue for use in mechanical devices. The most highly priced product of this species is the caviar made from its eggs and called "osetrovaya" (in Russia), "asetra" (in Iran) or "osietra".

Fishery. *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* is one of the three most important commercial sturgeon species in the world and its catch occupies the first place among all catches of acipenserids (Tab. 3, appendix).

However, its national utilization is not easy to describe since official fisheries statistics do not distinguish between sturgeon species. The three commercially most important species are *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*, *Acipenser stellatus* and *Huso huso* and account for 90% of all sturgeon catches in the world.

The major fishing area for *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*, as well as for the two other

commercially important species, is the Caspian Sea where about 90% of the world sturgeon catches are landed (Tab. 2, appendix). Within the Russian part of the Caspian Sea region, the Volga-Caspian region is the most important and produced about 77% of the total Russian sturgeon catch in that region in 1994 (with the Astrakhan region producing 64.2%), while the Ural-Caspian region (Kazakhstan) produced 8.9% in 1994, the Kura region (Azerbaijan) produced 7.7% and the catch in Turkmenistan amounted to 6.4% of the total Russian sturgeon catch in the Caspian Sea.

FAO fisheries statistics (Tab. 2, appendix) show a drastic decline of the total landings of sturgeons within the last years. Before the disintegration of the former USSR only two states, the USSR and Iran, were fishing for sturgeons in the Caspian Sea. There was a quota system between both states and a complete ban on the fishery in the open sea. In 1984, about 27,136 metric tons of sturgeons were landed world-wide, about 24,245 metric tons of which were caught in the USSR and 1,557 metric tons in Iran. In 1988, when the disintegration of the former USSR began, the world sturgeon catches had already declined to about 21,514 metric tons, with the Russian Federation accounting for 19,027 metric tons and Iran accounting for 1,851 metric tons. Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, five states, i.e. the Russian Federation, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran, and the two autonomous republics Dagestan and Kalmykia, are fishing for sturgeons in the Caspian Sea. Until the beginning of 1996, there were no fishing regulations, i.e. quota systems, between these states and republics and fishing in the open sea was no longer prohibited. Since 1988, the catches further declined to about 15,344 metric tons in 1991 (Russian Federation: 9,539 metric tons; Iran: 3,036 metric tons; Azerbaijan: 108 metric tons; Kazakhstan: 1,766 metric tons) and only 5,688 metric tons in 1996 (Russian Federation: 2,209 metric tons; Iran: 1,600 metric tons; Azerbaijan: 24 metric tons; Kazakhstan: 545 metric tons, Turkmenistan: 9 metric tons).

The above are the official figures. Unfortunately, the collapse of the USSR led to an expansion of illegal fishing which escapes any statistics. Furthermore, the FAO fisheries statistics do not distinguish between Russian inland waters, which means that the figures for the Russian Federation contain also a small amount of catches in the Siberian and Far Eastern water systems, estimated to be about 200 metric tons in 1993 (Barannikova et al., 1995) as well as an amount of catch in the Black Sea basin.

The catch statistics for *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* in the northern part of the Caspian Sea basin show a steady decline from 7,800 metric tons in 1990 to 1,500 metric tons in 1994 (Tab. 3, appendix).

The second fishing area of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* is the Black-Azov Sea region where the sturgeon fishery is concentrated mainly in the north-western part near the Danube Delta (Romania) and in the Sea of Azov. According to FAO statistics, the annual sturgeon catches within this region were about 1,527 metric tons in the 1970s, with the USSR accounting for 1,434 metric tons, Bulgaria accounting for 12 metric tons and Romania for 81 metric tons. For Turkey, no sizeable commercial catch of sturgeons has been officially recorded. The sturgeon catches in the Black and Azov Seas decreased to a minimum record of about 585 metric tons in 1988 (Russian Federation: 520 metric tons, Bulgaria: 1 metric ton; Romania: 35 metric tons; new independent state of Ukraine: 29 metric tons) but raised again to 1,257 metric tons in 1994 (Russian Federation: 1,012 metric tons; Bulgaria: 10 metric tons; Romania: 8 metric tons; Ukraine: 227 metric tons). In 1996, the FAO-reported sturgeon catch in Bulgaria amounted 41 metric tons, while in Romania a total of 7 metric tons of sturgeons have been caught.

The declining catches of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* as well as of the other sturgeon species reflect a drastical reduction of the population. The natural reproduction of the species is

believed to be very low at present and Barannikova (1995) estimated the natural reproduction rate in 1993 to amount only 20%. Since the disintegration of the former USSR in 1991 until the beginning of 1996, there were no fishing regulations between the range states in the Caspian Sea basin. Experts fear that the sturgeon stocks are overexploited and that the unregulated harvest is far from sustainable use. Especially the fishing in the open sea endangers the survival of the species, because a growing number of immature specimens is caught and hence the potential spawning stock is further reduced.

While the flesh of the Russian sturgeon is almost entirely produced for national trade, caviar is not only produced for domestic consumption but also for export.

Caviar. According to Josupeit (1994) the yields in caviar average between 2 and 17% of the total sturgeon catch, and up to 6 kg of "osietra" caviar can be harvested from one mature female Russian sturgeon.

FAO statistics indicate that the global caviar production - like the world sturgeon catch - decreased drastically in the last decade, the statistics not distinguishing between caviar of the different sturgeon species. In the early 1980s, a total production of 2,500 metric tons of caviar has been officially recorded, and in 1992 about 1,500 metric tons have been legally produced world-wide (Josupeit, 1994). For 1996, experts estimated a total legal production of 122 metric tons of caviar world-wide, of which 190 metric tons originate from the Caspian Sea and 32 metric tons are coming from the Black-Azov Sea region, China, USA, Canada and Siberia (Tab. 6, appendix).

The three major sturgeon species of which caviar is produced are *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*, *Acipenser stellatus* and *Huso huso*, and account for about 90% of the total caviar production. The major caviar producing countries are the Russian Federation, Iran, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. About 90% of the world production of caviar originates from the Caspian Sea. After the collapse of the USSR, the three independent states of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Ukraine (probably also Turkmenistan) and the two autonomous republics of Dagestan and Kalmykia also started to produce caviar. According to FAO data (Josupeit, 1994) Iran experienced a steady increase of caviar production during the 1980s from about 200 to 300 metric tons, and almost all caviar produced in Iran (ca 95%) was exported. The main drop in the global production of caviar came from lower production in the Russian Federation. An important share of caviar used to stay in the former USSR, where about 85-90% of the production was consumed domestically and only 10% were exported (Josupeit, 1994; Taylor, 1997). The decline in disbursal income after the disintegration of the USSR led to a reduction of caviar consumption in all republics of the former USSR (Josupeit, 1994). As a consequence, almost all caviar produced in the CIS during the last years was exported.

The main importing countries of caviar are the EU with an average importation of about 200 metric tons per year (Tab. 12, appendix), while Japan imported on the average 60 metric tons (Tab. 10, appendix), the U.S.A. about 52 metric tons (Tab. 11, appendix) and Switzerland an estimated 66 tons caviar per year (data provided by the 'Bundesamt für Veterinärwesen', Switzerland). However, some of the official import statistics (Japan and Switzerland) do not distinguish between roe from sturgeons and other fish species, a fact which causes a further problem to the estimation of the total volume of the caviar in trade.

Within the EU (Tab. 12, appendix), Germany is the main importer with an average of 81 metric tons per year, but a huge quantity is repackaged and re-exported into neighbouring countries. In 1994, the total import of caviar into Germany was 104.1 metric tons of which 27.3 metric tons were re-exported and 75.8 metric tons were consumed in the country. France

is the second major importer with an average of 53 metric tons per year and is the major consumer of caviar within the EU. In 1994, France imported 47 metric tons of caviar (Tab. 12, appendix). Belgium/Luxembourg and the UK import an average of 23 metric tons of caviar per year; in 1994, Belgium/Luxembourg imported 28 metric tons and the UK imported only 6 metric tons (Tab. 12, appendix). The main suppliers of caviar to the EU are the Russian Federation, Iran, Kazakhstan and China.

During the last years, the Western World demand for caviar in general and for "osietra" in special exceeded the actual total production by more than 100%. While the actual production of Iranian osietra (or asetra) was much lower than the demand and thus failed to supply the demand, the amount of the Russian osietra production exceeded the actual demand. The latter fact demonstrates that the current production does not correspond to market requirements.

The world caviar market is currently undergoing a major crisis (Josupeit, 1994; TRAFFIC; 1995, Taylor, 1997; De Meulenaer and Raymakers, 1996). Low quality caviar flooded the Western European markets in 1993 and 1994 (Taylor, 1997). This is mainly caused by over-exploitation, illegal production and smuggling of caviar, especially from the former Soviet Union. The sanitary conditions under which caviar is legally and illegally produced in this states are disastrous and as a result high amounts of processed caviar are only fit for disposal. Taylor (1995) estimated that for example in Azerbaijan although the raw material was of high quality, almost 80% of the processed caviar was only fit for disposal due to disastrous conditions during production, packaging and dispatch. As a result prices collapsed also for the high quality caviar still arriving from the Republics of the former USSR and from Iran (Josupeit, 1994).

The dramatical decline in sturgeon resources within the last years (about 50%) will soon lead to a further decline in the quantity of caviar which can be offered on both the national and international market.

Illegal Trade. According to several experts and TRAFFIC (1995) illegal catch of sturgeons (mainly the three commercially important species *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*, *Acipenser stellatus*, *Huso huso*) is of major concern, accounting for perhaps more than 90% of all sturgeon caught in the Caspian Sea. In Russia, widespread illegal fishing for sturgeon is known to be practised, motivated by international demand for the highly priced caviar which cannot be met by the legal production. The illegally traded products are caviar and to a lesser degree the meat of the fish. Whereas the meat is probably for domestic consumption only, caviar is mainly smuggled outside the country and subject of an international illegal trade. This much is testified to by the 1452 sturgeon poachers detained and the more than 5 metric tons of illegally caviar and 113 metric tons of sturgeon confiscated in Russia in 1994 (according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs). In the Astrakhan region, the Russian centre of caviar trade, seven caviar canning plants operating illegally were closed down in the same year. Also in 1994, an additional 21 metric tons of sturgeon meat and 10.5 metric tons of caviar were confiscated as products of unauthorised fishing in other Russian regions (TRAFFIC, 1995).

Large-scale smuggling and exporting of caviar has also developed in almost all range states of the Caspian Sea and illegal trade channels led or still lead through Turkey and Dubai, as well as Germany and U.S.A. (Taylor, 1997).

Since April 1998, the trade of sturgeon products on the international market is monitored by CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) regulations in order to stop the unsustainable rate of illegal trade.

Artificial Propagation. The two major sturgeon producing countries, e.g. the Russian Federation and Iran have ranching programmes for sturgeon species, including *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*. The Russian Federation already began the artificial breeding and raising of Russian sturgeon in the 1960s. Barannikova et al. (1995) report that in the early 1980s, 20 sturgeon hatcheries were operating in Russia, including 10 hatcheries in the Caspian Sea basin (of which 8 were located on the lower Volga) and 7 hatcheries in the Sea of Azov basin, while 3 hatcheries on Siberian rivers were producing *Acipenser baerii*. Levin (1995) states that the annual release of Russian sturgeon fry from hatcheries located in the lower Volga River was about 40-50 million juvenile individuals in 1993. Since 1994, only 2-4 of the former 8 hatcheries are still operating in the Volga River delta (V. Birstein, pers. comm.). According to Khodorevskaya et al. (1997) these hatcheries released about 37-40 million Russian sturgeon fingerlings in 1993, and in 1994 about 45-48 million juveniles had been produced. The hatcheries located upriver near the Volgograd Dam could not catch enough breeders for artificial reproduction in the same years because of the overfishing by poachers on spawning sites.

In the former USSR, a large amount of the sturgeon fry produced in hatcheries was transported to the northern Caspian Sea by special hatch boats and then released to the feeding grounds which are located in this area (Levin, 1995). This procedure guaranteed a high survival rate for the juvenile sturgeons as compared to the release into the rivers where the young fish may be caught by predators and do not find suitable food organisms. However, Levin (1995) reports that the number of Russian sturgeon fry that was transported to and stocked into the Northern Caspian Sea was zero since 1993.

In the Sea of Azov region, about 30 million juveniles (mainly *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* and *Acipenser stellatus*) were artificially propagated in hatcheries in 1993. Three hatcheries located on the Kuban River near the City of Krasnodar are still working efficiently. In 1993, they released 12.2 million Russian sturgeon juveniles and in 1994, 11 million juveniles were stocked into the Sea of Azov (Chebanov and Savelieva, 1995).

Iran is also artificially propagating sturgeons since 20 years when the first hatchery was built in Rasht. According to the Iranian SHILAT, currently 5 hatcheries are working for the restocking programme of sturgeon species. The annual fry release in Iranian waters was about 3.4 millions of sturgeon juveniles, the different species not further distinguished.

The ranching of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* is contributing to a relative high degree to the size of the population and thus to the commercial fishery. In 1993, the estimated portion of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* originating from hatcheries in the lower Volga River was about 30% (Barannikova, 1995) while in the Sea of Azov, about 84-86% of the Russian sturgeon catch is from hatchery raised fish.

Fish farming. Besides ranching, in 1985 the USSR also started extensive fish farming of sturgeons, including *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*, in warm effluent waters of thermal power stations. According to Barannikova et al. (1995) the total annual production of pond-reared sturgeon was about 200 metric tons within the area of the Russian Federation and about 200 metric tons in the Ukraine. These figures are given for all sturgeon species (4 different species and 6 different hybrids are grown). The so produced fish are contributing to the domestic demand for sturgeon meat. Caviar from sturgeon species grown in aquaculture is still not produced in economically significant quantities.

4. Protection status and needs

Proposal II / 154.1 National protection status

In **Hungary**, *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* is fully protected by national law.

In **Iran**, private sturgeon fishery is prohibited and fishing regulations include a size limit of 1m minimum length.

In the **Russian Federation**, only the catch of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* is governmentally controlled which implements a special fishing license to be issued by the local department for Fishery Management.

The legal status of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* in the other countries of origin is not reported.

4.2 International protection status

Acipenser gueldenstaedtii is listed in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

4.3 Additional protection needs

Detailed recommendations for the conservation of the Eurasian sturgeon species - worked out during the 1st Meeting of Representatives of the Range States on Developing Measures for the Conservation of Sturgeon Species under CITES Provisions (Moscow, Russia, 19-23 January 1998) -are attached in the Appendix at the end of the document.

5. Range States

Range States of the Caspian Sea population of *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* are

- Azerbaijan
- Iran
- Kazakhstan
- Russian Federation and
- Turkmenistan.

Range States of the Black Sea – Sea of Azov populations are (were)

- Austria (Ex)
- Bulgaria
- Croatia (Ex)
- Germany (Ex)
- Georgia
- Hungary
- Moldova
- Romania
- Russian Federation
- Serbia
- Slovakia
- ? Turkey and
- Ukraine.

According to FAO-data these countries are also the major fishing countries in the range area of the species.

6. Comments from Range States

The Range States of the species have been provided with a copy of a draft proposal (Inclusion of 18 species of Acipenseriformes in Appendix II of CMS) and were asked for their comments. The appreciated scientific comments and corrections are integrated in the text. The position of each Range state on the proposal are as follows:

- Caspian Sea population:
 - **Azerbaijan** agrees to the proposed inclusion of 18 sturgeon species in Appendix II of CMS and considers that it is very important to protect sturgeons in the Caspian Sea.
 - **Iran** has not submitted any comments until the end of May 1999.
 - **Kazakhstan** expressed the opinion that it considers possible the inclusion of sturgeons in Appendix II of CMS with the aim of taking measures on their conservation in the Caspian Sea.
 - **Russian Federation** wishes to discuss its comments on the proposal with Germany in a German-Russian working group „Nature Conservation and Biodiversity“ in Munich, Germany, in September 1999.
 - **Turkmenistan** has not submitted any comments until the end of May 1999.
- Black Sea – Sea of Azov population:
 - **Austria** mentions that it is not a Party to CMS. However, Austria supports the proposal and its entire contents.
 - **Bulgaria** has not submitted any comments until the end of May 1999.
 - **Croatia** gives its full support to the proposal.
 - **Georgia** fully agrees that the population status of almost all sturgeon species gives reason for major concern. It states that the conservation of sturgeon species would be even more facilitated in case of inclusion of these species into Appendix II of CMS. Furthermore, Georgia envisages the elaboration of a strategy for the conservation of sturgeon species and expresses its interest in the creation of a global network for the exchange of information on research, monitoring and conservation of all sturgeon species. Finally, it notes that the conservation of migratory species – including sturgeons – is only conceivable by the means of international conservation.
 - **Hungary** considering the conservation status of these species supports the proposal. Hungary seconds the inclusion of the 18 species of Acipenseriformes in Appendix II, excluding the sterlet (*Acipenser ruthenus*), the status of the population of which does not give reason for major concern in the country.
 - **Moldova** has not submitted any comments until the end of May 1999.
 - **Romania** supports the proposal. Considering the population status, the migration tendencies and areas of the six sturgeon species living in Romania as well as in 4 other Range states, the proposal to list these species in Appendix II is justified. The inclusion in Appendix II of CMS creates the basis for the realisation of international conservation programmes in the Range states of the lower Danube and the Black Sea.
 - **Russian Federation** wishes to discuss its comments on the proposal with Germany in a German-Russian working group „Nature Conservation and Biodiversity“ in Munich, Germany, in September 1999.
 - **Slovakia** submitted a list of very appreciated scientific comments which are now integrated in the text.
 - **Turkey** has not submitted any comments until the end of May 1999.
 - **Ukraine** has not submitted any comments until the end of May 1999.

7. Additional Remarks

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