

FACT SHEET

# Black gold: The caviar trade in western Europe

## Overview of legal international caviar trade 1998-2004

### The world's largest caviar importers (tonnes=t):

All EU Member States	591 t
(France	218 t)
(Germany	218 t)
USA	313 t
Switzerland	175 t
Japan	143 t

### The world's largest caviar exporters:

Iran	484 t
Russian Federation	210 t
Kazakhstan	85 t
China	29 t
Romania	25 t
Azerbaijan	25 t
Bulgaria	13 t

### Legal international trade between 1998 and 2004: 1307 t

Source: CITES trade data for the years 1998 to 2004.

Caviar, the renowned gourmet delicacy, is the unfertilised roe of sturgeon and paddlefish (*Acipenseriformes*), a very ancient group of fish that occur in coastal and inland waters of 25 countries in Europe, Asia and North America.

There are 27 species of sturgeon and paddlefish, among them the Beluga *Huso huso*, which can reach an age of 100 years and can weigh more than two tonnes. It produces the most valuable caviar, the sought-after beluga. Other traditional varieties of caviar include osietra, which comes from the Russian Sturgeon *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* and the Persian Sturgeon *Acipenser persicus*, and sevruga, which comes from the Stellate Sturgeon *Acipenser stellatus*. Caviar is one of the most expensive wildlife products, fetching retail prices of up to EUR600 per 100 g in “delicatessens” in western Europe and the USA.

Sturgeons of the Caspian Sea produce what is claimed to be the highest quality caviar and the countries bordering the Caspian Sea have been the source of over 90% of the caviar in global trade in recent years. Other important sources are the Amur and the Danube river basins, the Black Sea, the Sea of Azov and the Great Lakes of North America.

Many sturgeon stocks are seriously depleted as a result of illegal fishing of sturgeons and habitat degradation. In response to reported declines in sturgeon populations and with the aim of ensuring that trade in sturgeon products, such as caviar, is sustainable and not threatening the species' survival, all species of sturgeon and paddlefish have been listed in the Appendices of CITES (The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) since 1998. All caviar in international trade (exports, imports and re-exports) must be accompanied by CITES documents. These can only be issued by specific government authorities once certain requirements have been met.

### The European Union is the largest importer of caviar

According to trade statistics reported by countries to CITES, the European Union (EU), the USA and Switzerland are the largest importers of caviar, importing 83% of all caviar reported in legal international trade between 1998 and 2004 (see **text box** on left). During that period, the volumes of caviar reported in international trade per year plummeted from a peak at 314 tonnes (t) in 1999 to 100 t in 2004. Among the 25 EU Member States, France and Germany are the largest importers. Besides their role as consumers, the EU and Switzerland are also important 'transit' points for caviar, which re-export to other countries over 40% of the caviar they import. Besides the caviar reported in international trade, considerable volumes of caviar are also consumed domestically in the countries of origin, for example in the Russian Federation and the United States. The majority of the caviar imported by the EU and Switzerland comes from Iran and the Russian Federation, the two 'giants' among the world's caviar producers. Other important exporters of wild caviar are Kazakhstan, China, Azerbaijan and Romania.



### Caviar seized in the EU and Switzerland between 2000 and 2005:

2000	2964 kg
2001	2015 kg
2002	1209 kg
2003	4157 kg
2004	1431 kg
2005	1859 kg
<b>Total</b>	<b>13635 kg</b>

Source: EU-TWIX and data collected by TRAFFIC, 2005; Data is not complete and does not include seizures from all countries.

**TRAFFIC**, the wildlife trade monitoring network, works to ensure that trade in wild plants and animals is not a threat to the conservation of nature.

For further information about TRAFFIC visit [www.traffic.org](http://www.traffic.org).

This leaflet was made possible with the generous support of WWF. The Rufford Maurice Laing Foundation and the Baltic Sea Task Force are gratefully acknowledged for their contribution towards the production of this leaflet.



# TRAFFIC

is a joint programme of



**IUCN**  
The World Conservation Union

Over the past decade, quantities of legal caviar in international trade decreased for a number of reasons, mainly as a result of overfishing and poaching and – very likely – an increase in the illegal trade in caviar.

### Illegal trade in caviar is thriving

It is difficult to quantify the levels of illegal caviar trade, as this is by nature a hidden activity. What is known is often anecdotal and based on reported seizures and convictions. However, large seizures of illegal caviar in Europe indicate that there is a thriving black market in the luxury roe, which is threatening the survival of sturgeon species. They also demonstrate that caviar smugglers are well-organised and use sophisticated methods and the illegal caviar trade is considered to have strong links with organised crime groups.

EU-TWIX, a new online database, accessed exclusively by officials from the 25 EU Member States, helps law enforcers in the EU to fight wildlife trade crime. According to data reported to EU-TWIX to date, almost 14 t of illegal caviar were seized by European authorities between 2000 and 2005 (see **text box** on left), with the largest amounts of caviar seized in Germany (2224 kg), Switzerland (2067 kg), France (1965 kg), the Netherlands (1920 kg), Poland (1841 kg) and the UK (1587 kg). However, the real size of the illegal trade is likely to be considerably higher given that much of it is undetected and information is incomplete for some importing countries. The illicit caviar trade is particularly difficult to control in the EU single market, where caviar that has been imported by one Member State can be moved freely between the 25 countries. Co-operation and information exchange is therefore of particular importance, not only between EU Member States, but also with neighbouring and exporting countries.

A recent investigation by German Customs officials illustrated not only the size of the illicit trade but also the importance of international co-operation. The investigation revealed that two businessmen smuggled at least 1.4 t of caviar into the EU and sold it illegally in various EU Member States using falsified documents. German Customs discovered the case after they were tipped off by French Customs officials.

### Caviar labelling will help to stem illegal trade

In order to assist law enforcers and consumers in distinguishing legal caviar in trade from illegal caviar, CITES Parties agreed on a standardised labelling system for all caviar containers in domestic and international trade. This labelling system, which has been established to regulate the legal caviar trade around the world, will allow law enforcers to track the origin of caviar and identify whether it is legal or not.

In May 2006, the EU adopted *Commission Regulation (EC) No. 865/2006*, replacing *Regulation (EC) No. 1808/2001*, that has made the labelling of all caviar containers obligatory in all EU Member States. It is therefore essential that everyone involved in the caviar trade, including importers, exporters, wholesalers and retailers, as well as consumers, are aware of these new labelling requirements so that they can make sure the caviar they are selling or buying is labelled according to CITES requirements.