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MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE SIGNALS ILLEGAL BLACK CAVIAR TRADING

2006

THE BATTLE OF THE STURGEONS

Wild Sturgeons are, again, causing waves in Romania. In spite of the fact that fishing for sturgeons is prohibited within Romanian territory, five companies (with fishing and related activity) have obtained permits for their capturing, without fulfillment of all legal requirements, as shown in a report on control by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forests and Sustainable Development.

The guilt, in this case, seems to belong to the heads of the National Fishing and Aquaculture Association (NFAA), who are believed to have sided the "Raduta Sporting Group" SRL company. According to the laws currently in action, fishing of all sturgeon species is prohibited for a period of ten years, with the aim of stopping its extinction and restocking the Danube. Apparently, the measure is actually aimed at driving competitors out of the market and allowing unsupervised capturing of sturgeons to favored companies.

For the repopulation measure, the NFAA should have emitted procedural due processes to be strictly respected. Furthermore, before issuing a permit for the capture of sturgeons for brooding, NFAA should have purchased chips to be introduced into captured sturgeons' gills, to allow for a strict monitoring of these fish. It didn't. In spite of all this, the NFAA issued permits for capturing sturgeons to "Raduta Sporting" SRL, "Kaviar Hause" SRL, "Aquarom Elite Distributions" SRL companies, to ICDEAPA Galati (research institute) and to the Fishing Association of Producers "Lower Danube" which, based on the report of the Ministry by Agriculture's Audit Body, did not even dispose of the right to obtain such a permit. It eventually turned out that the association had also been capturing sturgeon for the "Raduta Sporting" company. In total, four of the five companies that obtained such permits have been working, practically, for Robert Raduta's company. The collaborations have been admitted to even by their beneficiary, namely Mr. Robert Raduta. In order to ensure that regional pisciculture inspectors wouldn't supervise the catching of the sturgeons from the Danube, the NFAA apparently authorized a large number of professional fishermen and boats. Without supervision and without legal norms to follow, companies authorized to capture the sturgeon could act most freely and according to their own interests – claims the Auditing Body of the Ministry of Agriculture.

Breached legal norms

In a correct handling, capturing male and female sturgeons from natural basins is effectuated based on a special permit granted by the NFAA, with the approval from the natural basins' administrators, namely the Authority of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve (ADDDBR) and its National Administration Company as well as the National Company for Administration of the Piscicultural Fund. The NFAA did not request for the approval of the two organizations. The NFAA's representatives were not present at the release of the captured reproductive sturgeons (after the harvest of caviar and sperm, it is compulsory to release the sturgeon in the Danube again). To top the issue, Raduta Sporting has not released all of the sturgeons it had previously captured.

At the date of the control, SC Raduta Sporting SRL was unable to provide documentation for the origin of their over 25.000 beluga fingerlings. After the control, the NFAA refused to confiscate the fingerlings, as it was required by the law. Furthermore, the NFAA allowed for the company to cover up its activity through a protocol with another company (SC "Kaviar House") that is a holder of a permit in this case¹.

Special licenses for capturing sturgeon were given with expiration date on the 31st of December 2006, even though sturgeon reproduction happens only in spring. As put in the control report, everything that was captured outside this period was used "in other purposes".

The stakes of this war – millions of Euros from the EU

Robert Raduta , the man behind the company that gained most from special permits for sturgeon capturing, claims that there are no specific orders that enforce the releasing of the caught sturgeons immediately. "I have kept them for brooding for myself – for that I do not need a second permit" – claims Raduta. As for the capturing of 33 sturgeons (the number is large), in spite of the fact that his company only held a permit for capturing 15 of them, Raduta claims that "the other companies (Lower Danube Association and Kaviar) held official permission for the rest of them and we cooperated so that we obtained the over 25000 fingerlings of sturgeon. For these we indeed have no provenience documents, because we were too busy keeping them alive instead of making papers. We collaborated with the Galati Institute as well, which obtained accreditation for sturgeon capturing." The sturgeon catchings were not documented on special forms because "the NFAA did not print them" and piscicultural inspectors/officers were not present at any of the capturing actions or releases "because the whole country was under water back then and the head staff of the NFAA Tulcea was tied up in battles for power as the new heads were being elected." According to Raduta, the leader's position at the NFAA is wanted by many because "starting from 2007 there will be millions flowing in from the EU that the NFAA will be distributing, hence the battle is fought on big money."

The head of the NFAA: "So what if he kept them?"

The president of the NFAA, Gheorghe Stefan claimed as a response to the accusations of not having respected the legal norms, that "it is stupid to make methodological norms, to print special forms for capturing, and the piscicultural inspector/officer is not a bodyguard to watch the sturgeons, he also holds a degree². All the sturgeons were thrown back into the Danube, with proper documentation. None of them was kept." When we informed him that Mr. Raduta gave in to have kept seven sturgeons and Kaviar six of them, Gheorghe Stefan took a turn:"So what if he kept them?"

¹ this sentence does not make a lot of sense in Romanian either, even put into context.

² my note: university degree, in Rom. also used as expression for saying someone is smart and has a higher social status.