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STURGEON POACHERS PAID BY THE STATE

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The NFAA (National Fisheries and Aquaculture Association) is spending millions of Euros for a Danube repopulation program that specialists do not approve of. It is considered inefficient as well as dangerous for the wild. One of the companies paid to deliver fingerlings born captive is accused of poaching for sturgeon. Thus, a female sturgeon that was supposed to be in the brooding basin behind a hotel in Uzlina, was found in a refrigerator eviscerated, with all of its caviar having “evaporated”. Furthermore, over 100 specimens were withdrawn from the water based on special fishing permits.

The president of NFAA, Gheorghe Stefan, declared that they will go on restocking the Danube with sturgeons this year as well. Stefan says that the NFAA will allocate during this year one million Euros again for stocking approximately 100.000 sturgeon, *nisetru*¹ and starry sturgeon fingerlings into the river. It is the third consecutive year of the program’s implementation, although the specialists from the *Danube Delta* Research and Development Center, who have been monitoring Danube sturgeons in the past for several years, do not approve of a restocking of the river with fingerlings born in captivity. They claim that this action is costly and inefficient as well as endangering the wildlife of the Danube River. Specialists also opposed a ban on sturgeon fishing, because they predicted an increase in poaching, which would then put the species in even more danger.

As a reminder, the NFAA has banned fishing for sturgeons two years ago for a period of ten years, with the reasoning that this would save the valuable species from extinction. After prohibiting fishing for sturgeons, the NFAA issued, each year, special permits for capturing the fish in repopulation purposes. This year there were 100 such permits emitted on the Authority of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve (ADDDBR) territory and there is documentation about capturing of 100 sturgeon specimens. Paul Cononov, the governor of ADDDBR declared that “the female specimens of sturgeon, *ascipenser guldenstaedti* and starry sturgeon captured this spring for reproduction have been taken to the brooding farms from Isaccea and Uzlina.” Constantin Enache, the director of the Tulcea branch of the NFAA declared that “the companies have produced sturgeon, starry sturgeon and *ascipenser guldenstaedti* fingerlings, which will be poured back into the river before the end of the year”.

A live sturgeon fingerling was acquired last year by the NFAA for the price of 10 euros, to which it added one euro for buying a chip to be implemented in the body of the sturgeon fingerling to monitor it after its reintroduction into the wild.

Throughout the past two years, the sturgeon restocking program had provoked several waves of scandals. Due to disapproval by specialists, the ADDDBR refused to issue environmental licenses for such actions, but the fingerlings were thrown into the Danube anyhow and the companies that produced them cashed in the million Euros from the Ministry of Agriculture’s budget allocated for this purpose. The administration of one of the companies has been accused by the Institute for

¹ *Acipenser guldenstaedti*, did not manage to find the English name

Environmental Protection² and the Fraud Squad³ that their company had poached a female sturgeon of over 200 kg from which they had extracted over 20 kilograms of black caviar under the pretense of artificial reproduction.

Officers have written reporting documents that demonstrate the apparent illegal nature of the sturgeon's capturing. According to these findings, a female sturgeon that was supposed to be in the brooding basin behind a hotel in Uzlina, was found in a refrigerator eviscerated, and all of its caviar had "evaporated", leading to suspicions that it had been sold on the black market. The brooding basin was drained at the request of the Environmental Institute's officers and it was found that the company had been keeping in the basin five more sturgeons captured illegally, unregistered with the ADDBR. These findings are the basis of a penal case of piscicultural poaching. The Prosecutor's Office under the Tulcea Law Court declared that "the file of illegal sturgeon poaching at Uzlina was recorded in 2007 and the filing was made by the Tulcea Prefecture; but for the lack of enough evidence there was no person officially put under charge".

While prosecutors are still looking for conclusive evidence in this poaching case regarding which officers of the Environmental Institute and the Fraud Squad claim the Tulcea Prefecture to have filed accusations against at the Tulcea Law Court, the company from Uzlina was again given the permission to artificially brood Danube sturgeons. Viorel Munteanu, the administrator of this company has declared that "the activity of capturing and reproducing sturgeons undertaken at Uzlina is done legally and under supervision by the NFAA". Paul Cononov, the governor of ADDBR added that "there are no legal reasons to deny a sturgeon capturing permit for this company, as well as for the functioning of the brood farm". The officer-in-charge of The Environmental Institute's ADDBR Commissariat⁴ Costel Ifrim contradicts the governor, claiming that "the company from Uzlina has captured, last year, several sturgeons without a permit, which were found in the drained reproduction basin. Hence, there is clear evidence and still, the ADDBR did not withdraw their environmental licenses, but renewed them at the beginning of this year".

The intransigence of the officer-in-charge Costel Ifrim in this and other unpunished poaching cases did not remain without repercussions. Several months ago, he was removed from his function by the President of the National Environmental Institute and replaced by an officer from Galati. As the decision for his removal was not explained, Costel Ifrim addressed the Court and was placed back in his position after several months.

"The company from Uzlina has captured last year several sturgeons without permit, which were found in their basin drained at our insistence. Although there is clear evidence against them, the ADDBR did not withdraw their environmental licenses, but renewed them at the beginning of this year". Costel Ifrim

Inefficiency

The scientific director of the National Research and Development Institute *Danube Delta*, Mircea Staras, declared that "the monitoring work realized over the past years with support from the local sturgeon fishermen community shows that even in the case of the fish's reproduction in its natural

² Garda Nationala de Mediu, something like an Environmental Conformity Squad

³ Garda Financiara, official translation. A Romanian equivalent to the US IRES

⁴ supervision office

environment, less than 10 % of sturgeon fingerlings reach the marine habitat to develop there. This proportion is most likely even smaller in the case of fingerlings from aquaculture farms. One thing is for sure: after three years from the first restocking with live fingerlings produced in captivity, there is no sturgeon captured that had previously been marked. This fact is very telling regarding the efficiency of restocking. The solution for the species' saving is aquaculture, but not for repopulation, as it is currently being done in the Delta, but for production of meat and caviar, which would ease the pressure on the natural environment.”

Big money- business

While piscicultors from the Danube Delta show no interest in growing sturgeons in captivity for doing trade with its meat and black caviar, this activity is developing in areas without tradition in pisciculture. The president of the NFAA, Gheorghe Stefan, declared that eight sturgeon farms have been authorized to open, all of them from outside of the Delta. These are located in Timis, Brasov, Mehedinti, Neamt, Calarasi counties and in the village Horia located at the bottom of Macin Mountains in Tulcea county. The farms have been set up relying on European funds. According to the NFAA the costs of setting up such a farm with a pond of one hectare surface and a natural source of water for refilling them is between 20.000 and 50.000 Euros. Investment costs are recovered rapidly after the sturgeon fingerlings reach maturity, as 1 kg of their meat is sold at 400 Lei, and 1 kg of caviar at 600 Euros.

Abandoned farms

Before 1990 there were 40.000 hectares of the Danube Delta territory that were used for pisciculture. At present, only 15.000 hectares from those ponds are used for producing fish. The director of the *Danube Delta* Institute, Romulus Stiuca, claims that companies that rented this land from the Council of Tulcea County have drained the water from the basins and transformed them into agricultural land. “With very small initial investment, these basins could be transformed by sturgeon producers, easing this way the pressure on wild sturgeon. Because poaching insures large income, there is no real interest for converting abandoned fish ponds into sturgeon growing farms”, said Stiuca.