

Caspian Sea

Resumption of Caviar Trade

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) announced in spring 2002 that the Caspian Sea countries had launched a coordinated programme for surveying and managing sturgeon stocks, paving the way for a resumption of the \$100 million annual (legal) caviar industry.

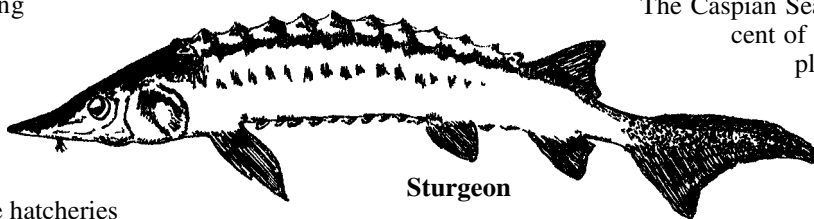
Willem Wijnstekers, Secretary-General of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) said that, 'For the first time, the Caspian Sea's wild sturgeon populations are being managed through a unified system rather than through competing national systems.' He noted that the resumption in caviar sales will bring in much-needed funding so that the hatcheries vital to the sturgeons' long-term survival can be expanded. However, he warned that the crisis was not over and greater efforts were needed to combat illegal fishing and corruption.

CITES halted the caviar trade by Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and the Russian Federation in June 2001 and gave the four countries until the end of 2001 to conduct a scientific survey of stocks and develop a common management plan.

They had until June 2002 to establish a long-term survey programme and to increase significantly their efforts

to combat illegal harvesting and trade and to regulate domestic trade. While the fifth Caspian country, Iran, was not subject to the caviar ban, it too has joined the regional effort.

Until 1991, the former Soviet Union and Iran virtually controlled the caviar market, investing heavily in maintaining fish stocks. With the demise of the USSR, the system collapsed, and many entrepreneurs dealing in the so-called 'black gold' sprang up to replace the state-owned companies.



Sturgeon

Courtesy: Espacios Naturrales

The Caspian Sea once provided 95 per cent of the world's caviar supply, although this proportion has fallen to nearer 90 per cent. Official catch levels fell from a peak of about 30,000 tonnes in the late 1970s to less than one-tenth of that figure

by the later 1990s. Reduced river flow, destroyed spawning sites, corruption, poaching, organised crime and illicit trade all contributed to this decline.

(Readers are also referred to the article on page 210, which illustrates the difficulties surrounding sturgeon conservation and the reliance of the CITES Secretariat on data provided by the governments of the countries concerned, which is not always supported by the scientific community.) (MJ)

