



TO

Mr. Miguel Bernal

Executive Secretary

General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean – GFCM

Dear Mr. Bernal,

We are addressing you with regard to the "Savior of the Sturgeons" initiative, led by the "For Our Sea" Foundation. The results of this effort are presented with the belief that they can provide valuable insights for the decision-making processes related to the conservation of sturgeon species in the Black Sea and the Danube.

We are also using this opportunity to thank you for the chance to present the initiative at the Fish Forum in Antalya in 2024. The Forum greatly enhanced our collaboration with the GFCM Black Sea Technical Unit and laid a strong foundation for data exchange between fishermen, the non-governmental sector, and the scientific community.

The "Savior of Sturgeons" initiative was launched in 2023 as a natural extension of our longstanding partnership with the fishing community. It was inspired by our observations in 2021, which indicated a rise in the bycatch of sturgeon during commercial fishing operations, as well as a growing willingness among fishermen to voluntarily release these fish back into the sea.

These positive trends inspired us to launch a structured campaign to encourage the release and reporting of incidentally caught sturgeons and to promote best practices.

Key results:

1. Between **June 15 and December 31, 2023, 86 sturgeon releases** were reported to the Foundation, 90% of which occurred between **June 15 and September 15, 2023**.
2. Between **June 15 and December 31, 2024, 89 sturgeon releases** were reported, 80% of which occurred between August 15 and November 28, 2024.
3. Five new cases have been reported so far in 2025: three sterlets (*Acipenser stellatus*) between 80 and 90 cm; a beluga sturgeon (*Huso huso*) measuring 140 cm and approximately 50 kg; and the largest beluga sturgeon recorded to date, **325 cm**.
4. The total number of incidentally caught and released sturgeon reported to date is **180**.
5. Reports have been received from **15 fishing vessels** operating in EU waters in the Black Sea. For comparison, before the initiative began, we had received information from only four vessels.

Catch characteristics:

In 2023, approximately 50% of the catches were reported from the area between Varna and Cape Emine, with the remainder south of Cape Emine. Fishing depths varied between 20 and 30 meters, at distances between 3 and 12 nautical miles from the coast;

In 2024, half of the reported catches were from the area between Cape Emine and Cape Kaliakra, and the other half south of Cape Emine. Fishing depths again varied between 20 and 30 meters, at distances between 1 and 12 nautical miles from the coast;

The predominant species were beluga sturgeon (*Huso huso*), sterlet (*Acipenser stellatus* and *Acipenser ruthenus*), with approximately 80% of specimens measuring between 80 and 120 cm;

By December 31, 2024, five beluga sturgeon measuring between 180 and 200 cm had been documented, and the largest specimen - 325 cm - was recorded in April 2025.

Notable cases:

1. June 21, 2023 - Beluga sturgeon, 200 cm long, caught in the bay between Pomorie and Nessebar;
2. June 22, 2023 - Beluga sturgeon, 190 cm long, caught 5-8 nautical miles east of Varna;
3. July 15, 2023 - Beluga sturgeon, 180 cm long, caught about 8 nautical miles east of Varna;
4. End of July 2023 - 13 sturgeons caught in one day, measuring between 60 and 90, caught by one fishing vessel, in the zone between Varna and Byala;
5. November 7, 2024 - Beluga sturgeon, 180 cm and approximately 80 kg, caught 1.5 nautical miles off Sozopol;
6. November 28, 2024 - Beluga sturgeon, 255 cm in length, caught approximately 10 nautical miles off Cape Emine;
7. October 28, 2024 - Beluga sturgeon, 150 cm in length, caught north of Cape Kaliakra;
8. March 29, 2025 - Beluga sturgeon, 140 cm long, 50 kg, caught 12 nautical miles east of Cape Shabla;
9. April 6, 2025 - the largest beluga sturgeon recorded to date, 325 cm long, caught 24 nautical miles east of Cape Emine.

Lessons learned:

Conservation of sturgeon species in the Black Sea would be much more effective with the active involvement of the fishing community. Although cases of illegal sturgeon catches have decreased, there are still instances of non-compliance with the ban by some fishermen.

The fishing community has shown a growing awareness of the need for sustainable fishing practices and protection of the marine environment. An appropriate approach and



effective communication with fishers will be crucial for the successful conservation of other species that may be subject to special management measures in the future.

Fishers are not always able to distinguish between different species of sturgeons. While beluga sturgeon are relatively easy to identify, there is often confusion about other species such as sterlets -*Acipenser stellatus* or *Acipenser ruthenus*, Russian sturgeon, and hybrids.

Fishermen generally do not record or officially report incidentally caught sturgeon, although they are willing to informally share information, including photographs and data on the size and location of the catch. The main reasons for this are uncertainties about the regulations governing sturgeon catches and conflicting messages from enforcement agencies, which create concerns among fishermen about potential fines if they report such catches.

Based on the experience gained, organizing joint training sessions for fishermen and inspectors of the Executive Agency for Fisheries and Aquaculture (EAFA) appears necessary to ensure a clear understanding of the applicable rules and to promote good practices for the conservation of sturgeon species.

"For Our Sea" Foundation will continue the "Savior of Sturgeons" initiative during 2025 and declares its readiness to cooperate with the relevant institutions to support the long-term conservation of the sturgeon species in the Black Sea and the Danube.

Sincerely,

Dimitar Dimitrov

Chairman of the "For Our Sea" Foundation