



Copyright Credit © Hartmut Jungius / WWF

RIONI RIVER STURGEONS



WHY SHOULD WE SAVE STURGEON?

Sturgeon have existed almost unchanged for 200 million years. **Among the largest and most iconic freshwater fish**, sturgeon can live for 100 years, growing up to 7m long and weighing up to 1.5 tonnes. Or they could. Large sturgeon are now very few and far between. Having survived the extinction of the dinosaurs, sturgeon today are **the most endangered group of species globally**. Once widespread across the Northern hemisphere, the damming of rivers that blocked their migration routes coupled with growing demand for caviar wiped out many sturgeon populations, eradicating them from most rivers. But together, we can save sturgeon from extinction and invest in a nature-positive future.

THE RIONI IN GEORGIA

The Rioni is the second largest river in Georgia and one of the largest in the South Caucasus region. It flows for over 300km from the glaciers of the Greater Caucasus to the Black Sea. Because it drains approximately 20 % – its entire catchment is 13,400 km² – of the country's total land area it boosts life across rare wetlands and cities of major cultural and economic importance, like Kutaisi and Samtredia. The Rioni basin sustains unique landscapes like its lowland peat bogs, swamp alder forests & hot thermal mineral waters. The Rioni is one of the few rivers where sturgeons spawn in natural conditions. The **Rioni and its adjacent area of the Black Sea is a global hotspot of critical importance** for the survival of sturgeon – and for WWF's [Sturgeon Initiative](#).

WHY ARE THE RIONI STURGEON THREATENED?

Sturgeon populations have been **dramatically reduced and remain under continuing pressure** – a cascade of hydropower dams and plants, irrigation for agriculture, poaching and illegal fishing, by-catch in the river and the sea, sand and gravel extraction, pollution and climate change threaten the integrity of the river's system. HPP operations cause rapid fluctuations in water flow which disrupt reproduction. As a result of the construction of the Vartsikhe HPP cascade in the 1970s and 1980s, only the lower 100km section of the river remains free flowing and accessible to sturgeon.

WHAT MUST BE DONE?

All **stakeholders' engagement is crucial** – from governmental divisions to private sectors, from the scientific departments at the Universities to the local communities and fishers. With an inclusive approach different priorities from various stakeholders can be accommodated, engaging them in meaningful dialogues on sturgeon conservation and coming to joint solutions.

NOT ON OUR WATCH!

- **Last Call** – All six sturgeon species in Georgia are on the Red list and have been protected by the national law since 1967, when fishing sturgeon was banned officially. Unfortunately, the population trend is still declining and urgent conservation measures must be carried out to avoid the complete loss of these ancient species in the Rioni River.
- **A Warning to Freshwater Species** – Sturgeon are iconic fish of ancient origin and have become symbols of healthy and free flowing river systems connected to the sea. If we cannot save a flagship species, chances are that other freshwater species will go extinct unnoticed!
- **Reintroduction is a last resort** – Reintroducing a species that has gone extinct in the wild is sometimes possible if captive stocks are available but saving remaining populations is far more cost effective.
- **High Commercial and Cultural Value** – Sturgeon provide an economic and cultural value to many rivers in the Northern hemisphere. If we bring back sturgeon populations and if fishers catch them sustainably, then we can boost local economies and create long term incomes for families.

A FIRST SUCCESS

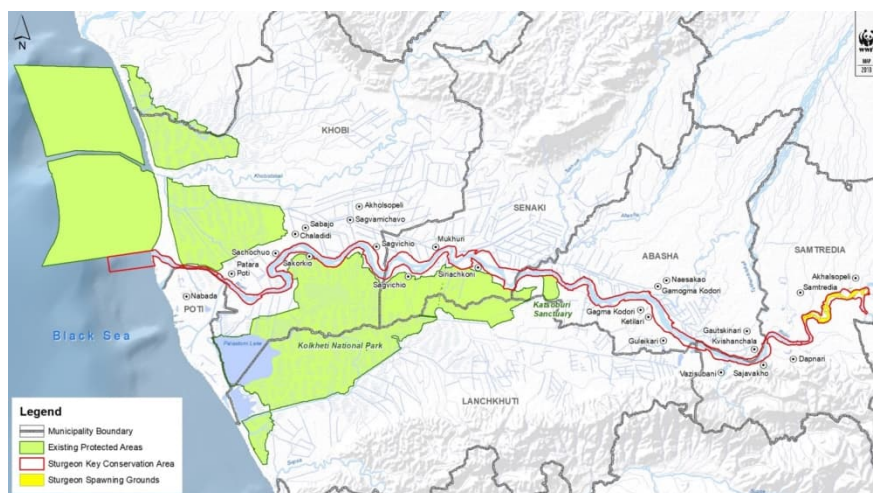
In June 2022, [671.5 ha were added to the existing Kolkheti National Park](#). The extended area now includes 7 km upstream, incorporating vitally important habitats for critically endangered sturgeon species. An important success for WWF-Caucasus advocacy work.

RIONI RIVER STURGEONS

Copyright Credit © WWF-Caucasus / Maka Bitsadze

THE FIGHT FOR THE RIONI STURGEON

RIONI BASIN AND THE EXPANDED AREA (IN GREEN) OF KOLKHETI NATIONAL PARK



WHAT IS WWF DOING?

WWF in Georgia works towards the conservation of the last remaining sturgeon populations and of their habitat in the Rioni River and the Black Sea:

- A multi-stakeholder platform was created, co-hosted by the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia. The platform members build and support a shared conservation agenda; promote, communicate, advocate and coordinate sturgeon conservation issues among key stakeholders – governmental, scientific, non-governmental and private sectors;
- Without species monitoring, no proper conservation measures can be implemented in a long-term perspective; therefore, WWF is working to develop a high standard sturgeon monitoring programme;
- Mitigation of the impacts of existing HPP operations and sand and gravel extraction can be accomplished by developing and advocating for sustainable pro-sturgeon operating practices;
- Increase the protection of critical habitats for sturgeon through legal recognition of the sites. Part of the marine area and the estuary of the Rioni River has already been successfully established as the Protected Area. WWF is now advocating to protect the last spawning grounds in the river as Rioni Sanctuary.
- Assessing the potential for restoring historical spawning grounds which are currently not accessible for sturgeon.

In parallel, WWF-Caucasus works to raise awareness about sturgeon conservation among local communities, fishermen and local schoolchildren in the villages.



SPECIES INFORMATION

Beluga (*Huso huso*)

- Among the biggest freshwater fish in the world - up to 1.5 tonnes and 7 m long, can live > 100 years
- Status: Critically Endangered

Russian sturgeon (*Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*)

- Very rare in the Black Sea basin
- Status: Critically Endangered

Stellate sturgeon (*Acipenser stellatus*)

- Distinctive star-shaped bone plates on its body; still spawns in Rioni river
- Status: Critically Endangered

Colchic Sturgeon (*Acipenser persicus colchicus*)

- Good example of the high variability in the morphology of the Acipenseridae – officially (e.g. the IUCN Red List, the National Red List of Georgia) this species is referred to as Persian sturgeon (*A. persicus*)
- Most common type of sturgeon catch in Georgian waters
- Status: Critically Endangered

Ship Sturgeon (*Acipenser nudiiventris*)

- Up to 2 m in length and 68 kg in weight.
- Considered to be extinct in the Danube but recent sightings of young fish show they have survived in the Rioni, making this the last hope for the species in the Black Sea region.
- Status: Critically Endangered

Atlantic Sturgeon (*Acipenser sturio*)

- Historically occurs in Rioni and Enguri rivers & wide parts of the Black Sea.
- Last caught in 2002 in Batumi, Black Sea coast
- Status: Extinct for the Black Sea Basin

FOR MORE INFORMATION

WWF-CAUCASUS:

https://www.wwfcaucasus.org/our_work/all_initiatives

CONTACT:

Maka Bitsadze - mbitsadze@wwfcaupo.org

Nino Peradze - nperadze@wwfcaupo.org



Working to sustain the natural world for the benefit of people and wildlife.

together possible. panda.org

WWF® and ©1986 Panda Symbol are owned by WWF. All rights reserved.

WWF, 28 rue Mauverney, 1196 Gland, Switzerland. Tel. +41 22 364 9111

CH-550.0.128.920-7