

CONVENTION ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN ENDANGERED SPECIES
OF WILD FAUNA AND FLORA

Forty-sixth meeting of the Standing Committee
Geneva (Switzerland), 12-15 March 2002

Interpretation and implementation of the Convention

Significant trade in specimens of Appendix-II species

ACIPENSERIFORMES

PRESS RELEASE

Caspian Sea states to resume caviar trade

Geneva, 6 March 2002 - The five Caspian Sea states have launched a coordinated programme for surveying and managing sturgeon stocks that meets the agreed requirements for proceeding with the 2002 caviar harvest, the Secretariat of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) announced here today.

"For the first time, the Caspian Sea's wild sturgeon populations are being managed through a unified system rather than through competing national systems. This has enabled the region's governments to demonstrate that sturgeon numbers are indeed stable or, in some cases, increasing," said Willem Wijnstekers, the CITES Secretary-General.

"The resumption in caviar sales will bring in much-needed funding so that the hatcheries that are so vital to the sturgeons' long-term survival can be expanded. But this does not mean that the crisis is over. In particular, greater efforts are needed to combat illegal fishing and corruption," he said.

CITES halted the caviar trade by Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Russia in June 2001 under the so-called Paris Agreement. It gave the four states until the end of the year to conduct a scientific survey of stocks and develop a common management plan.

They now have until 20 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 state, Iran, was not subject to the caviar ban, it too has joined the regional effort.

The CITES Secretariat has accepted the five states' proposal for a 2002 Caspian-wide quota of some 142 tons (142,237 kilograms) of caviar from five sturgeon species. This is 9.6% below the 2001 quota levels. The decision is based on information recently submitted by the Caspian states and by the Secretariat's frequent missions to the region to assess compliance and verify survey results.

The approved 2002 export quotas for caviar are 7,770 kg for Azerbaijan, 75,767 kg for Iran, 23,500 kg for Kazakhstan, 29,400 kg for Russia, and 5,800 kg for Turkmenistan. In addition, Russia and Kazakhstan are allowed to sell registered stocks left over from the spring 2001 harvest. (For details, [see the tables](http://www.cites.org) posted at www.cites.org.)

"In a region where fish stocks were once a carefully guarded state secret, and where there is still no comprehensive political agreement over how to share the Caspian Sea and its resources, this breakthrough on sturgeon management marks a dramatic step forward towards transparency and cooperation," said CITES Deputy-Secretary-General Jim Armstrong.

"A good example of this new cooperation is the adoption by the Caspian states of a self-imposed moratorium on caviar exports from the species known as ship sturgeon for 2002," he said.

Because many of the natural spawning grounds have been destroyed, some 50% of Caspian Sea sturgeon start their lives in artificial hatcheries. Following the Paris Agreement, the Caspian states have invested heavily in expanding and refurbishing these hatcheries. They are also changing their methods to improve the survival rate of fingerlings, for example by releasing them only after they are 50 or 100 grams in weight versus the previous standard of 3 grams.

Meanwhile, CITES has suspended all wildlife trade with the United Arab Emirates, largely because of its role as a major transshipment point for illegal caviar. A Secretariat survey estimated that over Sfr35 million (about US\$21 million) of illegal caviar transited the UAE during the first ten months of 2001.

Until 1991, two countries - the USSR and Iran - virtually controlled the caviar market, investing heavily in maintaining fish stocks. This made it easy to track the source of any given shipment of caviar. With the demise of the USSR, the system collapsed, and many entrepreneurs dealing in "black gold" sprang up to replace the state-owned companies.

The Caspian once accounted for 95% of world caviar, although this percentage has become closer to 90%. Official catch levels fell from a peak of about 30,000 tonnes in the late 1970s to less than one tenth that figure in the late 1990s. Reduced river flow, destroyed spawning sites, corruption, poaching, organized crime and illicit trade all contributed to the decline.

One result is that before the Paris Agreement the illegal catch in the four former Soviet Republics was estimated to be 10 or 12 times higher than the legal take. The legal caviar trade has been estimated to be worth some \$100 million annually - making it perhaps the world's most valuable wildlife resource. Because retail prices of illegal caviar vary widely from country to country, it is difficult to estimate the value of illegal trade. Average wholesale market prices are about \$150 per kilo for illegal caviar, \$500 for legal caviar, and \$1,000 for legal beluga.

Recognizing the need for action, in 1997 CITES decided to place all remaining, unlisted species of sturgeon on its Appendix II, effective from 1 April 1998. As a result, all exports of caviar and other sturgeon products must comply with strict CITES provisions, including the use of permits and specific labelling requirements. To obtain the necessary permits for export, it must be shown that trade is not detrimental to the long-term survival of the species.

In April 2000, the COP strengthened the controls on sturgeon by adopting a universal labelling system for caviar exports. It further required all range States to coordinate their annual export and catch quotas for 2001. In June 2001, the CITES Standing Committee decided that this had not been achieved and issued a zero quota for Caspian Sea sturgeon and caviar for four countries for the remainder of the year (Iran faced no restrictions because it had a functioning sturgeon management system).

The Secretariat will report to next week's meeting of the Standing Committee on its survey of enforcement needs in the region. It will issue a strong recommendation for improved regulation of the domestic caviar markets, particularly in Russia.

The Standing Committee meets in Geneva from 12 - 15 March to prepare for the 12th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES, to be held in Santiago, Chile from 3 -15 November. It will also review implementation issues, regional reports, enforcement issues, status reports for highly endangered species (bears, the tiger, Tibetan antelope, and musk deer), and other matters.

Note to journalists: For more information, contact Michael Williams at +41-79-409-1528 (cell), +41-22-917-8242 (office), or michael.williams@unep.ch. See also www.cites.org.