

On December 1, 2019, the Ministry of Environmental Protection of the Government of the Republic of Serbia passed a decision banning the fishing for sturgeon, which means that it can be served in restaurants only if it is grown in fishponds. Sturgeon belongs to one of the five sturgeons, species that still inhabit the Danube. According to the classification of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, their population is extremely endangered, and overfishing is one of the main reasons for the constant decline in the number of these species.

BIRN reporters and WWF activists collected meat samples from fish restaurants in the summer of 2020 to determine whether the sturgeon served was illegally caught in the Danube and Tisza or from permitted farming in fishponds.

Sturgeon from ponds usually weigh between 350-450 grams and not less than 40 centimeters. At two specialized sturgeon ponds, it was confirmed to BIRN that selling fish smaller than the stated size to farmers is not profitable. If you see helmets smaller than this size in your portion, it is usually a sign that it is a fish from the river.

The gastronomic habit of consuming small, sexually immature sturgeon in Serbia, led the World Organization for Nature (WWF) to launch the campaign "In the river, not in your plate" during 2018. The campaign resulted in a decision to ban her fishing. Despite the ban, during 2019 and 2020, numerous cases of illegal sturgeon fishing were recorded on the Danube and the Tisza, confirmed the fish keepers as well as fisheries inspectors.

The Association of United Fishermen of Serbia and the World Nature Organization remind of the importance of monitoring the sturgeon population in order to finally determine the real situation, and the effects of the application of the ban. Fish restaurants and chards are the central point around which illegal fishing takes place, especially sturgeon. The price of fish meat, which in restaurants ranges between 7 and 25 euros per kilogram, is an irresistible bait for local fish thieves. Sturgeon meat has always been valued and considered a delicacy - and not only in our country. In England, Russia and France, sturgeon was used exclusively by rich people. In China, it was reserved only for the emperor. During August and September 2020, BIRN and WWF activists visited several restaurants and chards on the Danube and Tisza to take samples of fried sturgeon meat. The meat analysis will be sent for genetic and isotopic analysis to the Leibniz Institute for Zoological Research in Germany. They state that "sharing the results of this research with state authorities in the target countries will increase the level of information on the availability and applicability of these scientific methods during the conduct of investigations." During 2017 and 2018, WWF conducted a similar survey in Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine and Serbia. One of the goals of the research was to collect data on the ratio of caught and farmed sturgeon in free sale. The

data showed that a third of all samples were illegal. The fish fund of the Republic of Serbia is difficult to protect, not only because the fish protection system requires numerous improvements, but also because of mild penalties, BIRN's interlocutors claim, including fishermen, university professors, journalists and recreational fishermen. Data from the Ministry of Environmental Protection show that inspectors of the Department of Fisheries performed over 600 regular and extraordinary inspections during 2019. In the same period, republic inspectors filed 19 misdemeanor, criminal, as well as reports for economic crime. Out of nineteen reports, the courts have pronounced ten verdicts, according to the Report of the Fisheries Inspection for 2019.

Data from the Department for Control of Protection and Use of Natural Resources and Fish Fund of the Secretariat for Urbanism and Environmental Protection of Vojvodina, show that during 2019, over 400 regular and extraordinary inspections were performed. In the same period, inspectors submitted 35 requests for initiating misdemeanor proceedings, four reports for initiating proceedings for economic crime and two criminal charges. 20 verdicts were passed. According to the data of the Republic Bureau of Statistics, during 2019, the judicial system of Serbia for crimes against the environment, which includes illegal fishing, passed a guilty verdict in less than 20 percent of reported cases. During 2019, a total of 2,425 charges were filed for crimes against the environment. According to the statistics of the judiciary, 417 people were fined on that basis. According to the same source, in 2019, 23 charges were filed for the crime of illegal fishing, while 13 convictions were handed down. Of that number, four are prison sentences, one is a fine and six are suspended sentences. One person was punished by house arrest and one by work in the public interest. Livija Panic Miletic, a prosecutor with the Basic Public Prosecutor's Office in Subotica, told BIRN that "the number of criminal charges filed reflects the true ratio of the number of crimes and misdemeanors to the number of inspections carried out." An additional problem in the protection of the fish stock of Serbia is the issue of inspection control of restaurants where illegally caught fish is most often sold. Insufficiently defined and intertwined competencies between the sanitary, veterinary and communal inspections are ideal "legal holes" through which tons of illegally caught fish pass every year, BIRN's interlocutors claim.

The United Fishermen of Serbia and the World Nature Organization state that part of the solution to the problem of illegal fishing is certainly a continuation of the previous practice of specialized training of judges and prosecutors on the importance of Danube sturgeons, especially sturgeons. They emphasize that the fish thieves "are not poor people, but thieves, because the local supermarket robber does not do such damage as those who commit

crimes against nature and steal common wealth.”

Livija Panic Miletic from the Basic Public Prosecutor’s Office in Subotica says that “the judiciary should not allow itself different treatment of different criminal acts”. Citizens can also contribute to the reduction of fishing theft with their reports, and that is why it is important that these cases are reported to fish keepers, fisheries inspectors, but also to the police, according to these two organizations. In addition to stricter penalties, they appeal to people to buy and consume exclusively fish, the origin of which is known. “In this way, the pressure on wild populations is drastically reduced,” they claim in these organizations. Despite the insufficiently precise data, experts warn that the destruction of habitats, as well as mass fish theft have led to a drastic impoverishment of the fish stock of Serbia, which has led some of the fish species, such as sturgeon, to the brink of extinction. Previous domestic and international experiences confirm that joint activities of environmental activists, fish keepers, inspection and other state services and institutions can certainly contribute to the preservation of the fish stock of Serbia. However, without changing people’s awareness and attitudes towards nature and natural resources, it is almost impossible to protect nature and its resources, BIRN’s interlocutors claim.

Source: birn.rs