

Following a proposal by WWF the Bulgarian Ministry of Environment and Water (MEW) declared a new protected area along the Danube River, Esetrite - Vetren. The area aims to protect an important habitat of critically endangered and vulnerable species of fish. It is also the first protected area in Bulgaria aimed at the conservation of sturgeons, a family that has survived around 150 million years.

*“The **declaration of Esetrite - Vetren Protected Area** is a definite success and the result of a decade of continuous work with local fishermen’s communities and the respective institutions. It was backed up by exhausting field research on sturgeons and their habitats that totals at more than 1400 kilometers of transects. The greatest achievement, however, is that the declaration of the protected area was supported by local professional fishermen who are aware of its importance in the long-term - not only for the conservation of sturgeons but of other fish populations in the river too”, says Stoyan Mihov, Freshwater Program Manager, WWF-Bulgaria.*

Esetrite - Vetren protected area

The newly established protected area covers more than 288 hectares of the Danube River in the vicinity of the village of Vetren, next to Srebarna Lake. With its nomination a number of activities harmful to the fish and their habitat will be prohibited, such as dredging and mining for construction aggregates from the river bed, waste disposal or untreated waste water release, hydraulic technical construction and disturbance of the natural hydro-morphological processes. The redirection and slowing of the water courses or the blocking of the side canals of the river in the area will also be prohibited.

The main conservation targets in the protected area are fish of the sturgeon family, and their young in particular - the ones that have chosen this section of the river as a resting and feeding site along their hundreds-kilometres-long journey towards the sea. Therefore the protected area is actually named after sturgeon (esetri in Bulgarian). Besides sturgeons another 40 species of fish have been recorded in this small section of the river, out of which 21 species are included in the Bulgarian Red List. The decree for the declaration of the protected area was issued following a proposal by WWF-Bulgaria with the support of the local fishermen’s association, the Regional Inspectorate of Environment and Water - Rousse, and the National Museum of Natural History at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences; it was deposited in April 2022.

Threats for sturgeons

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) states sturgeons as the most threatened group of species in the world. The Danube remains one of the last rivers in Europe where sturgeon still breed naturally, a reason why WWF puts a focus on the protection and conservation of their natural habitats. In the past nine years the team of WWF-Bulgaria monitored the river course from the village of Novo Selo to the town of Silistra, studying the habitats of the last remaining sturgeons and working with local communities for their conservation. Over 77,000 tagged sterlets, Russian sturgeons and belugas were released in the river in order to boost their natural populations in the wild.

Ichthyologists emphasize that sturgeons, as well as other species of migrating fish, play an important role as an indicator of healthy river ecosystems. Unfortunately, dam, dike and hydro plant construction, as well as aggregate mining from the bottom of the Danube River create insurmountable barriers along their migration routes; they change the natural water flow and lead to fragmentation and destruction of the fishes’ habitats. In the long term these human activities, along with others such as overfishing and water pollution, can lead to the

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extinction of the sturgeons.

At present in Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine and Serbia sturgeon fishing on the Danube and in the Black Sea is banned completely. Still a great part of the adult individuals that enter the river to reproduce fall victim to poachers. The reason is the high value of their role on the black market. WWF warns that any product from a wild sturgeon is illegal and it brings damage to both the few surviving sturgeon populations, as well as to the future income of the local fishing communities, WWF writes.