

## The Project's objectives include the following:

- To draft a proposal on the establishment of a Ural Sturgeon Protected Area;
- To establish a Ural basin-wide Sturgeon Expert Network;
- To transfer the best world practices in transboundary water management and migratory species conservation to the Ural region;
- To promote an interdisciplinary holistic approach to the solution of Ural environmental problems;
- To facilitate sturgeon related research in the region and collect, systematize and identify the gaps in existing knowledge on Ural sturgeon in both basin countries;
- To raise public awareness on the concept of Basin Sustainable Development, natural species reproduction and the importance of sturgeon conservation in the Ural river basin;
- To popularize the idea of the Ural river's uniqueness and a Ural Sturgeon Park creation in the local communities and world conservation communities;
- To assist regional education Institutions with the development of new environmental courses based on the concept of Basin Sustainable Development and a holistic interdisciplinary approach;
- To promote and coordinate involvement of local communities in environmental protection activities, such as monitoring and anti-poaching campaigns;
- To attract the attention of international environmental institutions and national/regional officials to the importance of the protection of the Ural river habitats;
- To create GIS databases on relevant aspects of the Ural river basin;
- To develop and test models of the sturgeon life cycle as a tool in feasibility studies of restoration programs world-wide;
- To provide a framework for further activities (including fundraising) on Ural sturgeon conservation.

To facilitate the success of these objectives a Uralbas Project website has been launched and an information campaign is being run in regional and national mass media.

More information can be found at the Project's website <http://uralbas.ru>.

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# The case for a Transboundary Ural Sturgeon Park



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## Sturgeon

Apart from its high economic value and flagship function the sturgeon is an indicator (umbrella) species for the river basin it inhabits. Moreover, living in the sea and migrating to rivers for spawning the sturgeon population links together the marine and riverine ecosystems and allows integrated transboundary management of the river basin to be developed.

The catastrophic depletion of sturgeon stocks worldwide has stimulated various activities of environmental national agencies and international organizations. Unfortunately, despite numerous conservation and restoration programs, sturgeon populations are not only continuing to shrink, but many are already extinct or face the threat of extinction in the near future. This situation is believed to be caused by several reasons, but the main ones are probably habitat destruction and blockage of the spawning places and migration routes by the construction of barrier complexes on the main basin rivers.

From this point of view the basin of the Ural river, shared between Russia and Kazakhstan, is a unique ecosystem. The Ural is the only river in the Caspian Sea with a non-regulated water stream in an area of historical sturgeon distribution. The sturgeon population lives in the internationally shared Caspian Sea and migrates to the spawning places in Russia through the territory of Kazakhstan.

Thanks to the absence of a barrier complex this is the only self-sustaining, viable sturgeon population capable of natural reproduction in the Caspian Basin.

However, the importance of the Ural sturgeon habitats for the conservation of the whole Caspian Sturgeon population is greatly underestimated in both national and international Action Plans and the importance of the Ural river has been neglected.

Moreover, although all sturgeon species of the Caspian basin are included in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species as endangered, and are protected by various international conventions, only two of these species are listed in national and regional Red Books.

## Transboundary Integrated Water Management

One of the factors influencing the riverine ecosystem is the quality of Integrated Water Management. The system of integrated basin management which once existed in the Soviet Union has collapsed and new international transboundary approaches need to be developed to take its place. At the same time experience and knowledge on transboundary river management accumulated in European countries cannot simply be copied. Careful evaluation of best practices and extensive research is needed to develop an appropriate regional strategy for sustainable basin development.

## Project

Looking for ways to improve the catastrophic situation with Caspian Sturgeon it was decided to initiate a transboundary Project on the preservation of natural sturgeon habitats and securing of its migration routes in the Ural river basin through crossdisciplinary collaboration and research. The ultimate Project goal is to establish and manage a Ural Sturgeon Park with the active involvement of local communities in nature conservation measures. The Ural river sturgeon population is unique not only due to its ability for natural reproduction but also for the high esteem in which it is held by local communities. For centuries the sturgeon was on the regional coat of arms.

The rational policy and management of sturgeon stocks can be the basis for basin sustainable development in the whole river. This project can help not only to preserve this flagship species, but also to solve social and economic problems by restoration of the traditional life style of local communities, which historically have lived in harmony with the river ecosystem.

The areas under the scope of the Project include different environmental disciplines and anthropogenic activities related to the well-being of the sturgeon population, taking into account its triple function in the river ecosystem: indicator species, flagship species and species of special concern. By adopting this holistic, integrated approach the Project will be a focal point for specialists on water quality, fishery, international and national environmental law, as well as sturgeon experts.

One of the Project's first activities will be to organize a series of workshops to: (i) bring together the basin stakeholders in international Ural river basin management and transboundary biodiversity conservation, (ii) establish a network of specialists working in sturgeon-related disciplines and (iii) organize a dialog between environmental officials and local communities.

The Project has been initiated and coordinated by the Environmental Systems Laboratory of the Central European University (Hungary) and the Research and Consulting Center "DonEco" (Russia).

