



SeaWeb

Raising Awareness of the Living Ocean

sustainable development - seafood - caviar

**AS U.S. IMPOSES MORE RULES ON BELUGA CAVIAR IMPORTS
TO PROTECT THREATENED STURGEON,
WORLD'S SECOND LARGEST IMPORTER OF BELUGA CAVIAR
AND GROWING PRODUCER OF FARMED CAVIAR**

The highly prized beluga sturgeon is on the brink of extinction. That unique 250 million-year-old magnificent fish species, sometimes referred to as a “living fossil,” produces the world’s wild beluga caviar. Its population has plummeted by 90 percent in the Caspian Sea during the past two decades due to overfishing, pollution, habitat loss and lack of effective governmental management.

After 4 years of efforts led by Seaweb - a major nonprofit ocean conservation organisation - the US, the world’s largest importer of beluga caviar, is slowly progressing to better protect the species by listing it as a threatened species under the US Endangered Species Act, and now by imposing new sturgeon conservation requirements on Caspian states who want to export beluga caviar to the U.S. But a sustained ban on international trade of beluga caviar is the next step to reach for Seaweb; a decision that only the UN’s Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), based in Geneva, could make.

In the meantime, SeaWeb is calling on consumers around the world to help save this critically threatened species by avoiding beluga caviar. It announces a coming campaign in France - the world’s second largest importer of beluga caviar - to point out to consumers environmentally-friendly farmed caviar choices that are emerging in Europe.

“French and other European consumers can play a role in the sturgeon’s recovery by avoiding beluga caviar and trying more sustainable farmed caviars that are improving in quality and are a better choice for the environment,” said Vikki Spruill, president of SeaWeb in Washington, DC. The group’s caviar campaign in the United States reached more than 100 million people through the media and helped hundreds of chefs make the better seafood choice by switching from wild to farmed caviars.

Caspian sturgeon:

A unique 250 million-year-old fish in crisis

Caspian sturgeon are referred to as “living fossils” but are now on the brink of extinction because of global demand for their eggs. In Russia, Iran and other countries surrounding the Caspian Sea, overfishing has led to rapidly declining populations of the rarest species, beluga sturgeon that produces wild beluga caviar.

The beluga sturgeon’s ability to recover is hampered as it takes 15 years to reach reproductive age. As a result, availability problems, soaring prices and unreliable quality are now associated with Caspian caviars.

Restrictions on beluga caviar trade:

Part of results of Seaweb 4-year campaign

Seaweb - the nonprofit ocean organisation founded in the U.S. - has been seeking to protect and restore critically threatened Caspian Sea sturgeon for the past 4 years under the Caviar Emptor campaign - a coalition that joined it with the Natural Resources Defense Council and the University of Miami’s Pew Institute for Ocean Science. Its efforts in urging protection for the fish have led to the U.S. government to list beluga sturgeon as “threatened with extinction” under the U.S. Endangered Species Act and to a 50% reduction in international trade of beluga caviar as authorized by the UN’s CITES.



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International trade in beluga caviar declined from 25 tons in 2001 to just over 9 tons in 2003, of which the United States imported 5.3 tons (60%) and France imported one ton (11%). (Source : most recent reports by the World Conservation Monitoring Center, an arm of the United Nations Environmental Program).

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decision:

Requires additional reports from Caspian states, but leaves trade open

A small step in the right direction, but a long-term, comprehensive ban is needed

To enforce its listing of beluga sturgeon on the threatened species list, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced late last week that it would require additional proof from Caspian states that they were making progress in sturgeon conservation, but in the meantime, they left trade open.

SeaWeb says there is still the need for a long-term ban on the international trade of beluga caviar in order for the species to recover.

“The Caspian caviar trade is out of control, plagued by declining numbers of fish and illegal activities that have created a crisis, from an environmental and quality perspective,” said Spruill. “It is in the hands of consumers to help save this species. It doesn’t make sense to eat the eggs of a threatened species such as beluga sturgeon. There are a number of exquisite farmed caviars in which we can indulge with pure enjoyment and without guilt.”

Seaweb announces a Caviar Campaign in Europe, starting in France, second largest beluga caviar importer and growing producer of farmed caviar

Seaweb is now calling on consumers around the world to help save this critically threatened species by avoiding beluga caviar. France is the world’s second largest importer of beluga caviar. French and other European consumers can play a role in the sturgeon’s recovery by avoiding the delicacy. By creating a caviar campaign in Europe, SeaWeb aims to protect the endangered wild sturgeon of the Caspian in part by pointing consumers, chefs and retailers towards eco-friendly farmed caviars from across Europe.

About Seaweb:

SeaWeb is a communications-based nonprofit organization that uses social marketing to advance ocean conservation. By raising public awareness, advancing science-based solutions and mobilizing decision-makers around ocean conservation, it urges better protection of the ocean and the life within it. The SeaWeb team is composed of experienced individuals from a wide variety of fields, including biology, policy, research, communications and marketing. SeaWeb conducts extensive reviews of the latest information on coastal and ocean issues, and is an objective resource on the health of the ocean.

Seaweb has acted for 4 years under Caviar Emptor program - a coalition of SeaWeb, Natural Resources Defense Council and the University of Miami’s Pew Institute for Ocean Science. Starting in 2005, Seaweb will develop a caviar campaign in France, Belgium and Switzerland, funded by the Oak Foundation, a private family foundation that seeks to encourage sustainable development and preserve the environment.

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For more information on the U.S. caviar campaign, see : www.caviareemptor.org