

PARCO REGIONALE DELTA DEL PO

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Region: **Venetia**

Area: **12,592 ha**

Established in: **1997**

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A Life for the Sturgeon

It looks like it is just arrived from Prehistory: with its long and thin body, projecting snout and, above all, its bony shields along the body, the Sturgeon does not look like a modern sea and river fish but as a fossil from the Upper Cretaceous.

In our country there are three Sturgeon species: the Adriatic sturgeon (*Acipenser naccarii*), Common sturgeon (*Acipenser sturio*) and the rare Beluga sturgeon (*Huso huso*).

The first is an Adriatic endemic species and lives only in the southeastern part of Europe. It can be easily recognized for its long and pointed snout and its smaller size. This species is disappearing in all the Italian range of distribution which includes the northern part of the Adriatic Sea and part of its tributary rivers. The risk of extinction is high because of water pollution, indiscriminate fishing, the Sturgeon's long reproduction cycle and interventions such as dams and barrages along the rivers, which prevent it from finding the most suitable reproduction areas. All Sturgeon species are anadromous migratory fish species: this means they reproduce in fresh water and spend the rest of their life in the sea. The Adriatic sturgeon migrates every year to the Rivers Po, Adige, Piave and Brenta, its main reproduction areas (but it reaches also River Ticino: in 2003, thanks to Life funding, the Park of the Ticino Valley started a project in order to draw up an action plan for the conservation of the Adriatic sturgeon).

For the year 2004 of Life Nature Program, the Regional Park of the Po Delta (Venetia) presented a project, then approved and financed by the European Union, for the expansion of the Adriatic sturgeon. It is a large-scale initiative, involving 16 co-financing bodies, aiming at the expansion and growth of the natural populations of this species in the main rivers flowing into the Northern Adriatic Sea.

Beside the Park, which is the promoter of this project, and Regione Veneto, also Regione Lombardia, with Ersaf (Regional Authority for Development, Agriculture and Forestry), Regione Emilia-Romagna, the Provinces of Rovigo, Venice, Ferrara, Piacenza, Treviso, Padua, Cremona, Verona, the University of Ferrara, Istituto Spallanzani in Milan and the University of Padua take part actively in this initiative. The total amount of funds is 2,228 Million Euros, 60% of which is paid by the European Union (1,258 Million). Regione Veneto and the Park Authority contribute with 113,000 Euros.

The aim of the project is to cast a light on the factors which led this fish on the brink of extinction. Causes such as its limited distribution, a particular vital cycle, ecological needs, and excessive fishing pressure determine an extremely low population density which may seriously jeopardize the reproductive activity of the each population.

The first important step towards the protection of this species was taken with the ban on sturgeon fishing and the acknowledgement of Article 12 of the Habitat Directive in the regional laws of Venetia, Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna.

But this is not enough. A national action plan will be drawn up, as already done in Lombardy (see the above-mentioned Life Project in Parco del Ticino), which will be adopted by all local institutions.

At the same time, a massive sturgeon reintroduction will be carried out. About 30,000 alevins will be released in ten different rivers. Considering the average death rate, more than 2,000 of them will reach sexual maturity. For this reason, the two animal houses in Lombardy and Venetia will be expanded in order to breed the alevins to be released in the rivers and for similar projects to be carried out in the future.

Moreover, genetic studies will be carried out and the results, together with those deriving from the restocking intervention, will be included in two databases, freely accessible from the Internet. Before being released in the rivers, the alevins will be electronically marked, in order to recognize them during later surveys and to facilitate the work of the operating network formed by provincial guards, volunteers, fishermen both in fresh water and at sea. There will also be communication initiatives to involve the school sphere and to create the necessary local support to the project.

The project will be terminated at the end of September 2007.