



Illegal Wildlife Trade (IWT) Challenge Fund Half Year Report

(due 31st October 2021)

Project reference	IWT082
Project title	Combating poaching and trafficking of Critically Endangered sturgeon
Country(ies)	Georgia
Lead organisation	Fauna & Flora International
Partners(s)	High School of Justice (HSoJ) School of Natural Sciences and Engineering, Ilia State University (ISU) Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia Ministry of Finance of Georgia, Revenue Service, Customs Department
Project leader	Fleur Scheele, Sub-Regional Manager Caucasus at Fauna & Flora International
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	HYR 2 29 th October 2021
Project website/blog/social media	N/A

1. Outline progress over the last 6 months (April – Sept) against the agreed project implementation timetable (if your project has started less than 6 months ago, please report on the period since start up to the end September).

Year 2 of this three year project (2020-2023) started with a high number of activities. As the sturgeon spawning season starts in spring, with the last spawning events thought to be taking place in September, the period April – September is our main period for field activities. Field activities in the spawning period focus on the Rioni River migration route and on the spawning grounds, some 90 kilometres inland from the Black Sea. The FFI sturgeon conservation team was active in the field every single day between 1st April and 30th September 2021. In addition,

various training events were organised throughout the whole country and where physical events were not feasible, the team ensured it was present online for information dissemination and awareness raising.

Output 1: Local citizens protect sturgeons against poaching for illegal trade and support legal fishing activities, on the Rioni River spawning migration route.

Activity 1.1

FFI's sturgeon conservation officer mobilised the FFI citizen inspectors to patrol the Rioni River for poaching activity and immediately continued to involve fishers in training and awareness raising. Citizen inspectors and student investigators also monitored markets along the Black Sea shore for wild caught sturgeon.

Shifting of some unspent funds from Project Year 1 (as agreed with DEFRA in December 2020) to our activities with citizen inspectors in Project Year 2 has allowed us to have a high presence at the river throughout the full sturgeon spawning season.

During 4633 hours of patrolling on foot and 539 hours patrolling by boat between 1st April and 30th September, the 12 FFI citizen inspectors and the sturgeon conservation officer covered 3547 kilometres on the Rioni River and detected only 15 cases of illegal fishing, which is considered to be a great success as poaching activity in previous years was significantly higher (see FFI's annual poaching monitoring reports). FFI's anti-poaching team is now widely known at the river and this is deterring poachers, as is frequently confirmed to our team by local fishers.

1.2

Between 1st April and 30th September, the FFI team trained 185 fishers, 118 of whom are anglers at the Rioni River and 65 are Black Sea fishers. The fishers learned about the use of legal fishing methods, and were taught and asked to take non-intrusive fin clips for genetic analysis as well as photographs when catching and releasing a sturgeon. All fishers were also educated about the endangered status of sturgeon, and were asked to always release sturgeon. In many cases, Rioni fishers are now willing to release sturgeon, and many have shared photographs and samples of sturgeon since these trainings. The total number of sturgeons reported by fishers to FFI in 2021 until the end of September 2021 reached 65, with 60 genetic samples collected.

1.3

The FFI team has continued to communicate with River Council and Youth River Council meetings, but no activities could be organised to COVID-19 risk (see section below). Alternative ways to reach these target groups will be introduced in the second half of the Project Year.

Output 2: Increased capacity of law enforcement and government agencies to enforce laws on poaching and trafficking of sturgeon in Georgia (Rioni River and Black Sea).

2.1

In all cases where FFI detected illegal fishing equipment at the Rioni River during the reporting period, the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture was immediately informed through the Environmental Supervision Department's Hotline. All inspectors who subsequently arrived at the Rioni received support and on-site training on detection of fishing equipment, use of the boat, and safe confiscation of illegal equipment. During the 2021 poaching season at the Rioni, 10 law enforcement officers received such training and support of the FFI team. This number is lower than the 20 inspectors we previously anticipated, but it can be explained by the very low number of poaching incidents at the Rioni – there was simply no need to for authorities to intervene.

2.2 and 2.4

To reach our goal (2.2) of training >150 members of Georgia's national Environmental Supervision, Customs, and Police departments at their headquarters in Tbilisi on IWT occurrence and impacts, detection, species identification and regulations and application of crime prevention techniques in a wildlife crime context, we developed training materials and contracted the Senior Specialist of the Biodiversity Division of the Department of Biodiversity and Forestry from the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture, as well as the Head of the Biodiversity Control Service, Environmental Supervision Department from the same Ministry. Using our educational video from the molecular genetics laboratory at Ilia State University (2.4), and bringing a bird specialist from the same university, we organised small training events at strategically selected locations along the Black Sea coast. No large Tbilisi-based event was organised due to COVID-19 risk (see relevant section in this document). In total, 79 law enforcement officers were trained (47 women, 32 men), of which 35 officers from the Customs Department of the Ministry of Finance; 20 police officers of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and 24 environmental inspectors from the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture.

2.3

A scientific paper by the FFI team in collaboration with Ilia State University and the University of Padova (Italy) bringing the important discovery of hybrid sturgeon in the Rioni River was submitted to the scientific journal *Conservation Genetics* by the end of Project Year 1, and in the first half of Year 2, was slightly modified after questions from the journal and was subsequently accepted by the editors. The article is expected to be published by the Springer journal during the second half of Year 2 and will appear as an open access article. The paper is significant as it is the first article describing the occurrence of young hybrids born in the Rioni and the fact that Russian sturgeon and Stellate sturgeon have been hybridising on multiple occasions has important implications for conservation. Data collection, sequencing and analysis partially took place prior to the start of the IWT Challenge Fund project, and was at the time financially supported by the US Fish and Wildlife Service. The work on the article and its publication continued under the IWT Challenge Fund grant and the publication fees required to publish the article as an open access article will be financed with the IWTCF grant.

Intensive collaboration with fishers over the reported period led to the availability of sufficient sturgeon samples of various species, to allow for development of molecular markers to identify species and hybrids. As genetic sample collection from wild sturgeon both in the Rioni and in the Black Sea continued steadily over the first months of Year 2, the FFI team has been able to reach an agreement with the genetic laboratory of the world class Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research (Germany) for a collaboration to jointly analyse 100 sturgeon samples that were collected by FFI. The Institute is kindly offering its support to our project and has invited FFI's collaborator from the Ilia State University molecular genetics laboratory to work in the Berlin laboratory for several weeks in 2021.

In November and December 2021, the Ilia State University geneticist will bring samples to Germany and this geneticist will work with colleagues of the Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research. The geneticists will then use sex-specific markers for every sample; work on mitochondrial DNA sequencing for species identification (for newly collected samples which have not been identified yet); and modification of sex-specific markers if needed (-these markers are not tested for *Acipenser nudiiventris* species and we might need to modify them); use other available species-specific markers for hybrid detection and population genetic diversity analysis. In addition, the geneticists will work on a scientific paper about the Ship sturgeon (*Acipenser nudiiventris*), a species formerly thought to be extinct in the region, but which was re-discovered by the FFI team in 2020 and 2021 (see publication in *Oryx*, 2021). The support we are receiving from European sturgeon geneticists, including from the Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research (IZW), is of crucial importance for the development of scientific work on Eastern Black Sea sturgeon genetics and has great implications for

conservation as well as science.

We have also frequently received support and advice from the World Sturgeon Conservation Society (WSCS) on sturgeon research and conservation; and the FFI team will continue to seek collaboration with IZW, WCSC, as well as with the University of Padua.

Output 3: Increased capacity of prosecutors and judiciary to interpret wildlife laws and effect increased successful prosecution and sentencing of wildlife crime cases

3.1 and 3.2

To achieve our goal of 50 judges taking better informed decisions when considering and sentencing relevant wildlife crime cases by year 3, we organised another training for judges on environmental law and illegal wildlife trade (3.1), and combined this with our planned training on international conventions and EU Directives (3.2). Based on requests from judges and our partner, the High School of Justice in Tbilisi, we organised a three day full time training at a remote location in Georgia that covered not only topics such as wildlife crime and national biodiversity protection laws, but also all relevant international environmental law frameworks.

The training was highly successful, with 15 judges trained and showing great interest in all topics. The full training programme was attended by all participants. The programme was shaped by FFI, the High School of Justice, a number of judges who had become trainers under our previous training for judges (see FFI's Annual Report to DEFRA over Project Year 1), and FFI's consultants. Trainers included Georgia's most experienced and most knowledgeable environmental experts as well as trainers who were trained by FFI in February 2021 (Project Year 1). The training was opened by the British Ambassador to Georgia via an online connection with the British Embassy in Tbilisi.

Valuable to the training were also the vivid discussions between participants and trainers about ecological damage, economic development versus environmental protection, responsibility of judges to not only consider short-term interests of offenders but also to weigh and quantify the long-term damage of environmental crimes to society and economy, and the current state of environmental legislation in Georgia in the context of the international environmental agreements to which Georgia is a signatory.

During and after the training, the judges emphasised that similar trainings had never before taken place in Georgia, and that they generally have limited time to focus on and study wildlife crime and environmental protection. The training was considered to be covering relevant topics that much needed attention; the participants were very pleased with the trainers and indicated that the programme covered their interests and needs. They asked FFI to organise more such training events, which the FFI team will certainly consider for future activities, projects, and fundraising.

Due to the success of the training, the great interest of judges in more future trainings, and the fruitful, friendly, and highly professional collaboration with the High School of Justice, we will seek to repeat and expand this work where possible.

3.3

Preparations were made for prosecutors' trainings (3.3), to be taking place in the second half of Project Year 2. For this we have already been communicating with the US Department of Justice at the American Embassy in Tbilisi, and the first contacts with prosecutors have been established.

3.4

A meeting was organised for the Wildlife Crime Platform (3.4) which we established in Year 1. During the platform meeting, the participants were introduced to the European Network of Prosecutors for the Environment through an introduction video, while FFI's geneticist from Ilia

State University presented information about the possibilities of genetic investigations for wildlife crime cases. A case study on wildlife trafficking was presented by a consultant with whom FFI has successfully worked before: an MBE Higher Officer, Border Force National CITES/IWT team, Specialist Crime Command from the United Kingdom. The case study was met with great interest from the participants, and the FFI team has reached out to contacts in Asia, Africa, and South America to identify interesting speakers for future wildlife crime platform meetings to be organised during the second half of Project Year 2.

Output 4: Increased coordination and action by key actors within Black Sea range states to address IWT

4.1

Encounters with high-level national decision-makers took place on multiple occasions. FFI engaged with the World Sturgeon Conservation Society to raise the question of sturgeon conservation in the Rioni River with the Minister of Environmental Protection and Agriculture. The WSCS communicated with the Minister and Deputy Minister via mail, to which the Deputy Minister responded in writing. To address sturgeon conservation concerns, share insights from the field and findings from our scientific research, and offer support on shaping a national sturgeon conservation strategy, FFI met with both Minister and the Deputy Minister in September 2021; spoke with the head of the Biodiversity and Forestry Department on multiple occasions and gave two presentations about sturgeon conservation to the Ministry, and participated in a multi stakeholder meeting about sturgeon that was organised by WWF in summer. In addition, FFI engaged with the European Energy Community to raise concerns over the impacts of planned hydropower construction on the Rioni River.

4.2

As no visits to Turkey were possible due to the pandemic (see section below), the FFI team merely communicated online with colleagues at WWF Turkey, and postponed visits to new stakeholders such as Turkish state institutions, fisheries organisations, and academic institutions to the second half of the Project Year.

4.3

With lack of possibilities for international conferences and travel, no activities were conducted under this point. This is expected to change in the second half of the Project Year, when the team will be focussing on Black Sea fisheries and is planning to engage directly with FAO, the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean, and the European Commission.

Output 5: Evidence-based behaviour change strategy developed to tackle demand post project.

5.1

Work on this activity will start as planned in the second half of this Project Year.

2a. Give details of any notable problems or unexpected developments/lessons learnt that the project has encountered over the last 6 months (for COVID-19 specific delays/problems, please use 2b). Explain what impact these could have on the project and whether the changes will affect the budget and timetable of project activities.

FFI's conservation officer who is responsible for activities with judges and prosecutors went on parental leave during the first half of Project Year 2. Therefore the training event for prosecutors was postponed to the second half of the year. No further delays or budget impacts were caused as a result of the absence of this team member.

By the end of the reporting period, the FFI team member responsible for strategic oversight and technical support was called to temporarily perform other duties within the larger organisation. He was replaced immediately by another FFI colleague with experience leading on Darwin and IWTCF projects at FFI and therefore continuity of strategic oversight and technical support of the project was guaranteed. As this situation is temporary, we are expecting the former staff member to return to his position in the project in the second half of Project Year 2. No Change Request was submitted as no structural changes are expected to be occurring.

With regards to maintaining a healthy gender balance in our team and promoting gender equality through all our activities, we put a lot of effort into attracting more female citizen inspectors in our team this year. Unfortunately, just before the start of this Project Year, a few young female citizen inspectors left the team as they had to prioritise their education, and despite a large campaign in the region to identify new female colleagues, only 2 out of 12 citizen inspectors and skippers on our team were female by the end of the reporting period. Although the FFI field team attracted advice from FFI UK's Senior Technical Specialist, Gender, Livelihoods and Governance; engaged intensively with two dozen women expressing interest in a position; advertised positions for female citizen inspectors on Facebook; included female sturgeon students in the recruitment process to generate a safe environment and remove any potential biases from FFI's male sturgeon conservation officer, and show to potential recruits that the sturgeon conservation and research activities are conducted by women and men equally, the team unfortunately failed to achieve a more balanced citizen inspectors team.

Our analysis is that there are multiple reasons why women are less likely to be hired: 1) in this country, all activities associated with fishing, hunting, boating, and generally spending time in nature outside of agricultural fields or yards are generally considered to be reserved for men. Therefore, women are less likely to consider a job that requires spending many hours at the river, and their husbands, families, and neighbours strongly argue against women taking such initiative. Social disapproval of such an untraditional job is discouraging women who might themselves have wanted to give it a try. The FFI team is attempting to take these strong biases and prejudices away by frequently engaging with husbands and families and showing very transparently how FFI is working, even inviting family members to come to the river when needed, but removing the scepticism of the whole family is time-consuming and does not often lead people to change their perceptions. 2) Families feel the work is dangerous and women should not expose themselves to physical risks at the river. The FFI team is attempting to reduce the risk as much as possible and is always entering discussions with families to explain that the risk really is limited: due to our non-confrontational, inclusive and friendly approach, there have never been any serious arguments or physically threatening situations at the river since our team started operating in 2017. In addition, no citizen inspectors are obliged to work alone, during night time, or at locations they prefer to avoid. In addition, FFI selects citizen inspectors who are trustworthy and kind to their colleagues; citizen inspectors can choose the partners they wish to work with; and there is a strong emphasis on equal treatment of women, so a female citizen inspector would not need to work in an intimidating work atmosphere. Nevertheless, interest of women for a job as a citizen inspector remains low.

During our next field season, which will start in March 2022, we will revise our strategy on how to engage and include more women in our citizen inspectors team and attempt to increase the percentage of women in our team up from 17% to 40%.

2b. Please outline any specific issues which your project has encountered as a result of COVID-19. Where you have adapted your project activities in response to the pandemic, please briefly outline how you have done so here. Explain what residual impact there may be on your project and whether the changes will affect the budget and timetable of

project activities.

The FFI team based in Georgia experienced many challenges associated with COVID-19 during the first half of Project Year 2. Georgia has been ranking in the top ten of the world's most affected countries in terms of most cases per 100,000 residents throughout the reporting period and enters the second half of Project Year 2 as the world's number one.

The Georgian authorities ceased to impose restrictions on movement and lifted the curfew that was in place for much of Project Year 1.

Although Chinese vaccines started to become available from May onwards, and Pfizer started being administered from July onwards, vaccination rates in Georgia have remained minimal with one out of four adults fully vaccinated by the end of the reporting period and about 40% of the population refusing to be vaccinated.

Safety of staff members therefore remained a concern for all activities. Two FFI team members in Georgia were infected with COVID-19 during the reporting period but were able to return to work after several weeks of illness.

No group events could be organised in the project region, such as Youth River Council events for children, or meetings and discussions with the River Council (1.3). Due to the fact that the project region is poor and many households do not have computers and internet access, no satisfactory digital alternatives could replace in-person awareness raising activities. While the FFI team was hoping for the pandemic to reach a low in summer, perhaps allowing for some group work in August, this unfortunately did not happen. Therefore, Youth River Council activities will be replaced by sturgeon paintings on schools in the region, as the paintings are widely loved and appreciated and will enable the FFI team to return to these locations for actual activities with children and adults at a later point in time. Meanwhile, the local Facebook page that aims to promote nature conservation and raise awareness on the need for local fishers and villagers to refrain from killing or trading wild sturgeon, is frequently showing new posts about sturgeon and showing our work to people in the region who do have internet access. The page had 9,500 followers by the end of the reporting period and continues to attract frequent attention from our target audience in the project region.

Citizen inspectors could do their poaching monitoring work in a relatively undisturbed manner (1.1), as patrols on the Rioni River do not require frequent close encounters with many people. Fishers were being trained by the FFI team (1.2), individually or with a handful of people only. On a few occasions, Black Sea fishing crews hosted our sturgeon conservation officer for an awareness raising session. This posed some risk to our sturgeon conservation officer but as these meetings were essential for our anti-trafficking work at the Black Sea, and these events were limited in size and frequency, the FFI team felt the level of risk was acceptable.

While practical assistance could be given to the Environmental Supervision Department (2.1) at the river, it was not possible to organise group training events for the whole department or for the customs service (2.2). Instead, a various small local trainings were provided to regional departments by one of FFI's conservation officers. (2.2). Such local, relatively informal training sessions will continue to be organised in the second half of the project year and are feasible as long as state regulations will allow for such events.

The EU Directives learning visit to Europe (3.2) that was planned to be organised in Project Year 2 was cancelled in its planned form due to the fact that the FFI team anticipated international travel for a group of people not to be safe throughout the entire Project Year. Instead, lectures on the EU Directives were delivered during a training event that was combined with activity (3.1): FFI and High School of Justice to develop environmental law and IWT training module for judges and the module taught annually in HSoJ's regular teaching curriculum. A group of 15 judges, 4 organisers, and 5 trainers underwent a PCR test prior to the training and then moved to a conference location in Eastern Georgia for a three day training event. During the event, all persons present also underwent rapid tests, and face masks were mandatory.

The decision for an in-person event was made upon request of participants and of the High School of Justice and turned out to be the right choice, as all participants indicated they would not have had the patience to follow an online training for three full days, and the many fruitful discussions and interactions would not have taken place. We believe therefore that people's physical presence enabled the activity to be a success, and we would organise it again in its current form. The funds for international travel and subsistence that had been budgeted for a multiple day trip of 10 judges to the European Union, were used instead for national travel, a conference location, PCR tests, hotel and subsistence for 15 judges in Eastern Georgia. As the event was high impact with great results and the contents of the learning events were actually no different than planned, we feel that this slight change in the use of funds has fully enabled us to reach our goals under activities 3.1 and 3.2.

The lack of large-scale events taking place and the impossibility to plan for major group events meant that our activities under output 4 were limited. International travel remained problematic and no FFI team members have been able to travel abroad for engagement with Turkish stakeholders on Black Sea fisheries and transboundary fish trade. This was partially compensated for by engaging via calls and email with WWF colleagues in Turkey, but much-needed physical visits for introductions to Turkish scientific and state fish management institutions were postponed to the second half of Project Year 2.

National exchanges were limited to regular exchanges with officials of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture, a physical meeting with the Minister and Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture, and participation in an online multi stakeholder meeting about sturgeon in the Rioni River, organised by our colleagues at WWF. Activities under output 4 will continue to be hindered by concerns over COVID-19 in the second half of Project Year 2, but the FFI team will be ready to take any opportunity to reach objectives under this output whenever possible.

2c. Have any of these issues been discussed with LTS International and if so, have changes been made to the original agreement?

Discussed with LTS: Yes/No

Formal change request submitted: Yes/No

Received confirmation of change acceptance Yes/No

3a. Do you currently expect to have any significant (e.g. more than £5,000) underspend in your budget for this year?

Yes No Estimated underspend: £

3b. If yes, then you need to consider your project budget needs carefully. Please remember that any funds agreed for this financial year are only available to the project in this financial year.

If you anticipate a significant underspend because of justifiable changes within the project, please submit a rebudget Change Request as soon as possible. There is no guarantee that Defra will agree a rebudget, so please ensure you have enough time to make appropriate changes if necessary. Please DO NOT send these in the same email as your report.

4. Are there any other issues you wish to raise relating to the project or to IWT Challenge Fund management, monitoring, or financial procedures?

Not this time.

If you were asked to provide a response to this year's annual report review with your next half year report, please attach your response to this document.

Please note: Any planned modifications to your project schedule/workplan can be discussed in this report but **should also** be raised with LTS International through a Change Request. **Please DO NOT send these in the same email.**

Please send your **completed report by email** to IWT-Fund@ltsi.co.uk. The report should be between 2-3 pages maximum. **Please state your project reference number in the header of your email message e.g. Subject: IWT001 Half Year Report.**