

## Biodiversity Challenge Funds Projects

### Darwin Initiative, Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund, and Darwin Plus Half Year Report

*Note: If there is any confidential information within the report that you do not wish to be shared on our website, please ensure you clearly highlight this.*

**Submission Deadline: 31<sup>st</sup> October 2022**

<b>Project reference</b>	IWT082
<b>Project title</b>	Combating poaching and trafficking of Critically Endangered sturgeon
<b>Country(ies)/territory(ies)</b>	Georgia / Turkey
<b>Lead partner</b>	Fauna & Flora International
<b>Partner(s)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High School of Justice (HSoJ)</li> <li>• School of Natural Sciences and Engineering, Ilia State University (ISU)</li> <li>• Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia</li> <li>• Ministry of Finance of Georgia, Revenue Service, Customs Department</li> </ul>
<b>Project leader</b>	Bianca Roberts, Projects Manager – Georgia, Caucasus Programme, Fauna & Flora International
<b>Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)</b>	HYR 3 Reporting Period: 1 April 2022 – 30 September 2022
<b>Project website/blog/social media</b>	Not applicable

**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 end September).**

**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 Citizen Inspectors patrol the Rioni River to monitor poaching and IWT activities throughout the sturgeon spawning season, reporting incidents to the Environmental Supervision Department.***

**Progress:** Activity 1.1 has been delivered as planned in Year 3. At the time of writing, 1,947 km and 1,714 hours of patrols have taken place across the 90km of the Rioni River designated under the project. Patrols took place both during the day and at night, led by 12 local Citizen Inspectors who monitored illegal activities during the entire spawning season. This season, four poaching incidents have been detected and reported to the Environmental Supervision Department.

Whilst the data is yet to be analysed, early figures for the 2022 season (March 2022 - September 2022) paired with findings from previous years evidence a decrease in poaching incidents year-on-year, despite increased patrolling effort (kilometres patrolled & hours spent patrolling). This may suggest that patrolling, education and awareness raising efforts and relationship building with communities could be reducing illegal fishing in the lower Rioni River (i.e. the 90km patrolled under the project). This may also have been impacted by out-migration and/or emigration from the region, as people leave to search for work in urban areas or neighbouring countries, resulting in a decreasing population along the Rioni River.

***Activity 1.2: FFI trains 100 fishers on legal fishing techniques, raise awareness on sturgeon conservation, and invites and encourages them to actively support sturgeon conservation and research.***

**Progress:** To date, including Years 1, 2 and 3 of the project, 92 fishers have been trained through formal training workshops by Citizen Inspectors and field-based team members. Through one-on-one engagement and mentoring, awareness has been raised among 165 fishers, with at least 95% of fishers agreeing to report sturgeon sightings to the local FFI team. So far in Year 3, 34 reports of sturgeon by-catch have been made to the project by Rioni River fishers. As such the project has exceeded the original target (100 fishers) for this activity, which was possible due to the relationships built with the fishers of the Rioni River. That is, the field-based team and Citizen Inspectors have incorporated fisher engagement as part of their patrols. They have been initiating conversations and building relationships with fishers, which has produced tangible results (and even aided the implementation of other project activities), including fishers actively sharing videos and photos of sturgeon releases (that is, when accidentally caught as by-catch). These less formal approaches, paired with more formal trainings & structured outreach, engages these key stakeholders in an accessible and locally appropriate manner that is proving to be highly successful in the Rioni River context.

***Activity 1.3: FFI and River Councils jointly organise 6 meetings, discussions, and awareness raising festivals and events per year, reaching 800 local villagers, teachers and school children.***

**Progress:** Activity 1.3 was one of the activities most impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic as it required one-on-one community engagement, in-person meetings and/or events. Moving to an online format was challenging, and often impossible, as many individuals could not easily access the internet (as reported in previous years). As such, a change of approach was required in Year 1 and 2 of the project, including engagement via social media.

In Year 3, Activity 1.3 is progressing well and a lesson plan has been created to enable teachers to educate students about sturgeon. This approach (i.e. a lesson plan) was chosen based upon lessons learnt by the project during Years 1 and 2, that is, the lesson plan can be disseminated by the project and utilised by schools, even if Covid-19 prohibits direct contact and one-on-meetings. Now that Covid-19 restrictions have been lifted, planning is under way to deliver Rioni River Youth Council activities in the latter half of Year 3. To support Activity 1.3, FFI has hired an intern who is providing guidance regarding youth & community engagement

activities. Given the challenges of engaging women on the project, this intern is a female scientist who has recently finished her masters at Ilia State University. This internship will enable her to gain experience and build contacts to support her career as a woman in a STEM field.

Engagement of adults via the River Council mechanism has present challenges, that is, adults showed little interest to form or participate in a River Council despite the project using various and repeated approaches to generate interest. As such, the project adjusted its approach and has utilised other activities and avenues to engage & raise awareness among adults in Rioni River communities, including via social media and via Activity 1.2. The alternative strategies adopted by the project due to Covid-19 has meant that thousands of adults have been engaged via social media and community outreach, far exceeding the original goal of reaching 800 individuals. Year 3 will continue to attempt to engage adults via different approaches, and place focus on the Youth River Council which has proved successful in previous years.

## **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).**

***Activity 2.1: FFI's Citizen Inspectors provide in-situ intelligence and logistical support to Environmental Supervision Department to reach, detect, handle, and confiscate illegal fishing equipment on the water.***

**Progress:** Over the Year 3 poaching season (April-September 2022), engagement of Environmental Supervision Department inspectors has been ongoing by the poaching monitoring team and Citizen Inspectors, with four reports of illegal activities made to the department.

***Activity 2.2: FFI organises central-level training events for authorities on IWT, CITES, threats and international obligations two days a year, every year.***

**Progress:** In Years 1 and 2 of the project, 109 members of Georgia's national Environmental Supervision, Customs, and Police departments were trained on IWT and its impacts, detection, species identification, regulations and application of crime prevention techniques in a wildlife crime context. Planning is underway to deliver training to the remaining 41 law enforcement actors, with the workshop scheduled for November 2022. As such the project is on track to achieve our goal of 150 law enforcement actors trained over the three years of the project, including in genetic detection techniques (Activity 2.3 below).

***Activity 2.3: FFI and Ilia State University develop molecular techniques for species identification, provide sampling instructions to authorities, disseminate sampling kits, and provide technical support for prosecution.***

**Progress:** As a direct result of this grant, molecular genetics analysis techniques are available at Ilia State University, and are being used for genetic identification of sturgeon in the Rioni River and Black Sea, including trafficked sturgeon. Specifically, the following tests are available and have been used to inform our understanding of sturgeon populations in Georgia:

- Sturgeon species identification;
- Sex-specific test for sturgeon sex identification for two species: Russian sturgeon (*Acipenser gueldenstaettii*); Beluga sturgeon (*Huso huso*) – a globally novel technique that was developed in 2021 and is being trailed in Georgia;
- Beluga sturgeon species-specific test;
- Russian sturgeon species-specific test;
- Stellate sturgeon (*Acipenser stellatus*) specific test; and
- Multiple sturgeon species-specific nuclear markers.

All above mentioned tests are designed to identify sturgeon species and species-specific parental contributions to detect sturgeon hybrid individuals. Analyses can be used to detect commercial and wild sturgeon interspecies hybrids. Since 1 April 2022, 15 sturgeon genetic samples have been tested. Samples collected from the Rioni River and the Black Sea during October 2021-March 2022 include:

- 4 individuals identified as Beluga sturgeon (*Huso huso*);

- 4 individuals identified as Russian sturgeon (*Acipenser gueldenstaetii*);
- 6 individuals identified as Stellate sturgeon (*Acipenser stellatus*); and
- 1 individual identified as non-native Siberian sturgeon (*Acipenser baerii*).

Additionally, the project is supporting two interns from Ilia State University. One intern is using the aforementioned molecular genetics techniques to analyse Russian sturgeon (*Acipenser gueldenstaetii*) samples from the Black Sea and the Rioni River to produce her master's thesis and update a database focused on sturgeon populations in Georgia. As mentioned above, the second intern has supported project activities and outputs including supporting research on the Black Sea and community outreach activities. Taking into consideration the gender elements of the project, and the fact that women are under represented in STEM fields, both interns are female scientists.

The project is also supporting two PhD students and one master's student at Ilia State University to develop a sturgeon research group in Georgia, and the group has now developed a close relationship with sturgeon scientists from the EU and the USA. Finally, one of the PhD students noted above is being supported by the project to undertake an exchange in America, where she is building her capacity to lead on sturgeon research.

Further, two scientific journal articles are underway, capturing research findings supported by the project. The first focuses on Ship sturgeon in the Rioni River, utilising novel genetic techniques to determine the identity and gender of sturgeon samples. The second focuses on utilising genetic analysis to differentiate wild and commercial sturgeon using nuclear molecular markers.

With regards to providing technical support for prosecution, to date including Years 1 and 2 of the project, 18 prosecutors, 49 judges and 54 law enforcement members have received training to build their understanding of techniques used in the genetic identification of trafficked sturgeon. The project aims to train a further 41 law enforcement members in Year 3, with the trainings including information on genetic techniques for wildlife crime cases. These trainings have been led by a female researcher from Ilia State University – another important gender focused output for the project, which is seeking to present opportunities for women working in STEM focused roles and wildlife conservation. Whilst no wildlife crime cases have been brought before courts in Georgia, knowledge and awareness have been raised for the first time as a result of activities implemented throughout this project. Ongoing, long term capacity development work is needed in country to change attitudes and build capacity of stakeholders involved in wildlife crime & its prosecution – an ongoing, aspirational outcome of FFI's that extends beyond the life of this project.

***Activity 2.4: FFI supports and encourages Environmental Supervision Department to inspect markets for illegal sturgeon sales and use genetic sampling techniques to distinguish wild meat from farmed.***

**Progress:** As reported in previous years, engagement with the Environmental Supervision Department (ESD) is on-going with the goal of supporting Activity 2.4. Continued focus is needed to make the ESD comfortable using genetic sampling techniques in their day to day enforcement work, and despite ongoing efforts, they show hesitancy to inspect markets for illegal sturgeon sales and use genetic sampling techniques. This level of hesitation is not surprising given they are still building their capacity and confidence to handle such enforcement matters consistently, and as such Year 3 of the Project will continue to provide training, kits and raise awareness of the impact that genetic techniques can have on sturgeon-related (and other fish, mammals, etc) law enforcement. A formal Change Request seeking an adjustment to the log frame and project timeline will be submitted in support of this activity.

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

***Activity 3.1: FFI and High School of Justice develop environmental law and IWT training module for judges and the module taught annually in High School of Justice's (HSoJ's) regular teaching curriculum.***

**Progress:** This activity was delivered as planned in Year 3 and a training for judges was held on the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> of October in Tbilisi in partnership with the High School of Justice (HSoJ). FFI supported 29 judges and judge's assistants to travel from across Georgia to attend the workshop, which focused on:

- biodiversity-related national and international legislation, conventions and agreements and case laws;
- types of administrative penalties, general principles and standards for reviewing court cases and making decisions, rules and procedures;
- the importance of biodiversity and scale and impact of illegal wildlife trade; and
- opportunities to use forensic science in court.

Furthermore, sessions were led by two of the judges who attended the Training-of-Trainers (ToT) course delivered by the project in February, 2021. The HSoJ has requested that FFI hold another ToT course to train additional judges, which would enable the HSoJ to expand upon their existing work. Whilst this sits outside the scope of the current project, the approach of training & empowering local partners has been very successful and FFI aims to continue these activities & utilise this approach across our programme and beyond the life of this project.

**Activity 3.2 Progress:** This activity was successfully actioned in Year 2 of the project as planned.

**Activity 3.3 Progress:** This activity was successfully actioned in Year 2 of the project as planned.

**Activity 3.4: FFI and High School of Justice establish a wildlife crime platform and organise 2 platform meetings every year to stimulate exchange enforcers-prosecutors-judges.**

**Progress:** Per the log frame, the platform was established in Year 1 of the project for judges, prosecutors, and law enforcers to share relevant information to streamline the process of prosecuting traffickers. In Year 3 of the project, two platform meetings are scheduled for early 2023 and this activity is on track to be delivered as planned.

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

It is noted that due to the Covid-19 pandemic and Ukraine war, Output 4 has not progressed as planned and a formal Change Request will be submitted to request adjustments to the log frame and project timeline, allowing more time to complete this task.

**Activity 4.1: FFI initiates 8 exchanges with high-level national decision-makers in Georgia and organises one large multi-stakeholder meeting per year to lobby and advocate for sturgeon.**

**Progress:** With a challenging and intensifying socio-political context in Georgia and neighbouring countries, engagement of the government has proven difficult. Further, with leadership changes at FFI and staffing changes in government, some relationships between FFI and key ministries will need to be re-developed and strengthened. Progress in Year 3 has included meetings with key government officials, including from the Environmental Supervision Department and the Biodiversity and Forest Policy Department. Further, FFI attended key meetings that supported the project to lobby and advocate for sturgeon, including a National Sturgeon Conservation Working Group meeting and the National Aquaculture Development Strategy of Georgia stakeholder consultations, which sought input regarding the creation of a national plan for aquaculture development in Georgia. We will continue to build on this progress for the remainder of Year 3. Further, as Covid-19 and other factors have prohibited the delivery of all goals under Activity 4.1, changes will be proposed to the log frame and project timeline via a formal Change Request to support the project to invest more time in achieving the desired outputs under Activity 4.1.

**Activity 4.2: FFI meets several times a year with Turkish agencies and research institutions and collaborates on data collection and knowledge exchange regarding transboundary sturgeon trade.**

**Progress:** As above, socio-political complexities (i.e. the Ukraine Russia war, Erdogan's crackdown on silencing Universities and NGOs), and COVID-19 isolation rules, have hindered progress against this activity. The project is currently reviewing the stakeholder landscape, conducting key informant interviews & undertaking desk research to understand governance systems in Georgia and Turkey, including by-catch and illegal fishing in the Black Sea that supplies sturgeon for markets in western Georgia. Further, contact has been made with stakeholders in Turkey to support a scoping visit in 2023 to facilitate a knowledge exchange regarding transboundary sturgeon trade. Requested changes to the project log frame and timeline will be made via a formal Change Request to enable the project to invest more time in realising the full potential of Activity 4.2.

**Activity 4.3: FFI stimulates prioritisation of sturgeon conservation in regional planning and decision-making regarding fisheries, bycatch, and IWT in 4 regional and international Black Sea fora.**

**Progress:** Though Covid-19, and now the war, has hindered regional / international fora some progress has been made by meeting with key stakeholders individually and attending available regional and/or international fora, for example, presenting at the International Conference on Biodiversity, Ecology and Conservation of Marine Ecosystems on 'Interspecific Hybridization in Natural Sturgeon Populations of the Eastern Black Sea' and presenting at the North American Sturgeon and Paddle Fish Society Conference on 'Sturgeon diversity and interspecies hybridization in Eastern Black Sea, Georgia'. Given that opportunities to engage via fora have been reduced in previous years and regionally, the project is also undertaking research and interviewing key stakeholders to inform next steps for engagement of the fisheries sector of the Black Sea with the long-term vision of reducing by-catch and illegal fishing nationally and regionally (beyond the scope of this project).

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

**Activity 5.1: FFI produces a supply and demand study report and develops a behaviour change strategy.**

**Progress:** To support the production of a supply & demand report regarding sturgeon in Georgia, the following research has been conducted:

- Surveys of fish farms in Georgia known to be farming sturgeon, including the volume produced, source of fingerlings and genetic sampling (where possible) to confirm if wild sturgeon is being sold to and bred in farms;
- Market surveys to detect if wild sturgeon is being sold in fish markets in western Georgia;
- Surveys with fishers on the Black Sea regarding sturgeon by-catch;
- Summarising findings from poaching monitoring that speak to the supply of wild sturgeon from the Rioni River & Black sea; and
- Findings from a demand study focusing on the consumption of sturgeon meat in western Georgia.

The supply & demand report is currently under development and due to be completed by the end of Year 3, per the log frame. Additionally, findings from the demand study have been used to draft a behaviour change strategy and theory of change, which is on track to be completed by the end of Year 3 of the project as planned.

**2. Give details of any notable problems or unexpected developments/lessons learnt that the project has encountered over the last 6 months. Explain what impact these could have on the project and whether the changes will affect the budget and timetable of project activities.**

The last 6 months of the project have presented unforeseen developments that have presented challenges, as summarised below –

*Ukraine War:* The Ukraine war, paired with the Covid-19 pandemic, have resulted in an intensifying socio-political context and unrest in Georgia and regionally. This has presented challenges for the project in many ways, firstly and most importantly with the engagement of government stakeholders. With unprecedented challenges splitting the attention of government officials, the project has faced difficulties driving conservation outcomes in such a charged political climate.

Further, inflation in Georgia was 14% in 2022 and paired with war in Ukraine has led to cost increases on goods and services and has impacted product availability, including increasing project costs, such as fuel, food and accommodation, thereby impacting project expenditure.

Further, with the war in Ukraine there has been an influx of Russian migrants and tourists to Georgia who may be driving development in the Adjara region and supporting tourism sector growth. Whilst this is important for economic growth, unless tourism related development is managed sustainably it could pose a threat to the region’s natural heritage. Further, the influx of tourists may drive consumption of sturgeon products, which have historically been in high demand in Russia<sup>1, 2</sup>.

*Covid-19 Pandemic:* As seen globally the Covid-19 pandemic impacted Georgia over a number of years, with travel and other restrictions in place through April 2022. Delays caused by Covid-19 in Years 1 and 2 continue to impact the project in Year 3, with deliverables and activities moved from previous years to Year 3 now adding an additional work load on top of activities originally planned for Year 3 (and in addition to the Ukraine war). For example, research for the demand study under Activity 5.1 was originally due to be completed by Year 2, however, such a study necessitated field-based surveys that were not possible given the Covid-19 pandemic. As such, both the research study and the subsequent outputs, that is, the supply and demand report and SBC strategy have to be delivered in Year 3, truncating the timeline. Activity 5.1 will delivered on time but the delays have added pressure for the project team.

Whilst it is possible to deliver against many of the activities delayed until Year 3, other activities necessitated action in Years 1 and 2 and therefore cannot be fully delivered in Year 3 alone. This has been particularly challenging for Output 4, which not only necessitated international travel but required ongoing engagement over the life of the project to build robust relationships in Turkey and Georgia, and shape national and regional agendas in support of sturgeon conservation. With travel prohibited and political agendas dominated by a global pandemic and war, progress against Output 4 has been limited (as reported in previous years). For activities which cannot be fully realised in Year 3 alone, including Output 4, changes to the project timeline and log frame will be formally requested of IWTCF via a Change Request (separate to this Half yearly Report), as suggested in the Annual Report Review and discussed with IWTCF team on 1 September 2022.

**3. Have any of these issues been discussed with NIRAS-LTS International and if so, have changes been made to the original agreement?**

Discussed with NIRAS-LTS: Yes

Formal Change Request submitted: No, but is currently being drafted.

<sup>1</sup> <https://transparency.ge/en/post/georgias-economic-dependence-russia-trade-tourism-remittances-and-russian-companies-georgia>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/georgias-new-wave-of-russian-migrants>

Received confirmation of change acceptance      No

Change request reference if known:

**4a. 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: ████████

**4b. 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 re-budget Change Request as soon as possible. There is no guarantee that Defra will agree a re-budget 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.****

**5. Are there any other issues you wish to raise relating to the project or to BCF management, monitoring, or financial procedures?**

No.

**If you are a new project and you received feedback comments that requested a response (including the submission of your risk register), or if your Annual Report Review asked you to provide a response 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 NIRAS-LTS International through a Change Request. **Please DO NOT send these in the same email.****

Please send your **completed report by email** to [BCF-Reports@niras.com](mailto:BCF-Reports@niras.com). The report should be between 2-3 pages maximum. **Please state your project reference number, followed by the specific fund in the header of your email message e.g. Subject: 29-001 Darwin Initiative Half Year Report**