Conservation & Crime
The paradoxical faces of caviar production in the EU

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Biodiversity and Security
The conservation benefit of farmed caviar production is ambiguous

The policy shift towards farmed production of caviar has resulted in the emergence of a caviar ‘grey market’ in the EU, which raises questions over the purported conservation benefits of captive-bred caviar production.

The global caviar industry has transformed over the past two decades, moving from wild-caught to captive-bred caviar. Brought about by a number of regulatory changes, key actors including policymakers, industry leaders and conservationists, have heralded this shift as a positive development for sturgeon conservation in the European Union and beyond. But my research found that the conservation benefit of farmed caviar production is ambiguous. What is clear however, is that sturgeon aquaculture and the systems of captive-bred caviar production have been exploited for illicit caviar trade. This has resulted in a caviar ‘grey market’ in the EU, with the potential to undermine any sturgeon conservation initiatives.

Problems with the policy move towards farmed caviar production:

There are a number of practical issues which complicate and potentially undermine the conservation potential of farmed caviar production. These are caused by gaps and grey areas in the regulatory frameworks, as well as inconsistent enforcement of the regulations. The main issues are:

- **Unclear conservation benefits**: Farmed caviar production is widely presented as a sturgeon conservation tool, particularly by caviar industry representatives. However, my findings challenge this perception. Academic studies have identified a number of factors that any conservation farming initiative must meet in order to have a positive conservation impact. These include farming products displacing demand for wild product; farming being more cost-efficient; no restocking from the wild; and an absence of laundering of wild specimens into farming enterprises. My findings show that farmed caviar production in the EU does not appear to meet any of these factors. Whilst this does not mean that captive-bred caviar production cannot support sturgeon conservation, it should not be uncritically promoted by policymakers and industry representatives as the silver bullet for the species, particularly at the expense of pursuing or supporting other sturgeon conservation measures.

- **Ilicit caviar trade**: The conservation potential of farmed caviar production is undermined by ongoing illicit caviar trade in the EU, which takes a number of forms. First, a preference amongst wealthy consumers for wild caviar drives a domestic black market for illegal caviar in EU Member States. The second form of illicit caviar trade is enabled by regulatory loopholes and grey areas in the caviar labelling and repackaging system, as well as gaps in enforcement and limited oversight of both aquaculture and repackaging facilities. Specifically, illegally harvested and wild caviar are laundered into legal enterprises and fraudulently labelled as farmed products and then sold on legal markets. The true extent of this whitewashing is not known. Finally, this whitewashing process is mirrored by a blackwashing process, whereby farmed caviar is sold unlabeled on the black market as wild product, to meet consumer demand for ‘wild’ caviar.

- **Lost livelihoods**: The impact of caviar export quotas, sturgeon fishing bans, and the subsequent wholesale shift to farmed caviar production has been felt most acutely by sturgeon fishing communities in the EU. The criminalization of the livelihoods of these communities has been compounded by the absence of compensation for the socio-economic impacts of the regulatory changes. Moreover, these communities have reaped little to no economic benefit from the expansion of caviar aquaculture in the EU, as the enterprises have typically proliferated in non-sturgeon range states. As a result of economic insecurity and a lack of alternative employment opportunities, some sturgeon fishermen have continued to illegally catch sturgeon and sometimes engage in corruption with enforcement officials and organised crime groups. Some reports suggest that poaching in sturgeon range states has reached ‘alarming proportions’.

The ‘de-localization’ of caviar aquaculture in the EU has therefore ironically resulted in poaching activities which limit the conservation impact of farmed caviar production.

Recommendations:

The caviar industry, policymakers, enforcement agencies and NGOs must work together in a holistic manner to address the limitations of farmed caviar production in the EU. This will ensure that caviar production effectively contributes to, rather than undermines, sturgeon conservation efforts. This can be achieved by:

- **Integrating the caviar industry into sturgeon conservation in the EU**: By creating legislation that mandates business and livelihoods for the sturgeon and caviar to engage in specific sturgeon conservation actions, of which their compliance would be monitored.

- **Targeting enforcement operations at sturgeon farms and caviar repackaging facilities**: To ensure that wild caviar is not being laundered and subsequently entering legal EU markets.

- **Investing resources and establishing initiatives in EU sturgeon fishing communities**: That are designed to counter the negative socio-economic impacts of zero export quotas, sturgeon fishing bans, and the shift to farmed caviar production.
About the Author

Hannah Dickinson is a Research Associate on the BIOSEC project. Hannah joined the project in 2016 and her doctoral research examines the impact of caviar trade regulations upon dynamics of illegal caviar trade and geopolitics in the European Union. More generally Hannah is interested in investigating illegal wildlife trade issues in Europe, and theorising how wildlife crimes in Europe intersect with issues of organised crime, geopolitics and political ecology.

About the BIOSEC Project

The BIOSEC Project is funded by the European Research Council (ERC) 2016-2020. More information on our outputs, our team and our research is on our website.

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