‘Black Gold’ & Grey Areas: Gaps in the regulation of caviar trade in the EU

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Presentation Outline:
• Context: Sturgeon, Caviar & The EU

• Description of the Project:
  • What/When/Where/How/Why?

• Discussion: Caviar Trade Regulation & Grey Areas
“85% of sturgeon... are at risk of extinction, making them the most threatened group of animals” (IUCN)

Caviar is one of the most expensive wildlife products – 100g retails up to 600 EUR+

The trade in sturgeon (live) and derivatives (roe, skin, meat) has been highly regulated since all 27 species of sturgeon were listed on CITES in 1998

1400+ Sturgeon Aquaculture facilities
Figure – Distribution across commodity groups of international seizure records of species mentioned in the Annexes of the Council Regulation (EC) No 338/97 reported by EU countries, 2014. Source: TRAFFIC

Caviar = 5% of IWT seizures in EU in 2014
“This is part of the problem, the focus has simply come off that species. The eye is off the ball...”

“I think if you looked at current statistics, I think they would probably suggest that not a lot is happening. But, from a sort of criminology point of view if you like, that doesn’t make sense. There were massive profits being made here...Now, if you’re a criminal, if you’re a corrupt official, if you’re someone in an organised crime network, you don’t just stand and wave that profit goodbye.

I just can’t believe that the massive criminality that surrounded this product has just disappeared. OK some of it obviously has diverted to other activities. But, there was such potential for profit, that I’m sure there must be other things going on. I think the difference is that people aren’t actively looking for it.”

Interviewee
PROJECT DESCRIPTION: WHAT?

Aim:
- To understand the (geo)politics embedded in the regulation, management and control of (illegal) caviar trade within the EU
  i.e. why does the EU regulate the caviar trade in the way it does?

Asking - What:
- Discourses
- Actors
- Methods
PROJECT DESCRIPTION: WHO/WHERE?

Total = 36 participants

UK
Interview N = 5
Enforcement
Caviar Industry

Netherlands
Interview N = 12
NGOs
Government bodies
Academia

Brussels (Belgium)
Interview N = 8
EU commission
Enforcement Authorities
Caviar Industry
NGO

Romania
Interview N = 6
Government Ministries
NGOs
Enforcement Authorities

Other (Skype):
Ukraine N = 1
(NGO)
Switzerland N = 1 (CITES)
Austria N = 1
(NGO)
USA N = 2
(Academia)
GREY AREAS - Aquaculture

• “Green-washing” of wild caught sturgeon/caviar?

Illegally caught wild sturgeon

• “Black-Washing” of farmed caviar?

Illegally Sold to aquaculture facilities and transformed to ‘captive’ bred fish
“And it also is a little bit strange, there are a lot of indicators that **captive bred caviar also is sometimes illegal caviar**. And this is a very dodgy, grey area. And still until now, I feel that there is way more to find within the corporations, within the aquaculture.”

“There were stories here of caviar traders/farmers in Europe that were being threatened by criminal groups to buy their caviar/sturgeon. So there’s also a form of actually **the criminal organization pushes legitimate traders/farmers to be involved in illegal trade**.”

*Interviewee*
Supplier investigated after top-grade caviar contained cheaper variety

The UK’s largest supplier of caviar is being investigated after one of its most sought-after products was mislabelled as top-grade caviar when it contained a cheaper, lower-quality type.
“The system is very open to fraud... There are issues with transparency in the caviar supply chain. It is such a murky business at times.”

*Interviewee*
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: ‘Political vs. Actual reality’

Although seizures of caviar have declined to almost nothing, it does not mean that illegal trade is no longer a problem.

Maybe we are not looking closely enough OR not looking in the right places?

Is that a ‘measured’ or ‘purposeful’ decision on the part of CITES/ the EU to turn a blind eye?
“They have interests [CITES and the EU] to communicate to the outside world that there are no problems at the moment... to focus on a discourse where caviar trade – illegal caviar trade – does not happen anymore; where it has become in the hands of legitimate traders; where there are good control mechanisms and so on.... This is the “political reality” I would say. And of course there is a reality how caviar trafficking takes place in the ‘actual world.’”

*Interviewee*
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: “Actual Reality”

• There are loopholes in the regulations that organized crime can take advantage of.

• The sturgeon/caviar aquaculture industry is possibly not monitored closely enough.

• The illegal trade now seems to operate in sync/alongside the legal industry.
Thank You!

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