

June 2021

Request for better reflection of outcome of MEASURES project in the DRBMP Update 2021

DSTF appreciates that the draft DRBMP 2021 Update that entered public consultation had been strengthened concerning sturgeon conservation. Since then, the project MEASURES (Managing and restoring aquatic Ecological corridors for migratory fish species in the Danube River basin), financed by the EU's Danube Transnational Programme, has issued some key results that need to be reflected in the Plan. This relates in particular to the conclusion that the functionality of ecological corridors for migratory fishes – including sturgeons – need to be secured by (1) ensuring the physical connectivity by addressing the issue of migration barriers, (2) protection and restoration of suitable habitats, (3) strengthening fish populations. The project also identified important data gaps that need to be filled through additional habitat surveys, including in the Black Sea, the protection status of the habitats, and monitoring of populations and habitat use.

In the following, DSTF provides recommendations on how the scientific input from MEASURES results can be integrated into the DRBMP with focus on restoration of ecological corridors and coordination and strengthening of intersectoral and international cooperation.

1) Restoration of ecological corridors

The DSTF highly appreciates that chapter 6.7 of the draft DRBMP 2021 Update summarises key measures (table 31, pp 103-104) needed for effective restoration of the Danube sturgeon populations. The DSTF also appreciates the continued commitment to establishing a solution to fish migration across the Iron Gate dams reconnecting the Lower Danube with the Middle Danube, as a basic prerequisite for migratory sturgeon recovery in this river section, and to begin exploration of solutions for fish passage at the Gabčíkovo water structures to reconnect the Middle Danube with the Upper Danube.

The importance of functional ecological corridors for migratory fish is equally well reflected in vision statement of section 8.1.5.2.1 "Interruption of River Continuity for Fish Migration" of the Joint Programme of Measures.¹ The management objectives for 2027 also address well the issues of existing or potential future barriers and thus the improvement of physical river connectivity and fish migration as set out in section 8.1.5.2.1.3 on the measures of basin-wide importance.

However, specific measures for habitat or population restoration complementing the already included continuity measures, in line with vision and objectives, are missing completely

DSTF therefore recommends including in chapter 8.1.5.3.1 "River Morphological Alterations" the following additional management objectives (*in red italics below*), in line with the very well formulated vision statement²:

¹ "The ICPDR's basin-wide vision is that anthropogenic barriers and habitat deficits do not hinder fish migration and spawning anymore – sturgeon species and specified other migratory species are able to access the Danube River and relevant tributaries. Sturgeon species and specified other migratory species are represented with self-sustaining populations in the DRBD according to their historical distribution"

² The ICPDR's basin-wide vision for morphological alterations is that rivers will be revitalized/ restored and maintained in a way, that aquatic species/populations are not negatively impacted, moreover, in a way that river restorations will support improvement of connection to groundwater bodies

- ⇒ Restoration/mitigation of river morphological alterations and habitats to ensure improvement of aquatic ecosystems and water status.
 - ⇒ Specification of location and extent of measures for the improvement of river morphology that will be implemented by 2027 by each country
 - ⇒ *Restoration of habitats of migratory fish species, in particular sturgeons*
 - ⇒ *Based on the results of MEASURES, complete the identification of habitats for migratory fish species and the assessment of their protection status to address the remaining gaps of a network of critical habitats and complete the map produced by the MEASURES project.*
 - ⇒ *Assess habitat functionality by monitoring the migratory fish populations and their habitat use*
 - ⇒ *Establish working relations with authorities responsible for nature protection and biodiversity in Contracting Parties, who will be closely associated in achieving this mission.*

2) Strengthening of intersectoral and international cooperation

Chapter 6.7 of the draft DRBMP 2021 Update rightly states that: “Saving the Danube sturgeon species is a truly multi-level governance challenge which will require the involvement of many disparate sectors and authorities at different administrative levels and many different economic stakeholders and civil society. There is no single sector or territorial jurisdiction where the long-term effectiveness of conservation measures does not depend on measures being taken in other sectors or in other territorial jurisdictions.” Chapters 6.2 on the marine environment and 6.3 on nature protection already speak on the need for cooperation.

However, DSTF misses a clear commitment to engaging actively in such cross-disciplinary dialogues towards sturgeon conservation and would suggest the following modified wording on p. 103:

“Effective action therefore requires effective coordination of action between different territorial jurisdictions and the relevant international organisations and authorities. The ICPDR and the Contracting Parties **are committed to** playing a crucial role by maintaining dialogue and discussion with other key actors to ensure, as far as possible, that the necessary actions **listed in Table 31** are taken. In this regard, follow up measures to the projects mentioned above **should** be considered as well as the organisation of a multisectoral conference for all stakeholders, **including those from the Black Sea cooperation context**, with the aim to **assess gaps and** discuss the need for further actions.”

DSTF also recommends including in the workplan of respective ICPDR Working and Task Groups for the period 2022-2027 analyses of data resulting from the measures listed above (identification of habitats for migratory fish species, monitoring, protection status) with involvement of nature conservation departments and making the identification and monitoring of activities towards a functioning network of critical sturgeon habitats a priority.

In view of the intersectoral nature of these issues, **a strong political commitment** from the responsible Ministers at the 2022 ICPDR Ministerial Meeting will be very important, in particular with regard to intensified cooperation between key players engaged in water management of Danube and the Black Sea Basins responsible for nature conservation, fisheries, navigation, hydropower or enforcement.

In this context, **DSTF strongly welcomes that the Romanian 2022 ICPDR Presidency is considering taking the lead in organizing a conference for all stakeholders** which will discuss the need for action to restore and conserve the Danube sturgeons in the Danube and Black Sea Basins.