

Poking the bubble

Alarmed by declining fish resources like sturgeon, the Russian government launches a plan to revive its fishing industry

In an effort to revive Russia's foundering fish industry and protect its waters from poachers, the government plans to create a state-run National Fish Resources organization, within the existing State Committee for Fisheries. The new organization will deal exclusively with the protection and improvement of natural fish resources throughout Russia.

Western and Russian legal exporters of sturgeon black caviar, concerned about the large black-market trade, are also eager to eliminate poaching and smuggling channels. The State Committee for Fisheries data shows that black-market fish exports deprive the exchequer of \$300 to \$500 million annually.

The Russian fish industry plunged into a full-fledged crisis after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia's ailing fish-producing enterprises—from fleets to processing plants—may have already become obsolete by the year 2000. Two-thirds are already severely outdated and have become a burden for the State exchequer.

The government's intention to restructure the fishing industry was clear when, in late April 1999, the then Prime Minister, Yevgeny Primakov, described the fishing industry as "one of the most disorganized sectors of Russia's economy." According to data from the Russian Association of Fish Producers and Exporters, the national production of fish is currently only one-third of the 1990 figure, amounting to 2.6 million tonnes a year.

The director of the Federal Border Guard Service, Konstantin Totsky, says that illegal fishing in the Pacific Ocean strip belonging to Russia has lately increased significantly. Fishermen from Japan,

South Korea, China and Poland are taking advantage of Russia's reduced fish takes.

Russian border guards have already detained 222 fishing vessels fishing without licences off Russia's far-eastern coast this year; a third of them were foreign vessels.

But there is still hope for Russia's fish resources in the Pacific. Not so for Caspian Sea sturgeon, Russia's most valued fish. The sturgeon is on the brink of extinction because of mafia-controlled poaching for the fish's black caviar. Sturgeon and black caviar production has shrunk dramatically. In the 1980s, the Astakhan Fish Processing Factory (now Russkaya Ikra) was producing 1,300 tonnes of black caviar annually, mostly for export, with revenues of around \$350 million. The sturgeon catch from the Caspian Sea during the last decade was over 100,000 tonnes a year, and its black caviar production 1,500 tonnes. Black caviar production dropped throughout the past decade, reaching 150 tonnes last year. The sturgeon take from the Caspian also dropped a hundred times, to 1,000 tonnes.

Russian fish farms release 50 million baby sturgeon each year, but resources remain low, as increasing numbers of the fish are caught before reaching maturity and legal weight. Experts also warn that extensive oil-drilling development planned for the Caspian Sea will deal the last blow to its sturgeon population.

Not well known

In Russia, rational exploitation of fish resources is not a well-known concept. Lev Bucharov, director of the Pacific Fisheries Research Center, complains that some fish species, such as sturgeon, are caught in excessive amounts, while others are not fished at all.



Turkey, with no access to the Caspian Sea, is now the world's second largest exporter of black caviar. In 1998, Turkish exports reached 120 tonnes of caviar, bought mainly from Dagestan and Azerbaijan.

The flourishing black market, Russia's inability to pace fishing to suit existing resources, and increased fishing by other countries in its waters, are sinking Russia's fishing industry. Its Soviet-style facilities will only poke the bubble until it bursts. 3

This is from a story filed by Anna Vlasova in *The Russia Journal*