

The Height of Luxury – Soon only a Memory

By William R. Polk

A glance at the menu of any top-class restaurant will show that the most expensive item is caviar. In the spring of 2003, buying it even in “duty free” shops cost about € 800 a kilogram. A few months later the price soared to nearly € 1,500. It is expected to increase even further because soon there will be no “real” or Caspian Beluga caviar on the market. What was once the height of luxury will soon be only a memory.

Given the cost, it is not perhaps surprising that few people know much about caviar. Ask anyone and you are apt to find much guess work or simple misinformation. Some people, for example, will tell you that Russian caviar is better than Persian, but, in fact, both come from the same fish, sturgeon, in the same sea, the Caspian. They are simply caught by sailors from different countries. Then, in a vague sort of way, you will find that people will draw a distinction by name. Sevruga is thought to be less tasty than beluga. They do, indeed, come from different fish and servuga roe is smaller than beluga. The latest retail price list from America, where about 80% of the world’s supply is consumed, shows sevruga at \$49 an ounce and beluga at \$118.

What is really different about the two is more important, over the long run at least, for caviar lovers. The sturgeon species that produces sevruga grows to maturity and begins to produce eggs in just seven years whereas the beluga sturgeon takes up to twenty-five years to begin to reproduce and even then only produces eggs every three or four years. Therein lies a part of the tragedy for the caviar lover. The beluga sturgeon is endangered and soon will completely disappear. The numbers of mature adults is thought to be down an estimated 90% in the last twenty years and now in free fall.

What has happened to the Caspian sturgeon has happened to many fish and animals throughout the world, but the beluga sturgeon has been particularly vulnerable to pollution, destruction of its spawning grounds and over-fishing, according to Gussein Bagirov, the Azerbaijan minister of ecology and natural resources. It is a victim of the larger quest for economic development. Diversion of river waters for irrigation and the construction of dams have severely cut back on areas necessary for natural reproduction. Particularly destructive to the beluga has been the Volgograd dam which closed the most important spawning ground for Caspian fish, the Volga river.

Given its fragility and the decline in its natural habitat, various measures have been taken over the last twenty-five years to restrict fishing. At one point in the 1960s, fishing was completely banned, but the pressures on governments to earn revenues and on fishermen to profit were too strong to resist.

If they survive, beluga can live for at least half a century and may grow to a thousand kilograms in weight and five meters in length. Catching such a fish can earn €90,000 on the retail market. It is as irresistible for a poor fisherman to evade controls and poach as it is for poor farmers to engage in the drug trade. During the last twelve months, an estimated 2,000 poachers have been caught on the Caspian and over 100 tons of sturgeon and 300 kilograms of caviar were confiscated. But, as in the drug trade, it is not just the small operators who are active: poaching in the Caspian is big business.

Legal fishing nets only about ten percent of the actual catch. Quotas were agreed between the members of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). These divided up the right to harvest 155 tons of beluga sturgeon in 2003. When killed and cut open, that amount of fish would yield about 9 tons of caviar. But

Iran is not a party to the convention; so the restriction was not enforceable. What actually restricted the catch was that the Caspian Sea states, including Iran, were not able to meet the full quota. There simply were not enough fish left in the sea. In 2002, a survey of a test area in the Caspian fishing areas found only 28 beluga sturgeon of which most were immature and so incapable to renewing the fishing stock.

But the desire to continue to catch all the fish possible is explained by the fact that even the legal part of the trade produces about \$100 million a year. Given the fact that this part of the trade is only the small end, the total trade may approach \$1 billion. Recognizing that unless fishing was stopped or at least severely curtailed, there soon would be no more beluga sturgeon, an international organization known as “Caviar Emptor” was established in 2000 and is working to encourage the use of different species of sturgeon, those with shorter maturation periods, and other related fish. Spurred by the organization, a number of chefs have promised to substitute caviar from other species of sturgeon. This gesture is almost certainly too little and too late. Azerbaijan Minister Bagirov urged the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to cut back or ban imports to what is the largest market, America. The Service did declare the sturgeon endangered but failed to act so in April of this year the National Resources Defense Council sued for compliance. So far, at least, the Council’s efforts have made little impact. Azer Karayev, the chairman of Azerbaijan’s society of animal protection, believes that only a decade-long complete moratorium can save the fish.

Some progress has been made in producing caviar in fish farms, particularly in America where about \$15 million worth of caviar producing fish are raised each year, but

these farms, for economic reasons, are unlikely to emphasize beluga. Instead, they will make caviar from a variety of other sturgeons, bowfin and paddlefish which grow faster.

Ironically, caviar was not always regarded as a luxury: at Baku on the Caspian Sea, oil workers went on strike about 1900 because they were sick of being fed on caviar and wanted some more worthwhile food. Meanwhile in the United States, where the Delaware, the Hudson and the Columbia rivers had made it the world's largest producer, caviar was so cheap that it was served free in bars to make drinkers more thirsty. Prospectors in the California gold rush lived off of cheap caviar and the better known restaurants dished it up as an offering before a meal. From being a working man's meal, it gradually had become a teaser to encourage diners to order more lavishly; today, it is considered bad taste to gobble down more than an ounce or, at most, two. Soon even that tiny taste will also be beyond avarice.

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