

Guideline for *EX SITU* conservation measures in sturgeons

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The draft Guideline is distributed confidentially and only for information purposes and potential input to the national sturgeon focal points participating in the second meeting of the National Focal Points for the conservation of Sturgeons in the frame of the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern Convention), and the experts supporting them.

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Authors: Joern Gessner, James A. Crossman, Joel P. Van Eenennaam, Molly A.H. Webb, Thomas Friedrich, Marie-Laure Acolas, Ralf Reinartz, Leonardo Congiu, Patrick Chèvre, Elena Galich, Mikhail Chebanov

Edited by:

Joern Gessner, James A. Crossman, Joel P. Van Eenennaam, Molly A.H. Webb, Thomas Friedrich

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This Guideline represents a collaborative effort of WSCS and WWF which represents an update of the 2011 *Ex situ* guideline and Hatchery Manual by Chebanov *et al.* (FAO Tech Ser. 558 and 570).

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Executive Summary

Sturgeons although threatened by extinction, are key indicators for the ecological integrity of rivers, as habitat for completing the life-cycle may cover entire catchments (Schiemer 2000). Within the EU, all sturgeon species are protected under the Habitats Directive (43/92/EWG) and their conservation is a legal obligation for the Member States of the EU. While *Acipenser naccarii*, *A. oxyrinchus* and *A. sturio* are listed on Annex II and IV and are considered species of special concern to the EU, requiring member states to “apply a strict protection regime across their entire natural range” the other five species are listed on Annex V obliging Member States to ensure that their exploitation and removal from the wild is compatible with maintaining them in a favorable conservation status. Yet their return from a currently unfavorable status urgently requires active recovery measures.

Viable sturgeon populations depend upon ecologically functional habitats. The underlying reasons for the decline of a population must be well understood in order to start a qualified recovery program. Such a program should be based upon a sequence of prerequisites. In any case decision making must be based on sound scientific assessments that provide the basis for the measures to be implemented. This also includes the decision on the "hosting" organization that is to lead the measures and is responsible for the coordination with partners and stakeholders. It is vital that the partners obtain necessary permissions from authorities as early as possible. If infrastructure needs to be provided, cost coverage must be ensured not only for its establishment but also for the operation of the facility. The acquisition of broodstock must be based on genetic prerequisites and is to secure the genetic variability of the founder population from the geographic origin. If controlled reproduction is to be applied, best practice methods with minimal adverse impact upon the broodstock and its offspring are to be applied both for reproduction and rearing of fish for release. The releases should be implemented in accordance with the target to be reached, be it supplementation of an existing population or its reintroduction and must take into consideration the carrying capacity of the system to be stocked. The impacts of the releases again must follow a scientific approach, with the results being utilized to optimize both the rearing and release as well as addressing the threats in the given system that impact the success of the recovery measures.

As such, mitigation or removal of adverse impacts is essential to ensure population recovery is possible and sustainable in the long run. Monitoring of habitat and population status is instrumental to provide the necessary data for any decision on recovery measures. *Ex situ* measures come into play to overcome recruitment failure or the loss of population. The ultimate goal of *ex situ* measures is to restore viable self-sustaining populations allowing the subsequent termination of all *ex situ* measures, which can happen only, if *in situ* sturgeon habitat is functional and sufficiently protected from adverse impact and direct threats to wild populations (i.e., bycatch, poaching, etc.) are reduced to biologically safe levels.

Most populations of sturgeons in Europe have been impacted so severely, that they need massive support or even reestablishment to return to a self-sustaining and in the further development even favorable status. *Ex situ* measures are a means to safeguard the genetic heterogeneity and diversity of the populations that still exist following detrimental anthropogenic impacts. The measures comprise the safeguarding of remaining individuals under controlled condition (in captivity) to allow their utilization in future reproduction and providing the basis for population support through releases of fish being reared under controlled conditions. This guideline summarizes the currently available knowledge and developments of *ex situ* methods and their application under different population scenarios. It needs to be ensured that future projects follow the best practice approaches outlined in this document in the sense that the research questions are clearly articulated and the methods applied are appropriately chosen to answer these questions. It is of utmost importance to set recovery priorities, which should be summarized in a national sturgeon action plan or conservation strategy, following the framework of the PANEUAP.

Due to the longevity of sturgeons, adult animals may still be around for a long time after natural reproduction ceased, providing ample opportunity to secure animals for *ex situ* conservation. Once a population is functionally extinct, the measures for re-introduction require decades to become effective. Since the *ex situ* approach has to be maintained over long periods, due to the long generation time of the species and the fact that available broodstock (genetic basis) is rare or even irreplaceable the *ex situ* measures are complex and cost coverage is challenging. *Ex situ* measures can require the construction or utilization of specialized facilities to safeguard biodiversity which result in long term costly investments. The later they are applied, the more intensive and complex they become. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to start these measures timely enough, e.g., when populations start to struggle and to accompany them with effective *in situ* protection. In order to assess the right point-in-time for the onset of effective *ex situ* measures, monitoring data on population status are essential, yet in a European context these were not available and the onset of *ex situ* measures started too late in most regions.

In particular because the populations to be restored are shared between countries in, a close collaboration with other range countries of the species is mandatory to manage the resource jointly which also includes cost coverage. As a prerequisite, it needs to be ensured that results of *ex situ* actions are shared transparently with the public, relevant stakeholders involved in sturgeon conservation. This also comprises regular information and data exchange with neighboring countries sharing the same populations in a river or sea basin. As for example the information on release timing and locations in an upstream country affects management decisions (for example on fisheries) of downstream countries or vice versa. In order to seek for political support, it is essential to include the conceptual planning of *ex situ* as well as *in situ* measures in strategically relevant documents. In the long term, this procedure will support national governments and international organizations alike to ensure necessary funding to support the implementation of effective conservation actions. The combination of national sources with EU funding instruments may provide good

opportunities to initiate the implementation of *ex situ* measures but, in the longer term, such costs should be integrated into national or even better joint regional budgets. In the short and medium term, Ministries of environment of EU Member States should therefore ensure that *ex situ* measures of threatened migratory fish species are included in their Priority Action Frameworks.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Joern Gessner, James A. Crossman, Thomas Friedrich, Beate Striebel

Sturgeons are endemic to the Northern hemisphere. They are of significant ecological, commercial and recreational value and importance. The threats adversely affecting sturgeon populations are closely linked to their biological and ecological requirements (see Figure 1.1). All sturgeons share specific traits, like late maturation, longevity, low specific fecundity and expressed homing behavior, that render them extremely susceptible to anthropogenic impacts and complicate recovery actions. Among these anthropogenic impacts, fisheries, obstruction of migration routes and destruction of physical habitats have been associated directly with population declines (see Chapter 2). While combinations of threats may differ regionally, as well as change with time and population status, their principal impacts remain. As a result, sturgeons are among the most threatened species of fish according to the IUCN Red List Reassessment (IUCN 2022) that outlined the ongoing decline of sturgeon populations globally. Today, 80% of sturgeon species are classified endangered or critically endangered with one species having gone extinct in the last decade. Within the EU, all sturgeon species are protected under the Habitats Directive (43/92/EWG) and their conservation is a legal obligation for the Member States of the EU. *Acipenser naccarii*, *A. oxyrinchus* and *A. sturio* are listed on Annex II and IV and are considered species of special concern to the EU, requiring member states to “apply a strict protection regime across their entire natural range, within and outside Natura 2000 sites” (art 16). The other five species are listed on Annex V which obliges Member States to ensure that their exploitation and removal from the wild is compatible with maintaining them in a favourable conservation status. Yet their return from a currently unfavourable status requires urgently protection measures.

Reflecting the high risk of extinction for this species group, a Pan-European Action Plan for Sturgeons (PANEUAP)¹ was adopted in November 2018 as a recommendation² of the Standing Committee to the Bern Convention to which all important European sturgeon range countries as well as both the EU and its Member States are parties. In May 2019, the EU Nature Directive Expert Group (NADEG) also recommended the implementation of the Action Plan to EU Member States. The PANEUAP was designed to serve as a framework of almost 70 actions that aim to “restore all existing sturgeon populations to “least concern” (IUCN) or “favorable” conservation status (Habitats Directive) and re-establish self-sustaining

¹ <https://rm.coe.int/pan-european-action-plan-for-sturgeons/16808e84f3>

² <https://rm.coe.int/recommendation-199-2018-action-plan-sturgeon/1680a01895>

sturgeon populations as well as their life-cycle habitat in their historic range to an extent that ensures species survival and representation of the subpopulations where possible.”

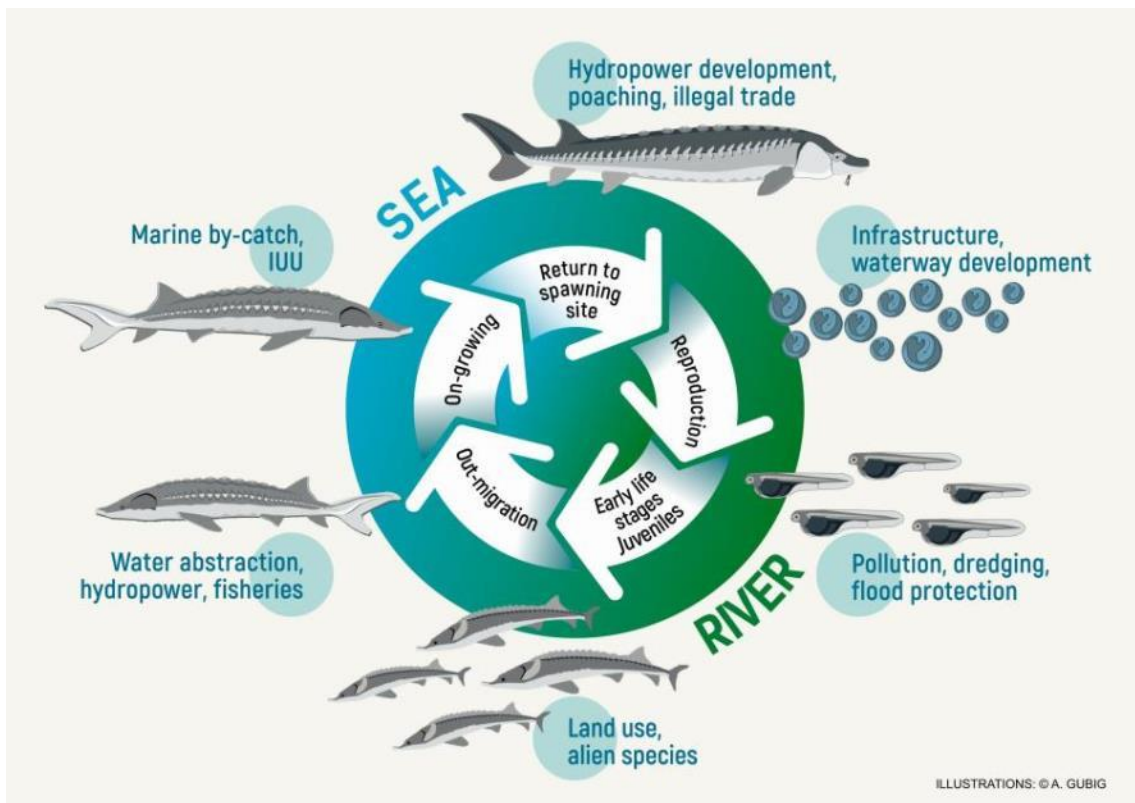


Figure 1.1. Schematic life-cycle and main threats predominantly impacting the various life stages

The recommendation mandated the Secretariat of the Bern Convention to closely monitor the implementation of the Action Plan and to coordinate the implementation of regular reporting on the implementation of the Action Plan at national level

Since its adoption, the EU Commission has closely followed the implementation of the PANEUAP and in 2022 issued a service contract (ENV/2022/OP/0019) to support its implementation. The scope of the contract covers the assessment of the implementation of the PANEUAP in 18 key sturgeon range countries, including 15 EU Member States (Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Slovakia, Austria, Germany, Italy, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, France and the Netherlands) as well as Serbia, Ukraine and Georgia. Existing knowledge about sturgeon habitats and migration obstacles in eleven key river basins including Danube, Rioni, Po, Vistula, Oder, Nemunas, Gauja, Narva, Elbe, Rhine and Gironde have been collected and displayed in maps.

Further the contract encompasses (1) a study about sturgeon by-catch and possible measures to avoid or mitigate it, (2) guidelines for sturgeon population monitoring, (3) guidelines for habitat monitoring as well as (4) guidelines for best practice *ex situ* breeding and release programs.

This document presents the guideline for *ex situ* measures, contributing explicitly to reaching the PANEUAP Objective 2 **POPULATION STRUCTURE IS ACTIVELY SUPPORTED TO REVERSE THE DECLINE** focusing specifically on the utilization of *ex situ* measures to bring the populations back to levels that allow to

sustain themselves. The objective is based upon the results of the population monitoring and the habitat assessment and monitoring guidelines developed under the same service contract.

Viable sturgeon populations depend upon an ecologically functional habitat. The identification of the underlying reasons for the decline of a population must be well understood in order to start a qualified recovery program. As such, mitigation or removal of adverse impacts is instrumental to ensure population recovery is possible. Restoring populations, their habitats or their migration routes requires substantial political will and resources while a sound knowledge base is required to make informed decisions concerning the conservation priorities which is why the series of guidelines was produced.

To obtain the information, monitoring of habitat and population status is instrumental to provide the background data that allow to decide on measures to be taken. *ex situ* measures come into play to overcome recruitment failure or the loss of population components as a result of the adverse impacts. The ultimate goal of *ex situ* measures are viable self-sustaining populations and the subsequent termination of all *ex situ* measures, which can happen only, if *in situ* sturgeon habitat is functional and sufficiently protected from adverse impact.

Sturgeons although threatened by extinction, are key indicators for the ecological integrity of rivers, as habitat for completing the life-cycle may cover entire catchments (Schiemer 2000). Their status therefore, is an excellent indicator for the function of ecological corridors, the existence of sufficient breeding, feeding and wintering habitats, habitat accessibility and connectivity as well as water quality. In most cases the populations that suffered from habitat loss and overharvest have deteriorated to such a large degree that makes immediate safety and recovery measures necessary in the attempt to safeguard and support the populations to be restored to historic levels. The knowledge of the population status, its reproductive performance and the impacting factors on population development are key for the success of the recovery of populations. The knowledge gained from population monitoring can serve multiple uses and would provide the best available knowledge to make informed management decisions on priority settings for the implementation of measures required to sustain a population in question. In cases when natural reproduction and recruitment is decreasing to insufficient levels to maintain the population in question, reproduction has ceased, or in cases when extinct populations are to be restored, *ex situ* measures come into play.

Ex situ measures might be targeting a) the safeguarding of the genetic diversity in cases of ongoing attempts to mitigate habitat deficits, the support of wild populations to b) help reaching the desired population size and self-sustaining status faster, or c) to allow a certain intensity of harvest. Naturally, the different targets require a different set of approaches or different intensities of the measures to ensure success. Due to the current status of sturgeon populations in Europe, the goal needs to be recovery of populations first while harvest would be an aim for the distant future.

Ultimately, in many cases of sturgeon populations for instance in the Baltic Sea or most parts of Western Europe *ex situ* measures are the only means to revive the populations and are key to the potential success or failure of the measures undertaken in the frame of the PANEUAP, to *“restore all existing sturgeon populations to “least concern” (IUCN) or “favorable” (Habitats Directive) status and re-establish self-sustaining sturgeon populations in their historic range to an extent that ensures species survival and representation of the subpopulations where possible.”*

The guideline at hand is to provide guidance to responsible national authorities and institutions on best practice approaches to design *ex situ* programs or to decide on funding priorities. Descriptions of methodologies and technologies, their purpose, advantages and disadvantages provide orientation and guidance for practitioners to develop their own individual solutions to implement targeted methodological approaches to address specific research questions and to close existing knowledge gaps.

Technical chapters are complemented with a compilation of required resources, main pros and cons, practical examples from the field of applied science and a compilation of key references on the respective topic for further reading and research.

While the underlying principles can be adapted also to other endangered fish species to a certain extent, the information provided in these guidelines is based on the general similarities of species within the sturgeon family of Acipenseridae. However, variations exist between species and also the populations of different catchments. Furthermore, there are still gaps in knowledge with regard to rearing conditions and the underlying requirements. Whenever available, specific information is provided, but it remains the responsibility of the document user, to do adapt the given information to the conditions in which they are applied.

Chapter 2

Sturgeon biology and life history

James A. Crossman, Molly A.H. Webb, Thomas Friedrich, and Joern Gessner

2.5 Sturgeon systematics, range and characteristics

Sturgeons belong to the family *Acipenseridae* within the order *Acipenseriformes*, a group of primitive ray-finned fishes that have persisted relatively unchanged for millions of years (Peng *et al.* 2007; Brownstein *et al.* 2024). The family comprises 25 species, distributed across freshwater and marine habitats within the Northern Hemisphere. Sturgeons exhibit distinctive morphological characteristics common to all species that include elongated bodies covered in five rows of bony plates called scutes, a heterocercal tail fin, a distinctive elongated rostrum equipped with sensory barbels, and a notochord instead of a spinal column. Their mouths are positioned ventrally, adapted for bottom-feeding habits. Sizes vary greatly among species, with some reaching lengths of over 7 meters and weights exceeding 1,000 kilograms, which presents challenges for ex situ programs where captive adults are required.

2.6 Global conservation status of sturgeons

Sturgeons are the most imperiled group of species globally (IUCN 2022), with all species suffering from substantial declines in abundance in the last century. These declines are attributed to anthropogenic impacts associated with habitat loss, ecosystem changes, pollution, overfishing, and restricted migrations due to the regulation of many rivers used by sturgeons (Haxton and Cano 2016). These impacts substantially change the properties and functions of the ecosystems and alter productivity throughout the food web. The longer the life-span and generation interval of a species, the more challenging recovery will become as many anthropogenic impacts have occurred within a single generation for most sturgeon species. Despite implementation of protection and recovery measures for most species, sturgeon population continue to decline and may require substantial intervention beyond the current efforts to ensure their survival.

2.7 Life history characteristics and considerations for *ex situ*

2.7.1 Longevity and maturation, reproductive potential and generation time

Sturgeons are exceptionally long lived with individuals exceeding 170 years of age (Bruch *et al.* 2009). Life span depends upon species and latitude, with the northern ranges revealing extended time spans until reaching maturity and longer overall life span. Their slow growth rates contribute to this longevity, with sturgeons typically taking many years to reach maturity. Generation times can vary among species but generally range from 30 to 60 years.

Sturgeons are typically late maturing, reaching sexual maturity after 3-6 in small species in southern ranges and up to 27 years in northern populations in large species (Caron *et al.* 2007) and have infrequent spawning events. Female sturgeons produce vast quantities of eggs, with some species capable of releasing millions during a single spawning season. However, since it takes a considerable time for the fish to mature and since they may only spawn every few years, the specific fecundity of the fish is considered to be low.

2.7.2 Migration types and their implications for *ex situ* decisions

Sturgeon are diadromous migrants that ascend their natal rivers to spawn. Two different groups can be distinguished in sturgeons. Fully anadromous species that spawn in freshwater and spend much of their life in marine environments as well as potamodromous species that migrate in the river system or between connected lakes and the river for reproduction. Migration distance varies between subpopulations, the timing of their migration and the underlying genetic control of this behavior. Early life stages and juveniles then tend to move downstream from the spawning sites into feeding and holding habitats over time. The presence of different ecological groups varies between river systems with larger rivers generally revealing more differentiated reproductive groups (e.g., races in sensu Berg, 1948, Derzhavin 1947).

Generally, individuals that ascent rivers earlier in the year tend to migrate further upstream, later migrations take the fish to spawning habitat in the lower reaches of the river. It has been shown that their migration and its timing is rather constant in individuals (Delaware & James rivers), suggesting that a genetic control is effectuated. As such, these different spawning groups or subpopulations have to be treated as distinct management units which can be affected by different impacts during their life cycle.

With a perspective on the *ex situ* measures to be applied it is of utmost importance to keep these ecological groups or subpopulations separated since admixture could result in lower fitness and lack of adaptation to the conditions in the target rivers (see Chapter 6).

2.7.3 Reproduction

Sturgeon are gonochoristic (i.e., eggs and sperm present in separate individuals) and gymnoovarian (i.e., gonads are open to the body cavity). They are late-maturing, and reproduction is controlled by endogenous and environmental factors (Dettlaff et al 1993; Doroshov et al. 1997; Webb and Doroshov 2011). Puberty is a hallmark in the onset of a reproductive cycle, and the timing of puberty depends on age and body size, accumulated energy (e.g., lipids), and environmental cues. The first reproductive cycle is activated by neuroendocrine signals, with endogenous factors acting as the gates to first maturation (see Webb and Doroshov 2011). Spawning periodicity (i.e., number of years between spawning events) is 2–11 years for females and 1–6 years for males (Billard and Lecointre 2001; Haxton *et al.* 2016). It has been found that naturally vernalized water temperature is important for successful oocyte maturation and ovulation in sturgeons (refs). Most species spawn in the spring to early summer over a wide range of temperatures (6 to 25°C; Billard and Lecointre 2001), though there are a few species that have populations that spawn in the fall (*A. gueldenstaedtii*, *A. oxyrinchus*, *A. sinesis*, *A. stellatus*, *Huso huso*; Berg 1946; Balazik *et al.* 2012; Wu *et al.* 2015). Sturgeons are highly fecund (100,000–1,000,000+ eggs per spawn depending on the species), and fecundity is dependent on body size and egg size. However, over their reproductive life span, sturgeons have low specific fecundity as their spawning periodicity can be long). Multiple males may spawn with a single female (e.g., Refs) and males may spawn several times within a season. Spawning substrate differs across species and includes gravel of different sizes, cobble, and bedrock (e.g., Refs). The relative importance of the environmental factors controlling reproduction and the magnitude of change of these factors required to initiate a spawning event have not yet been well defined for many chondrosteian species. It will be important to understand the specific role of environmental factors in driving gametogenesis and spawning to address the mismatch that may occur with global climate change, and understanding these factors is important for successful reproduction in captivity.

2.7.4 Embryos

Sturgeon eggs are broadcast over coarse substrates where they can incubate and develop in fast water either adhered to the surface of rocks (e.g., gravel, cobble boulders) or within the interstitial spaces. Following fertilization, sturgeon embryos progress through a series of developmental stages before hatch, the rate of which is influenced significantly by temperature (Wang *et al.* 1985). Susceptibility to mortality is higher during earlier development stages (e.g., cleavage, and gastrulation) and handling for *ex situ* activities should be limited prior to neurulation. Total incubation time is correlated to water temperatures, with warmer temperatures accelerating development, while cooler temperatures reduce it. Optimal temperature ranges vary among sturgeon species but typically fall between 10°C to 18°C for spring spawners and exceed 20°C for summer and fall spawning species (e.g., *Acipenser oxyrinchus*). Temperatures exceeding optimal ranges are known to increase rates of mortality as do reduced dissolved oxygen levels. During

incubation in the wild, eggs are offered some protection from predation associated with fast water velocity barriers (>1.0 m/s) and the substrates they are incubating within, however mortality during this life stage is naturally high and predicted to exceed 99% (*Acipenser oxyrinchus desotoi*; Pine *et al.* 2001). Pathways of mortality are not limited to predation from other species but can include microbial infections (Fujimoto *et al.* 2013; Walquist *et al.* 2022), the rate of which accelerates with increasing water temperatures and is an ongoing challenge for many *ex situ* programs during captive incubation. In addition to microbial infections, physical properties of spawning habitats such as shear stress and reduced substrate complexity can influence survival, especially in systems with altered flow regimes from regulation.

2.7.5 Larvae

For the purpose of this document the larval stage comprises the period from when embryos hatch from the egg and the larval stage and concludes once the individual resembles the adult phenotype at development stage 45 (Dettlaff *et al.* 1993). Generally, all sturgeon larvae emerge from embryos measuring just a few centimeters in length, though size at hatch will vary according to species and environmental conditions during incubation (Beer 1981; Wang *et al.* 1985; Wang *et al.* 1987; Dettlaff *et al.* 1993; Hardy and Litvak 2004; Jay *et al.* 2020).

All sturgeon larvae have a prominent yolk sac at hatch, which provides endogenous resources for initial development either prior to or during dispersal downstream of spawning sites. Many species utilize these endogenous yolk-sac reserves while hiding within interstitial spaces at spawning sites, emphasizing the importance of spawning substrate restoration as a recovery tool (Crossman and Hildebrand 2014; McAdam *et al.* 2018) in combination with *ex situ* measures. While many species have a dispersal period once endogenous reserves are exhausted (e.g., *A. fulvescens*, Hastings *et al.* 2013; *A. transmontanus*; Kynard *et al.* 2014), some species disperse long distances immediately following hatch (e.g., Pallid sturgeon, Guy *et al.* 2015; Chojnacki *et al.* 2023; Marotz and Lorang 2018; Braaten *et al.* 2008; Braaten *et al.* 2006) or disperse continuously from hatch until they reach river mouths and the sea (e.g., *H. huso*; Pavlov 2002). Transition through larval developmental stages is influenced primarily by temperature (Jay *et al.* 2020) but is likely influenced by species-specific variability and habitat conditions (e.g., Nguyen and Crocker 2006; Boucher *et al.* 2014; Boucher *et al.* 2018).

Larval development and physiology are optimal for most species between 12-18°C, with survival capacity beyond those limits. Larvae of fall spawning species will encounter much warmer temperatures during development, but this generally remains understudied for this life history characteristic. Like the larval species of many fishes, sturgeon larvae tend to disperse during darkness to reduce the risk of predation, which is high for this life stage (Waraniak *et al.* 2018). In many river systems, natural turbidity associated with spring freshet flows during spawning may also provide adequate cover for dispersal during the day,

though natural levels of turbidity have been greatly diminished due to river regulation (citation). Sturgeon larvae begin feeding in areas of fine sediments (e.g., silt) where food of the appropriate size and type (largely macroinvertebrates; Braaten *et al.* 2007) is available. The total duration of the larval stage varies among species but typically lasts a few weeks, during which time developmental and physiological changes allow for transition to the juvenile life stage.

2.7.6 Juveniles

The juvenile life stage comprises the period of fastest somatic growth for sturgeons as they transition from larvae through to reproductive adults. Initially, juveniles are highly susceptible to predation and offset this risk through the development of five rows of bony scutes to provide protection and rapidly grow in length (Beamish *et al.* 1996; Ireland *et al.* 2002; Crossman *et al.* 2023) to escape the gape size of other fish predators (French *et al.* 2014; Crossman *et al.* 2018; Baird *et al.* 2020; Gadomski and Parsley, 2005). This allometric growth tends to be faster in length than weight initially to avoid predation, followed by an increase in the rate of growth in weight. In favorable environmental conditions, growth in weight will be allocated between somatic growth and reproductive development, the latter taking either a few years (e.g., *Acipenser ruthenus*) or a few decades (*Acipenser transmontanus*). Juvenile sturgeon tend to be benthically orientated during initial feeding as prey consist primarily of invertebrates and insects within fine sediments or in shallow river margins (Nilo *et al.* 2006; Bock *et al.* 2011; Barth *et al.* 2013). As juveniles grow, diversity in the diet increases and while prey selection generally reflects availability (Crossman *et al.* 2016), opportunistic feeding or selectivity for specific prey items of high value is common. The diet of juveniles for some species remains focused on invertebrates and insects (*Scaphirhynchus platyrhynchus*, Gerrity *et al.* 2006), while most others transition to a diet that incorporates other fish species (Gerrity *et al.* 2006; Wanner *et al.* 2007; Margaritova *et al.* 2021). Habitat use varies according to species with many using entirely freshwater during early (age-0) juvenile stages (e.g., *Acipenser fulvescens*; *Acipenser transmontanus*; *Acipenser ruthenus*) followed by partial (*Acipenser brevirostrum*; *Acipenser oxyrinchus*) or even full estuarine habitat use for juveniles of certain species (*Acipenser sturio*). Salinity tolerance is generally influenced by body size (Amiri *et al.* 2009; Allen *et al.* 2011) and most sturgeon species have considerable tolerance for using brackish or marine waters. While *ex situ* rearing could adapt juveniles to rearing in saltwater for many species, sensitivity varies considerably among species with some being less tolerable of salinity regardless of life stage (e.g., *Acipenser naccarii*; Cataldi *et al.* 1999). As juveniles gradually approach adulthood, they may display increased space use and expand their feeding habits. They may also mimic or follow reproductive adults to spawning areas, important feeding areas, or overwintering habitats though this behavior is not well documented or studied. The duration of the juvenile stage varies greatly among sturgeon species, with some completing this stage rapidly (e.g., *Acipenser ruthenus* 4-5 years) and some taking decades (*Acipenser transmontanus* and *Huso* >16 years). Therefore, the time required to understand the

dynamics of recruitment to, and survival through, the juvenile stage can be a significant undertaking for many recovery programs.

2.7.7 Adults

Sturgeons are defined as adults once they reach sexual maturity. Depending upon species, this may take up to 22 years at sizes of around two meters (e.g., *Huso sp.*, *A. oxyrinchus*, *A. sinensis*). Smaller species (e.g., *Pseudoscaphirhynchus sp.*, *Scaphirhynchus sp.*, *A. ruthenus*) mature after four to six years. Upon reaching maturation, females normally spawn in intervals of two to four years, with annual gonad ripening occasionally observed in small individuals of smaller species such as *A. ruthenus*. In general males mature 1-4 years earlier than females and tend to stay smaller. Likewise, the spawning interval in males is shorter.

Depending upon species and/or population segregation, mature adult sturgeons are found in both marine, brackish, riverine and lacustrine systems and continue to forage until the next reproduction cycle. Adult sturgeons feed opportunistically on a variety of prey organisms, including fish, crustaceans and benthic invertebrates. Feeding migrations within and between these systems may span large distances, based upon seasonal variations of prey availability. Within riverine systems, winter months are normally spent in deeper sections of the river with reduced movement and feeding (Suciu *et al.* 2009). These migrations and aggregations often lead to mixed stocks of several sub-populations to be present in the same area, having direct implications on the collection and assignment of broodstock for sound *ex situ* practices.

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3 Chapter 3

Means of sturgeon conservation and the role of *ex situ* measures

Joern Gessner, Marie-Laure Acolas, James A. Crossman, Thomas Friedrich, Ralf Reinartz

3.1 Introduction

The guideline presented in this manual has been developed specifically for use by sturgeon hatchery managers, fisheries managers, fisheries policy-makers and other authorities responsible for fisheries and aquaculture development. It aims to increase awareness, help make sound decisions in conservation planning and support capacity building on best practices currently available in sturgeon hatchery management.

Several documents are dealing with guidance to preserve and manage resources utilized by humans to reach a level of sustainability that allows long-term utilization along with thriving populations. Approaches have been outlined in the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (1995) for example. The prerequisites for sturgeon conservation were outlined in detail in the Ramsar Declaration on Global Sturgeon Conservation (2006) and updated in the Vienna Sturgeon Conservation Declaration (2017). Nevertheless, the sustainability approach has utterly failed in sturgeons due to management approaches that did not sufficiently consider the life history until all of the global populations were heavily affected by the anthropogenic impacts as demonstrated in the current outcome of the IUCN Red List Assessment (Congiu *et al.* 2023).

Conservation attempts in cases when populations are beyond the point of being self-sustaining require to overcome recruitment deficits. In these cases, *ex situ* measures help to protect the last remaining individuals and provide the option for supportive releases. It is therefore of utmost priority, to help facilitating the decision at what point *ex situ* measures are mandatory to save a species or population from extinction and to provide a rationale for the inclusion of *ex situ* conservation into a wider sturgeon conservation framework. At this point, population and subsequently habitat monitoring comes into play.

3.2 Challenges in sturgeon conservation

Challenges and threats which have to be considered in sturgeon conservation and recovery are inherent to this group of fishes and stem from the peculiarities of Acipenserid biology, ecology and life-cycle. These peculiarities and resulting management approaches are apparent on different hierarchical levels of organization and are furthermore impacted by the target that the conservation approach aims to achieve. All of this makes sturgeon conservation a rather complicated endeavor, involving a variety of fields of expertise and stakeholders and calling for detailed planning, coordination and synchronization for any integrated approach to be successful.

Major examples for challenges are listed in Table 1. Most are related to the late maturity of the species, its longevity associated to the resulting impacts of even low fisheries related mortality and the large sizes attained, the adaptation to given river systems and the resulting presence of

subpopulations that are segregated by the time and distance of reproduction sites from the sea. Furthermore, the long-distance migrations between feeding and spawning habitats and the concentration during spawning runs require adapted management strategies.

3.3 Aims and targets of recovery

The **overall final objective** for rehabilitation measures may be defined as re-establishing/securing self-sustaining viable wild populations. According to the Pan-European Action Plan for Sturgeons this means: “To restore all existing sturgeon populations to ‘least concern’ (IUCN classification) or ‘favorable’ (Habitats Directive) status and re-establish self-sustaining sturgeon populations as well as habitat critically required for each stage of their life-cycle habitat in their historic range to an extent that ensures species survival and representation of the subpopulations where possible. “

Other targets might be a) the safeguarding of the genetic diversity in cases of ongoing attempts to mitigate habitat deficits, the support of wild populations to b) help reaching the desired populations size and self-sustaining status faster, or c) to allow a certain intensity of harvest.

These different targets require a different set of approaches or different intensities of these measures to ensure success. In any case, the determination of a population status is the first input to be provided when considering the need for different recovery measures. This needs a thorough analysis to verify if recovery of a population can be feasible. It has to consider if habitat availability and quality allow a population to sustain itself in the long term. It is of further importance to verify if increased mortalities have been dealt with, largely depending upon the size of the remaining population. Based upon the current state of the population in question, different approaches can be considered as outlined in Figure 3.1. Before an *ex situ* conservation program is established it is important to consider the characteristics and dimensions required, the timeframe and the financial effort it requires.

The decision to include *ex situ* management in the conservation strategy for a species should be determined by weighing the potential conservation benefit for the species against the likelihood of success and overall costs and risks of not only the proposed *ex situ* program, considering also alternative conservation actions or inaction. As is the case for conservation planning in general, these evaluations are made ideally by a multi-stakeholder group, including both *in situ* and *ex situ* expertise and experience.

Table 3.1. Life history traits of sturgeons and associated threats resulting from anthropogenic pressures with an outline of the approaches in management for mitigation		
Characteristics	Resulting management challenges	Conservation approaches
Show a high plasticity of morphological traits	Making it difficult for the unexperienced observer to identify individuals on the species level, hampering the involvement of lay people in conservation work and the evaluation of anecdotal information	Requires availability of reliable determination techniques (through experts or application of AI) to verify reports and prevent illegal harvest
Long life-spans and late maturity	Very sensitive to harvest and prone to be overexploited	Effective fisheries management to limit harvest at tolerable levels; allow for removal only at max reproductive potential; prevention of bycatch;
	Conservation effects become assessible only after long periods	Long-term commitment for restoration and funding to ensure targeted conservation outcome
Aggregation during spawning runs	Obscures the impacts of mortality/recruitment failure on adult population level due to large numbers that return annually	Detailed knowledge of population structure and natural mortality to set targets for harvest required, Assessment of YOY abundance as an indicator for population recruitment
Individuals do not spawn annually	Prevents inbreeding by mixing different year classes in spawning runs	Requiring larger groups of captive breeders being collected over longer periods of time for <i>ex situ</i> measures
	Resulting in only a fraction of the whole population being represented in the annual reproduction migrations	Breeding protocols need to involve families to preserve and/or maximize the representation of certain genotypes in a population
Multi-aged population structure	Depletion of spawners results in deficits in annual spawning runs affecting reproduction success for decades	Long-term recovery measures to allow rehabilitation of populations
Populations are ecologically adapted to their specific catchment and	Limits the transferability of fish between river systems	Selection of hydrologically and genetically similar sources

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respective conditions	Limits the transfer of research results between subpopulations from different catchments	Careful verification of prerequisites and boundary conditions required
	Availability of populations may be seriously affected by man-made changes to the hydrological regimes	Trial and error approach in restoration with clear objectives to be addressed with regard to the population segment to be recovered/replaced
	Renders fisheries management difficult since impacts might be separated temporarily or spatially	Regionally harmonized fisheries management required to minimize adverse impacts of gear types
Populations may display different forms with both vernal and hiemal migration patterns	Bearing the risk of losing such distinct patterns and forms through a) hatchery practices in <i>ex situ</i> activities as well as b) climate change	Proper characterization and mindful utilization of reproductive groups that display differences in maturation timing
	Past overexploitation, habitat destruction, modification and subsequent loss of such substructures result in complications defining a reference population status and environmental (habitat) reference conditions	Needs caution when interpreting population data
Sturgeon populations and their substructures (e.g. subpopulations, different spawning runs and locations), may be stretched out over thousands of kilometers at one point in time, in different habitat types in a marine-estuarine-riverine catchment system	Rendering the meta-population difficult to assess;	Multiple timepoints and sampling sites for assessments annually
	Have led to selective harvest of single population segments revealing different status;	May result in specific segment requiring protection, and for support
	Increases susceptibility to obstacles of migration routes;	Address migration impacts on a transnational or basin-wide scale
Spawn in freshwater at different distances from the sea	Exposes them selectively to multiple impacts and threats associated utilization of riverine environments (landscape sinks with multiple stressors and excessive impacts by various users, see above)	Knowledge of population structure, differentiated assessment of threats and different requirements for migration facilitation
Inhabit mainly deep stretches in the main channel in the lower and middle stretches of large rivers	Being exposed to a multitude of anthropogenic impacts (settlements, water abstraction, navigation in combination with hydropower)	Integrated management and spatial development targets to be elaborated, monitoring effort needs to be high

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	Results in overlap with navigation use of the river (dredging, ship strikes), loss of feeding habitat;	Integrated management and development targets to be elaborated
	Habitat requirements do interfere with targets for navigation channels (pool, bank structures), bearing the risk of detrimental impact on habitat use in general and reproduction in particular	Key habitats require effective protection, maintenance work must consider species protection as a critical factor
Utilize shallow marine areas on the continental shelf	Resulting in overlap with intensive fisheries leading to marine bycatch with an important impact upon recovery targets	Adapted fisheries techniques, closed seasons, closed areas and surveillance systems to be implemented; align with protection measures for other species groups for the development of a uniform measure to be applied
Large sizes already as subadult individuals in comparison with other species in a respective system	Subadult individuals (as well as large and potentially caviar-carrying fishes) are prone for bycatch considering the selectivity of the common gear used for demersal fish species may be harvested without ever having taken part in reproduction	Information campaigns, adapted fisheries techniques, closed seasons, closed areas and surveillance systems to be implemented
Large size animals	Adapted to open spaces and wide rivers Risk of injuries in man-made infrastructures (fish passes)	Appropriately dimensioned passing solutions at migration barriers/ obstacles (compared to other fish groups)
Absent or extremely rare in many former distribution areas	Makes population monitoring impossible or extremely difficult (e.g.); Renders preservation of genetic variability for establishment of <i>ex situ</i> populations difficult (low encounter probability)	Select targeted methods and life phases to allow data acquisition. For example, establish long term collection programs based upon eDNA identification of aggregation sites
Capable of intra- and inter-species hybridization	Bearing the risk of outbreeding for populations	Apply restrictions in the transfer and use of exotics in aquaculture and ornamental fish trade (ICES Code of Practice); intensify the safeguarding against escapement

The overall final objective for rehabilitation measures may be defined as re-establishing/securing self-sustaining viable wild populations. According to the Pan-European Action Plan for Sturgeons this means: “To restore all existing sturgeon populations to ‘least concern’ (IUCN classification) or ‘favorable’ (Habitats Directive) status and re-establish self-sustaining sturgeon populations as well as habitat critically required for each stage of their life-cycle habitat in their historic range to an extent that ensures species survival and representation of the subpopulations where possible. “

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Add text box on targets and criteria for recovery: Define self-sustaining by means of timeline, recruitment, a quantifier using the persistence of the population, discuss baseline relative to historic pop levels

3.4 Strategies for recovery

Viable sturgeon populations depend upon an ecologically functional habitat. The identification of the underlying reasons for the decline of a population must be well understood in order to start a qualified recovery program. As such, mitigation or removal of adverse impacts is instrumental to ensure population recovery is possible. To obtain the information, monitoring of habitat and population status is instrumental to provide the background data that allow to decide on measures to be taken. *Ex situ* measures come into play to overcome recruitment failure or the loss of population components as a result of the

adverse impacts. The ultimate goal of *ex situ* measures are viable self-sustaining populations and the subsequent termination of all *ex situ* measures, which can happen only, if *in situ* sturgeon habitat is functional and sufficiently protected from adverse impact. The habitat of sturgeons as a basis for the sturgeon life-cycle of wild and reintroduced populations comprises the marine, estuarine and riverine water bodies of the ecological corridor. Therefore, their connectivity is of paramount importance, as well as the functionality of the associated habitats. The habitat mosaic represents a functional unit, into which any *ex situ* measures feed.

Wild populations need to be protected *in situ* in order to be able to thrive. One major aspect of this protection addresses fisheries to prevent overexploitation either directed through IUU fishing as well as the removal of individuals through bycatch. Targeted fisheries, to be considered sustainable, must be based upon the annual population growth and the recruitment of the population in question. This will also help to minimize the potentially detrimental effects on introduced individuals from *ex situ* measures and render these measures more successful in general. A special case is represented by scientific fisheries for monitoring purposes or for *ex situ* measures, which are essential for the understanding of the response of the population towards management but removal of individuals needs thorough justification. The options and approaches for conservation and recovery are summarized in Figure 1.

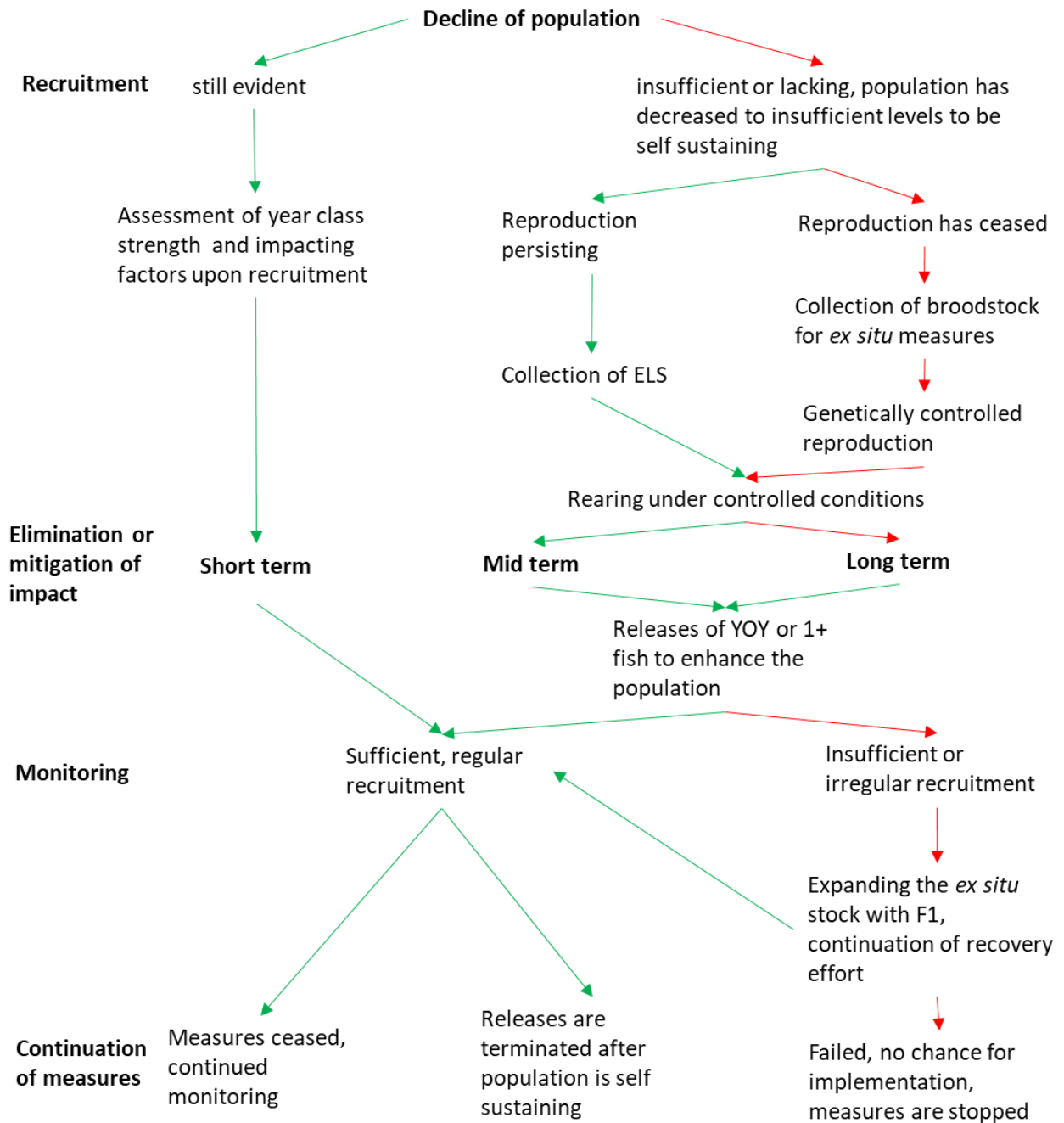


Figure 3.1. Decision tree for population recovery strategy implementation

Local communities, stakeholders and the general public need to be informed about the importance of sturgeon conservation in general, the options for their implementation, and the benefits of sustainable fishing practices. Furthermore, the public as well as the stakeholders have to be involved in the decision-making processes throughout the conservation activities to ensure long term support. *Ex situ* measures e.g., rearing of fish under controlled conditions and subsequent releases provide plenty of opportunities for public involvement which can also help support *in situ* measures.

Finally, international cooperation and exchange on methodology and results obtained for both *in situ*- and *ex situ* measures is essential to minimize repetition of mislead approaches

and to actively promote sturgeon conservation across borders to ensure the long-term survival of sturgeon populations. As a result, an integrated, coordinated and synchronized approach is necessary to combine the different fields of expertise in a harmonized regional strategy.

The following main steps should be taken into consideration and coordinated within an integrated approach for the recovery of a population:

- Pressures need to be identified and their effects upon populations have to be assessed
- Detrimental impacts have to be eliminated or mitigated
- Population responses to impact elimination or mitigation have to be monitored
- In case of an insufficient or lacking response of the population and an ongoing decline, *ex situ* populations have to be established
- Aims and measures of *ex situ* programs need to be clearly defined on a population level. For this purpose, the prerequisites, recovery targets and milestones as well as the exit strategy have to be outlined.

3.5 What is *ex situ*?

When a population is becoming rare and decline is progressing, the decision – regardless of the effectiveness of the habitat and fisheries associated measures taken - if a representative part of the population is to be secured under controlled conditions to prevent the loss of the inherited diversity or even the species in total. Here, the *ex situ* conservation comes into play as one element of the recovery strategy applied which aims at supportive measures from the increase of recruitment to securing the genetic heterogeneity by maintaining selected population segments under controlled conditions which then can be utilized to produce offspring for supportive stocking.

In line with the IUCN Guideline, “*ex situ*” is defined as “conditions under which individuals are spatially restricted with respect to their natural spatial patterns or those of their progeny, are removed from many of their natural ecological processes, and are managed by humans. In essence, the individuals are maintained in artificial conditions under different selection pressures than those in natural conditions in a natural habitat” (IUCN 2014).

The first objective to deal with is the question to which degree the previously defined conservation target can be reached through minimizing the mortality of the natural population and most importantly, if the population is viable under the current conditions. In cases when the population in question is not sufficiently large to recover even when the anthropogenic pressures have been dealt with or if longer time periods are required to fully revert or mitigate these pressures, the population support through increased recruitment becomes mandatory to prevent extinction (c.f. Figure 3.1).

3.6 Why *ex situ* conservation?

There are two main purposes for *ex situ* measures in sturgeon conservation: Firstly, the conservation of residual sturgeon biodiversity in captivity and secondly, the provision of genetically appropriate individuals for the support and restoration of populations.

If the population in question is reproducing naturally still, this can be achieved through the collection of F1 for rearing to overcome the high natural mortality from egg to fingerling stage and subsequent release.

If the population does reproduce only sporadically or reproduction has ceased, broodstock development in captivity as a basis for subsequent releases would be the option to prevent the remaining genetic heterogeneity to deteriorate. In this case timing is a decisive factor and as such it needs ample consideration to assess the time at which to interfere with the system to start *ex situ* measures. Here criteria such as the lack of or insufficient natural reproduction, the genetic diversity in the remaining population when compared to the initial population to be recovered, the knowledge about the extent and seasonality of the migration as well as access to the different population segments and evidence for the population trend need to be considered.

The extreme case would be an extinct population that is reestablished through a captive rearing program of genetically and behaviorally similar fish of a sister population to facilitate release to reestablish an extirpated population.

Small populations are particularly vulnerable to primary threats and stochastic processes. As such they require a more intensive and rapid management measures to be taken to avoid extinction. But even in larger populations revealing a substantial decline, the establishment of a diverse and sustainable *ex situ* population may be critical in preventing species extinction. Especially, if a sufficiently rapid reduction of primary threats is uncertain or has been unsuccessful for the respective population, timely action is required while the population in question still inherits sufficient diversity and heterogeneity. The assessment of the potential to revert the population trend by halting or reverting the principle impacts must be critically evaluated and an assessment of the factors that might impede or likely contribute to conservation success have to be carried out.

Table 3.2. Causes for population dysfunction and proposed countermeasures

Symptoms	Cause	<i>In situ</i> measures to address the impacts	<i>Ex situ</i> measures to be taken besides remediation of causes
Lack of reproduction	Subcritical number of spawners	Reduction of mortality	Establishment of an <i>ex situ</i> broodstock and controlled

			reproduction
	Unsuitable flow or temperature conditions	Improved river basin management	Utilization of wild spawners for controlled reproduction
	Lack of suitable spawning habitat	Facilitation of lateral erosion, artificial spawning habitat	Utilization of wild spawners for controlled reproduction
Recruitment failure in juveniles	Excessive egg mortality under natural conditions	Habitat improvement (water quality, substrate quality)	Collection of eggs in the wild and rearing under controlled conditions
	Predation	Improved substrate quality, habitat enrichment	Collection of eggs, larvae and juveniles in the wild and rearing under controlled conditions
	Habitat deficiency	Habitat restoration	Utilization of wild or establishment of captive broodstock
Recruitment failure in broodstock	Excessive mortality in fisheries	Effective protection, enforcement, increased compliance	Utilization of wild breeders or establishment of captive broodstock
	Predation	Habitat restoration, education of introduced predators, fisheries management	Utilization of wild breeders or establishment of captive broodstock
	Mortality through hydro constructions	Migration facilitation, habitat improvement	Utilization of wild breeders or establishment of captive broodstock
	Migration obstacles	Migration facilitation, habitat improvement	Utilization of wild breeders or establishment of captive broodstock
Continuous decline of wild population of all age classes	Unknown or combination of reasons	Research	Establishment of an <i>ex situ</i> broodstock and controlled reproduction to obtain sufficient time to solve the underlying reasons of the

			decline
Releases to account for insufficient sturgeon resources to support a regional fishery	Insufficient regulation of harvest	Increased natural recruitment, fisheries management	Utilization of wild breeders or establishment of captive broodstock
Releases to maintain the species in natural environments	Lack of recruitment, deficit in carrying capacity, overambitious project aims	<i>In situ</i> measures to improve habitat quality, recovery of functional populations	Establishment of an <i>ex situ</i> broodstock and controlled reproduction as a basis for release
Sturgeon rivers and seas void of sturgeon	Extinction in the wild	Reintroduction and <i>in situ</i> measures for habitat provision	Establishment of an <i>ex situ</i> broodstock and controlled reproduction, controlled translocation and re-colonization based upon releases

3.7 How to apply *ex situ* measures?

Ex situ management has been applied in several different approaches in support of threatened sturgeon species. Sturgeon species extinctions have largely been prevented this way so far. At the same time, conservation measures or re-introductions that were carried out following periods of *ex situ* management were rarely successful if such measures were focusing solely on supporting populations through releases, while at the same time the associated habitat deficits were left unconsidered. Therefore, the need for, and suitability of, an *ex situ* program must be carefully evaluated as part of an integrated conservation strategy (IUCN 2014). This strategy should comprise

- a status review of the species and its habitat
- a threat analysis,
- the identification of the role of the *ex situ* measures in the conservation of the species,
- an analysis of the population segments and sizes that need to be represented in the *ex situ* measures,
- an assessment of the resources required,
- a feasibility study that the targets will be achieved,
- a risk analysis for the adverse impacts upon the program,
- a transparent decision on the fate of the planned measures incorporating all stakeholders involved.

The process of establishing and implementing *ex situ* measures for sturgeons requires long-term planning. Therefore, an outlook should be provided on the overall duration of the *ex situ* process until reaching the conservation target. Based on this forecast, and considering the rate of population decline, the necessity of an *ex situ* program has to be assessed. Once the primary threats have been addressed and the impacts mitigated, *ex situ* populations may be used for population restoration or the re- introduction in an assisted colonization. As such, these guidelines are complementary to the IUCN Guidelines for Reintroductions and Other Conservation Translocations (IUCN 2014). For proper *ex situ* planning it is essential to describe the conditions and the time at which to interfere with the system to start *ex situ* measures.

Table 3.3. Prerequisites associated with different objectives of *ex situ* applications to ensure its effectiveness

Target	Purpose(s)	Method	Prerequisites
Protect remaining genetic heterogeneity of species/population	Prevent extirpation through a natural catastrophe, natural mortality and lack of recruitment, fisheries; temporarily overcome adverse conditions that potentially affect the viability of the population	Catch of representative segments of an available population and transfer into <i>ex situ</i> facilities	Ensure genetic integrity, proper identification of substructures of a population and that they are represented in the <i>ex situ</i> population, safeguard rearing through qualified personnel, fail-safe rearing technology and procedures
Support natural recruitment	Enhance recruitment by reducing mortality of early life phases	Collect eggs/larvae of natural reproductions for hatchery rearing to fingerling or 0+ size or establish <i>ex situ</i> population	Minimize selection of hatchery environment on offspring and ensure behavioral plasticity
Replenish stocks	Support recreational/commercial harvest	Catch and reproduction of natural spawners	Prevent adverse impact of releases upon natural reproducing population segments
Reestablish extirpated population	Release fish to initiate a self-sustaining population	Establish and expand <i>ex situ</i> population, reproduce and rear offspring fit for release	Utilize a suitable (genetics, habitat quality) source population, identify the bottlenecks and reasons for initial population decline, ensure that threats have been terminated

Figure 3.2. Potential interaction of conservation approaches and measures upon genetic integrity and fitness for survival

In any case, the acquisition, collection, transportation and documentation of origin of animals must be conducted on the basis of legality and traceability. Furthermore, all animals to be used in the establishment and reproduction of the broodstock need to be assessed genetically to ensure the use of native strains, the differentiation into different recognizable conservation units and families for pedigree documentation and subsequent propagation (see Chapter 6). A comparison with the genetic diversity of the wild population is mandatory to represent the diversity of the natural population in the conservation program.

In an attempt to safeguard the rare animals incorporated in the broodstock and the resulting F1 (or later) of the conservation units it is suggested to distribute the animals to two or more *ex situ* facilities for risk split and to avoid the total loss due to local adverse events.

In cases where natural reproduction has ceased and collection of naturally reproduced offspring is infeasible, controlled reproduction of broodstock is used to sustain both the long-term operation of the living gene bank and the support of the population through releases of animals in the wild. Maturation of broodstock should preferably be initiated under natural rearing conditions to match the biological cycle of the animal. Hormonal induction is required to induce ovulation in most cases still it would be preferable that the animals' physiological response could be triggered by the modification of environmental stimuli (see Chapter 8).

Countermeasures might be necessary in the rearing facilities to address effects of climate change on the maturation of the fish such as temperature regulation during the maturation process. To ensure the safeguarding of the broodstock, minimal invasive techniques are to be applied to collect eggs from the females (see Chapter 9).

3.8 Resource requirements

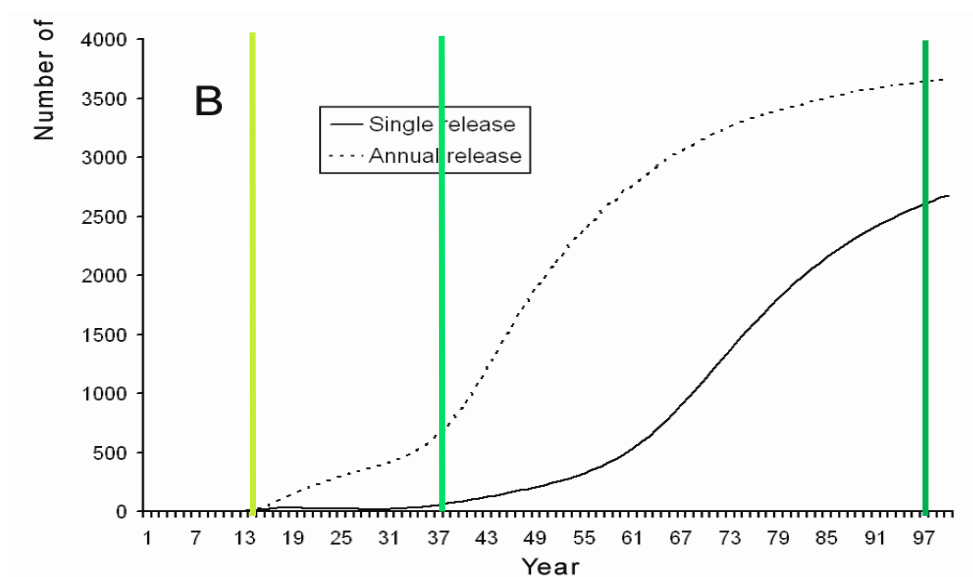
The development of species- and/or population-specific *ex situ* programs must consider the status of the respective population and take its biological and ecological requirements and peculiarities (time of spawning, migration patterns, etc.) into account when designing the rearing facilities. To meet the aims of genetic purity of the population in question, the identification of potential sources for broodstock development or for progeny that represent the genetic variety and identity of the population in question (see Chapter 6). To prevent the loss of animals that represent the entire heritage of a population segment, a suitable facility to maintain them is essential. This aim might be facilitated by using an existing (commercial) infrastructure or through the development of facilities to safeguard the animals and to produce offspring adapted to be released into natural conditions. It is inevitable however, to ensure that the experience/expertise to handle, maintain and raise the animals in question is available, ensuring also that animal welfare is ensured in the operation of the facility. This also includes the presence of failsafe plans, backup devices and a long-term strategy for the development of the captive population. In a second step, establishing and implementing propagation plans based on molecular genetics to ensure diversity is maximized and to avoid the risks usually associated with controlled propagation like e.g., inbreeding, outbreeding, domestication (see also Chapter 6). Both the genetic basis and the application of releases have the potential to adversely affect the supported population in the wild. This can be the case through introgression of fish that originate from different genetic subgroups or simply by releasing a huge quantity of

genetically identical fish or fish that are large enough to outcompete the wild fish and dominate subsequent reproduction. As a result, the recovery of population demographics that resemble the natural population should be a long-term goal.

Because of the very large size of these *ex situ* facilities, and the required financial investment it can be difficult for single countries to implement such measures, especially when more than one species is to be addressed. These restrictions further emphasize the need for basin wide collaboration, allowing coordinated programs to be developed between several facilities, not only to split the costs and risks, but also to preserve genetic diversity in captivity over many decades.

3.9 Timeframe for recovery

With species that reach maturity only after a decade or more, sturgeon recovery requires time. The verification of the target to reach a sufficiently large population size to ensure self-sustaining status over time without further intervention will have to be monitored over prolonged periods to be able to exclude unforeseen drawbacks. Therefore, releases might require to be continued until the populations reveals continuous and regular reproduction and recruitment. Even if the pressures on the population have been addressed properly and the released individuals survive, it is essential to monitor the performance during this period to verify if recruitment is consistent and sufficient to



maintain the population at a stable level.

Figure 3.3. Timeframe for recovery of sturgeon populations under continued release (broken line) and based upon single release; yellow line onset of reproduction, green line starts of exponential growth of population, dark green line endpoint reaching plateau phase in supported recovery (after Jaric & Gessner 2011)

If it is considered that the *ex situ* population at this stage might not be needed for supportive releases anymore, it is highly recommended to establish and maintain it for another

generation period to be able to respond in cases when the recruitment suffers from adverse or temporally fluctuating impacts and the population begins to decline again. The initial safeguarded population segment is the most precious part of the *ex situ* process since it represents the entire genetic heterogeneity of the population in question.

In most cases, it has taken a century or more to deplete the populations of sturgeon and it seems rather optimistic to expect that the recovery would be a process that can be achieved in much shorter timeframes by simply "filling" population deficits short-term with individuals from controlled propagation.

3.10 Adaptive management

In order to be successful, *ex situ* programs need to be carefully planned and implemented since it has been shown in a variety of fish species that the rearing of individuals under monotonous controlled conditions alters their behavior and their cognitive abilities, exemplified in salmon (Johnson *et al.* 2009), trout (Bradshaw 1996), and sturgeon (Carmona Ruiz *et al.* 2017). Therefore, the need to further develop scientifically based and innovative approaches to *ex situ* conservation is evident and requires constant updating to make best practice methods widely available.

When applied properly, *ex situ* conservation can be a potent tool for species conservation that supports *in situ* conservation and vice versa. Potential *ex situ* goals, objectives and actions should therefore be evaluated alongside of the *in situ* activities in the process of conservation planning to ensure that they secure the most benefit for the overall program.

In order to allow the recovery measures to be effective, the monitoring of the effects of the measures is paramount. For this purpose, the definition of the aims of the monitoring becomes essential. For *ex situ* measures two main approaches have to be followed:

- a) The performance of the *ex situ* facility in rearing the fish which comprises the growth and mortality of the fish as a summary parameter for the appropriateness of the rearing conditions, their genetic integrity, their maturation and reproductive effectiveness. Fitness of fish to be released is to be assessed prior to release (Galich & Chebanov 2011, see also Chapter 12). It is noted that behavior assessments in broodstock are difficult to be carried out but with time improved rearing designs might ease this assessment in the years to come.
- b) The effectiveness of the releases in contributing to the population establishment or enhancement. Of key importance for the evaluation of the performance of the released fish are the following indicators: Survival, population genetics, migration, reproduction and recruitment.

In both cases it is essential to note that the provision of funds for monitoring is a prerequisite for successful *ex situ* measures!

Without the assessment of the effects of the measures undertaken, the effectiveness of the measures remains open, preventing any means to be improved by adaptive management. Conceptual mistakes in such cases are perpetuated and contribute to the wasting of funds that could be used sensibly if monitoring data would be at hand. Population monitoring and habitat monitoring practices are described in detail the respective guidelines published under this contract (Neuburg *et al.* 2024, Reinartz *et al.* 2024).

In this context, the monitoring of fish released into the wild and their performance in the natural environment, including the growth, mortality, migration and effectiveness of reproduction and recruitment are key issues to be determined. Only sound data on the response of the released fish and eventually the fish that still reproduce naturally in addition to the impact of the releases can help to support adaptive management of the recovery measures, an adaptation of the time plan or to conclude on necessary alterations to the program and to develop alternative means of population support.

The effectiveness of conservation actions will become visible through the population monitoring, namely the survival, mortalities, and recruitment of a reintroduced population. Nevertheless, habitat plays a decisive role in the performance of the released fish. As such habitat monitoring and monitoring of habitat use, including tagging and tracking to assess migration and dispersal are essential parts of the assessment also to evaluate the effects of ongoing habitat alterations through climate change or anthropogenic pressures such as navigation or damming. Furthermore, population genetics in both the released individuals and the *ex situ* population will provide indications of adaptation of the offspring to the conditions of the habitat into which they are released.

In order to be able to assess the mortalities observed in the population under recovery, monitoring of fisheries and their impact through bycatch, poaching or habitat disturbance needs to be incorporated in the data acquisition.

3.11 Potential drawbacks of *ex situ* measures

While the safeguarding of wild fish (and their offspring) under controlled conditions must be considered a last resort to “buy time” to overcome the obstacles for sufficient natural reproduction and recruitment, supported recruitment can be helpful under conditions of low natural reproduction and recruitment, or for reestablishing populations that have been lost. In these attempts, sturgeon hatcheries play an important role. The release of hatchery produced offspring requires thorough planning and practice to prevent adverse effects. Due care must be applied to minimize the impact of hatchery fish upon naturally reproducing conspecifics to prevent adverse effects upon an already stressed resource (Arlinghaus *et al.* 2019).

When implemented on a small but functional population, supportive stocking can have the goal to increase the speed of a population recovery or focus on a different target like supporting fisheries. While the first option has been applied on several occasions, for

instance, in *A. sinensis* in the Yangtze River (Wei *et al.* 2010), in the Lower Danube between 2005 and 2009 for *A. gueldenstaedtii*, *A. stellatus* and *H. huso* (Holostenco *et al.* 2019) as well as currently in *A. ruthenus* in the Upper Danube (Friedrich *et al.* 2022), these measures require a cautious implementation in order to avoid dominance of released fish over potential natural recruitment through the release of older and more robust fish and pathogen transmission.

It has been recognized that stocking of hatchery-produced progeny may include the risk of altering the genetic structure of the natural populations while at the same time producing juveniles not fit for survival in nature (Clugston and Randall 2006).

Usually, fish of hatchery origin have a low genetic diversity, originating from few parental specimens, due to limited holding capacities of conventional hatcheries (see Chapter 6). In contrast, long term collection of broodstock has resulted in almost complete coverage of natural genetic diversity in the *ex situ* stocks (*S. albus*, *A. transmontanus* in Kootenai River (add Refs)). Releases for re-introduction are currently applied for instance in the European sturgeon *A. sturio* (Germany and France) and the Atlantic sturgeon *A. oxyrinchus* in the Baltic Sea, *A. fulvescens* (Michigan example (add refs)).

As a result of the above considerations, based on well-established knowledge for conventional hatchery operation for any fish species, the current hatchery practices have to be optimized in terms of their appropriateness for future sturgeon rehabilitation programs (see Chapter 10). Therefore, the entire husbandry and breeding process, as well as the strategy for conservation culture, must be critically assessed to adjust rehabilitation programs and subsequently the design of hatcheries and their operation mode to serve the targeted release purposes.

In order to assist in understanding the requirements for conservation aquaculture for sturgeon, one has to emphasize clearly the fundamental differences in hatchery operations for commercial aquaculture and for culture for release into natural waters.

3.12 *Ex situ* rearing and aquaculture production

Identifying the commonalities and differences of conservation and production-oriented culture techniques is one of the main and pivotal goals of this document. Aquaculture production focuses on the performance of the cultured specimens of any species in the aquaculture system and meeting consumer preferences. Therefore, the entire operation aims at ensuring maximum survival (producing high numbers) and fast growth (producing a large biomass in the shortest time possible) under farm conditions. In this context the production of disease-free specimens and/or specimens resistant to disease is paramount to avoid any losses while at the same time achieving high feed conversion efficiency to reduce production costs which leaves the fish without need to train to hunt for food. On top of the previous points the production process requires appropriate meat composition/quality; adaptation to all-year-round spawning and need to be hardy when handled, allowing easy

management for sorting and live transportation. Practices applied in commercial hatcheries conflict with ecological, environmental and socio-economic objectives of the recovery programs. They are a result of economic pressures rather than ecology and oriented towards maximizing a short-term profit. As a consequence, none of the target objectives mentioned above for commercial aquaculture of sturgeons or any other aquatic species applies for conservation cultivation for release.

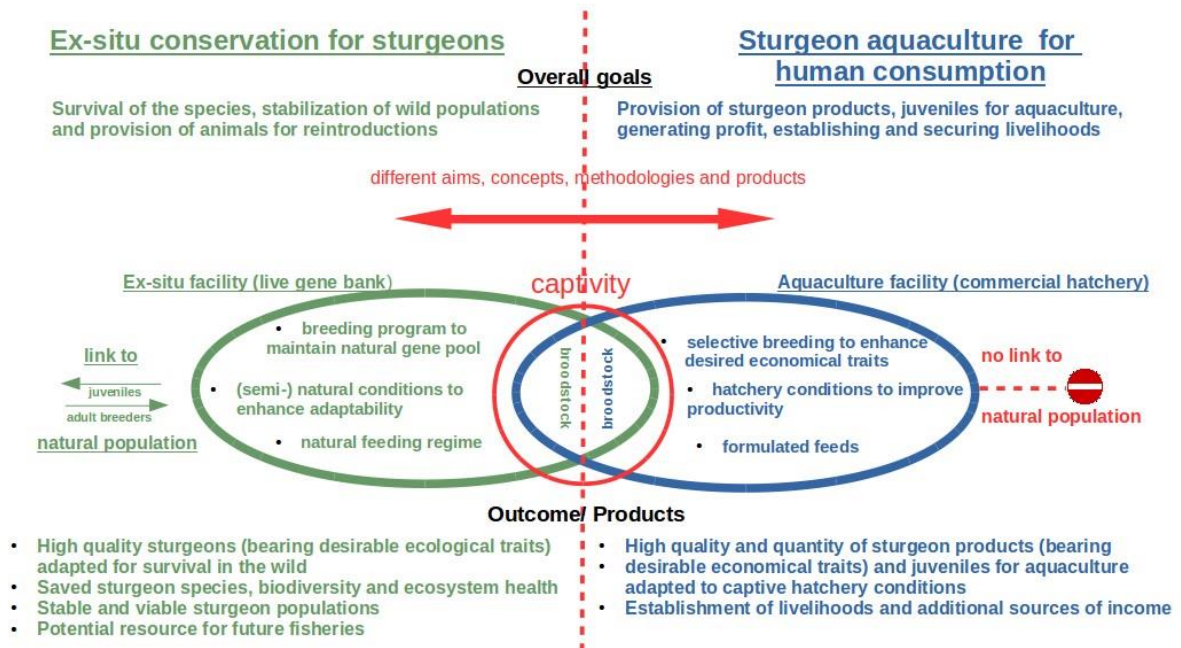


Figure 3.3: Comparison of rearing for release and commercial production for consumption of sturgeons providing an overview of main differences (after Reinartz 2015)

As a result, numerous projects and activities in recent years that have aimed to increase the release of sturgeon in order to rehabilitate the populations in the wild, but many have failed to achieve their expected goals due to an insufficient preparation and duration of the measures planned (see Chapter 12).

In general, the rearing for release aims at the provision of heterogenous rearing conditions with regard to water quality, light, feeding regime and responsiveness to predator presence. The approaches vary from incubating and rearing early life stages in river water, with substrate in semi natural rive-like structures to application of rather controlled conditions that are followed by training schools during which the fish are challenged with the location and uptake of natural diets, coping with temperature fluctuations, exposition to increased current velocity and heterogeneity, to predator exposition. In all cases the aim is to increase the responsiveness and behavior al flexibility to increase survival after release.

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Table 3.1. Life history traits of sturgeons and associated threats resulting from anthropogenic pressures with an outline of the approaches in management for mitigation

Characteristics	Resulting management challenges	Conservation approaches
Show a high plasticity of morphological traits	Making it difficult for the unexperienced observer to identify individuals on the species level, hampering the involvement of lay people in conservation work and the evaluation of anecdotal information	Requires availability of reliable determination techniques (through experts or application of AI) to verify reports and prevent illegal harvest
Long life-spans and late maturity	Very sensitive to harvest and prone to be overexploited	Effective fisheries management to limit harvest at tolerable levels; allow for removal only at max reproductive potential; prevention of bycatch;
	Conservation effects become assessible only after long periods	Long-term commitment for restoration and funding to ensure targeted conservation outcome
Aggregation during spawning runs	Obscures the impacts of mortality/recruitment failure on adult population level due to large numbers that return annually	Detailed knowledge of population structure and natural mortality to set targets for harvest required, Assessment of YOY abundance as an indicator for population recruitment
Individuals do not spawn annually	Prevents inbreeding by mixing different year classes in spawning runs	Requiring larger groups of captive breeders being collected over longer periods of time for <i>ex situ</i> measures
	Resulting in only a fraction of the whole population being represented in the annual reproduction migrations	Breeding protocols need to involve families to preserve and/or maximize the representation of certain genotypes in a population

Multi-aged population structure	Depletion of spawners results in deficits in annual spawning runs affecting reproduction success for decades	Long-term recovery measures to allow rehabilitation of populations
Populations are ecologically adapted to their specific catchment and respective conditions	Limits the transferability of fish between river systems	Selection of hydrologically and genetically similar sources
	Limits the transfer of research results between subpopulations from different catchments	Careful verification of prerequisites and boundary conditions required
	Availability of populations may be seriously affected by man-made changes to the hydrological regimes	Trial and error approach in restoration with clear objectives to be addressed with regard to the population segment to be recovered/replaced
	Renders fisheries management difficult since impacts might be separated temporarily or spatially	Regionally harmonized fisheries management required to minimize adverse impacts of gear types
Populations may display different forms with both vernal and hiemal migration patterns	Bearing the risk of losing such distinct patterns and forms through a) hatchery practices in <i>ex situ</i> activities as well as b) climate change	Proper characterization and mindful utilization of reproductive groups that display differences in maturation timing
	Past overexploitation, habitat destruction, modification and subsequent loss of such substructures result in complications defining a reference population status and environmental (habitat) reference conditions	Needs caution when interpreting population data
Sturgeon populations and their substructures (e.g.,	Rendering the meta-population difficult to assess;	Multiple timepoints and sampling sites for assessments annually

<p>subpopulations, different spawning runs and locations), may be stretched out over thousands of kilometers at one point in time, in different habitat types in a marine-estuarine-riverine catchment system</p>	<p>Have led to selective harvest of single population segments revealing different status;</p> <p>Increases susceptibility to obstacles of migration routes;</p>	<p>May result in specific segment requiring protection, and for support</p> <p>Address migration impacts on a transnational or basin-wide scale</p>
<p>Spawn in freshwater at different distances from the sea</p>	<p>Exposes them selectively to multiple impacts and threats associated utilization of riverine environments (landscape sinks with multiple stressors and excessive impacts by various users, see above)</p>	<p>Knowledge of population structure, differentiated assessment of threats and different requirements for migration facilitation</p>
<p>Inhabit mainly deep stretches in the main channel in the lower and middle stretches of large rivers (potamal)</p>	<p>Being exposed to a multitude of anthropogenic impacts (settlements, water abstraction, navigation in combination with hydropower)</p>	<p>Integrated management and spatial development targets to be elaborated, monitoring effort needs to be high</p>
	<p>Results in overlap with navigation use of the river (dredging, ship strikes), loss of feeding habitat;</p>	<p>Integrated management and development targets to be elaborated</p>
	<p>Habitat requirements do interfere with targets for navigation channels (pool, bank structures), bearing the risk of detrimental impact on habitat use in general and reproduction in particular</p>	<p>Key habitats require effective protection, maintenance work must consider species protection as a critical factor</p>
<p>Utilize shallow marine areas on the continental shelf</p>	<p>Resulting in overlap with intensive fisheries leading to marine bycatch with an important impact upon recovery targets</p>	<p>Adapted fisheries techniques, closed seasons, closed areas and surveillance systems to be implemented; align with protection measures for other species groups for the development of a</p>

<p>Large sizes already as subadult individuals in comparison with other species in a respective system</p>	<p>Subadult individuals (as well as large and potentially caviar-carrying fishes) are prone for bycatch considering the selectivity of the common gear used for demersal fish species may be harvested without ever having taken part in reproduction</p>	<p>uniform measure to be applied Information campaigns, adapted fisheries techniques, closed seasons, closed areas and surveillance systems to be implemented</p>
<p>Large size animals</p>	<p>Adapted to open spaces and wide rivers Risk of injuries in man-made infrastructures (fish passes)</p>	<p>Appropriately dimensioned passing solutions at migration barriers/obstacles (compared to other fish groups)</p>
<p>Absent or extremely rare in many former distribution areas</p>	<p>Makes population monitoring impossible or extremely difficult (e.g.); Renders preservation of genetic variability for establishment of <i>ex situ</i> populations difficult (low encounter probability)</p>	<p>Select targeted methods and life long term collection programs to allow data acquisition based upon eDNA identification of aggregation sites</p>
<p>Capable of intra- and inter-species hybridization</p>	<p>Bearing the risk of outbreeding for populations</p>	<p>Apply restrictions in the transfer and use of exotics in aquaculture and ornamental fish trade (ICES Code of Practice); intensify the safeguarding against escapement</p>

4 Chapter 4

Capture, Handling, Sampling and Fish Welfare

Thomas Friedrich, James A. Crossman, Molly A.H. Webb, Joel P. Van Eenennaam, Joern Gessner

4.1 Introduction

Conservation programs usually rely on the capture of wild fish (see chapter 7) for the establishment of *ex situ* programs where progeny is either reared for an indefinite period (e.g., fingerlings, age-0, etc.) or released into the wild at a specified age, size or time (Anderson et al., 2022). This chapter will briefly cover the legal requirements for collection and possession, animal welfare, and review the techniques to capture, handle, collect samples, and anesthetize sturgeon. In addition, recommended data collection and potential sampling techniques are reviewed.

4.2 Legal Framework and Permits

Animal protection laws are a result of changing attitudes and social norms that have been developing over many years, and every country has its own established regulations for collection in the wild and for use of animals in conservation programs, research, teaching, and farming. For example, the European Convention for the Protection of Vertebrate Animals used for Experimental and other Scientific Purposes (ETS No. 123) concerns the use of animals in research and its provisions cover areas such as care and accommodation, conduct of experiments, and humane euthanasia. In North America, the Endangered Species Act (US) and Species At Risk Act (Canada) govern access to the resource either in the wild or captivity.

The legal framework is typically provided at the national level, addressing not only animal use and welfare, but for almost all sturgeon populations worldwide, there are species-specific regulations in place due to their threatened and endangered status. Since the laws, restrictions, and required permits vary from country to country they will not be presented here, but it is emphasized that it is of utmost importance that the personnel involved in capture, handling, sampling and retaining sturgeon at *ex situ* facilities implement the conditions of the relevant legal framework for the species in question.

4.3 Fish Welfare

Fish welfare remains a controversial issue (Diggles *et al.*, 2024) since it is an anthropogenic reflection upon the response of an animal to the environment it is exposed. As such, the underlying notion is based upon similarities between men and its conspecifics which might or might not be fully justified and reflect a precautionary approach. We use the term welfare to describe the condition under which the behavior and physiological state of an animal is close to the preferred. Reference for this state is the behavior and response observed in the natural environment and is challenging to measure accurately in captivity. In this respect deviating conditions imposed upon the animal is interpreted as stress, resulting in a compromised physiological state and being expressed also in the behavior of the animal.

Since stress in animals is a critical aspect of welfare, which is triggered through changing or suboptimal conditions of rearing, unsuitable handling and feeding, precise planning, selection of methods and careful handling and rearing should be self-evident principles. Below are some highlighted aspects of sturgeon welfare when capturing, handling, and sampling.

4.4 Collection and Handling

2.1.1 General Considerations

Since most sturgeon species are endangered or threatened, special attention must be devoted to ensuring safe and careful fish handling to avoid adverse impacts upon the fish and the population as a whole. The collection, processing, and sampling of fish must only apply safe techniques and must consider fish welfare during all stages of the operation. Applying the precautionary principle, especially when dealing with critically endangered species, should be self-understood. When large fish are captured, the fish can do considerable damage themselves, the gear, and the crew if not handled appropriately and quickly. The amount of handling and sampling procedure after capture will vary by the aims the program has and thus between different conservation programs. For example, if only mature fish are being targeted for transport to *ex situ* facilities, then maybe only limited assessments (e.g., length data and tagging) will be done in the field and the rest conducted in stable conditions following transport to reduce total stress. Stress in mature individuals may lead to reduced reproduction and recruitment success which can further endanger populations. It is known that stress can impede effectiveness of reproduction through reduction of gamete and subsequently progeny quality (e.g., Campbell *et al.*, 1994; Pankhurst and Van der Kraak, 1997; Schreck *et al.*, 2001; Semenikova, *et al.*, 1999; Bayunova *et al.*, 2002), increase incidence of gonadal atresia (e.g., Clearwater and Pankhurst, 1997; Cleary *et al.*, 2000; Pankhurst and Van der Kraak, 1997), and potentially compromised immune function (e.g., Georgiadis *et al.*, 2001). Immature fish are typically more robust prior to being reproductively active and may be more thoroughly sampled

(see below), tagged, and then released back into the wild. Since stress is cumulative, stress associated with handling events should be reduced under all circumstances. Reducing stress during each handling event should be attempted by assessing the relevance of the procedure (e.g., is there a less invasive technique that will provide the data needed with acceptable accuracy), the duration of the procedure, and the conditions under which the animal is handled (e.g., temperature, air exposure, dissolved oxygen, water quality, direct sunlight, etc.). Stressors experienced in one developmental stage can have an effect during later developmental stages (see Schreck, 2010), and as such minimizing stress is essential to ensure minimal impact upon the fish.

4.5 Capture methods

Eggs, embryos, juvenile, subadult and adult sturgeon can be captured by active (drift gill and trammel netting, trawling, seining, electrofishing) or passive (gill and trammel nets, fyke, stow and hoop nets, D-frame nets, baited setlines, egg mats) methods. The methods of choice vary between life cycle stages, locations, and purpose (e.g., Wanner *et al.* 2007; Doyle *et al.* 2008; Kahn and Mohead 2010; Hupfeld *et al.* 2022; Haxton *et al.* 2023). They are presented in detail in the Population Monitoring Guideline (Neuburg *et al.* 2024) and will be very briefly presented here.

2.1.2 Active Fishing Methods

2.1.2.1 Drift Gill Netting

The operation of drifting gill or trammel nets is from a boat or between two boats, which allows coverage of a large area of water. The net is typically deployed from a boat, tied to buoys at both ends and maintained in position while drifting, rowing, or motoring the boat, to match the speed of the drift. The net is fished while dragging on the bottom while it is maintained perpendicular to the flow.

2.1.2.2 Trawling

Trawling utilizes a motored vessel that drags a net bag of multifilament equipped with a bottom chain and floats on top between two otter boards that keep the net open. For sturgeon, the net is usually fished with continuous bottom contact. Due to the constant motion and the tendency to collect debris, fish in the trawl can suffer trauma but short trawl sets (30 minutes) can help to minimize the impact (Acolas *et al.* 2020).

2.1.2.3 Seining

Seining refers to the utilization of a net to encircle a target either being operated from shore in rivers or coastal waters, or from two boats when operated at sea (purse seining). The net is

generally made of polyfilament nylon netting and is equipped with a leaded bottom and float line.

2.1.2.4 Electrofishing

Electrofishing has proven to be an effective method for collecting sturgeon mainly in shallower water (e.g., Harris *et al.* 2017; Hupfeld *et al.* 2022; Haxton *et al.* 2023). Fishing with a direct current field between a cathode at the boat and the anode that typically is the dip net operated in front of the boat, leads to electronarcosis, and tends to drag fish to the anode where they can be captured. The major drawback of electrofishing is the limited range of the field, reducing its effectiveness on fish in deep water.

2.1.3 Passive Fishing Methods

2.1.3.1 Gill and Trammel Nets

Stationary gill and trammel nets are equipped with a lead line and a float line and are set between two anchors that keep it fixed in position. As such the net collects fish that are moving perpendicular to the net when they are either entangled or are captured by running their heads into the mesh. In some cases, mortalities have been documented and were associated with elevated water temperature, extended soak times, and net interactions (clamped opercula) that prevented normal respiration. To decrease mortality risk, collection methodology should be modified (e.g., shorter soak times) as needed, based on the environmental conditions.

2.1.3.2 Fyke, Stow and Hoop Nets

These generally similar nets consist of netting in the form of a cylindrical or cone-shape (fyke), cone or pyramid shape (stow), or nylon mesh hung on round frames (hoop), all with a funnel shape end to retain the fish. These nets are fixed at the bottom with stakes or anchors. These large passive gear types have the advantage of low mechanical injury and stress on the fish, and as a result the survival and fitness are high (Gessner *et al.* 2011).

2.1.3.3 D-Frame Nets

Anchored D-frame nets are set below known spawning sites and have been used for sampling eggs, larvae and early juveniles (e.g., Caroffino *et al.* 2009; Wei *et al.* 2009; Poytress *et al.* 2015; Usvyatsov *et al.* 2013; Haxton *et al.* 2023). The nets are a steel frame in a D- or rectangular- shape that is maintained in position by an anchor or by steel piles driven into the sediment. The frame is equipped with a conical net and the cod end is equipped with a detachable mesh sampling container. Depending on the current velocity and amount of debris accumulation, the soak times must be adjusted. In strong currents or high debris drift, a

retrieval might become necessary every 10-20 minutes. Mortalities associated with this sampling technique can be high, due to the mechanical pressure and stress on larvae.

2.1.3.4 Baited Setlines (Trotlines)

The use of baited setlines, also known as trotlines, for capturing sturgeon has been successful (e.g., Thomas and Haas 1999; Holtgren and Auer 2004; Wanner *et al.* 2007; Steffensen *et al.* 2013; Patton *et al.* 2020; Haxton *et al.* 2023). Setlines will vary in length, and hook size and type will vary among target species and body size. They are often set in mid-river with anchors and buoys at each end. Wet times (4-24 hours) will vary depending on the rate of fish capture and/or bait loss. Setlines have versatility as they can be set deep and in currents where other capture techniques may not be as effective (Haxton *et al.* 2023).

2.1.3.5 Egg Mats

Due to sturgeon egg adhesiveness, egg mats can be used to verify spawning locations and collect embryos to be hatched at *ex situ* facilities. This technique requires knowledge of potential spawning regions in a river system and has been successfully utilized (e.g., McCabe and Tracy 1994; Sulak and Clugston 1998; Duncan *et al.* 2004; Poytress *et al.* 2015; Gillespie *et al.* 2020; Haxton *et al.* 2023). Egg mats can range in design from simply wrapping concrete cinder blocks with air filter material (Haxton *et al.* 2023) to use of two rectangular pieces of air filter material secured back-to-back within a welded steel framework (Brown 2007), held in position using various types of anchors, with a marker float or buoy attached. Egg mat retrieval and sampling can range from 1-3 days, and spawn dates can be back calculated based on collection day/time, the observed development stage, and the average daily water temperature.

4.6 Handling Procedures

Removal of fish from the capture gear has priority when bringing the gear into the boat. Depending upon the conditions and gear type used, the length of it might need to be fully retrieved before removal of fish can be started. In this case water supply and cover from direct sunshine are important means to reduce stress in captured fish. Nets must be treated as consumables as the value of a live sturgeon is higher than the cost of the nets. It is advisable to have knives, ideally with a sickle blade for worker safety, at hand to cut fish out of nets if removal exceeds 1-2 minutes. If a sturgeon removed from fishing gear appears to be non-responsive, it is often possible to resuscitate these fish by flushing water, preferably enriched in oxygen, over the gills or into the mouth until recovery is obvious. Dragging the fish back and pushing it forward requires careful operation to prevent injuries so that the gill filaments are not damaged.

If it is necessary to hold sturgeon for short periods while fishing continues there are various methods, depending on fish size and number caught:

When water quality is acceptable, portable net pens are a good option for holding fish. Mesh sizes should be large enough to allow for the free exchange of water but small enough to prevent entanglement of all sizes of fish being sampled. It is preferable to use nets with knotless webbing and have a means of covering the net pen to prevent escape as well as sunburn. It is not recommended that fish be held for extended periods of time when water temperatures are high. Thermal maximums will differ between species and populations based on their acclimation to local water temperature regimes and the rate of temperature change the fish are exposed to during collection and holding. If air temperatures are lower than 0°C handling sturgeon should be avoided to prevent damage to skin and tissues, and potential death. If freezing temperatures cannot be avoided, then the sturgeon must always remain in water while collecting morphometric data and sampling.

Holding tanks should be designed to accommodate the size and number of fish that might be held before being handled. When fish are held on board a research vessel, they should be placed in tanks with the size of the fish. The tanks are supplied by a water supply that allows for total replacement of the water volume every 15-20 minute. If maintained in a static bath, aeration or oxygenation the water should be exchanged every hour to maintain water temperature and quality. A sump pump equipped with a long hose allows collection from deeper water levels to minimize the temperature fluctuations between catch and handling on board. Water level in the tank should be sufficient to entirely cover the fish. Temperature and oxygen levels should be frequently controlled. Oxygen saturation should not exceed 110%. This can result in decreased respiration and thereby cause accumulation of CO₂ (hypercapnia), which can be lethal. If pure oxygen is used to augment ambient oxygen levels, it is to be measured frequently. In static water, osmotic stress can be relieved by the addition of 0.25-0.5% uniodized salt depending upon body size, and/or the use of commercial electrolytic solutions, like Stress Coat™ can be beneficial.

A hooded stretcher of appropriate size, with a drain at the base of the hooded region, is commonly employed to hold fish. The stretcher, which should be the size of the fish and allow to circumvent its entire girth, is made from a coated textile with a soft surface, equipped with drains to let the excess water runoff, a hood to cover the head of the fish and two handles. For the ease of measurement, a meter band can be sewn into the stretcher. Individuals are captured from either the holding tank or net pen, by carefully guiding an individual (by pectoral fin and snout) directly into the stretcher, which is then moved to the stretcher holder/sampling area. For very large fish, the stretcher can be tethered to the side of the boat for collection of samples. Once in the stretcher the fish is rolled ventral side up, and upon reaching the sampling

area a hose of oxygenated fresh water is placed directly above the mouth or in the mouth. Flow is adjusted to have a consistent outflow from both ventilating opercula. The stretcher holder should be designed with sufficient pitch to allow water to drain toward the hood. Mature sturgeon under this condition typically exhibit tonic immobility and begin ventilating their opercula due to the water flow (Wagner and Cooke, 2005; Chapman *et al.*, 2019; Marbury *et al.*, 2020; Colborne *et. al.*, 2022). One of the most useful physiological benefits of tonic immobility is analgesia, or the decreased sensation of pain, and Páez *et. al.*, (2023) and Kessel and Hussey (2015) proposed that tonic immobility be recognized as an acceptable anesthetic technique for some surgical procedures. However, the smaller, immature sturgeon tend to be more active and may require some level of sedation (see section 4.6). Fish should not be held for extended periods of time in the stretcher. Captured wild sturgeon often have extremely sharp scutes and denticles which can easily slice skin. Thus, it is recommended that gloves be used when handling sturgeon and have back-up stretchers available.

When sampling sturgeon downstream of dams, be aware that while the turbines are operating, total gas pressure (TGP) of the water may be elevated. This condition can cause stress and in extreme cases gas bubble disease. When fish are retrieved from the depths in these conditions, even mortality could result. Therefore, TGP should be tested in such locations and sampling rescheduled when TGP is too high.

Release may be the final step in field sampling of some sturgeon while some may remain in a holding tank, transported to shore and then to an *ex situ* hatchery. Sturgeon are physostomes, in which the swim bladder is connected to the gut through a pneumatic duct. They can overinflate their swim bladder when stressed during capture and handling by engulfing air and not releasing the excess air sufficiently. Also, when collections are made from extreme depths the fish should be brought to the surface very slowly, allowing the fish to release gas from the swim bladder as they are brought to the surface. This is evidenced by “bubbles” when slowly retrieving a net from the depths. If the fish has excess air in its bladder and it seems unable to release the gas, to return the fish to neutral buoyancy prior to or during release, slight pressure on the anterior part of the belly can be applied in a posterior to anterior motion. Also keeping the fish upright upon release and slowly moving it back and forth in the water helps to release gas from its swim bladder. In any case the behavior of the fish must be monitored after collection and sampling, until a full recovery and normal swimming is reestablished, to ensure high survival.

4.7 Anesthesia

A key component of sturgeon welfare when sampling after capture is the use of anesthesia which is based on multiple factors, including the time and degree of invasiveness of the

procedure and legal restrictions, cost-effectiveness, user safety and environmental impact (waste disposal). In general, it is recommended to weigh the risk and stress imposed by using an anesthetic against the expected impact. Some countries and agencies will require the use of anesthetics for any invasive procedure to meet animal use and care protocols and address animal welfare issues (Zahl *et al.* , 2012; Williot *et al.* , 2018).

Guidelines and policies regarding the use of chemical anesthetics vary between manufacturers and between countries. Hatchery personnel should consult local and regional agencies for the latest regulations and currently approved-use chemicals. The primary goal of using an anesthetic is to immobilize the animal while blocking nerve impulses when conducting invasive procedures. The stage of anesthesia used (Table 1) will depend on the degree of invasiveness and length of time the procedure will take. Procedures like ultrasonography, fin clipping, blood sampling, tagging for identification purposes do not typically require anesthesia. While endoscopy, celiotomy/biopsy, pectoral fin ray sampling, as well as the insertion of a telemetry tag by surgical procedures will require anesthesia to stage III or stage IV (Table 2).

Table 4.2. Stages of anesthesia (modified from Summerfelt and Smith, 1990; Burka *et. al.*, 1997; Sneddon, 2012).

Stage	Anesthesia level	Criteria
I	Light sedation	Disorientated, reduced activity, slight loss of reactivity to stimuli
II	Excitation	Agitated, increased activity and gill ventilation rate, difficulty maintaining equilibrium
III	Light anesthesia	Partial loss of equilibrium, decreased gill ventilation and muscle tone, reaction to strong stimuli only
IV	Surgical anesthesia	Total loss of equilibrium, occasional and shallow gill ventilation, relaxed muscle tone, no reaction to stimuli, reduced heart rate
V	Deep anesthesia	Rare gill ventilation and heart contractions, no muscle tone
VI	Overdose	No gill ventilation, cardiac arrest and death (euthanasia)

2.1.4 Chemical

Three of the more widely used fish anesthetics are tricaine methanesulfonate (MS-222), clove oil, and 2-phenoxyethanol (Neiffer and Stamper, 2009; Priborsky and Velisek, 2018). Both MS-222 and 2-phenoxyethanol are reported to be hazardous to human health (potential carcinogenic), therefore personal protective equipment must be used when handling the chemicals and solutions. Also, the disposal of the solution after use may require special treatment.

The induction and maintenance of anesthesia is temperature dependent. Concentrations must be applied with care and should be adapted to the water temperature. Supplemental oxygen should be added to the anesthesia tank and monitored throughout the process.

Immersion is the most common method for fish anesthesia, as the agents dissolved in solution enter the bloodstream through the gills and skin. An individual may be maintained at the induction dose, after reaching the desired stage of anesthesia, if the procedure(s) last no more than 10-15 minutes. After this, the induction dose will likely result in excessive anesthetic depth (Neiffer, 2021), so a maintenance dose (approximately half the induction dose) is used to maintain the desired level of anesthesia until the procedure has been completed. Induction and recovery times vary, primarily based on the dosage level, the duration of time the fish is under anesthesia, and the water temperature. The guideline for dosage is to induce the desired state of anesthesia within 5-10 minutes and then have a similar recovery time (Neiffer, 2021). Exact dosages for the lowest induction and recovery time will vary with species, body size, age and life stage, stage of anesthesia targeted, and water temperature and quality (Summerfelt and Smith, 1990).

Tricaine methanesulphonate (MS-222), sold under several trade names (i.e., Tricaine-STM and FinquelTM, USA; Aqualife TMSTM, Canada), is a derivative of benzocaine. Many users prepare stock solutions (10 g/L) to reduce human exposure to the powder. Fresh stock solutions should be made every 30 days, and both the drug and stock solutions should be protected from light (Neiffer, 2021). MS-222 reduces water pH so a buffer, typically sodium bicarbonate, is added initially at a 1:2 ratio (MS-222: sodium bicarbonate) followed by pH measurements and adjustments made as needed to maintain pH at approximately 7.0. Typical doses for induction range from 60-250 mg/L, and maintenance doses reported have ranged from 75-90 mg/L (Conte *et al.*, 1988; Hernandez-Divers *et al.*, 2004; Divers *et al.*, 2009; Kahn and Mohead, 2010; Matsche, 2011, 2013; Johnson *et al.*, 2016; Webb *et al.*, 2019).

The active ingredients of clove oil are eugenol (approximately 84%), iso-eugenol (5-10%), and methyl eugenol. Clove oil is incompletely water soluble, so using 95% ethanol as a solvent with a mixture of one-part clove oil to nine parts ethanol, yielding a 100 mg/ml stock solution is

often used, and typical induction doses are 20-70 mg/L (Neiffer, 2021; Kübra, 2022). Dosages need to be adjusted, based on the percent content of eugenol, and how fast or slow induction takes to reach the desired stage of anesthesia. Water-soluble alternatives to natural clove oil like synthetic isoeugenol AQUI-S exist. AQUI-S contains 50% active isoeugenol, and dosages are 75-150 mg/L. AQUI-S 20E contains 10% active isoeugenol, and dosages are approximately 375-750 mg/L (Hurvitz, *et al.*, 2007; Gomulka, *et al.*, 2008; Kahn and Mohead, 2010; Feng *et al.*, 2011; Adel *et al.*, 2016; Johnson *et al.*, 2016; Webb *et al.*, 2019).

Ethylene glycol monophenyl ether (2-Phenoxyethanol, 2-PE) has been used on numerous aquaculture species (Priborsky and Velisek, 2018), including sturgeon (Adel *et al.*, 2016; Shaluei, *et al.*, 2012; Kübra, 2022). The effective concentration ranges from 0.06 – 1.20 ml/L which has a wide margin of safety and range of effects from light sedation to surgical anesthesia (Priborsky and Velisek, 2018). Shaluei *et al.* (2012) reported concentration of 0.7 – 0.9 ml/L on *Huso huso* resulted in deep anesthesia within 3 minutes of exposure.

The anesthetic properties of carbon dioxide (CO₂) on fish have been documented, including sturgeon (Holcomb, *et al.*, 2004; Gomulka *et al.*, 2015; Baaberoo, *et al.*, 2016) and although it can decrease stress and immobilize fish for a quick procedure, like ultrasonography, its analgesia properties may not be appropriate for invasive procedures (Mylniczenko *et al.*, 2014). The blood gas and acid-base balance of a fish are altered when using CO₂ (Gomulka *et al.*, 2015) thus sodium bicarbonate should be added to buffer the bath to neutral pH (maintain pH 6.5-7.5; Mylniczenko *et al.*, 2014). Typically, CO₂ compressed gas is introduced into a large water bath with ceramic plate diffusers and fish are immobilized within 5-10 minutes. The use of CO₂ is routinely used on sturgeon farms in the USA when sexing large numbers of fish with ultrasonography. However, exposure of fish over a longer period should be avoided since accumulation of CO₂ in the blood reduces blood pH and renders the fish susceptible to elevated water pH values during recovery, especially if ammonia levels are elevated (Gessner, *et al.*, 2009).

There are several other chemicals less frequently used. Some are used as immersion anesthetics and include alfaxalone, propofol, and metomidate hydrochloride (Neiffer, 2021). Some, although less commonly, are used as injections like ketamine hydrochloride, xylazine, medetomidine, midazolam, and diazepam (Neiffer, 2021).

Euthanization of fish is commonly carried out by chemical anesthesia overdose (usually for fingerlings and fish < 5kg) or in larger fish by concussion/percussive blow to the head and subsequent pithing or severing of the notochord just behind the head (Neiffer, 2012).

2.1.5 Physical

There has also been an increasing interest in using electroimmobilization (review by Reid *et al.*, 2019) to anesthetize fish, including sturgeon (Henyey, *et al.*, 2002; Hudson *et al.*, 2011; Balazik, 2015; Johnson *et al.*, 2016), and a recent review summarized that it is a useful tool for fish handling that equals or surpasses the capabilities of chemical sedatives (Reid *et al.*, 2019). Direct current power supply is used to limit issues with tetany responses. Electroimmobilization causes a blockage of brain messages to the spinal motor nerves (Gosset *et al.*, 1974; 2004). While its effect upon receptors for pain/stress perception is not shown. Some of the benefits listed include no expiration/degradation of chemicals, no disposal protocols, significant shorter induction and recovery times, easier to adjust “dosage”, a single device is reusable as opposed to chemicals that must be purchased regularly. Challenges include maintaining equipment in proper and safe working order, proper application of electricity (too little or too much can be harmful), fish must be positioned properly within the apparatus, and certain devices will have a higher start-up cost compared to chemical sedatives.

4.8 Sampling

In order to safely handle large sturgeon, experienced individuals and a crew with predefined duties are recommended to minimize risk. Because of inherent risks to both fish and humans, all staff who wish to conduct collection efforts are strongly encouraged to initially participate in collection efforts with an experienced person and to undergo appropriate training prior to participating or conducting independent efforts.

Each conservation program that utilizes wild-caught sturgeon will develop their sampling procedures and own set of data to be collected. One set of data typically covers the details of the gear utilized (e.g., gill net; location, habitat, depth, date, time, and length of set, length and depth of net, mesh size, etc.). Another set of data is regarding each fish captured, listing the sampling procedures conducted and samples collected, tag type and identification number, and whether the fish is either released back or held for transport to an *ex situ* facility, and below are some of the common sampling procedures.

2.1.6 Physical Examination

Depending on the location and ongoing sturgeon conservation programs, collected sturgeon should first be examined for evidence of previous capture events. This could include the presence of internal and/or external tags, and/or external markings (removed scutes, fin clips) (see Chapter 13). Each captured fish should also be examined for injuries, scars, deformities or other physical abnormalities, and photographs of each fish collected and/or sampled are recommended.

2.1.7 Length, Girth and Weight

Sturgeon should be measured for total length, fork length and girth (circumference of the body at the widest section of the body). Weighing, especially on a moving or swaying vessel can be difficult and imprecise but, if it is possible. Precision of the measurement depends upon size of fish and the error associated to the technique applied. Fish that will be transported to an *ex situ* facility can be accurately weighed when unloading from the transport vehicle.

2.1.8 Sex Determination and Maturation Assessment

To obtain a comprehensive picture on the state of the population, the identification of sex and stage of maturity of a given fish is a vital element and is most important for selecting mature individuals to retain and transport to an *ex situ* facility for spawning induction. Sexing of wild fish can be difficult, because sexual differentiation occurs only after age 3-4 years, and examination requires either invasive surgical methods or non-invasive ultrasonography (reviewed in Chapter 8). Newly developed sex markers using genetic analysis are proving proficient for several sturgeon species and may be conducted along with other genetic analyses, although this analysis will only provide sex, not the stage of maturity, and the analysis must be conducted in a specialized laboratory.

2.1.9 Genetic Sampling

Applying genetic techniques allows us to understand the presence of a species in each area (i.e., native, non-native, hybrid, or aquaculture origin) and the movements of sturgeon on different spatial scales. Also, for some species, multiple spawning populations may exist within a single river system, leading to different lineages utilizing different spawning sites. Genetic technologies may thus also be used to assign individuals to certain natal rivers in marine catchments, where sturgeon from different spawning populations may aggregate. And for mature fish to be used for spawning in *ex situ* hatcheries it is important to establish their genetic relatedness for breeding plans (see Chapter 6).

Genetic sampling is typically collecting a small piece of fin (0.5 – 1.0 cm²) which is placed in an ethanol resistant labelled screwcap or snap-cap tube filled with 95% non-denatured ethanol, using surgical scissors and forceps. To prevent cross-contamination between fin samples the surgical tools should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected between samples. Samples can be stored at room temperature.

2.1.10 Gastric Lavage

The identification of food organisms for different life phases of sturgeon may lead to identification of certain habitat types where such organisms are abundant, and such favorable conditions could help to identify locations where the fish are aggregating. Gastric lavage is a

reasonably safe and effective technique for flushing food items from the stomach of live sturgeon (Haley, 1998; Brosse, *et al.*, 2022; Barth *et al.*, 2013).

The use of light anesthesia (Stage III, Table 1) is recommended to relax the fish and minimize the risk of injury during the procedure. Intramedic semi-rigid polyethylene tubing, with a blunted leading edge is used, and the outer (i.e., 2.1-7.0 mm) and inner diameter (i.e., 1.6-5.8 mm) will increase depending on the size of the fish. Larger diameter tubes have also been utilized to act as a sleeve, to assist in getting the smaller diameter tube down the esophagus. The tubing is carefully and slowly inserted down the pharynx and esophagus, and into the forestomach (proventricle; Vajhi *et al.*, 2013).

Various sized syringes, garden sprayers, as well as hand operated and electric pumps have been used to provide the "flushing water". Regardless of the water delivery device used, the amount of applied water pressure should be very limited to protect the fragile internal organs. Therefore, if high volume or pressure pumps are used, a flow/ pressure restricting device is imperative. Positive results have been noted for both continuous water flow and pulsed or interrupted flow. Gently moving the tube in and out while pumping seems to enhance the effectiveness of regurgitation.

2.1.11 Age Determination

In sturgeon, age estimation is commonly applied using a 1-2 cm section of the first pectoral fin ray that is removed with a fine (diamond) saw in the field, after air-dried it is sectioned into thin slices and sanded smooth with increasing grades of sandpaper, examined under a dissecting scope until it's at the right thickness to see the growth rings (annuli), and count the annuli from the center and working outward. Alternatively, otoliths or bony scutes can be used for aging, but because otolith removal is a terminal procedure, this method is only for the evaluation of carcasses, occasional mortalities, or fish that must be euthanized.

Analysis of non-lethally collected fin rays can provide an estimated age but caution must be applied since there are several factors affecting the aging procedure. Feed deprived years, reduced growth during reproduction years and the compaction of slow growth increments for older individuals increases the difficulty of accurate readings. A number of studies have reported the unreliable nature of determining age estimates from older sturgeon pectoral fin spines (e.g., Rien and Beamesderfer, 1994; Hurley, *et al.*, 2004; Whiteman, *et al.*, 2004). However, Bruch, *et al.* (2009) provided a verification model for older lake sturgeon using bomb radiocarbon assays, allowing for a mathematical correction for reading errors in mature fish.

2.1.12 Tagging, Release or Transport

Sturgeon captured and sampled may be released back into the wild or transported (see Chapter 14) to an *ex situ* facility (see Chapter 5), and some or all sturgeon will be tagged (see Chapter 13) with an internal tag and in some cases an additional external tag.

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Chapter 5

Ex situ facility concept and design

Mikhail Chebanov, Joern Gessner, James A. Crossman, Joel P. Van Eenennaam, Patrick Chèvre

5.9 Purpose of *ex situ* rearing facilities

As outlined in Chapter 3, the main purpose of an *ex situ* program is to secure the genetic heterogeneity of a species population under the risk of extirpation while supporting it through the limitation of early life stage mortality. There are different strategies to reach this aim which have been discussed in Chapter 3; namely

1) Capture wild-caught embryos and larvae (early life stages = ELS) to be reared *ex situ* until a target release size is reached. to minimize natural mortality,

2) Annual capture of pre-spawn wild broodstock, induced reproduction and rearing of progeny for release. Post-spawned broodstock are released back at the locations of capture or

3) The establishment of a captive broodstock to secure the genetic variability of the natural population and to reproduce. Post-spawned wild caught broodstock, and immature fish in some cases, remain captive as part of a multi-generation broodstock development and maintenance program. This facility is especially important for species at risk of extinction. Fish are conditioned for controlled reproduction, and subsequent progenies are reared for both broodstock and juvenile release.

The choice of which strategy depends upon the status of the natural population and its risk of extinction. In the following sections, a variety of prerequisites and potential options are illustrated. These can serve as examples but depending upon the national policy regarding water and wastewater rights and regulations, availability of land, etc. the design of the facility as well as its technical components would have to be adapted to fit the regulatory framework and the intended scope that the program is to serve.

5.10 Basic considerations for facility design

Depending upon the strategy applied, the complexity of the facility required varies with the life-cycle stages involved and the duration of the rearing process. Based upon the above

descriptions, three *ex situ* facilities are envisioned which are listed in the order of increasing size and complexity in Table 5.1. The status of the given population and the goals of the conservation program will define the approach to be taken, and as such, not all rearing steps must be integrated in the facility design.

Table 5.1. Methods associated with three different approaches to *ex situ* facility programs rearing juveniles (YOY) for release: 1) collect wild embryos and early life stages (ELS), 2) wild caught broodstock are collected annually, spawned and then released, 3) wild caught fish are collected, spawned and retained, to begin a captive broodstock program.

Methodologies	Approaches		
	Collection of ELS	Collection and release of wild broodstock	Retention of wild fish for captive broodstock
Broodstock collection	NA	Overwintering of fall collected broodfish and/or spring assessment for suitable spawners.	
Controlled reproduction	NA	Final maturation assessment, spawning induction, collection of gametes and fertilization.	
Egg incubation and Rearing of ELS	Assessment of fertilization rates, incubation to hatch, adaptive rearing conditions for free embryos.		
Rearing YOY	Transition to exogenous feeding, using live feed and commercial diets. Constant grading and enrichment of rearing conditions. Training schools.		
Release of YOY or age 1+ fish	Testing for fitness, tagging (in some programs), preparation for transport, transport, and release.		
Integration into future captive broodstock	NA	NA	Retain post-spawn wild fish and some YOY for captive rearing.
Long-term rearing	NA	NA	Rearing of multiple age classes, development of a breeding plan.

5.10.1 Location of site

When choosing a suitable site for locating a hatchery facility the following critical components should be considered (modified from Chebanov et. al., 2011):

- The location must be in accordance with national and local government regulations to obtain the required permits for construction and operation.
- The location must be protected from floods or located in areas of low flood risk.
- The type of facility (utilizing ponds, tanks, flow-through, recirculating or a combination) will determine the amount of land required.
- The facility should be located at minimal distances from infrastructure (e.g., roads, canals, electricity, gas).
- A properly designed facility (e.g., for power requirements, pumping and discharging water, tank/pond design and layout, recirculating systems), will require a qualified aquaculture engineer.
- Reliable water source(s) for both quantity and quality must be available, whether river or surface water and/or groundwater.
- Water discharge capabilities and requirements must be considered (e.g., required water treatment or not, permits for release).
- Protection devices to prevent escapement of fish into the environment (especially if fish are maintained outside of their natural range)
- The facility should be a short distance (e.g., < 30 km) from the source of wild broodstock (if applicable) to minimize transport stress, and short distances (e.g., < 20 km) from locations of release.
- Access to water of the river of release is instrumental for imprinting and acclimation of juveniles prior to release.

5.10.2 Water supply

For a *ex situ* facility the decision to use river water, ground water, stored river or ground water in a reservoir (e.g., elevated head pond), or a combination of these, comes first and is mainly driven by the condition on site as well as the approach taken. Preferably, river water of the recipient water body where the fish are to be stocked is used to allow for early adaptation to the natural fluctuations in water quality parameters to increase the survival potential of the released fish. However, in some cases this may not be practical (e.g., water use and discharge restrictions).

Water supply needs are calculated based upon the size and type (pond, flow through or RAS) of the facility in question to determine the water demand of the facility. Many aspects need to be considered: quantities for flushing of water supply and discharge systems, capacities of water treatment facilities, and the maximum water flow to be used in each pond and tank system. The climate of the construction location (precipitation, evaporation and filtration

related losses) and hydrogeological data (e.g., seasonal variations in level and temperature of ground water) must be incorporated.

5.10.2.1 *River water*

River water can either be pumped from a river or gravity fed if the facility is located below a dam. Since river water often contains debris, suspended solids, organic matter and small fish and invertebrates the use of a screened inlet before the pump is important. Further smaller particle removal is then done with mechanical filters, such as a drum filter. To reduce the chance of disease in the hatchery disinfection of the water is crucial. The most common system is ultraviolet (UV) and it is also possible to use ozone, but extra care must be taken as it is toxic to humans as well as fish. Cooling or heating systems may be required depending on the water source as well as the goals of the *ex situ* facility, and the water should be oxygenated to reach >70% saturation.

5.10.2.2 *Ground (well) water*

Pumping of well or groundwater typically does not require extensive filtration before use but will require nitrogen removal and oxygen enrichment through aerators/degassing columns, trickle filters, oxygenation systems. Depending on the water quality analysis of your water source, the removal of certain chemicals, like iron and manganese may be required.

5.10.2.3 *Surface water*

Modified water sources for an *ex situ* facility could be surface water, originating from either river or ground water pumped to a large elevated reservoir. The reservoir water is then either gravity fed or used with an in-line pump system to increase flow rates. Some facilities use this design to degas and oxygenate ground water as it is continuously pumped into the reservoir, and is also a partial back-up system in case of a pump failure as the head pressure alone will allow continued water flow into the facility.

5.10.3 Water quality

The water used in sturgeon hatcheries should be of high quality. It is important to ensure that the levels of harmful substances and impurities are below the threshold values or within the range of values given (Table 2).

Table 5.2. Optimal water quality parameters for rearing and breeding of sturgeons (adapted from Chebanov and Galich 2011; Hochleithner and Gessner 2012; Svobodová *et al.* 1993; Conte *et al.* 1986).

Water Quality Parameter	Range
Oxygen Saturation	70 – 100 %
Total Gas Pressure, for N ₂	< 110 % <102 %
Carbon Dioxide (CO ₂)	< 10 mg/l
Nitrogen (N ₂)	< 103 %
pH	6.5- 8.0
Ammonia (NH ₃ -N)	< 0.01 mg/l
Ammonium (NH ₄ -N)	< 0.10 mg/l
Nitrite (NO ₂ -N)	< 0.01 mg/l
Nitrate (NO ₃ -N)	< 100 mg/l
Total Hardness (CaCO ₃)	50-400 mg/l
Turbidity	20-30 NTU
Total Suspended Solids (settleable and colloidal)	< 80.0 mg/l
Total Alkalinity (carbonate + bicarbonate + hydroxide)	40-300 mg/l
Biological Oxygen Demand (BOD ₅)	< 7 mg/l
Chemical Oxygen Demand (COD)	< 10 mg/l
Hydrogen Sulfide (H ₂ S)	< 0.002 mg/l
Iron (Fe)	< 0.01 mg/l
Magnesium (Mg)	< 40 mg/l
Manganese (Mn)	< 0.10 mg/l
Chloride (Cl)	< 30 mg/l
Chlorine (Cl ₂)	< 0.01 mg/l
Phosphate (PO ₄)	< 0.3 mg/l
Sulfate (SO ₄)	< 50 mg/l
Calcium (Ca)	< 180 mg/l
Cadmium (Cd)	< 0.003 mg/l
Lead (Pb)	< 0.003 mg/l
Zinc (Zn)	< 0.03 mg/l

5.11 Facility Type 1 – Rearing of wild-caught embryos and larvae under near-natural conditions

For some populations of sturgeon there are known regions of river systems where the collection of embryos and larvae is possible (e.g., *A. transmontanus* (Idaho Power Company, 2021), *A. medirostris* (Poytress, *et al.* , 2015), *A. fulvescens* (Hunter, *et al.* , 2020), *A. sinensis*

(Wei *et al.* , 2009)). The advantages of rearing these wild caught individuals under more controlled near-natural conditions include, reducing natural mortality that would have occurred if left in the river, while maintaining naturally produced genotypes, and at the same time maximizing fitness of juveniles at release. Capture and transport of these early life stages into the facility and to the release sites are covered in Chapters 4, 7, and 14.

The facility design for early life stages utilized for release has adopted new approaches targeting at increased fitness of the fish produced, aiming at improved survival through faster adaptation to post release conditions (see Chapter 10, Crossman *et al.* 2007, Mc Adam *et al.* 2007, Friedrich *et al.* 2018, Gessner *et al.* 2023;). Key elements of this type of facility include: 1) incubation of eggs and rearing of fry in river water to mimic natural conditions and to ensure homing behavior, and 2) rearing of juveniles in river water to expose them to natural fluctuations in temperature, turbidity, water chemistry, and bacterial fauna, improving adaptability and survival to conditions in the wild when released.

Feeding of natural live food and irregular feeding patterns minimize domestication effects and require suitable feed storage or feed production facilities to be incorporated in the design. Additional stimuli like different flow patterns, substrate, changing light regime, smell of predators etc. can further improve performance of released juveniles in the wild. In cases when rearing conditions reveal deficits in fitness, the implementation of training schools to increase the adaptation to localization and uptake of natural feed, to temperature fluctuations, of swimming performance or to improve predator recognition can enhance survival upon release (Camara-Ruiz 2018, see Chapter 10). As such the hatchery design needs to address these needs by providing extra capacities for the measures to be implemented.

5.11.1 Incubation and rearing facility design

Systems utilized for early life stages can be permanent or mobile, buildings or containers, indoors or outdoors or a combination of both, with water treatment and holding systems for incubating embryos and rearing larvae until they reach juvenile release size. The specific design will be dependent upon the site, the goals of the stocking program (number and size of juveniles to be released), and whether it will be a flow through and/or semi-recirculating system(s).

The main advantage of a mobile container system is the fact that it can be moved between sites or rivers. Holtgren *et al.* (2007) provide a very detailed design for their successful lake sturgeon portable streamside rearing facility used for lake sturgeon. Briefly, the facility used a portable generator, and later a local power line as the power source. Screened river water intake pipes and a pump system, with a sediment removal system, as too much silt and fine sediment can be

detrimental to sturgeon fry. Water was then supplied by two separate pipes, one to the incubation system and one to the rearing tanks system.

The most common incubation systems typically utilized for large numbers of eggs (Yuschenko, Osetr, Weiss jar, McDonald jar, Eagar upwelling jar) could be too large and so smaller versions may need to be constructed or acquired from aquaculture supply companies. The number of incubators needs to be sufficient to handle the estimated multiple batches of embryos to be collected. Illumination in the incubation area should be controlled as direct light can negatively affect the embryonic development of sturgeon. If overhead skylights are used to maintain a natural photoperiod in the facility, a shaded area for incubation is needed, and any incandescent lighting should be on dimmer switches. Post hatch larvae are reared away or protected from direct light, in troughs or circular tanks that have adjustable (directional and quantity) water inflow, and aeration near the screened outlets to help keep them clean.

An example of a streamside container is given in Figure 1. The largest portion of the container is set up for the multiple hatching containers and troughs for rearing post hatch larvae. It also has a separated laboratory and water treatment compartment that serves for rearing of Artemia for the onset of feeding, holds a sink and a small lab bench for a microscope and feed storage/preparation, a fridge/freezer for supplies and feed as well as the water and aeration system. The incoming water is filtered mechanically by a drum filter (60-100 μ m) and treated with UV (20,000-120,000 μ WScm⁻² @254nm) to reduce the load of pathogens in the supply water.

Regarding feed storage, the balance space available with planned replenishments provided in weekly or biweekly intervals to avoid using too much space in the container for storage. For example, a 5 kg bulk pack of artemia could be stored in the container, along with 25-40 kg of brine. For frozen natural feed the capacity of freezer to hold 7 days' worth, and formulated diets (semi moist and dry) could be stored in appropriately sized ice chests in the container.

Another example for ELS rearing could be a two-container facility with one container as described above and then a second container for longer term juvenile grow out to larger sizes. The standard 40' container offers room for 8 troughs of 400 x 65 x 30 cm or 4 circular tanks 200 x 40 cm if stacked. Some hatcheries prefer troughs for rearing, although they typically require more time for cleaning. The circular tanks make tending the fish more difficult due to restriction of working and handling space but for larger fish they have very low maintenance due to the self-cleaning aspects of having a center standpipe. Keeping the screen clean can be challenging but aeration near the drain will help keep it from clogging.

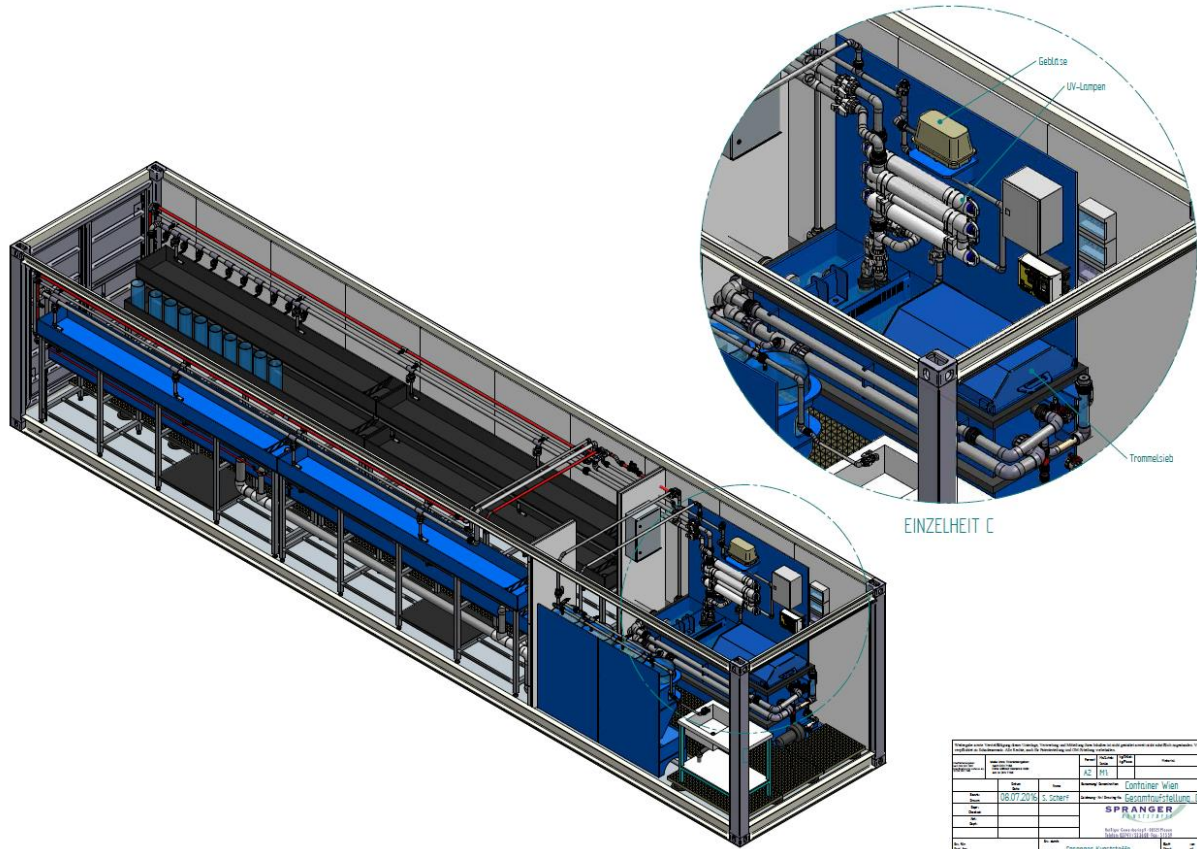


Figure 5.1. Streamside container based rearing facility with both a rearing compartment (left) and a compartment for the water management, artemia systems and lab (right). Water system includes mechanical filtration, supply pumps, UV unit and blower for compressed air © Spranger Kunststoffe GmbH

A recently constructed permanent hatchery for *A. transmontanus* ELS (Idaho Power Company, 2021) comprises a 325 m² facility designed for the annual production of up to 2,500 juveniles at approximately 200 g (30 cm fork length). The hatchery building houses an embryo receiving room, an incubation area with 2-liter upwelling hatching cones, rearing area with various diameter circular fiberglass tanks (16-0.6 m, 8-1.2 m, and 6-2.4 m), mechanical room, wet lab, office and an attached separate dormitory. This facility utilizes pathogen free gravity fed spring water (14C) and two electric water heaters to have the ability to increase rearing temperatures to 16-18C.

Incubation and rearing tank units for any ELS facility could be designed as both flow-through and recirculating. Recirculating would allow for thermoregulation of very cold river water to facilitate growth, if desired, for larger juveniles at release and/or release at different times of the year. To ensure the continued operation, replacement pumps and aerators, and an automated emergency electrical supply system must be available.

5.12 Facility Type 2 – Wild-caught broodstock spawned and released

In cases where natural reproduction is insufficient or the reproduction sites are unknown or not accessible to collect early life stages from natural spawns, while at the same time sufficiently sized spawning migrations are observed and are accessible, the collection of broodstock and their transfer to a controlled reproduction facility is a common *ex situ* hatchery alternative, with the subsequent release of the broodfish after gamete collections. Although, due to the manipulation of both the broodfish and the offspring, the potential to reduce fitness of the fish should be considered. The reproduction of wild breeders to maximize genetic heterogeneity (see Chapter 6), use of appropriate rearing techniques (see Chapter 10) and feedback from fitness assessments (see Chapter 12) will improve the overall fitness of released juveniles. Some of these facilities may also start to incorporate a captive broodstock program, from the rearing of some of the non-released progenies, to act as a gene-pool back-up if wild broodstock become unavailable during spawning migrations (*S. albus* propagation program).

5.12.1 General design considerations

The critical components of the facility location were presented above, and the main purpose of these *ex situ* facilities is to conduct procedures for long-term (decades) holding and propagating broodstock under controlled conditions. As mature fish are the most valuable and irretrievable genetic resource for conservation, utmost care and fail-safe procedures must be used during capture and handling (see Chapter 4) and transport (see Chapter 7) to reduce stress and to maximize the success of artificial reproduction (see Chapter 9). The size of your overall facility will be based on the projected number of broodstock to be brought to the facility and their maximum size, and the program's production goal for juveniles to be released. If available and practical, the visitation of nearby existing *ex situ* sturgeon facilities and/or a sturgeon aquaculture facility would be extremely valuable to help design a proper facility. Discussions with the facility staff should cover what rearing systems work well and what they would design differently if they had had the choice.

Basic infrastructures include the water supply, electricity, and accessibility of the facility by truck, and boat for some facilities. The facility must be equipped with an alarm system for water supply, power supply and have an emergency generator to provide power to maintain the essential operation working in case of power cuts. A control room where the essential functions and data are collected and displayed eases the supervision of the facility. This room ideally has visual contact with the main rearing facility. Furthermore, it is essential to strive for failure safe operation. Backup devices for pumps, aeration or oxygenation and water makeup are essential to prevent losses through malfunctions of equipment. It is highly recommended that a water quality monitoring/alarm system also be installed for parameters such as, water flow (pump operation), water temperature, dissolved oxygen, and total dissolved gas. The

human error factors in operations, handling and servicing must be considered, and the “four eyes principle” should be applied to all critical decisions, to prevent any unintentional mistakes that could lead to drastic consequences for the well-being of the animals in question. Surveillance cameras, fences, and alarm systems for human or animal intruders are usually a necessity due to the high value of the animals.

In general, there are two main criteria that will guide the design of these hatcheries, the short-term holding and spawning of ripe broodstock caught during the spring spawning run, or the longer-term overwintering of pre-spawning broodstock collected during the fall-winter season. Several different broodstock holding systems should be considered: 1) holding systems for monitoring final maturation for spring caught broodstock and/or for over-wintering of fall caught broodstock and then assessment of final maturation during spring, 2) spawning tanks for injected males and females, 3) recovery systems for holding post spawned fish until transported for release. These holding systems can be outdoors or indoors or a combination of both.

5.12.1.1 *Broodstock overwintering and/or pre-spawning holding system*

After wild broodstock have been captured (see Chapter 4) and transported to the *ex situ* facility (see Chapter 7) they are placed into some type of holding system until selected for spawning induction (see Chapter 8). Holding densities, in general, should range from 10-30 kg/m³ with tolerance levels being species specific (Chebanov and Galich, 2011). Females and males should be held together to take advantage of any possible behavioral and pheromone cues that may occur during maturation.

5.4.1.1.1 Ponds/Raceways (earthen or concrete)

Historically, sturgeon hatcheries have used a variety of facilities for fish holding, rearing and maturation (reviewed in Chebanov and Galich, 2011). For example, Chebanov and Galich (2011) describe the “Kazansky” type facility as an earthen-pond system for holding broodstock. The earthen pond has a length of 130 m and comprises two parts, a wider (100 m) section of 2.5 m depth and a narrower (30 m) shallower (0.5–1 m deep) section that simulates conditions of sturgeon passage to the spawning reach of a river (i.e., high current velocity, gravel bottom). The water flow through the pond at the onset of the holding period is 30–40 liter/s and at the end of prespawn holding, it can be elevated to 300 liter/s. The disadvantage of this system is the large water demand.

The ponds for rearing sturgeon are generally rectangular in shape with a side ratio of 1:2 or 1:3, with a maximum depth of 2.5 m. A constant slope from inlet to outlet helps in draining the ponds effectively. The system supplying water to the ponds consists of a main canal or pipe with supply lines (regulated flow) to each pond with the capability to ensure rapid filling (1-2 days) or flushing. The water supply system should ensure a full water exchange in the ponds

every 1–2 days based on water quality parameters. The design of the ponds should allow easy access of personnel and the dikes between ponds must be sufficiently wide and stable to allow access by trucks and equipment for pond maintenance and fish transportation.

5.4.1.1.2 Tanks (concrete, fiberglass, plastic, metal with plastic liner)

Tanks for broodstock are typically circular or rectangular with rounded corners (diameter >3 time the body length of the species) with water flows to create a current (>0.2m/s). Depending on the clarity of the water, tanks are either deep enough (~2.5m) or are covered/shaded (>60% shade cloth) to minimize stress caused by intense sunlight or if indoor incandescent lighting is not dimmable.

5.4.1.1.3 Cages (stainless steel, fine-mesh netting)

Cages 20-100 m² and depth 3-3.5 m can also be used for broodstock, typically placed in ponds or reservoirs, at a maximum density of 10-25 kg/m² (Chebanov and Galich, 2011). These are also covered to keep low light conditions and to prevent any escape.

5.4.1.1.4 Controlled recirculating aquaculture systems (RAS)

Due to the increasing concern of limited water resources (river, surface, and ground), and increasing regulations for use and discharge, and compounded with climate change, the most rapidly developing option is to hold wild-caught broodstock under controlled conditions to thermoregulate (heating and/or cooling) the holding systems using RAS. Many of these RAS systems are indoor facilities, however some are also used outdoors, primarily to recirculate water.

The ability to maintain overwintering water temperatures, for example, will allow for holding selected pre-spawning broodstock to reach final maturation during later months of the spawning season. And with heated water some females could be acclimated to spawn earlier in the season. This could allow a facility to produce multiple progenies spread over a longer time frame and thus allow for maximum production of juveniles.

The basic layout of an indoor facility is an area of circular tanks for holding pre-spawning or overwintering broodfish (generally, the diameter is at least 3 times their maximum total length). The facility design should allow easy access to these tanks by your broodstock transport vehicle and allow sufficient space to handle the fish in stretchers or for the larger species space enough to use a small crane or bobcat with a lift net. Smaller sized circular spawning tanks can be used for post-injected fish, and then at least one of the larger sized tanks for holding post-spawned fish until release back into the river.

A separate area is for collection of gametes, usually right next to the egg incubation unit, and then an area for rearing tanks of increasing diameter, to hold the larval sizes through the target release size of the juveniles (see Chapter 10 – Rearing for Release). All these systems should be RAS to maintain temperature control during final maturation, spawning induction, and embryo incubation. The most critical area(s) of the facility is the operational area(s) of the RAS(s) as there is usually more than one (e.g., the egg incubation system usually stands alone as it only requires a recirculating system with a small chiller to maintain optimal water temperature). Hatched larvae typically have a more tolerant thermal range, and, in some programs, it is desirable to add warmer water for faster growth and thus shorter time to release size.

There has been a rapid development over the last two decades in the technologies involved in RAS and it is beyond the scope of this manual to go into details of designing an *ex situ* RAS sturgeon facility. There are numerous publications and books on the subject (e.g., Timmons *et al.* , 2002; Aich *et al.* , 2020; Ahmed and Turchini, 2021; Bregnballe, 2022) and we highly recommend that a qualified engineer help design the more complex systems for any *ex situ* facility. Generally, and briefly, the basic RAS design is to continuously treat circulating water by removing waste products (solid and chemical) excreted by the sturgeon and add oxygen to maintain optimal levels. As water drains from the fish tanks it passes through a mechanical filter, and then a biological filter, and then it is aerated and stripped of carbon dioxide. Further steps can include oxygen enrichment, UV disinfection, automatic pH regulation, and heating or chilling.

5.4.1.2 *Broodstock spawning system*

Broodstock ready for hormonal stimulation (see Chapter 8) are moved into a system of tanks with thermoregulation to maintain ideal spawning temperature of the fish. The tank size should allow the fish to move freely, the diameter being 2-3 times the length of the fish, and the depth should just be 3-4 times the width of the fish for easy capture and removal for gamete collection. The rearing density is recommended not to exceed 10-15kg/m³ (Conte *et al.* 1986; Chebanov and Galich, 2011). To reduce stress and prevent escape, the tank is covered. To ease the determination of onset of ovulation by spotting eggs, the tank bottom should have a light blue to grey coloration and the water, if needed, should be filtered for sufficient transparency. Optimal water quality must be maintained either in RAS or in flow through. Some facilities prefer having only one female per tank although some will place more than one female per tank which can make it more challenging to determine which female started releasing eggs first. These tanks can be multi-purpose and subsequently be used for juvenile grow-out after the spawning season has ended.

5.4.1.3 *Gamete collection and fertilization area*

For gamete collection, fish are removed from the spawning tank system, and typically the collection of gametes requires a suitable sized tank for narcosis of the fish (see Chapter 4), sufficient space to move and handle the fish by forklift or in the stretcher, a stable table of support device for the stretcher to place the fish on, access to rearing water to flush the gills with fresh oxygenated water and capacity to place the required materials (e.g.,towels, syringes, milt flasks, egg bowls, beakers for fertilization water, etc..) on two different portable-folding tables. A freely accessible space of 4x4 m is sufficient for small and medium sized sturgeon, and for large fish of more than 2.5m additional space might be required.

5.4.1.4 Post-spawning recovery system

After gamete collection (see Chapter 9) the wild caught broodstock can be moved back into one of the empty overwintering and/or pre-spawning holding systems or a similar sized recovery tank, until transported back for release at their capture site.

5.4.1.5 Embryo incubation system

Various types and sizes of incubators are used to hold sturgeon embryos from post-fertilization through hatching. The most common systems (see Figure 5.2) utilize either horizontal (Yuschenko system, Osetr system) or vertical (Weiss jar, McDonald jar, Eagar upwelling jar) flows of water and are described and pictured in detail by Chebanov and Galich (2011). Ideally, ultraviolet (UV) light sterilized ground water should be used that is semi-recirculated with a chiller if needed to maintain optimal incubation temperature. Oxygen levels should be at greater than 80% saturation. In general, the incubation systems should be in low light sections of the hatchery (< 100 lux) and never in direct sunlight, which can lead to developmental abnormalities (Chebanov and Galich, 2011). It should be noted that some species of eggs may survive better in specific incubation systems. For example, it was found that the McDonald jars, typically used for white sturgeon embryos, were too vigorously tumbling the thin-chorion green sturgeon embryos resulting in high mortalities compared to the gentler upwelling Eagar incubators (Van Eenennaam *et al.* , 2008).



Figure 5.2: Incubators frequently used for sturgeon embryos a) Yushenko, b) Osetr, c) Weiss Jar, d) Mc Donald Jar, e) Eagar jar

5.4.1.6 *Number of incubators*

The number of incubators will depend on the number of females induced to spawn at one time and their estimated fecundity. The volume or number of eggs placed into an incubation system will depend on the size of the section/box/jar, and species egg size (Chebanov and Galich, 2011) and in general a Yushchenko section can have 150-260 thousand embryos, an Osetr box 100-250 thousand, a 6-liter McDonald or 15 cm diameter Eagar upwelling jar 20-65 thousand, and an 8-liter Weiss jar 20-35 thousand.

5.4.1.7 *Larval and Juvenile rearing systems*

Hatched larvae are often stocked in tanks (fiberglass, concrete or plastic), that are circular, rectangular or square, with rounded corners. Additionally, net cages and small ponds have been used but juveniles should be at least 100 g in size before stocking into ponds (Chebanov and Galich, 2011).

For circular tanks, initial water flow is low and almost vertical into the tank to prevent any vortex that will impinge larvae onto the center standpipe or cause forced clumping of larvae. Screens are initially ~500 μm mesh and subsequently increased to 4 mm+ dependent upon juvenile size, and aeration near the screened center standpipes or outlets will help to keep them from fouling and clogging. Water inflow is angled more and more as the juveniles grow and which will also make the tank more self-cleaning. In general, the initial post-hatch larval

tanks should have 3-5 complete changes of water every hour with aeration to maintain dissolved oxygen >70% saturation (see Chapter 10-Rearing for release). Water depth from 0.2-0.5m with blueish to grey colored preferred, as white is too bright and black too dark (difficult to see the larvae).

5.4.1.8 *Stocking densities*

Initial stocking densities range from 1,000-5,000 larvae per square meter for initiation of exogenous feeding (see Chapter 10 – Rearing for release), and to help design a facility layout, Table 5.3 provides guidelines for stocking densities for the different sized juveniles and rearing systems.

Table 5.3. Size and stocking density for systems used to rear different size sturgeon juveniles in tanks, net cages, and small ponds (modified from Chebanov and Galich, 2011). Not stocked (NS) at that size.

Mean Body Weight (g)	Tank Sizes	Net Cages	Small Ponds
	5-20 m ²	4-25 m ²	250-750 m ²
Stocking Density (kg/m ²)			
1	2.5 – 5	NS	NS
5	5 – 10	NS	NS
30	7 – 14	6	NS
200	9 – 18	7	3
400	10 – 20	8	4
800	12 – 24	9	5

5.4.1.9 *Storage, food preparation and laboratory unit*

Spares and backup equipment of essential, life-saving systems should be maintained on site in a dry storage area for equipment, cold or deep freezer storage is needed for fish feed, and an area for wet equipment, such as nets, raingear, boots and waders. Nearby should be a changing area with lockers for personnel to store personal items/shoes while changing into wet gear. A small workshop/repair area is also needed.

The feed preparation area needs to incorporate a sink, a workbench (stainless steel), storage racks, scales, bowls etc. The provision of live feed makes it necessary to designate a room for the tanks for rearing live food such as Artemia and for the enrichment of live feed items. A

rearing area is also required if additional live feed (polychaetes, insect larvae etc.) is to be reared and prepared.

The laboratory unit should be one room with two workstations; one for a microscope, dissecting scope and analytical equipment for water quality, and one to act as a wet lab for fish examination.

5.4.2 Office space

To operate the facility in daily business, a small office with 2-3 workstations, as well as a bathroom with toilet, sink and shower and a kitchen and meeting area are necessary. If presence of personnel overnight is required, or if research infrastructure is included in the facility, bedrooms are useful.

5.4.3 Outdoor storage-backup power-parking area

For larger equipment and vehicles, fish transport trailers and boats, an outdoor storage area must be planned into the design. An emergency power system must be installed to provide electricity in case of a power loss, which is also located outdoors. And an appropriate number of parking spaces should be included for the facility personnel.

5.4.4 Planning of workflow and facilities layout

Overall workflow and routines must be envisioned to be able to plan for the arrangement of the different facilities within the overall layout. In principle, quick and easy access, and material transport as well as movement of fish is essential to increase efficiency and ease of handling. Deliveries of materials (e.g., feed, chemicals, equipment, fish) requires various transport equipment (e.g., forklift, crane, bobcat) to the storage areas, and different holding facilities. Accessibility of infrastructures (e.g., pumps, filters, pipes) needs to be easy and provide sufficient space for maintenance and replacement.

5.5 Facility Type 3 - Wild caught sturgeon become a captive stock

In cases when *ex situ* facilities are covering the entire life cycle, to preserve rare species in living gene banks, the facility will be much larger and it is a multi-decade approach. These *ex situ* facilities must house and protect extremely valuable genetic heterogeneity and biodiversity components. For this reason, it is essential to minimize losses in the process of maintaining them under captive conditions. This requires the efficient control and manipulation of rearing conditions as needed, which means that the rearing facility should provide different options for environmental conditions either through e.g., the water sources utilized, aeration, oxygenation, and temperature control.

5.5.1 General design considerations

For this type of *ex situ* facility, the number and sizes of different rearing facilities must be estimated based on the total biomass of fish that is considered necessary for goals of the program. This can be based on the average weight of the fish to be reared from age 1 to age of maturity, the number of different year classes to be reared concurrently from hatch to maturity, and the optimal stocking densities. Different year classes have to be identifiable during their whole life-cycle requiring a reliable marking technique or separation in the rearing facility. This procedure could further increase the number of rearing units required.

In general, the decision is to be made if the facility will solely comprise a tank-based facility or if ponds will also be utilized for juvenile and subadult or even adult fish to be reared until maturation. In the first case the design of the facility largely depends upon the water source and water treatment (i.e., flow through or RAS), and this decision is largely influenced by environmental legislation and water supply. In general, ground water flow through and RAS provide better control than surface/river water systems. The manipulation of the rearing water makes the use of RAS more sensible for heating and cooling, even though RAS are more energy intensive than flow through systems, they reduce water use.

The basic facility design is the same as Facility Type-2, but the systems used for the rearing of juveniles for release need to be kept separate for biosecurity reasons, and because the requirements for the rearing environments will be different between fish for release and the fish being reared for future broodstock. The development of captive broodstocks require the same rearing systems, as described in Type-2 facilities, but systems are needed to transition wild-caught fish into long-term captive rearing conditions, which primarily involves weaning them onto artificial diets (see Chapter 10) and similar systems but with increasing numbers and sizes of tanks and/or ponds, to grow out and close the reproductive cycle of each subsequent year class to be reared as future captive broodstock. Because of the high initial capital cost to construct a large facility all at once, the facility could be designed for anticipated expansion of tanks and/or ponds. While the initial year class and wild fish are being reared, more and larger tanks/ponds can be added to the layout as the fish grow and more subsequent year classes are added.

5.5.2 Ponds, tanks, net cages, RAS considerations

Beyond the general description of these systems in the above Facility Type 2 sections, the development of captive broodstock program will require a much larger capacity, and likely even larger sized tanks/ponds to maintain the increasing number of captive adults from different age classes as they age.

5.5.3 Stocking densities

To help design a facility layout, Table 4 provides guidelines for stocking densities for the different sized fish and the different rearing systems.

Table 5.4. Size and stocking density guidelines for systems used to rear different size sturgeon for future broodstock in tanks, net cages, and small ponds (modified from Chebanov and Galich, 2011).

Mean Body Weight (kg)	Tank Size 20-40 m ²	Net Cages 10-50 m ²	Small Ponds 250-1,500 m ²
	Stocking Density (kg/m ²)		
1.5-3.0	15 – 30	10	6
3-4	18 – 36	12	7
4-6	25 – 50	15	8
6-10	30 – 60	25	9
>10	40 – 80	30	10

5.5.4 Guidelines and considerations for size of a facility

The size of the captive broodstock to be maintained should be based on the genetic diversity of the natural populations and the breeding plan underlying the program (see Chapter 6) and this will help design the overall size of the facility.

Considering the age at maturation of each species and using the estimated survival rates of 75% from yearlings to five-year old animals and 90% survival thereafter, until maturation, the total number of fish to be kept from each year's reproduction can be estimated. As controlled reproduction can be stressful for the fish, mortalities must also be considered when planning for the broodstock size. Chebanov and Galich (2011) provided a guideline for the numbers of fish required at different ages to end with one surviving broodstock (Table 5). Thus, if 100 broodstock are needed, a minimum of 400 age 2+ or approximately 1000 yearlings will be required with the remaining fish being released or culled.

The estimated size of a tank facility rearing 18 age classes of sturgeon, and one tank of spawning fish, and rearing 130,000 juveniles for release at 5-gram size, and some at age 1 and 2 years, is provided as an example (Table 6). The total biomass reared in each system is based on the hypothetical mean body weight at each age and the number surviving, from an initial 20 fish at age 2, is given in Table 7. These high numbers of large animals demand large facilities, the size of which is ever increasing with increasing numbers of older and larger individuals to be maintained. Table 6 refers to fish maturing at 1.5 -1.8 m FL and reaching 2.1 m at age 25. The

required size of this tank facility can be reduced on the other hand by rearing subadults age 3-15 years, in pond facilities.

Table 5.5. Dimensions of the rearing systems calculated for 18 age classes of future broodstock of *A. sturio* sturgeon (including one spawning brood tank), and systems to rear 130,000 five-gram, age 0 juveniles and larger age 1–2-year-old fish for release.

Tank Size (m)	Tank Height (m)	Tank Area (m ²)	Rearing Density (kg/m ²)	# of Tanks	Total Biomass (kg)	Age Classes Reared	Rearing Area (m ²)	Water makeup Systems (m ²)	Gross Area (m ²)
<u>Future</u>									
<u>Brood</u>									
4x4	0.8	12.5	10	2	242	2,3,4	25	7.3	48
6x6	1.2	28.3	10	3	856	5,6,7,8	85	44	264
10x10	1.4	78.5	10	5	3900	9-18	393	236	960
10x10	1.4	78.5	7	1	550	Brood	79	45	188
<u>For release</u>									
4.5x0.6	0.4	2.7	5	50	650	0	135	75	315
2x2	0.8	3.2	5	12	16	1	38	12	76
4x4	0.8	12.6	5	5	64	2	63	14.5	120

Tanks are circular except the troughs used for age 0 fish. Total space requirement (gross area) for all the tanks, water handling systems/treatments, and working space in between tanks, is approximately 2000 m². Not that *A. sturio* is very sensitive to rearing density, which is the reason for low broodstock stocking densities suggested.

Table 5.6: The mean body weight at each age for *A. sturio* and the estimated number of survivors, from an initial 20 fish at age 2.

Age (year)	Mean Body Weight (kg)	# of Fish (N)	Total Biomass (kg)	If stocked at 10 kg/m ² ; tank area required (m ²)
2	2	20	40	4
3	4	19	76	7.6
4	7	18	126	12.6
5	10	17	171	17.1
6	13	16	208	20.8
7	15	15	225	22.5
8	18	14	252	25.2
9	21	14	294	29.4
10	24	13	312	31.2
11	29	12	348	34.8
12	35	12	420	42.0
13	35	11	385	38.5
14	38	11	418	41.8
15	41	10	410	41.0
16	44	10	440	44.0
17	47	9	423	42.3
18	50	9	450	45.0

5.6 Biosecurity (Prevention of escapement)

In cases where *ex situ* facilities are placed outside of the range /catchment of the (sub-) population to be maintained, it is indispensable to ensure that the escapement of fish into the environment is prevented by the establishment of security measures. For the different *ex situ* facilities, security levels at the fish-farm can be described as follows:

5.6.1 ELS rearing facility

Rearing of ELS takes place under security measures to avoid fish escape. If rearing takes place in closed systems, the design itself of the water supply and the biofilter system constitute the most effective barrier to avoid fish escape. These comprise three successive security measures:

1. Supply tank and biofiltering systems. The water from the supply tank flows into a reservoir where it is aerated and supplies the mechanical (sand or mesh) filters. The design of these systems acts like an effective set of successive barriers that prevent fish escape from the closed circuit.

2. A grid with a mesh size of 0.3-2 cm (depending upon fish size) is placed at the outlet of each rearing tank, and is complemented by a mechanical filter of 0.04 - 0.1 mm for the mechanical filtration on the inlet of the biofilter.
3. Two grids with mesh size below 1 cm are placed at the overflow of the filter on the drainage channel

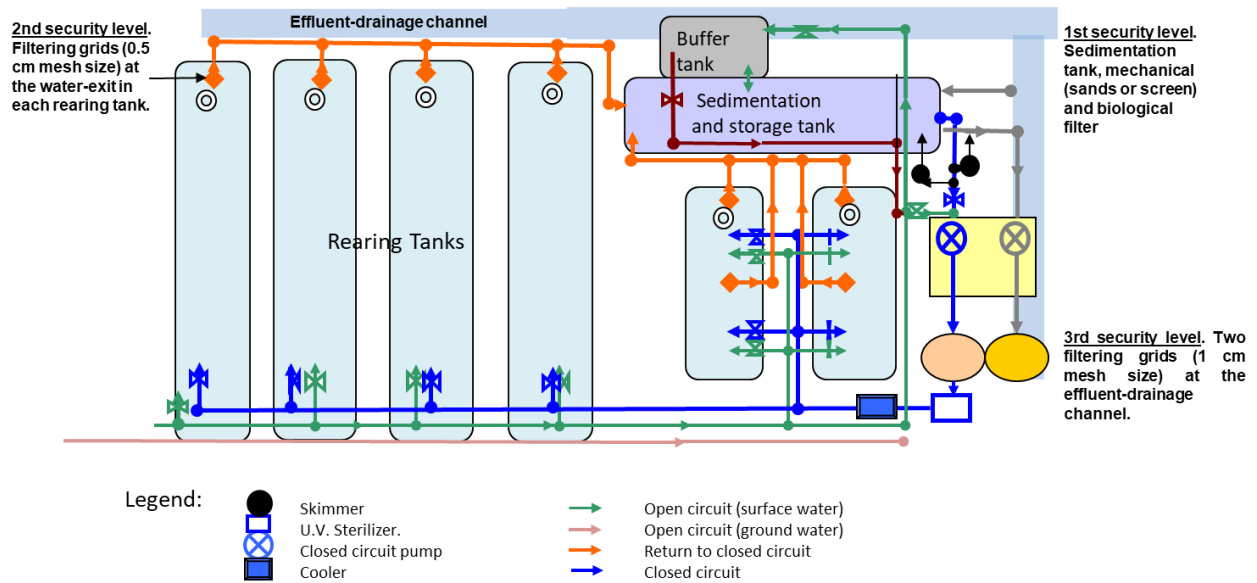


Figure 5.3. Hatchery design with different water sources and protection against escapement

The same approach holds true for any recirculation facility that is used to grow sturgeon broodstock or temporarily maintaining spawners for their reproduction and releasing them after. In cases where flow through facilities are utilized, the principal design can follow the approach in the following chapter for pond rearing.

5.4.2 Sturgeon on-growing in earthen ponds

An example of semi-intensive earthen ponds for on-growing of sturgeon is shown in the Figure 5.4. In these ponds, water is continuously exchanged in order to maintain proper chemical and biological conditions. The water level of the semi-extensive production unit (as those designed for sturgeon on-growing) in the demonstration facility is at intermediate level between the irrigation channel and the pond for extensive rearing for instance of future broodstock. A cross section from an irrigation channel to a water-drainage channel is illustrated in Figure 5.5.

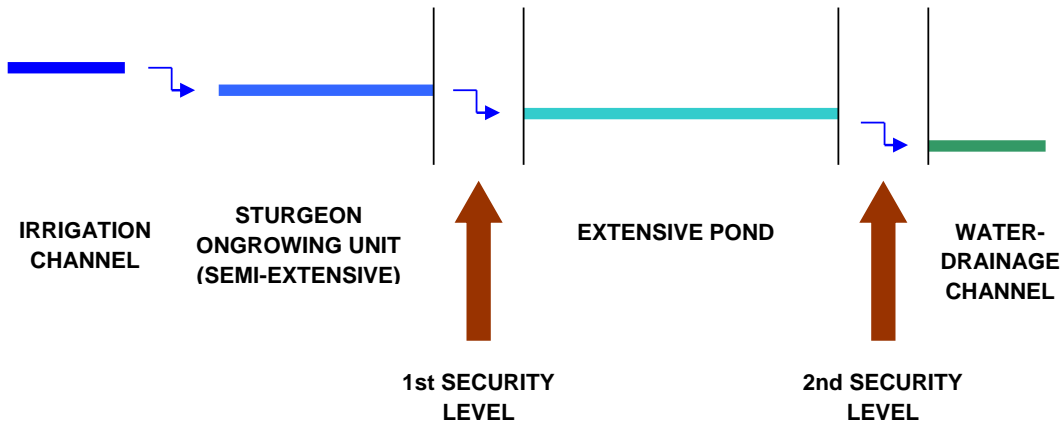


Figure 5.4. Water level scheme with screening devices between subsequent pond facilities to prevent escapement

The water flow into the pond can be adjusted by the inlet level of the supply systems while the outlet weir of semi-intensive culture units is provided with curved filtering grids, with mesh size adapted to the size of the fish in the unit. Such grids prevent fish escape from the semi-intensive culture system into the extensive ponds.

Additionally, the inlets to the extensive ponds are equipped with filtering / collecting devices that act as a second security mechanism to avoid any accidental transfer of escaped fishes into the ponds.



Figure 5.5: Inflow floodgate at the entrance of a semi-intensive unit equipped with a spherical filtering screen (red circle) mounted (left) and detached (right)

Similarly, the overflow structured placed at the outlet of the extensive ponds and at the intake of the water-drainage channels are to be provided with screens and filtering / collection devices.

The combination of filtering grids and filtering / collection devices placed between the irrigation channels, semi-extensive earthen pond units (as the ongrowing units) and extensive earthen ponds, constitute two main security levels in the active prevention of fish escape.

A third security level consisting of a filtering grid placed in the communication between main water-drainage channels and the recipient water body, further minimizing the possibility of any accidental escape from the farm into the river. The whole set of retaining devices needs to be reviewed on daily basis by qualified operators for the revision of screens, their cleaning and repair.

5.7 Transplants out of range

In cases when fish are transferred into bioregions outside of the native range of the species, it must be ensured that the establishment of the broodstock follows the ICES Code of Practice for transplants (ICES 2003) to prevent the co-transfer of pathogens along with the fish. In these cases, the transfer of disease free F1 originating from a captive broodstock that is certified disease free is recommended.

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Chapter 6

Genetic considerations in *ex situ* measures

Leonardo Congiu, James A. Crossman, Joel P. Van Eenenaam, Joern Gessner

6.1 Introduction

Many *ex situ* conservation plans, include the establishment of a captive breeding population. Whether the goal is to support recovery of natural populations or reintroduce a population to an area where it has locally become extinct, the establishment of this breeding population should represent, as much as possible, the genetic composition of the target population in order to minimize the inevitable impact after release. Managing an *ex situ* conservation program for sturgeons involves addressing a range of genetic issues. Decisions such as which source population to use, how many individuals to maintain in captivity and how to select breeding pairs all necessitate a scientifically informed approach. Therefore, it is crucial for operators to understand the potential genetic consequences of their activities and carefully consider them before implementing any actions

In this chapter, the most common issues that can arise in the management of *ex situ* sturgeon populations and their potential effects on genetic diversity will be briefly discussed, while also providing guidelines for informed management. First and foremost, it is important to outline briefly some unique characteristics of sturgeons that are significant for their genetic conservation. These characteristics not only impact the evolutionary consequences of management decisions but also pose constraints on researchers conducting genetic analyses on these organisms.

6.2 Main sturgeon features with genetic relevance

In sturgeons, genetic analyzes must deal with complex genomes and different levels of ploidy, resulting from different whole genome duplication events. The first duplication event occurred in a common ancestor which possessed 60 chromosomes, leading to a genome with approximately 120 (110-130) chromosomes (Peng *et al.* , 2007). The species belonging to this group include *Acipenser nudiiventris*, *Acipenser oxyrinchus*, *Acipenser ruthenus*, *Acipenser stellatus*, *Acipenser sturio*, *Huso dauricus*, *Huso huso*, *Scaphirhynchus albus*, *Scaphirhynchus platyrhynchus*, *Scaphirhynchus suttkusii*, *Psephurus gladius* (recently declared extinct, see Congiu

et al., 2023), and *Polyodon spathula*. A second whole genome duplication event occurred in both the Pacific and Atlantic clades, leading to a total of approximately 240 chromosomes (220-276). The species in this group include *Acipenser baerii*, *Acipenser fulvescens*, *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*, *Acipenser medirostris*, *Acipenser naccarii*, *Acipenser persicus*, *Acipenser schrenckii*, and *Acipenser transmontanus*. Lastly, a third event led to the unique karyotype of 360 chromosomes observable in *Acipenser brevirostrum* (Kim *et al.*, 2005). The determination of ploidy associated with each chromosome number has been the subject of extensive debate between two principal theories. The first argues that species with 120 chromosomes resulting from a duplication event in the common ancestor, should be considered tetraploid and those with 240 chromosomes should be considered octoploid. The second position focuses more on functional aspects, attributing diploidy and tetraploidy conditions to species with 120 and 240 chromosomes, respectively (Fontana *et al.*, 2007). Both positions can be considered correct since a whole genome duplication event is generally followed by a ploidy reduction process. For example, a nominally tetraploid genome can be largely diploidized (Fontana *et al.*, 2008; Stift *et al.*, 2008; Birstein, 2002). However, the process of functional ploidy reduction is gradual, making it likely that different regions of the genome are characterized by different ploidy levels (Dalle Palle *et al.*, 2022). This considerably complicates genetic analyses.

6.3 Genetic identification of Conservation units

Maintaining genetic diversity within and among populations is a crucial priority for recovery and rehabilitation programs (Palsbøll *et al.*, 2007). The differentiation between natural populations can be adaptively neutral, resulting from reproductive isolation and random divergence of gene pools. However, the genetic differences among populations may also hold adaptive value, particularly if the ecological conditions in their respective environments differ. In such cases, the forced mixing of populations adapted to different conditions can lead to a decrease in fitness in subsequent generations, known as "outbreeding depression" (Frankham *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, understanding the natural geographic patterns of genetic variability is of paramount importance in informing the different phases of an *ex situ* conservation program. All activities, ranging from the establishment of broodstocks to the release of captive bred animals, should be designed to preserve the natural differentiations between populations. The breeding stocks must consist of individuals from the same conservation unit, and their offspring should be exclusively used for restocking the corresponding natural populations. Transferring animals between different populations or, even worse, crossing breeders with different evolutionary histories must be avoided.

In many instances, establishing breeding populations for controlled reproduction cannot be carried out based on animals from wild populations. Instead, integration of captive-bred individuals becomes necessary, which in many cases obscures the geographic origin of the

individual. Therefore, it is crucial to develop genetic tests for each species that enable rapid and reliable determination of geographical origin or source population. In some cases, population differentiation is pronounced enough to be easily detected, facilitating straightforward geographic allocation. For example, the *A. naccarii* exhibits distinct populations from Italian rivers and the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea, which can be distinguished even through simple analysis of mitochondrial DNA (Ludwig *et al.*, 2003). However, in other cases, detecting genetic structure among populations is more challenging and may require labor-intensive investigations, as seen with *H. huso*. Only recently, a whole-genome RAD approach allowed differentiation between Black and Azov Seas populations and the Caspian Sea population. This differentiation was impossible using more conventional markers (Boscari *et al.*, 2021).

Considerable efforts are being made by researchers to reconstruct the pattern of geographic differentiation and identify the conservation units that require separate management. For certain species like, for example the above cited *A. naccarii* and *H. huso*, the information is already accessible and should be incorporated into the planning of *ex situ* conservation programs. This is intended to lead towards the establishment of specific broodstocks for each conservation unit.

For other species, conservation units have not yet been identified, and a concerted effort involving geneticists, aquaculture facilities, and conservationists is needed to elucidate the natural patterns of genetic differentiation. Unfortunately, for several species, decades of translocations and releases across basins have massively impacted the different gene pools. As a result, it has become strenuous to identify animals with certain geographical origin and reduces the chances of collecting reliable reference samples with known geographic origins. In these cases, an adequate representation of the genetic diversity of the source population is almost impossible to identify. Aquaculture facilities can be of great importance if they possess very old animals captured in well-known geographic areas. This greatly enhances the chances of accurate geographic allocation based on the history of individual specimens and represents one of the advantages of working with such long-lived animals.

6.4 Analyses of relatedness

Once the population to be used as a source of individuals for establishment of a broodstock as a basis for the planned release into the natural environment has been identified, another priority is to represent a significant portion of the natural genetic diversity. Genetic diversity can be regarded as the adaptive potential of a population. The greater the heterogeneity of a population's gene pool, the higher the chances that some individuals will possess genetic traits that enable them to respond effectively to the various selective pressures of the natural environment. Therefore, it is important to strive for maximum genetic diversity in a population while respecting the differentiation between populations discussed in the previous paragraph.

The ideal scenario is one where wild mature individuals are available in a natural population which can be kept in a controlled environment temporarily or permanently to facilitate their reproduction or where offspring of such parental stocks can be collected in the wild to increase their survival in captive rearing. In such cases, the likelihood of dealing with related individuals can be disregarded.

However, if wild individuals are unavailable in sufficient numbers or protected and cannot be captured for conservation purposes, reliance on aquaculture stocks becomes necessary for selecting breeders. This presents several potential problems, primarily due to the fact that the rearing conditions in facilities intended for caviar production and the criteria for acquiring, selecting, and breeding animals are not aligned with the conservation of natural populations and their genetic diversity. Hence, it is crucial to be aware of the potential genetic issues and take appropriate precautions to prevent or at least mitigate their impact.

The first significant issue with aquaculture stocks that renders them unsuitable for conservation purposes is the prevalence of closely related individuals. Typically, fish farmers personally carry out breeding within the facility or acquire animals in the form of embryonated eggs. In both cases, due to the large number of individuals produced by each female, the number of crosses performed is limited in general, resulting in a population of closely related individuals. As a result, over time, each farm typically ends up with a small number of closely related groups of individuals. It is crucial, therefore, to determine the kinship relationships among the different animals in order to identify family groups and prevent mating between relatives. Mating between relatives has two major disadvantages. First, it exposes offspring to potential inbreeding depression, which refers to the reduced fitness or health of individuals resulting from reproduction between parents with shared genetic ancestry. When parents share their genetic ancestry, alleles with adverse effects on traits related to survival, growth, fertility, or disease resistance are more likely to be co-inherited and expressed in the offspring. In sturgeons, a certain role of ploidy in modulating the effects of inbreeding was never been proven but it can be hypothesized with some reason. In fact, the probability that a deleterious mutation is in complete homozygosity in a tetraploid is lower than in a diploid and it is therefore conceivable that the effects of inbreeding are somewhat reduced by a polyploid chromosome set.

The second negative consequence of mating between relatives is the reduced contribution of their offspring to the genetic diversity of the natural population, again limiting genetic diversity and a such adaptability compared to mating between unrelated individuals.

Therefore, it is strongly recommended to implement breeding plans that consider both the level of relatedness among different breeders and the overall genetic diversity within a given facility. The objective should be to release the highest degree of diversity into the natural

environment, and to achieve this, it is important to maximize the diversification of genetic lines in future generations. These breeding plans should be developed over several years, gradually involving all available genetic lines. If the diversity within a single facility is limited and insufficient to develop appropriate breeding plans, it is advisable to transfer animals or gametes between different facilities as long as they still belong to the target population.

Another measure that should be adopted in crossbreeding planning is to delay the crossing of new generations and continue crossing older generations as much as possible. This maximizes the portion of genetic diversity from the older generations that will be successfully transmitted, thereby reducing the rate of genetic erosion.

In the management of breeding plans, it is important to consider that not all animals are ready to reproduce every year, especially females, who tend to reproduce intermittently. This fact imposes strong constraints on the selection of animals for reproduction and makes long-term planning impossible. One way to overcome this limitation is to consider families as reproductive units rather than individual animals. This increases the likelihood of having some females available from a specific family group when needed. Of course, this assumes that a sufficient number of individuals from each family group are retained over time, accounting for intrinsic mortality, to ensure at least ten adult breeders per family. An alternative approach, focusing on the individual basis of reproduction would be the implementation of a gene bank for cryopreserved sperm, allowing to select suitable partners for each female according to the genetic breeding plan.

Relatedness analyses for diploid species are well-established procedures in genetics, and there are many software tools available that facilitate the inference of the degree of relatedness based on genetic data (e.g., ML-relate, etc.). However, for tetraploid species, the available approaches are more limited and generally less automated. Nevertheless, methods do exist to identify related individuals in tetraploid species, both through parental allocation analyses (if genotypes of the parental generation are available) and through estimates of genetic distance between tetraploid profiles (e.g., Congiu *et al.* , 2011; Boscari, etc.).

Info-Box: Risks of captive breeding as associated with controlled propagation in aquaculture

Genetic drift is the change in the frequency of an existing gene variant (allele) in a population due to random sampling of organisms. The alleles in the offspring are a sample of those in the parents, and chance has a role in determining whether a given individual survives and reproduces. Genetic drift may cause gene variants to disappear completely and thereby reduce genetic variation. It can also cause initially rare alleles to become much more frequent and even fixed. If only a few copies of an allele are present within a population, the effect of genetic drift is larger, especially in small populations.

Inbreeding is defined as the production of offspring from the mating of individuals related by ancestry. Inbred offspring are more likely to inherit recent copies of the same allele from both parents, that is, alleles that are identical by descent (derived from a common ancestor of both the parents).

Natural populations contain low frequencies of deleterious recessive mutations (due to the balance between their occurrence by mutation and removal by selection) that are normally found as heterozygotes and are thus not expressed. Inbreeding increases the probability of individuals inheriting these recessive alleles as homozygotes, thus enabling the expression of their deleterious effects. Consequently, in most populations of animals and plants, inbreeding results in a decline in reproduction and survival (reproductive fitness), also known as **inbreeding depression**. Another cause of inbreeding depression is overdominance. Different genotypes have different effects on fitness. In some traits or loci, even though alleles are not recessive, the homozygous genotypes are, on average, less fit than the heterozygous genotype. These traits or loci are referred to as over dominant or showing heterozygote advantage. As inbreeding decreases the proportion of the fitter heterozygotes in a population, the average fitness (e.g., reproduction and survival) of the population declines, resulting in inbreeding depression. Studies show that most inbreeding depression is due to the accumulation of deleterious recessive mutations, rather than overdominance.

Mating between distantly related individuals, such as individuals from different populations or subspecies, is called **outbreeding**. Crossing populations may increase reproductive fitness by increasing heterozygosity and thus preventing the expression of deleterious recessive alleles (aka "hybrid vigor") or may decrease fitness because of various kinds of genetic incompatibilities between the genes from the different populations (**outbreeding depression**). Outbreeding depression is a reduction in reproductive fitness, reduced ability to mate or pollinate, fertilize, produce offspring, survive, or reproduce, in the first or later generations following the crossing of populations (Ralls *et al.* 2013).

6.5 The threat of hybridization

Another important characteristic of sturgeons is their genetic plasticity, to the extent that they can readily form interspecific hybrids with almost all existing sturgeon species (Birstein *et al.* 1997; Havelka *et al.* 2011; Zhang *et al.* 2013; Rachek *et al.* 2022; Vasil'ev *et al.* 2021). This has led to the generation of hybrid types in nature and aquaculture, which can pose a significant challenge for conservation, as will be discussed later. When hybrids are formed between species with the same ploidy level they are often fertile, like the widely cultured bester (*H. huso* x *A. ruthenus*) for meat and caviar on aquaculture farms, and some hybrids between species with different ploidy levels are also fertile (Vasil'ev *et al.* 2021; Rachek *et al.* 2022). Sturgeon aquaculture has continued to experiment with various hybrids, combining species that would

rarely encounter each other in nature, such as species from the Pacific clade with species from the Atlantic clade. This experimentation, conducted with the aim of finding hybrids with desirable productive characteristics, has extended beyond first-generation hybrids, resulting in backcrosses or multiple hybrids with the contribution of more than two species. This process has generated a multitude of variants that are often no longer identifiable based on morphology (Congiu *et al.* , 2023b).

These genetically impure animals present in aquaculture facilities are often mixed knowingly or unknowingly with individuals of pure species. As a result, in stocks intended for conservation purposes, hybrid individuals with different species can occur accidentally (e.g., the example of *A. naccarii* hybridization in aquaculture). It becomes crucial, therefore, to be able to identify these animals in order to remove them. Several genetic methods are available for the identification of species and interspecific hybrids, summarized in Congiu *et al.* (2023b) and Ludwig (2008). However, in some cases, identification based on the established and widely used genetic methods is still impossible, requiring further development of diagnostic genetic markers. The issue of reference markers is also central in this case. To identify species-specific markers, it is necessary to compare an adequate number of unrelated individuals of the species is to be characterized with representatives of all other species. It is crucial that the reference samples for these analyses are pure; otherwise, it may be impossible to identify diagnostic markers. An emblematic example is the hybrid between *A. schrenckii* and *H. dauricus* which is widely produced and used in Chinese aquaculture (Boscari *et al.* , 2017). The two parental species are very different morphologically and belong to different genera. Therefore, it is expected that the identification of distinctive markers between the two species would be straightforward. However, probably due to the presence of hybrids in the reference samples used, this has not been possible (Boscari *et al.* , 2017). It is absolutely crucial that breeding stocks intended for conservation programs are established using breeders of which the purity has been verified genetically.

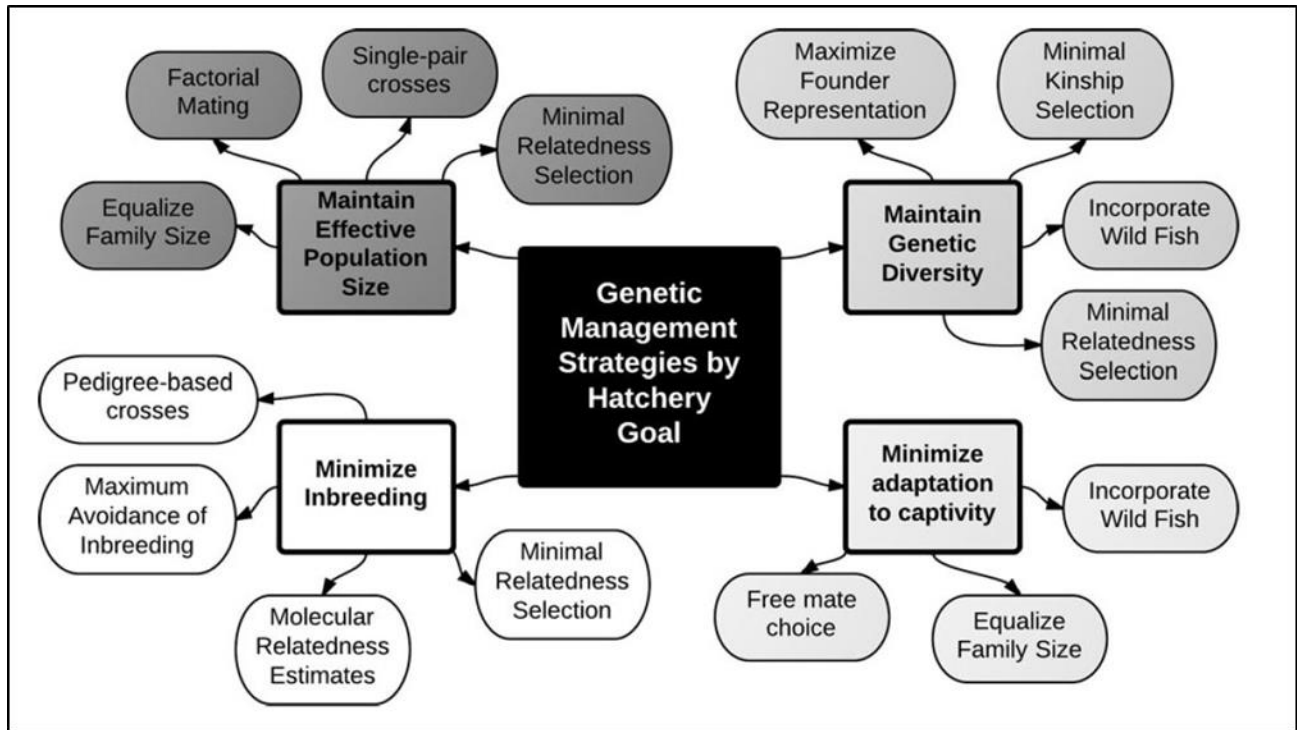


Figure 6.1: Four main objectives and related actions to consider on the level of *ex situ* propagation facilities/ conservation hatcheries (from Fisch *et al.* , 2015)

6.6 Genetic effects of long-term rearing

When an organism is held in captivity, it is exposed to a different set of stimuli compared to its natural environment. These stimuli effectively act as selective pressures that impact both the physiology and the behavior of the animal. The environmental conditions in aquaculture facilities, where sturgeons are typically kept, can vary significantly in terms of structural characteristics, climatic regions, and water quality. Each facility's conditions exert selective pressures that favor individuals (genomes) capable of surviving, growing, and reproducing more effectively under those specific conditions. This phenomenon is known as captive selection (Frankham *et al.* 1986) and is often reinforced by operators selecting individuals that demonstrate better performance, thereby increasing the frequency of their genetic traits over generations.

Furthermore, another evolutionary process observed in aquaculture, as opposed to the natural environment, is the relaxation of natural selective pressures. In controlled conditions, where abundant food is provided and parasites and predators are controlled, genetic traits that would be swiftly counter-selected in nature can increase in frequency, especially if they are randomly

associated with the aforementioned characteristics that promote superior performance in captivity.

To mitigate or at least slow down this process of genetic adaptation resulting in a loss of fitness, certain management strategies are recommended (see Figure 6.2). The first strategy is to utilize wild-origin animals for as long as possible, as their genetic heritage has been naturally selected. For sturgeon, which have a life cycle spanning several decades, this can significantly delay the process of genetic erosion. In this sense, also the cryopreservation of sperm can prolong the genetic contributions of males. The second approach is to implement breeding plans that aim to utilize all available breeders (or all family groups in the case of a family-based breeding plan), giving lower priority to animals that have already been bred in the past. A third approach is to distribute animals across different facilities with diverse environmental conditions, thereby diversifying the selective pressures and, consequently, the genetic variants inadvertently selected. It should be noted that there are documented cases of animals that did not reach sexual maturity for 40 years in facilities where other conspecifics were reproducing regularly until, immediately after being transferred to a new facility with river water instead of groundwater, they ovulated for the first time (Storione Ticino S.r.l., pers. comm.). This demonstrates the crucial role of the facility environment in influencing the performance of

Preliminary analyses suggested for broodstock establishment

Breeders from the wild

- Geographical allocation
- Check for purity

Farmed breeders

- Geographical allocation
- Check for purity
- Analyses of relatedness

Suggestions for rearing and propagation

- Split the stock in different plants
- Do not prioritize animals
- Involve all breeders along the years
- Breed wild generation as long as possible
- Cryopreserve sperm
- Retain part of the offspring from all crosses
- Translocate not ovulating adult females to different conditions

- Use families as breeding units
- Avoid mating related animals
- Delay the reproduction of new generations
- Split the stock in different plants
- Do not prioritize animals
- Involve all families along the years
- Breed older generations as long as possible
- Cryopreserve sperm
- Retain part of the offspring from all crosses
- Translocate not ovulating adult females to different conditions

different animals.

Figure 6.2. Overview of the safety measures to be applied depending upon the source of the fish used in an *ex situ* program

6.7 Effects of Aquaculture Practices on Genetics

The most recently discovered genetic risk for *ex situ* hatcheries to consider is the occurrence of spontaneous autopolyploidy which has been documented for multiple species (Schreier et. al., 2021). Although the rate of spontaneous autopolyploidy is higher in hatcheries and is primarily due to post-ovulatory aging of oocytes and mechanical shock during egg de-adhesion (Van Eenennaam et. al., 2020) there is also spontaneous autopolyploidy documented in wild stocks, including recovery programs (Schreier et. al., 2021). Since spontaneous autopolyploids are fertile any mating with normal ploidy individuals will produce viable intermediate ploidy females that are either sterile or have delayed maturation and that will pass the new ploidy level to their offspring. For captive *A. transmontanus* autopolyploids, instead of maturing at ages 7-9 years, maturation was delayed until ages 12-16 years for some females (Van Eenennaam, unpubl. data; Fiske et. al., 2023). Of course, for any released spontaneous autopolyploid sturgeon into the wild, they first need to survive to maturity and then spawn with a normal ploidy individual, and those intermediate ploidy progenies then need to survive to adulthood, thus it could be decades before the potential impact on a conservation program could be identified. Therefore, the risk of release of spontaneous autopolyploids needs to be assessed on a program-by-program basis. For example, the Snake River *A. transmontanus* conservation program (Idaho, USA) began checking for spontaneous autopolyploid individuals in 2015-2016. A total of twelve families were made with wild-caught broodstock and three of the families had 6%, 13% and 27% incidence of spontaneous autopolyploids (Idaho Power Company, 2021). In 2019 they shifted to a repatriation program and began to screen every fish using coulter counter analysis of RBC nuclei volume (Fiske *et al.* , 2019) to ensure only normal ploidy fish were released. They identified and culled 98 spontaneous autopolyploids (1.5%) during 2019-2022 (Brown, 2023), considering the large size of the individuals that would have been released (200-400g) and probability of survival to maturation and spawning (Ireland *et al.* , 2002; Justice *et al.* , 2009), their implementation of verifying the normal ploidy of all released individuals has been a critical component of their *ex situ* hatchery program.

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Chapter 7

Approaches for incorporating wild sturgeon populations into *ex situ* programs

James A. Crossman, Molly A.H. Webb, Thomas Friedrich, and Joern Gessner

7.1 Introduction

ex situ for sturgeon commonly relies on the collection of gametes from wild caught or captive bred broodstock native to the river system where recovery efforts are required (Anderson *et al.* 2022). While gametes from broodstock of the same species but from adjacent catchments have been used (e.g., *Acipenser oxyrinchus and sturio*), this practice is now much less common and only considered if extirpation of the native population is imminent or populations are reintroduced after their extinction. For the latter case, a structured approach to sourcing suitable broodstock to ensure genetic and evolutionary consequences are mitigated is discussed in Chapter 4. A key emphasis of *ex situ* is to limit selective rearing pressures to the extent possible and this has included adapting more traditional hatchery methods to incorporate more species-specific biology through the use of wild breeders or their progeny. Reflecting more natural conditions during both spawning and rearing of early life stages has been a priority for *ex situ* programs utilizing wild breeders. Much success has been attributed to transitioning from a focus centered on large numbers of juveniles for release and rather optimizing hatchery practices for producing smaller numbers of robust progeny for release across multiple life stages or ages. This chapter expands on the review by Anderson *et al.* (2022) and discusses the rationale for incorporation of wild fish into conservation aquaculture activities and outlines specific methodology associated with different approaches for directly spawning wild adults or collecting naturally produced progeny from the wild.

7.2 Rationale for use of wild fish

As covered in Chapter 3, objectives for each specific program will drive the rationale for how progeny are produced or collected. Briefly, prevention of extinction while promoting measures to retain genetic diversity of the wild population are generally the overarching goals governing how *ex situ* programs are developed. The use of wild breeders to ensure genetic diversity benefits from natural selection while adopting strategies outlined in Chapter 6 allows some mitigation of genetic selections by environment during hatchery rearing. Progeny are ideally sourced from the wild population that is of focus, provided sufficient numbers of annual breeders can be captured and directly spawned. Alternatively, collecting naturally produced gametes or larvae at or near spawning grounds upon adults spawning in the wild allows to circumvent the controlled reproduction in the hatchery altogether (Crossman *et al.* 2011; Jay *et al.* 2014; Thorstensen *et al.* 2017).

Ideally, concurrent population monitoring would confirm effectiveness of these approaches through monitoring spawning activity, larval dispersal, and recruitment to the juvenile stage. In many cases, *ex situ* programs are occurring in parallel to other recovery activities where the goals (e.g., relationship between wild recruitment and environmental conditions) could be compromised if *ex situ* programs are not designed comprehensively within the larger framework of recovery.

7.3 Approaches for incorporating wild populations

There are three common strategies that can be employed to incorporate individuals from the wild population into conservation aquaculture programs. These include, from least invasive to most: 1. collection of embryos or larvae from spawning events that occur naturally in the wild, 2. capture of mature adults for short-term holding and direct spawning in the hatchery, and 3. long-term holding of mature adults for direct spawning in the hatchery. Each approach is described in detail below, with a direct comparison provided in Table 7.1.

7.3.1 Direct collection of naturally produced progeny

Embryos or larvae produced through natural spawning events can be collected and incorporated into conservation aquaculture programs. Because wild spawning allows for natural mate selection and spawning location, eggs and larvae collected experience natural selective pressures at early developmental stages. This approach has been shown to improve genetic diversity compared to the more traditional method of spawning adults under controlled conditions (Crossman *et al.* 2011; Jay *et al.* 2014; Thorstensen *et al.* 2017). Success requires detailed knowledge of spawning and egg deposition locations and general larval dispersal behaviors. Embryos or larvae are collected from the river using several techniques but most commonly include egg mats or drift nets. The design of egg mats traditionally consists of filter material (synthetic or latex coated animal hair) fastened to a square steel frame, the size of

which will be specific to hydraulic conditions in the river. Egg collection mats are deployed to rest on the river substrate at or immediately downstream of spawning sites and work by entrapped drifting or deposited embryos in the filter material. Egg mats are especially beneficial in situations where frequent monitoring is not possible and can be left to passively sample for multiple days assuming the frequency of assessing them is less than the time required for egg incubation and hatch.

Standard drift nets consist of a rolled stainless-steel frame in a “D” shape with a tapered plankton net (0.16 cm delta mesh size) attached ending with a collection cup device. Drift nets are deployed to stand perpendicular to the river bottom and collect drifting embryos and larvae in the tapered plankton net. They are more labor intensive compared to egg mats as they can quickly become filled with organic material in the water column which will reduce survival of sturgeon progeny if nets are not inspected and cleaned frequently. Drift nets are used successfully to capture passively dispersing yolk-sac or feeding larvae for many sturgeon species including *Acipenser transmontanus* (Crossman and Hildebrand, 2014), *Acipenser fulvescens* (Auer and Baker 2002), and *Acipenser brevirostrum* (Moser *et al.* 2000). For programs that intend to use naturally produced progeny, a combination of egg mats and drift nets is recommended as the mats allow for detection of spawning and a better idea of where spawning occurs, while drift nets can then be placed downstream of these sites. In shallow streams with small substrates, kick nets or other tools that can collect and separate substrate materials to allow embryos to be removed have also been used with some success (Crossman *et al.* 2011) but this method is not practical for the majority of sturgeon species that spawn in deeper rivers.

When possible, collection should capture the entire spawning distribution to maximize genetic diversity (Jay *et al.* 2014; Anderson *et al.* 2022) as individual spawning time appears to be repeatable for some species (Forsythe *et al.* 2012) and most species spawn over a protracted period of 4-8 weeks. During collection in the field, embryos and larvae should be developmentally staged to identify spawning timing and allow for rearing groups to be identified. Fertilization date for collected embryos and larvae can be estimated by back-calculation from the capture date and time based on developmental stage and mean incubation water temperature (Dettlaff *et al.* 1993). Separate rearing by distinct periods (e.g., early vs late spawning runs in *Acipenser fulvescens*) or spawning events to control for disproportionate survival ensures all groups are better reflected in the final stocking numbers. While it is expected that this approach will increase genetic diversity compared to direct spawning of adults, genetic monitoring is recommended during rearing or before release to confirm effectiveness.

Natural reproduction or population persistence would not likely be impacted by collection of embryos or larvae from wild spawning events given that natural rates of mortality at these life stages are extremely high for sturgeons (Jaric & Gessner 2013).

To improve survival during early life stages, streamside incubation can be used to allow for less transportation and handling effects and can ensure early life stages are exposed to natural environmental profiles and chemical signatures. There may be benefits associated with imprinting, though further study is required to identify mechanisms and life stages. Several species have transitioned to streamside rearing including *Acipenser fulvescens* (Holtgren *et al.* 2007; Crossman *et al.* 2011; Crossman *et al.* 2014), *Acipenser transmontanus* (Snake and Upper Columbia River), *A. oxyrinchus* (Gessner *et al.* 2023) and *Acipenser ruthenus* (Friedrich *et al.* 2019). Streamside rearing can involve temporary, semi-permanent, or permanent facilities that rear certain life stages or are used for the entire rearing process up to release. In some cases, embryos are incubated streamside, and larvae transferred to conservation facilities for rearing.

Transportation of embryos and larvae to the hatchery would generally follow methods described in Chapter 8 but would have additional considerations. Embryos should experience natural adhesion but if they are collected close to the time of fertilization they may require treatment with diatomaceous earth or other adhesion techniques, as described in Chapter 14. This should occur as close to collection as possible, either prior to transport or during transfer into a streamside facility. Handling in the field should be limited, especially for embryos that have not reached neurulation. Lastly, a possible concern for some facilities associated with bringing in embryos and larvae from the wild is that initial incubation periods in the river allow for microbial community development to occur naturally on embryo surfaces (Fujimoto *et al.* 2013; Fujimoto *et al.* 2021; Walquist *et al.* 2022). This could complicate their use at certain facilities if quarantine is not possible or if there are disease concerns (Chapter 11).

7.3.2 Capture, short-term holding and direct spawning

7.3.2.1 *Streamside spawning of wild adults*

*Streamside spawning can be the method of choice if access to adults in the act of spawning is possible. Gametes in this case can be collected directly on the spawning grounds (Crossman *et al.* 2011; Bruch *et al.* 2009) and either be fertilized on site or transported to a controlled hatchery setting. If an adult is collected that is expressing gametes, gentle hand stripping can be used to collect eggs or milt directly, similar to the approach described in Chapter 9. The amount of time adults are handled should be limited to ensure they return and continue spawning. Holding tanks on the river's edge could be considered while adults are collected, but eggs and milt can also be collected and stored until sufficient numbers have been collected to meet*

breeding objectives. By preserving eggs in plastic bags floating in ambient river water and milt in bags filled with oxygen at kept at ambient river temperatures (Ref.), a wider array of breeding combinations may be possible. This is likely worth the minor compromise to egg quality or sperm motility. Milt can be held for longer durations in a refrigerator if oxygen is replenished every few days. Eggs likely require fertilization within 12 hours of collection while being mindful of other potential effects, like influencing rates of spontaneous autopolyploidy by fertilizing overripe eggs (Schreier *et al.* 2021). If adult capture and gamete collection is occurring later in the spawning period when temperatures are elevated (e.g., >16°C), fertilization of eggs may need to occur more quickly following collection as egg quality declines with increasing temperatures for most species.

There are risks associated to streamside spawning of wild adults as even though small amounts of gametes are collected, (<1L) fish may abandon spawning in the wild. This risk should be weighed against allowing fish to spawn naturally and collecting embryos or larvae after spawning is over (as described before), especially in populations where some evidence of natural recruitment has been documented.

7.3.2.2 Short-term captive holding for direct spawning

Wild adults that are typically captured close to (within 6-8 weeks) or during natural spawning time, either at staging grounds or directly on the spawning grounds are subsequently spawned under captive conditions. Successful examples include *Acipenser guedenstaedtii* (Ruban *et al.* 2019), *A. ruthenus*, *A. stellatus*, *A. transmontanus*, *Huso huso*, and *Scaphirhynchus albus*. Adults captured prior to the spawning period and assessed as spawning ready, are transported to a conservation facility and held in tanks with water temperature matching ambient river temperatures with natural photoperiod. Fish should be closely monitored at hourly intervals immediately after arrival. Segregation by sex should be performed initially to ensure spawning does not occur naturally since adults are close to spawning (Van Eenennaam *et al.* 20XX). The water temperature in female holding tanks should be increased slowly (< 2 °C/day) until it reaches known spawning temperature for the population to mimic natural environmental conditions to the extent possible. If more precise temperature control is possible, following the natural temperature profile of the river of origin is recommended. Wild males can be kept at the initial ambient river temperature, and then increased to the spawning target after being induced to spawn. Typically, wild adults being held for short duration (~1 month) are offered either live feed or are not fed while in captivity. In most cases, hormonal induction is still used for adults that are transported to a facility for short-term holding.

Following spawning, adults in facilities are held for a period of observation of recovery before release near their location of capture. While slightly less invasive compared to holding wild adults for longer periods in captivity, many of the same risks as detailed below need to be

managed. In the Upper Columbia River White Sturgeon Recovery Initiative, 21% of the adults brought to the hatchery (n=220) for short-term holding over a 14-year period failed to spawn, with 2 adult mortalities occurring in captivity (FFSBC 2020). In *Scaphirhynchus albus*, success has been XX% (total wild spawners XX). Further, as described above, cumulative stress and physiological impacts may last well beyond captivity following release back into the wild and this aspect remains understudied. Facility requirements are similar to long-term holding but may allow for additional wild adults to be used following initial rounds of direct spawning when fish have been returned to the river.

Natural tank spawning could be an option for adults that are very close to spawning but has not been rigorously assessed for effectiveness with wild fish brought in for short duration. It has been successfully applied for a few captive species including *Acipenser medirostris* (Van Eenennaam *et al.* 20XX), *Acipenser oxyrinchus oxyrinchus* (Crossman *et al.* 2024), and *Acipenser brevirostrum* (Kynard *et al.* 2011) where adults in spawning condition are allowed to mate naturally with or without hormonal induction. This approach can be conducted in traditional circular holding tanks where gametes are collected using mesh netting incorporated into the outflow design (Van Eenennaam *et al.* 2014; Crossman *et al.* 2024) but is potentially limited to a single female with one or more males. The approach used by Kynard *et al.* (2011) and proposed by Chebanov (2008), incorporates a larger artificial stream structure with natural water velocities and spawning substrates allowing for embryos to incubate under more natural conditions. This approach has been shown to improve survival, growth, and development in some species (e.g., *Acipenser transmontanus*, Boucher *et al.* 2014; McAdam 2011; Gessner *et al.* 2004). With the more complex artificial stream, Kynard *et al.* (2011) was also able to incorporate multiple females and males to allow for more natural mate choice. However, this approach may be less feasible to incorporate for many programs as it requires considerable infrastructure.

7.3.2.3 Long-term holding for direct spawning

Utilization of wild adults after a prolonged lead time in captivity typically applies when spawning or at staging sites prior to spawning are unknown. Further, this strategy may be applied to small populations when encountering fish is difficult, or in systems where sampling is less practical during the spawning period (e.g., during spring freshet in large rivers). They can be selected a year to 9 months in advance during the spawning migration (potamodromous species, hiemal migrants) of natural spawning. This may also include adults that have been reconditioned to reach spawning readiness in the hatchery. Adults are captured and assessed for sex and stage of maturity as described in Chapter 8 and in Webb *et al.* (2019). Individuals that are expected to spawn in the coming year are transferred to a facility where they are held

(see Chapter 5) and spawned in a similar manner to the methods described in Chapter 9 for hormonal induction.

To adapt the wild caught fish to captive conditions, the fish are maintained fish in an adaptation unit for 2-3 weeks at a low stocking density, at low temperatures (10-12°C) and high oxygen content. Stress factors should be minimized during this period. A natural photoperiod is applied. Handling if necessary, is postponed to the hours of darkness and is carried out under red light with a wavelength of 680 nm, that is invisible for sturgeon.

Feeding of transferred fish should be initiated with natural feeds (crustaceans, mollusks, worms, fish) with a gradual transition to paste-like compounds, composed of mentioned components. During the period of accustoming fish to feeds, they should be held at a temperature of 12-15°C, as at higher temperature non-feeding individuals quickly lose weight and their physiological condition decreases, which can lead to irreversible dystrophy.

Weaning of wild caught fish to feeding with formulated dry diets, if necessary, begins with carefully selected suitable (healthy, well-conditioned) fish. It should be considered that different sturgeon species in natural conditions consume different food organisms and the composition of the feed mixture during accustoming to feeds should also be different.

With successful feed uptake of natural diets, formulated diets are added. The process is started with less than 5% of dry diet is introduced into paste-like natural feeds (minced fish, mussels, shrimp, etc.) feed additives (ω 3 fatty acids) can help to increase acceptance of the paste-like diets and only when the fish begin to consume this mixture, the content of artificial feeds in the mixture is gradually raised, increasing the size of feed pellets.

Fish that do not begin to feed in natural way are force-fed through a tube (catheter) with paste-like feeds. Forced feeding should be carried out only once every three days. In some cases, to start feeding of individual fish, it is sufficient to force-feed them once. Typically, with the proper selection of ingredients, the fish begin to feed no later than after the fifth forced feeding. Fish that do not consume granulated feeds for more than 90 days of adaptation should be released into natural water bodies.

The effectiveness of adaptation of wild sturgeon, as with pre-spawning holding, can be increased through injections of vitamins. For this purpose, vitamin "C" (ascorbic acid) and "E" (α -tocopherol) are used, which are affecting the fat, protein and mineral metabolism.

Effective daily doses of vitamins in the course of adaptation are lower than at pre-spawning administration and amounted to 5 mg/kg of ascorbic acid and 10 mg/kg of α -tocopherol. The duration of injections is 5-7 days. When feeding begins, vitamin C can be added to the feeds at the rate of 2 g/kg of feed.

For the next successive maturation of the ovaries, domesticated females need not only to restore energy and compensate losses incurred during the period of wintering, spawning, holding, curing of injuries and the period of adaptation to feeding, but also to accumulate a sufficient amount of reserves for the formation of new generations of oocytes. During the first feeding season in controlled after spawning wild females, there occurred a significant decrease in weight: in beluga up to 15%, in *A. gueldenstaedtii* and *A. stellatus*– up to 13.5% (Chebanov *et al.* 2011).

Breeding plans will follow population specific guidelines that will depend on the numbers of breeders available within a year and the genetic objectives for the population (see Chapter 6). During the period of captivity, rearing methods vary by species but feeding typically occurs until fish are spawning ready (Chapter 8). Following spawning, adults are held for a short period to ensure they recover before being released back into the wild near their location of original capture. It is recommended that adults are individually tracked using PIT tags to ensure their genetic contributions to the program can be controlled, as some programs have elected to not reuse adults once they have contributed to a single year class (Anderson *et al.* 2022). Wild adults are recommended to have a genetic assessment to ensure spontaneous autoploidy is not a concern (see Chapter 6) and to develop a database of genotypes to allow for genetic measures of the program to be determined. The conservation aquaculture program for *Scaphirhynchus albus* for example requires that genetic relatedness (see Chapter 6) is estimated for all available spawners within a year to optimize breeding pairs that minimize relatedness while maximizing effective population size.

This approach is considered the most invasive of those covered in this chapter as removing reproductive adults from the wild comes with elevated risks associated with capture, transport, and captive rearing. Cumulative stress associated with these activities could result in direct mortality or have sub lethal effects that persist following release back into the wild. While these effects can be mitigated to some extent following best practices outlined in Chapter 4, not all adults that are brought into facilities for spawning the following year respond well to the controlled conditions and all precautions should be taken to maximize individual welfare, even if that means returning the individual to the wild. Further, this approach has the most facility requirements and may conflict with optimal breeding designs if facility limitations preclude sufficient numbers of adults from being held in captivity.

Table 7.1. Comparison of approaches that can be used to incorporate wild adults into *ex situ* programs.

Approach	Benefits	Challenges
Direct collection of naturally produced progeny	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Least invasive</u> • Increased number of wild adults represented • Increased genetic diversity • Natural mate selection • Natural spawn timing • Less facility infrastructure • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of spawning locations • Sampling logistics for capturing early life stages • Treatment of microbial infections • Increased handling of sensitive life stages • Facility requirements for streamside •
Streamside spawning of wild adults:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less invasive than holding adults • Include more adults in the breeding design • Natural spawn timing • Less transportation infrastructure • Less facility infrastructure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited number of systems where this is possible • Controlling conditions for gamete holding and fertilization • Unequal volumes of gametes from different individuals • Capturing sufficient numbers of adults in the act of spawning • Access to spawning sites
Short-term captive holding for direct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less risk to wild adults through reduced holding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removal of adults that could contribute to natural spawning events

Approach	Benefits	Challenges
spawning of wild adults	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final maturation stages occur in natural environmental conditions • Adults are closer to spawning, less risk of failed spawn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased stress that may result in individuals failing to spawn (e.g., atresia in females) • Increased risk of unintended mortality •
Long-term holding for direct spawning of wild adults	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensures availability of adults for small populations • Spawning time can be controlled through hormonal induction • Field sampling can be protracted in a year in advance of spawning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Space for adequate numbers of wild adults, especially for large bodied species • Appropriate feed for adults while captivity • Increased stress that may result in individuals failing to spawn (e.g., atresia in females) • Increased risk of unintended mortality • Removal of adults that could contribute to natural spawning events •

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Chapter 8

Broodstock Management and Selection

Joel P. Van Eenennaam, Mikhail Chebanov, Elena V. Galich, Patrick Chèvre, Joern Gessner, Molly A.H. Webb

8.1 Introduction

Broodstock management requires identification of the different stages of maturity in both females and males (see 8.2). Subsequently, selection of mature broodstock for breeding can be divided into holding regimes to optimize the maturation process throughout the last stages of gonadal development:

- Initial Selection Assessment (see 8.3)
- Autumn-Winter Holding Regimes (see 8.4)
- Maturation Assessment (see 8.5)
- Pre-spawning Holding Regimes (see 8.6)

8.2 Gonadal Stages of Maturity

Gonads of sturgeons are gymnoovarian (open to the body cavity), paired, and consist of both fatty (adipose) tissue and germinal tissue where the ovarian follicles or spermatozoa develop. There are multiple books and guides (e.g., Dettlaff *et al.* 1993; Bruch *et al.* 2001; Chebanov and Galich, 2011) and papers (e.g., Doroshov *et al.* 1997; Van Eenennaam and Doroshov, 1998; Webb *et al.* 2002; Flynn and Benfey, 2007; Webb and Erickson, 2007; Wildhaber *et al.* 2007; Chebanov and Galich, 2009; Webb and Doroshov, 2011; Du *et al.* 2017; Kazemi, *et al.* 2019; Webb *et al.* 2019) describing gonadal maturation. However, the gonadal classification schemes in each guide or paper can be slightly different based on the study objectives, the actual phases encountered, and the selected detail in describing broader or more specific aspects of gametogenesis (Webb *et al.* 2019) resulting in limited comparability of the stages described. Standardized terminology for the stages in the reproductive cycle for sturgeons and the use of the stage name (differentiation, pre-vitellogenic, early to mid-vitellogenic, late vitellogenic, post-vitellogenic, oocyte maturation and ovulation, post-ovulatory, mass atresia) rather than a number or combination of numbers and letters is recommended for comparison purposes.

8.2.1 Classification of Maturation Stages

The stages used in this publication to describe decisive progress in the maturation process are based on Webb et al (2019), which provides one of the most recent macroscopic and histological descriptions for sturgeon females (Table 8.1) and males (Table 8.2), and the classification scheme of Bruch et al (2001) has been summarized for comparison. The classifications by Trusov (1972) for both females and males have been described in detail using ultrasound diagnostics by Chebanov and Galich (2009, 2011).

Table 8.1. Phases and stages of female gonadal development (descriptions modified from Webb *et al.* 2019) during the maturation assessment, compared with classifications by Bruch *et al.* (2001) and Chebanov and Galich (2011). Because oocyte diameter differs by species, a range is given that incorporates all species; sf=semi-fatty; f=fatty; i=incomplete; c=complete.

Phase	Stage	Webb et al. 2019	Bruch et al. 2001	Chebanov and Galich 2011
Immature	Differentiation: formation of ovigerous lamellae embedded in the adipose tissue along the gonad length; oogonia along periphery of lamella with perinucleolar oocytes developing; not visible macroscopically	1	Fv	F1
Developing	Pre-vitellogenic: obvious well-developed ovigerous folds with small translucent oocytes in the early endogenous growth phase; oocyte diameter 0.1 - 0.4 mm	2	F1	F2, F2sf, F2f
Developing	Early to mid-vitellogenic: ovigerous folds contain small white to larger yellowish oocytes; oocytes have differentiation of 1-2 layers of the zona radiata and yolk platelets in the cytoplasm; nucleus (germinal vesicle) is centrally located; oocyte diameter 0.3 - 1.5 mm	3	F2	F2-3
Spawning Capable	Late vitellogenic: ovarian follicles begin to darken in color as melanin pigment is deposited under the oolemma; follicular layers and three layers of the chorion are fully differentiated; nucleus begins to move off-center toward the animal pole; depending on the time of an autumn	4	F3	F3

Spawning Capable	assessment (early/late), spawning season, and species, some of these females may be spawning capable in the spring; oocyte diameter 1.0 – 3.0 mm Post-vitellogenic: fully grown ovarian follicles that have a polarized structure with the animal hemisphere containing small, round yolk platelets and lipid inclusions, while the vegetal hemisphere contains large, oval-shaped yolk platelets and large lipid inclusions; nucleus displaced to the animal pole, and most of these females could be spawning capable in the spring; depending on spawning season, species, population, and location, some may be spawning capable at the time of an autumn assessment; oocyte diameter > 2.0 mm	5	F4	F4i, F4c
Spawning	Oocyte maturation and ovulation: oocytes have undergone germinal vesicle breakdown and are ovulated; eggs are freely flowing from the vent when captured in the wild or from a hormonally induced fish	6	F5	F5
Regressing/Regenerating	Post-ovulatory: ovaries contain post-ovulatory follicles and the next generation of oocytes (pre-vitellogenic or early vitellogenic; some recent atretic follicles from non-ovulated eggs may be seen	7	F6	F6
Regressing/Regenerating	Mass atresia: ovarian follicles are soft and break easily with deformed cell shape and melanin pigment in the yolk; have a marbled appearance; may occur anytime during autumn-spring assessments in spawning capable females	8		

Table 8.2. Phases and stages of male gonadal development (descriptions modified from Webb, *et al.* 2019) during the maturation assessment, compared with classifications by Bruch *et al.* (2001) and Chebanov and Galich (2011).

Phase	Stage	Webb <i>et al.</i> 2019	Bruch <i>et al.</i> 2001	Chebanov and Galich 2011
Immature	Differentiation: testes appear as a smooth, thin, white thread on top of adipose tissue; histological analysis of a biopsy reveals clusters of primary spermatogonia in less-defined testicular cysts	1	Mv	M1
Immature	Spermatogonia proliferation: testes appear as a thicker white thread (≈ 0.5 cm) on top of adipose tissue (≈ 0.5 -1.5 cm); histology reveals spermatogonia undergoing mitosis in differentiated testicular cysts	2	M1	M2f
Developing	Onset of meiosis: testes are whitish with a turgid texture (≈ 0.5 -2.0 cm thick) on top of variable amounts of adipose tissue (≈ 1.0 -3.0 cm thick); histology reveals spermatogonia ($\approx 50\%$ of cysts) and primary and secondary spermatocytes and spermatids in the remaining testicular cysts; a few may contain spermatozoa	3	M1	M2sf, M2
Potentially Spawning Capable	Spermiogenesis: gonad is primarily testicular tissue, with little adipose tissue; testes are turgid, lobular and white (2.0 - 4.0 cm thick; histology reveals most testicular cysts containing spermatocytes, spermatids, and spermatozoa, with less than 10% of cysts containing secondary spermatogonia; depending on the time of an autumn assessment (early/late), spawn season, and species, some of these males may be spawning capable in the spring	4		M3
Spawning Capable	Mature: completion of spermatogenesis; the testes are large (≈ 3.0 – 8.0 cm), white and lobular when assessed in the autumn for spring spawning induction, and depending on the species some maybe spawning capable in autumn; histology reveals differentiated spermatozoa in $> 90\%$ of the testicular cysts; animal is not actively spermiating	5		M4
Spawning	Spermiation: spermiating males release thick,	6	M2	M5

	white milt (peak spermiation) to thin “watery” milt (either at the beginning or end of spermiation); histology reveals spermatozoa in all testicular cysts		
Regressing	Post-spermiation: histology reveals residual spermatozoa in regressed testicular cysts, and clear seminal fluid can sometimes be collected from the urogenital pore; this fluid when placed in a clear glass beaker reveals white flocculants of residual clumped non-viable spermatozoa	7	M3

8.2.2 Methods for Assessment of Phases of Gonadal Maturity

Because external sexual dimorphism is not apparent in sturgeon before sexual maturity, different techniques are used to determine the sex and the phase of sexual maturity. The most widely used techniques are ultrasound, endoscopy, celiotomy/biopsy and determination of plasma sex steroid concentrations. Technique selection will depend on the *ex situ* program objectives and limitations. Limitations may be financial (limited funds), time sensitive (need immediate results), regulatory (biopsies or bleeding of threatened or endangered species may require permits), results based (high accuracy required), or a combination of these factors (Webb *et al.* 2019).

It is important that new personnel obtain training from an experienced individual for any of the methods described. Training can come from another *ex situ* hatchery, a research facility using one or more of these techniques, or if available an established sturgeon farm (e.g., many farms use ultrasonography for broodstock management).

8.2.2.1 *Fish Handling*

Fish handling for each method of assessment is similar. Individuals are captured from either inside the rearing tank/pond/cage or river (see Chapter 4) by carefully guiding an individual (by pectoral fin and snout) directly into a hooded stretcher, sling or cradle, or from outside the rearing system by using some type of dip net or tube-net made of knot-less netting material. The animal is then moved to the stretcher/sampling area which is set-up close so the fish is out of water for only a short time. Depending upon the size of the female, sufficient personnel, or technical support measures (forklift, bobcat, crane) might be required. Once in the stretcher and at the sampling area, the fish is rolled ventral side up, and a hose of oxygenated fresh water is placed directly above the mouth or in the mouth. Mature sturgeon under this condition typically exhibit tonic immobility (see Chapter 4).

8.2.3 Diagnostic methods

8.2.3.1 *Ultrasonography*

Ultrasonography, as the least invasive tool to assign sex and phase of maturity, has been the fastest growing technique, and has been used on most sturgeon species and their hybrids (Annex 8.1). The accuracy of this technique (68-100%; Webb *et al.* 2019) depends on the quality of the ultrasound equipment, the species, the age or body size, phase of maturity, and the degree of expertise of the ultrasound technician. Ultrasonography can provide immediate identification of sex and phase of maturity and images can be saved for further analysis.

Depending on the make and model, an ultrasound unit and transducer will cost \$12,000-35,000 USD, with refurbished units at a discount. There are less expensive units, but the sonograms tend to have poor resolution making the phases of gonadal maturation more difficult to discern. More recent systems that are being successfully used are hand-held computer tablets, with software to view the sonograms on the tablet screen, and a transducer. These systems basically are the cost of the transducer (\$6,000-8,000 USD). Most companies will allow on-site testing of units, and this is highly recommended prior to purchase.

The settings used on each ultrasound/transducer unit will need to be determined by the user for their species and body size. In general, a 2D mode is used, with a small parts exam, and depth and gain are adjusted based on the fish body size. What can confuse the user in the interpretation of a sonogram is the overall gain, and the far and near gain controls. These controls brighten or dim the sonogram and can potentially make the easily distinguished light-dark ovigerous folds to be too bright and indistinguishable or make the image too dark. Either extreme can make the homogeneity or heterogeneity of gonadal tissue and the hyperechoic and hypoechoic echo signals difficult to interpret (Webb *et al.* 2019).

Regardless of the make/model of ultrasound used, the proper transducer is most critical and will depend on the species, body size, body wall thickness, and gonad size. Higher MHz provides greater resolution but lower penetration and vice versa. A convex 2.0-3.5 MHz transducer allows for imaging at > 20 cm depth which is important for large fish (> 50 kg; Chebanov and Galich 2008) like the *Huso huso*. Linear transducers from 5-10 MHz were used in most sturgeon studies (Novelo and Tiersch 2012), and currently a 6-15 MHz linear transducer is being used to sex and determine phase of maturity in *Acipenser medirostris*, *A. transmontanus*, *A. fulvescens*, *A. oxyrinchus*, *Scaphirhynchus albus*, *S. platyrhynchus* (Annex 8.1). The use of ultrasound gel is not usually required when pressing the transducer down onto the body, as in the water environment keeping the head of the transducer wet is adequate. However, it is recommended for most species to use a protective plastic sheath to cover the transducer, with gel on the inside of the sheath, to help protect the transducer head from getting small cuts from sharp dermal scutes. Although in some cases, the scutes are so sharp they can cut the protective sheath.

General guidelines for ultrasound use include: 1) position the unit and fish so that the user working with the transducer can easily observe the ultrasound screen at the same time, 2) the unit needs to be protected from splashing water, 3) if working outdoors or in brightly lighted indoor facility, the unit screen needs to be angled and shaded from direct and indirect light. Good resolution and contrast of the screen is essential. A monitor hood/sunshade can be very useful.

There are three common body positions for sexing and assessing phase of sexual maturity: the ventral side up (provides frontal or longitudinal view of the gonad), the half-lateral recumbent position (fish is half-way between being on its side and ventral side up), and the lateral recumbent position (fish is on its left or right side). For ventral side up fish, the transducer is placed lengthwise onto the abdomen (frontal scan), 3-5 ventral scutes anterior from the pelvic fin, directly above the gonad, and is the preferred position for differentiating late vitellogenic and post-vitellogenic females based on ovarian follicle size (Table 8.1) and males (Table 8.2) during the autumn and spring assessment. Both lateral views are especially good for sexing sturgeon as it more easily allows you to position the transducer head just above the ventral scute line (3-5 scutes anterior to the pelvic fin) at just the right location and angle, so the germinal tissue of the developing gonad is directly below. In all body positions, the transducer can be turned ninety degrees to obtain a transverse section of the gonad (except in cases of species with large ventral scutes). Each view can be used to examine the entire length and degree of thickness of ovarian tissue or the thickness and lobes of testes. Details on the use of ultrasonography for determining sex and phases of maturity, with representative sonograms of the different phases is presented in Annex 8.1 (Chebanov and Galich 2009).

8.2.3.2 Endoscopy

Endoscopy is a procedure in which an instrument is introduced into the body for visual examination. In sturgeons, one may use an endoscope, laparoscope, borescope, or otoscope inserted primarily through the abdomen (celiotomy; see 8.2.3.3) and occasionally through the urogenital opening. The success of endoscopy has been reported for numerous sturgeon species (e.g., Wildhaber *et al.* 2005; Hernandez-Divers *et al.* 2004; Bryan *et al.* 2007; Hurvitz *et al.* 2007; Divers *et al.* 2009; Trested *et al.* 2010; Falahatkar *et al.* 2011; Matsche 2013; Kazemi *et al.* 2019; Maskill, *et al.* 2022). Endoscopy can provide immediate identification of sex and most phases of maturity, and images can be saved for further analysis (Figure 8.1.). The accuracy of this technique (85-100%; Webb *et al.* 2019) depends on the individual's knowledge of the phases of sturgeon gonadal maturity, expertise in locating the germinal tissue, especially of immature fish, and the degree of clear visualization of gonads. Although most endoscopy systems currently used are just for visual inspections of sturgeon gonads and image archiving, specialized instruments are available that can be inserted into the probe to collect small biopsies.

Endoscopy systems utilize similar components: a slender and tubular probe that is flexible or rigid with a miniature video camera fitted with a lens that permits viewing in a variety of directions, a halogen or LED adjustable light source with a fiber optic transmission cable that allows brightness, contrast and resolution to be controlled, a camera control unit, and a color monitor or computer screen. Images can be saved and, in some systems, further edited to improve contrast and clarity. This is useful to later confirm sex and phase of maturity, if there is uncertainty in the field, and provides material for training purposes.

Examinations are typically made through a small (~0.5-2.0 cm) abdominal incision 3-4 scutes anterior to the pelvic fins and 1-3 cm off the midline (see Figure 8.2). A few studies have made examinations through the Mullerian duct by inserting the instrument into the urogenital opening. However, the view of the gonads is not as clear as through an abdominal incision due to the opaqueness and the presence of blood vessels in the Mullerian duct wall (Wildhaber *et al.* 2007), and the degree of haziness can vary by species and body size (Wildhaber *et al.* 2005). Using a boroscope inserted into the urogenital opening of shortnose sturgeon, Kynard and Kieffer (2002) could only identify females with vitellogenic ovarian follicles (39%) and could not distinguish between male and an immature female (61% sex undetermined).

Using an otoscope to assign sex in prepubertal and post-pubertal white sturgeon was 98-100% accurate (Maskill, *et al.* 2022) and is the most portable and easiest instrument to use for endoscopy. The exam is made through an abdominal incision (1-2 cm) in a similar position as described previously. The otoscope contains a light source and a simple magnifying lens (3x) with a removable front speculum that can be exchanged for different lengths and diameters (Figure 8.3.) depending on the size of gonad being observed. In most otoscopes, the lens can be removed which allows other instruments to be inserted through the specula into the body cavity. Once the gonadal tissue is identified in the body cavity, a gonadal biopsy can then be collected through the specula using an instrument, like a Miltex cup jaw biopsy forceps and the sample histologically processed to verify sex and phase of maturity (Maskill, *et al.* 2022).

8.2.3.3 Celiotomy/Biopsy

Celiotomy is a surgical incision of the abdomen that allows for direct observation of the gonad by eye or by endoscopy and when appropriate, collection of a gonadal biopsy for histological processing and analysis. Like endoscopy, this technique can provide immediate determination of sex and the exact phase of gonadal maturity, which can then be verified with histological analysis to determine stage of gonadal maturity (e.g., Amiri *et al.* 1996a, 1996b; Doroshov *et al.* 1997; Webb *et al.* 2002; Chapman and Park 2005; Petoichi *et al.* 2011; Chapman and Van Eenennaam 2012; Falahatkar *et al.* 2013; Kazemi *et al.* 2019; Webb *et al.* 2019; Maskill *et al.* 2022). The accuracy of this technique (100% if the gonadal tissue is sampled; Webb *et al.* 2019) depends on the individual's knowledge of sturgeon phases of gonadal maturity, expertise in biopsy collection of gonadal tissue, and the

availability of a histology processing lab. If the fish is a spawning capable female, ovarian follicles may be collected (see Section 8.5.2.2).

The procedure takes approximately 5 minutes per fish to make the incision, view the gonad by eye or through endoscopy, biopsy the gonad if desired, and suture the incision closed. The exact time will depend on the individual's experience in surgery, biopsy sampling, and suturing. Details of the procedure, surgical instruments required, and suturing techniques are given in Chapman and Van Eenennaam (2012) and Webb *et al.* (2019). Briefly, an individual fish is placed in a holding device, such as a hooded-stretcher, ventral side up with fresh sufficiently oxygenated water irrigating the gills. An incision (1-3 cm) is made approximately 1-3 cm off the ventral mid-line, opposite 3-5 ventral scutes anterior from the pelvic fin, and the exact position depends on species and body size. For collection of ovarian follicles for assessment of oocyte polarization index, a trocar, extraction system, or shoup (Candryl *et al.* 2010; Chebanov and Galich 2011) may be inserted through the abdomen in the same location described above (photo) or through the lateral abdominal wall between scutes 3 and 4 (Figure 8.4.). The goal is to make the incision or insertion point directly above the gonad but away from organs such as the liver and intestine. The incision is opened using tissue forceps and a pair of forceps to view the gonad by eye or with an endoscope. The forceps or a Miltex cup jaw biopsy forceps (Figure 8.5.) can be used to collect a gonadal tissue sample. This incision is then sutured closed with a Cruciate (cross-mattress, interrupted-X, or multiple single stitches).

8.2.3.4 Plasma Sex Steroids

The pattern of sex steroid production in sturgeon allows for discrimination of sex and stage of maturity (Webb and Doroshov, 2011). Steroid concentrations are undetectable or low prior to initiation of puberty and during the non-reproductive phase of gametogenesis once puberty has been reached (Webb *et al.* 2002; Webb and Doroshov 2011; Du *et al.* 2017; Webb *et al.* 2019). When sturgeon have reached puberty and are in the advanced phases of gametogenesis, using testosterone (T) and estradiol-17 β (E2) to assign sex and stage of maturity has a high accuracy of 72-100% (e.g., Webb *et al.* 2002; Malekzadeh Viayeh *et al.* 2006; Webb and Doroshov 2011; Maskill *et al.* 2022). The collection of the blood sample from the caudal vasculature requires some training, but much less than ultrasonography, endoscopy and celiotomy. However, the disadvantages to this technique are the lack of immediate assignment of sex and phase of maturity, and the required specialized laboratory to conduct the analysis by radioimmunoassay (Webb *et al.* 2002) or liquid chromatography tandem mass spectrometry (LC-MS/MS) (Nouri *et al.* 2020).

8.2.3.5 Other Methods

There are several other techniques to potentially sex and determine the phase of maturity in sturgeon, but they have not been verified with multiple species, have variable accuracy, or

are still undergoing or require further research and development. These include morphological characteristics such as the shape of the urogenital opening (Vecsei *et al.* 2003; Wheeler *et al.* 2019), shape of the pectoral fins (Podushka 2008), and morphometrics of the head (Mal'tsev and Merkulov 2006; Balazadeh and Litvak 2018).

The use of biomarkers like vitellogenin (Craig *et al.* 2009) as well as the determination of calcium levels in the blood, which serves as a proxy for the vitellogenin concentration since the plasma concentrations are correlated with vitellogenin (Doroshov *et al.* 1997; Linares-Casenave *et al.* 2003; Stahl, *et al.* 2009), have been successful. As well, using Fourier transform infrared (FT-IR) spectroscopy (Lu *et al.* 2011) and near infrared spectroscopy (Servid *et al.* 2011) have been used with limited success to predict the onset of follicular atresia in females.

Recently, the discovery of a genetic sex marker has opened a new opportunity for the determination of sex in very early stages of development (Kuhl *et al.* 2021). The marker has been tested to be effective in *A. sturio*, *A. oxyrinchus*, *A. ruthenus*, *A. gueldenstaedtii*, *A. baerii*, *A. fulvescens*, and *H. huso* (Kuhl *et al.* 2021; Scribner and Kanefsky 2021), while the verification of its applicability in *Scaphyrrinchus* and *Polyodon* and the Pacific clade of sturgeons (*A. transmontanus* and *A. medirostris*) is still pending. Other recent studies have examined whole-genome inter-sex variation in *A. gueldenstaedtii* (Degani *et al.* 2022), real-time PCR for sex determination in *A. fulvescens* (Kanefsky *et al.* 2022), and the search for genetic sex markers in *A. baerii* and *A. oxyrinchus* (Panagiotopoulou *et al.* 2023).

8.3 Initial Selection Assessment

Regardless of how captive broodstock were established (see Chapters 4 and 7) an initial maturation assessment during autumn is done to select the late vitellogenic and post-vitellogenic females and the late spermatogenic and mature males (Tables 8.1 and 8.2) and hold them together in facilities under controlled temperature regimes through autumn-winter and the spring spawning season. Males and females that are not spawning capable are returned to the grow-out facility, or if the hatchery has enough empty tanks/cages/raceways/ponds, then further segregation of different phases of maturity could be done after each fish is assessed. If a hatchery works with both captive and wild-caught broodstock, captive and wild fish must be kept in separate broodstock holding system for biosecurity reasons. Some hatchery programs may not have any autumn assessments if they only work with wild caught spring run fish that are spawned and then returned to the wild.

8.3.1 Methodology

The fastest, easiest, and least invasive method for assessment is using ultrasonography. The large, white lobular testis of a mature male (Stage 4) and the large late or post-vitellogenic ovarian follicles of a potential spawnable female in the spring (Stage 4) are clearly

distinguishable. And at this assessment, depending on the species, population, and objectives of the hatchery, ovarian follicles could be sampled for size and phase of maturity (see section 8.6.2). For example, in the captive *A. medirostris* population in California, USA, autumn spawning has been identified at the fall assessment (Van Eenennaam, unpubl. data). *S. platyrhynchus* (Tripp *et al.* 2009), *A. oxyrinchus* (Balazik *et al.* 2017; Smith *et al.* 2015; Hager *et al.* 2014), and *A. oxyrinchus desotoi* (Randall and Sulak 2012) sturgeon populations have also had evidence of autumn spawners. Initially, the existence of up to 4 distinct spawning subgroups was described for the Volga River and the tributaries to the Caspian and Azov seas (Gerbil'ski 1951, 1953, 1955; Berg 1959). The separation of these subgroups increases the complexity of the *ex situ* management since the "Autumn" assessment in this case has to take place in spring, and holding temperature regimes will be different. For this reason and for biosecurity reasons, the separation of the different subpopulations is important to avoid intermingling between these groups.

8.3.2 Data Collection

Individuals selected for potential spring spawning should be, at a minimum, weighed, measured (fork length and total length), and if not already tagged upon integration into the broodstock or at sexing, they should be injected with a passive integrated transponder (PIT tag) (see Chapter 13). The tag will be maintained for the fish's life, and all subsequent assessments/spawning inductions of the individual can be tracked. Mature wild-caught individuals are often weighed, measured and PIT tagged on the vessel prior to arrival at the hatchery holding facilities. Some of these individuals may be released back into the wild after spawning, while some may be held in captivity for subsequent reproductive cycles.

8.4 Autumn-Winter Holding Regimes

There are many different types of holding regimes, including circular tanks (fiberglass, concrete, plastic), cages, earthen or concrete raceways or ponds (see Chapter 5). The required dimensions and number of holding systems needed will depend on the maximum spawning size of the species and number of broodstock to be maintained.

8.4.1 Rearing conditions

Broodstock holding systems are usually outdoors, subject to natural photoperiod, although indoor systems can also be used (see Chapter 5). The overall goal is to have an optimal environment with low stress during final maturation. Ideal water quality parameters (see Chapter 5) are essential for broodstock. Optimal water temperature profiles are essential, which will vary with species and sub-populations, and any substantial temperature fluctuations during the day must be avoided. Dissolved oxygen levels (>80% saturation) should be monitored continuously or, if monitored daily by a person, should be monitored at least twice daily in the morning and afternoon. Densities should be lower than in commercial grow-out facilities (which can vary between 50-100 kg/m²; Van Eenennaam *et al.* 2004) and, in general, should range from 2-20 kg/m² with tolerances being species specific (Chebanov

and Galich 2011; Webb *et al.* 2018). Selected females and males should be held together to take advantage of any possible behavioral and pheromone cues that may occur during final maturation.

8.4.2 Feeding

Broodstock of North American species are typically given a grow-out diet of 42-52% protein and 12-18% fat until early vitellogenesis and are then offered reduced fat (8-10%) feed (Gille *et al.* 2017), while Fedorovykh *et al.* (2015) reported the optimal fat content in diets for Russian sturgeon females to be 12-13%. The actual feed rate (approximately 0.15% – 0.30% of body weight per day) will depend on water temperature. It is important to prevent overfeeding which adversely affects gonad quality and high fat storage in gonadal tissue. High fat storage indicates an unbalanced composition of fatty acids in the diet since the triglycerides mainly contain saturated fatty acids (Wirth *et al.* 2000). The feeding rate can be further reduced (<0.1%) during overwintering based on feeding activity and observations of eaten/uneaten food. Conversely, a period of no feeding is often applied in Eurasian species at temperatures below which feeding occurs or following a finishing diet feed with the highest vitamin and mineral levels and enriched in fatty acids for up to two months prior to maturation and spawning (Chebanov and Galich 2011). Wild fish that do not transition to formulated feed should be fed natural prey items.

8.4.3 Overwintering

Wild sturgeon populations have a natural cold winter (vernalization), and this should be replicated as close as possible using ambient cold-water sources or artificial chilled water for successful completion of ovarian development (e.g., Kazanskii and Molodtsov 1973; Williot *et al.* 1991; Chebanov and Savelyeva 1999; Webb *et al.* 1999). Sturgeon are known to spawn within relatively wide temperature ranges, with most species spawning at 10-20 °C (Dettlaff *et al.* 1993), and the degree of winter temperature drop and length of time will vary between species and river systems. Chebanov and Galich (2011) recommend for Russian species a drop to 2-6 °C for 2-3 months, while Sacramento River *A. transmontanus* of western USA seldom have winters below 9-10 °C, which is the lowest temperature captive stocks have been overwintered, but it is usually closer to 11-12 °C (Webb *et al.* 2001). *A. sturio* are maintained at minimal sea water temperatures of 10-13 °C for the overwintering period in France. In Germany, European sturgeon are maintained at ambient temperatures of below 2 °C, which would reflect the temperatures in the outer estuary in the North Sea. As such, it can be concluded that a substantial drop in winter temperatures seems to help in synchronizing maturation and provide a cue for final maturation, but the amplitude seems to be of lesser importance as long as it resembles the natural conditions of the population in question. General guidelines for grow-out, overwintering and spawning temperatures for different species of sturgeon are given in Table 8.4.

8.5 Maturation Assessment

Wild caught broodstock during spring are usually assessed on the vessel used to capture the fish, and any found to be post-vitellogenic should be moved to and placed into a separate pre-spawning quarantine tank upon arrival at the hatchery. Any wild caught fish at other phases of maturity that are brought to the hatchery to be maintained as future broodstock should be placed into a separate culture system to prevent transfer of pathogens.

All autumn-assessed fish held over the winter are reassessed to verify they are post-vitellogenic and spawning capable in the spring. Any fish that are found to have atretic follicles or regressed testes are moved back to their original grow-out systems or released back into the wild.

Spring assessment is conducted at a time based on historical population data for spawning migration of the species or from other spawning data if available from other hatcheries or farms. The goal is to time the spring assessment to occur a few weeks before the earliest females are capable of spawning while being fully matured already. Due to their own internal/genetic time clock, in any given population of same aged mature females, there will be some early, middle, and late season spawners, therefore assessment of some individuals may have to be repeated during the spring.

Some facilities schedule the spring assessment of broodstock while fish are still maintained at the overwintering temperature (ambient or artificially chilled), while some that have the capability will gradually warm (1 °C/every 2-3 days) tank temperatures to 1-2 °C below spawn temperature and then assess their broodstock. Facilities with no artificial chilling capacity will assess their broodstock when ambient temperatures naturally warm to 1-2 °C below spring spawning temperatures.

8.5.1 Selection of Mature Males

Mature males that will most likely respond to exogenous hormone injections are usually selected using ultrasonography, although some hatcheries may prefer endoscopy. With the individual placed ventral side up on a stretcher, the transducer is moved along the entire length of both testes, and the maturity status and readiness to spawn can usually be assessed by the bright white reflection of the echoes due to increased density of the testicular tissue containing primarily spermatozoa (Chebanov and Galich 2011). The size of the testicular lobes is not as critical as the bright white tissue, as size of testicular lobes does not always confer stage of maturity and large lobes could also be at the post-spermiation stage (Webb *et al.* 2019). Endoscopy will reveal the bright white testes and if sampled, the mature testis tissue is soft and milky (spermatozoa releasing from the broken testicular cysts).

An alternative option to test for spawning readiness of males for hormonal induction is the verification of urine pH using an indicator paper (preferably for a pH range of 5.5-9.0 (e.g.,

Merck Neutralit or similar). The male is placed ventral side up, in a stretcher and slight pressure on the belly results in the fish expelling clear urine. In smaller fish, a slight bend backwards of the fish often increases the success of the pressure treatment. If the fish does not readily expel urine, the moisture developing on the urogenital pore is usually sufficient for the pH test. In unripe males, pH varies between 6.0 and 6.5. In males that have progressed in maturation and are responsive to hormonal induction by successfully spermiating (accuracy 100% if hormonal injection is administered with 2 weeks of the test), the pH varies between 7.5 – 8.0 (REF.). This test is quick to apply and provides a reliable result within seconds.

8.5.2 Determination of Oocyte Maturation and Acquisition of Maturation Competence in Females

8.5.2.1 Principle

Ovarian follicle maturation (OFM) in fish includes maturational processes of the nucleus (germinal vesicle; GV) and cytoplasm of the oocyte. The main processes are germinal vesicle migration (GVM), a switch in follicular secretion of C18 to C21 steroids, and acquisition of oocyte maturational competence (OMC; the ability of the oocyte to resume meiosis in response to a progestin) (Patiño and Thomas 1990a, b; Nagahama *et al.* 1995). Unlike most modern teleosts, OFM in sturgeon is prolonged and occurs over 3–4 months before spawning (Doroshov *et al.* 1997; Webb *et al.* 1999). Due to the heterogeneity of post-vitellogenic females held under the same culture conditions, individual females' ovarian follicles are sampled to determine the stage of oocyte maturation using the oocyte polarization index (PI), which is the distance of the germinal vesicle from the animal pole divided by the maximum oocyte diameter, and acquisition of maturational competence is assessed by the response of ovarian follicles *in vitro* to progesterone with resumption of meiosis, germinal vesicle breakdown (GVBD). These two tools may be used in concert to determine the optimal oocyte PI to hormonally induce maturation and ovulation, and it should be noted that germinal vesicle breakdown and ovulation are two distinct hormonal events.

8.5.2.2 Sampling and Processing

Ovarian follicles are collected by either a hollow stainless-steel probe that is 3-6 mm internal diameter (ID), depending on the size of the ovarian follicles, inserted through the abdominal wall or through the lateral muscle (see Figure 8.5) (Candral *et al.* 2010; Chebanov and Galich 2011) or by a 4-6 mm ID rigid tubing inserted through a small 6-9 mm abdominal incision (see Figure X) (Conte *et al.* , 1988). It is recommended the incision is closed using a single suture, especially if a female will be hormonally induced to spawn within a few days, or the incision is disinfected with iodine/iodine gel. Individual females can be sampled repeatedly in this manner and can successfully be induced to ovulate, producing eggs with high fertility and hatch rates. It is recommended to refrain from sampling at higher intervals than every 3-

4 weeks since stress of repeated sampling can lead to the arrest of oocyte maturation and atresia.

Approximately 20-30 ovarian follicles from each female are collected to calculate oocyte PI. Additional ovarian follicles (Goncharov 1999, Chèvre *et al.* 2019) are needed if performing an *in vitro* progesterone assay (see section 8.5.3). For the determination of PI, ovarian follicles are placed into a container of modified Ringer's solution (Dettlaff *et al.* 1993) and kept in a cool environment (14-16°C). To make one liter of Ringer's add 6.5 g of NaCl, 2.0 g NaHCO₃, 0.3 g CaCl, and 0.25 g KCL to one liter of distilled water. Each females' ovarian follicles are placed into separate small glass beakers, all with equal amount (15 ml) of Ringer's solution and gently boiled for approximately 3-5 minutes. Beakers are placed onto wet ice for 15-30 minutes and then the follicles are placed into containers of 10% buffered formalin overnight. Follicles can be sectioned after chilling, but it is much more difficult to get good cross sections compared to post-formalin fixed oocytes.

For shorter processing times, oocytes can be transferred into a mixture of ethanol, formalin and acetic acid (6:3:1) for 3.5 hours before they are ready to be dissected. It is recommended to use protective measures (ventilation) whenever dissecting the follicles after formalin treatment or rinsing the follicles a couple times in water before sectioning due to health concerns.

The ovarian follicles are sectioned along the longest axis (the animal-vegetal axis) usually recognized by the oval shape, and fortunately in most cases, the animal pole can be distinguished by coloration (rings and/or a faint white spot of variable size). For accurate measurements, the follicles need to be bisected so there are two equal-size halves, with equal size GV in both halves. To calculate the oocyte PI, measure the distance from the outer edge of the GV to the oolemma at the animal pole (thin black pigment layer) (Figure 8.6) and the oocyte diameter (thin black pigment layer at the animal pole to the thin black pigment layer at the vegetal pole). Oocyte PI is the distance of the GV to the animal pole divided by the diameter of the diameter of the oocyte. Details of this procedure can be found in Chapman and Van Eenennaam (2007a).

To make measurements for PI calculations, the sectioned ovarian follicles can be simply projected from a USB connected adjustable-zoom magnifier so the half oocyte can be adjusted to fill a large portion of the computer screen, and an accurate mm ruler used to measure the distances on the screen. A more technical system would include a zoom dissecting microscope with a digital camera connected to a computer and monitor and image analysis software used to make the measurements.

8.5.2.3 Segregation of Females for Spawning Induction

Females can be segregated into general groups based on their calculated oocyte PI and can either be induced to spawn immediately or potentially resampled before the PI is at the appropriate value for spawning induction (Table 8.3). Females with a PI <0.04 maybe

overripe and this can be verified by the maturation assay (see section 8.5.3) as overripe oocytes will not respond to the progesterone. If the females have the same high PI value (> 0.16) after a period exceeding 4-5 weeks, they have stopped final maturation and are not spawning candidates. The mechanisms for arrest of oocyte maturation are not well understood, though the effects of non-optimal temperatures and stress have been described (Webb *et al.* 2001). These females should be moved back to their grow-out facilities. The most common reason for arrested development is stress or suboptimal water temperature profiles. In outdoor systems, suboptimal temperature regimes are becoming more common due to global warming. Recommendations and PI grouping will vary depending on species and actual temperature regimes and data should be collected over several years to establish stock-specific selection criteria.

8.5.3 Oocyte Maturation *In Vitro* Progesterone Assay

The oocyte PI provides a good indication of female spawning readiness (Dettlaff *et al.* 1993; Chapman and Van Eenennaam 2007a), and many hatcheries use only this criterion for scheduling spawning induction. Oocyte PI does not actually measure whether the ovarian follicles have acquired maturation competence, so an oocyte maturation assay can be performed to determine if the ovarian follicles will respond to hormonal injections.

8.5.3.1 Principle

During the completion of oocyte maturation, the GV reaches the top of the animal pole (PI = 0.00) where it then undergoes GVBD. Once GVBD occurs, the oocyte is released or ovulated from the follicle and is now called an ovum and the genetic material of the female, released from the broken nucleus, can mix with the genetic material of the male carried inside the cytoplasm by the fertilizing sperm.

8.5.3.2 Methodology

Briefly, the *in vitro* oocyte maturation assay, as described in Dettlaff *et al.* (1993) is conducted in Ringer's solution. Incubation time can be developed for each species and incubation time is usually 16 °C. Ten to fifteen oocytes are incubated with 5 µg/ml progesterone, and the same quantity are incubated without progesterone to serve as a control. After incubation, the oocytes are boiled, chilled on wet ice, and stored in 10% buffered formalin overnight, bisected, and examined for GVBD.

A female with oocytes at a PI < 0.10 and 100% GVBD in the progesterone assay is a good candidate for hormonal injection and should be induced to spawn as recommended in Table 3. If there is no GVBD in the assay, this female will not ovulate when injected with GnRH α . Injection of pituitary extracts will likely induce ovulation; however, the eggs are often lower quality (see Chapter 9). For females with oocyte at a PI of 0.10 – 0.15 and less than 100% GVBD in the assay, it is recommended to wait a set amount of time depending on temperature before inducing ovulation or resampling prior to injection to ensure the oocytes

have matured to an established oocyte PI for the species (Table 8.3). Details of the oocyte maturation protocol and the materials/equipment required are given in Chapman and Van Eenennaam (2007b), and the major limitation to this assay is the necessity for an accurate low temperature laboratory incubator.

A female with ovarian follicles at their full size (species specific determined egg diameter), a PI < 0.10 with distinct yolk polarization, and 100% GVBD in the maturation assay should ovulate after injection with exogenous hormone and produce high quality eggs (see Chapter 9)

Once the analysis of oocyte PI and the oocyte maturation assay are completed, and water temperature has been transitioned to spawning temperatures, the identified individuals for first spawning (PI = 0.05-0.10, Table 8.3) are moved out of the overwintering or pre-spawning holding tanks usually at the time of first hormonal injection to minimize handling stress and are placed into spawning tanks (see Chapter 9).

Table 8.3. Guidelines for grouping of spring assessment females based on the oocyte polarization index (PI), and general recommendations for spawning induction or resampling (modified from Chebanov and Galich, 2011). These guidelines are based on females being held at overwintering temperatures, initially sampled for oocyte PI, and then acclimated to spawning temperatures (approximately 1 °C/day). There are a few species that are at the extreme ends (*A. medirostris* are hormonally induced at oocyte PIs of 0.04-0.06 and *A. oxyrinchus* and *A. baerii* are hormonally induced at oocyte PIs of 0.10-0.15).

PI Range	Group Description	Recommendations
PI < 0.04	Potentially Overripe	Attempt to spawn immediately (especially if 100% GVBD in the maturation assay, see 6.6.4) or if your species consistently does not ovulate, then transfer back to the original grow-out facilities.
PI = 0.05 - 0.10	Ripe 1 (should respond to hormonal injections)	Induce spawning after reaching spawning temperature.
PI = 0.10 - 0.12	Ripe 2 (spawning capable in approximately 1-2 weeks)	Acclimate to spawning temperature, hold for 2-7 days, and then induce spawning.
PI = 0.12 – 0.15	Ripe 3 (spawning capable in approximately 2-4 weeks)	Either inject after acclimation and then holding for 2-3 weeks or resample 4 weeks after first assessment (to ensure PI has reached 0.05-0.10).
PI = 0.15 – 0.19	Spawnable	Resample after 4-5 weeks.
PI > 0.19	Potentially Spawnable	Resample after 5-6 weeks.

8.5.3.3 Duration of Progesterone-induced Oocyte Maturation Time *in vitro* as a Criterion for Selecting Sturgeon Females for Breeding

Different criteria are used for the segregation of females to optimize reproductive success (i.e., to select females with high egg fertilization, survival rate and normal development of fry). Oocytes that have reached the post-vitellogenic stage have mostly the ability to mature *in vitro*, except those coming from females not in the final stages of oocyte maturation, easily identifiable by very high PI values. However, not all females whose oocytes are able to respond *in vitro* to the hormone are able to respond to hormonal stimulation, and among those who respond, not all produce eggs of high quality. The speed of progesterone-induced oocyte maturation varies greatly (Goncharov 1976; Goncharov *et al.* 1999). Females with rapidly maturing *in vitro* oocytes are more capable of responding to hormonal treatment. The medium used was Ringer's solution and 17 α ,20 β -DHP (1 μ g /ml). The target of 50%

GVBD (T50) has proven to be the most effective criterion of female selection for breeding. Females in which T50 took longer than 18 hours (incubation at $18 \pm 0.5^\circ\text{C}$) either did not respond to hormonal injection or produced eggs of low quality (Chevre *et al.* 2019).

8.5.3.4 Application of Oocyte PI and Oocyte Maturation Assay

The real need for the maturation assay occurs if a hatchery is using only the oocyte PI to schedule spawning induction and has an unacceptable low-rate of ovulatory success, depending on the goals of the program. As the use of both tools in combination, to choose females for hormonal injection, is more effective than PI alone, fewer spawners may be required, which promotes animal welfare (reduction and refinement aspects). It is also of great relevance for the reproduction of threatened and endangered species which have low number of spawning adults.

There are some species that do not follow the general guidelines in Table 8.3 and so individual hatcheries should refine this Table as they accumulate data for their species. For example, Klamath River *A. medirostris* are found to enter the river at PIs of 0.04, and they are typically hormonally induced at oocyte PIs of 0.04-0.06 (Van Eenennaam *et al.* 2006; Van Eenennaam *et al.* 2012), while *A. oxyrinchus* and *A. baerii* are hormonally induced at oocyte PIs of 0.10-0.14 (Fuest *et al.* 2024).

8.6 Pre-spawning Holding Regimes

The advantage to having a separate pre-spawn holding system is that some individuals can be selected to remain in the overwintering colder temperature tank to slow the process of oocyte maturation, while some females can be moved out into a separate tank (initially at the winter water temperature) and gradually warmed (approximately $1^\circ\text{C}/\text{day}$) to spawning temperatures. This management regime can provide broodstock for spawning later in the spawning season and is especially important for maintaining high quality males. The duration (days) of holding females with higher oocyte PI value at different water temperatures (also expressed in degree-days) was given by Chebanov and Galich (2011).

Table 8.4. General guidelines for grow-out, overwintering and spawning temperatures for different species of sturgeon in captivity. Overwintering temperatures are maintained approximately 2-4 months prior to slowly acclimating (1 °C/day-week) to spawning temperatures. Some species (e.g., *Acipenser transmontanus*, *A. oxyrinchus*, *A. brevirostrum*, *Scaphirhynchus albus*, *S. platyrhynchus*) will have lower ranges of temperatures for more northern latitude populations, and higher ranges of temperatures for more southern latitude populations that may not be given in the references cited, and different temperatures ranges will exist for summer or autumn spawning populations.

Species	Grow-Out Temp (°C)	Over-Wintering Temp (°C)	Spring Spawning Temp (°C)	References
<i>Acipenser baerii</i>	19-22 ^a	5-9 ^b	9-18 ^c	^a Rad <i>et al.</i> 2003; ^b Williot <i>et al.</i> 1991; ^c Gisbert and Williot 2002
<i>Acipenser brevirostrum</i>	18-20 ^a	1-6 ^b	9-18 ^c	^a Flynn and Benfey 2007; ^b Fernandes <i>et al.</i> 2010; ^c Kynard 1997
<i>Acipenser fulvescens</i>	17-22 ^a	1-2 ^b	12-16 ^c	^a Aloisi <i>et al.</i> 2019; ^b Brandt <i>et al.</i> 2022; ^c Bruch and Binkowski 2002
<i>Acipenser gueldenstaedtii</i>	18-20 ^a	4-5 ^b	14-18 ^b	^a Castellano <i>et al.</i> 2017 and Elhetawy <i>et al.</i> 2020; ^b Chebanov and Galich 2011
<i>Acipenser medirostris</i>	18-19	9-12	13-16	Van Eenennaam <i>et al.</i> 2012
<i>Acipenser nudiventris</i>	21-25 ^a	4-5 ^b	14-18 ^b	^a Feshalami <i>e. al.</i> 2019; ^b Chebanov and Galich 2011
<i>Acipenser oxyrinchus</i>	15-19 ^a	1-6 ^b	13-26 ^c	^a Kelly and Arnold 1999; ^b Fernandes <i>et al.</i> 2010; ^c Hager <i>et al.</i> 2020
<i>Acipenser o. desotoi</i>	21-30 ^a	5-12 ^b	17-20 ^c	^a Lazur <i>et al.</i> 2008; ^b Vine <i>et al.</i> 2019; ^c Sulak and Clugston 1999
<i>Acipenser ruthenus</i>	19-24 ^a	4-5 ^b	10-15 ^b	^a Sion <i>et al.</i> 2011; ^b Chebanov and Galich 2011
<i>Acipenser stellatus</i>	18-23 ^a	4-5 ^b	17-21 ^b	^a Bubunets <i>et al.</i> 2022; ^b Chebanov and Galich 2011
<i>Acipenser transmontanus</i>	18-20	9-12	14-16	Van Eenennaam <i>et al.</i> 2004
<i>Huso huso</i>	21-23 ^a	4-5 ^b	9-14 ^b	^a Mani and Ebrahimi 2022; ^b Chebanov and Galich 2011
<i>Scaphirhynchus albus</i>	17-20	>7 [*]	12-20	Webb <i>et al.</i> 2018
<i>Scaphirhynchus platyrhynchus</i>	12-24 ^a	>10 ^{a**}	12-24 ^b	^a Kappenman <i>et al.</i> 2009; ^b Phelps <i>et al.</i> 2016

*To prevent iridovirus outbreaks, pallid sturgeon are maintained above 7 °C in captivity.

**To prevent cessation of growth overwinter, shovelnose sturgeon are maintained above 10 °C.

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Annex 8.1.

References for the use of ultrasonography as a technique to assign sex and stage of maturity in different species of sturgeon. Age and body weight ranges for individuals examined with a specific transducer are provided. Accuracy percent is for identifying sex and a range of percent values covers the different phases of gametogenesis. Data not reported is given as “n/a” (not available) and “wild” indicates wild-caught sturgeon with no available age and/or size data. Colombo *et al.* (2004) reported the size of the wild *Scaphirhynchus platyrhynchus* sampled to be 444-714 mm in fork length.

Species	Age (yr.)/ Weight (kg)	Transducer	Accuracy (%)	Reference
<i>Huso huso</i>	1.5/4-6 3/3-6 3-5/7-12 9-16/50 -118	Linear 9-13 MHz Linear 6-13 MHz Linear 5-10 MHz Convex 2-3.5 MHz	81 98 100 100	Esmailnia <i>et al.</i> 2018 Masoudifard <i>et al.</i> 2011 Chebanov <i>et al.</i> 2004 Chebanov and Chmir 2002
<i>Huso dauricus</i>	-/62-115 wild	Convex 2-3.5MHz	100	Galich and Chebanov (unpublished data)
<i>Acipenser persicus</i>	2/1.5-1.8 -/13-27 wild/wild	Linear 5-10 MHz Linear 5-10 MHz	100 100	Chebanov and Galich 2008 Galich and Chebanov (unpublished data)
<i>Acipenser persicus</i>	13-45/16-48 - / 8-25	Linear 5-7.5 MHz Linear 5-9 MHz	100 100	Vajhi <i>et al.</i> 2013 Chebanov (workshop at ISS5, 2005)
<i>Acipenser stellatus</i>	6-16/5-16 2-3/2-2.5	Linear 5-7.5 MHz Linear 5-10 MHz	76-99 n/a	Moghim <i>et al.</i> 2002 Chebanov and Galich 2009
<i>Acipenser baerii</i>	3-4/0.8-3 2-3/2-2.5	Linear 3-10 MHz Linear 5-10 MHz	88 n/a	Munhofen <i>et al.</i> 2014 Chebanov and Galich 2009
<i>Acipenser transmontanus</i>	10-17/6-7.5 wild/32-57	Linear 6-15 MHz Linear 6-15 MHz	49-65 56-81	Maskill <i>et al.</i> 2022 Maskill <i>et al.</i> 2022
<i>Acipenser medirostris</i>	9-12/20-49	Linear 5-10 MHz	100	Van Eenennaam <i>et al.</i> 2012
<i>Acipenser mikadoi</i>	7/5-8 wild/15-27	Linear 5-10 MHz	100	Galich and Chebanov (unpublished data)
<i>Acipenser fulvescens</i>	wild/11-51	Linear 5-10 MHz	88-96	Chiotti <i>et al.</i> 2016
<i>Acipenser</i>	10-11/3-13	Linear 7.5 MHz	100	Memiş <i>et al.</i> 2016

<i>gueldenstaedtii</i>	1+-3/2-2.5 7-15/6-18 wild/wild 3-8/2-14	Linear 5-10 MHz Linear 5-9 MHz Linear 5-9 MHz Linear 5-9 MHz	n/a	Chebanov and Galich 2009 Chebanov <i>et al.</i> 2004 Chebanov and Chmir 2002; Chebanov 2005 Chebanov and Galich 2009
<i>Acipenser sinensis</i>	10-17/45-166 12-21/37-215 4-8/9-27	Convex 2-5 MHz Convex 2-3.5	88 100	Du <i>et al.</i> 2017 Chebanov and Galich 2008, 2009 a, b
<i>Scaphirhynchus platyrhynchus</i>	16-19/0.7-1.1 wild/wild	Linear 5-10 MHz Linear 5-10 MHz	68 86	Wildhaber <i>et al.</i> 2005 Colombo <i>et al.</i> 2004
<i>Acipenser ruthenus</i>	2.8/1.3-2.3 1-2/0.3-0.5 3-8/1-4.5	Convex 4.5-7.5 MHz Linear 5-10 MHz Linear 5-9 MHz	64-85 100 100	Igna <i>et al.</i> 2017 Chebanov and Galich 2009 Chebanov and Chmir 2002; Chebanov, 2005
<i>Acipenser naccarii x Acipenser baerii</i>	6/9-13	Linear and Convex 3- 7.5 MHz	n/a	Petochi <i>et al.</i> 2011
<i>Acipenser gueldenstaedtii x Acipenser baerii</i>	1+-2+/2-2.5	Linear 5-10 MHz	n/a	Chebanov and Galich 2009
<i>Huso huso x Acipenser ruthenus</i>	2-3/2.5-3	Linear 5-10 MHz	n/a	Chebanov and Galich 2009

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Annex 8.2.

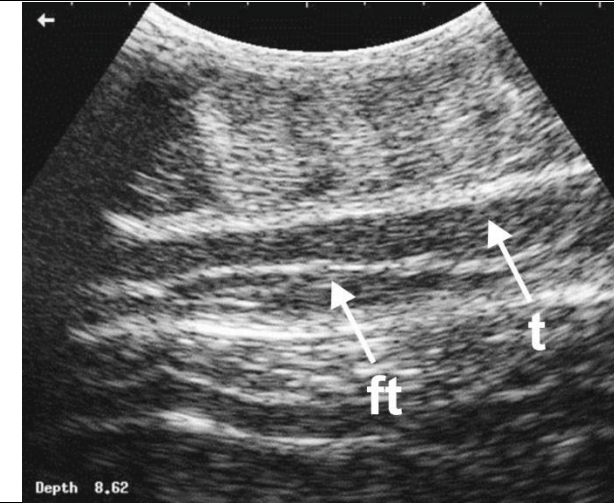
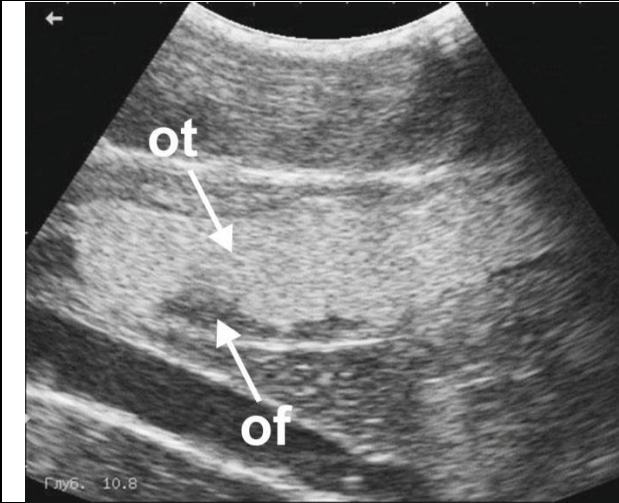
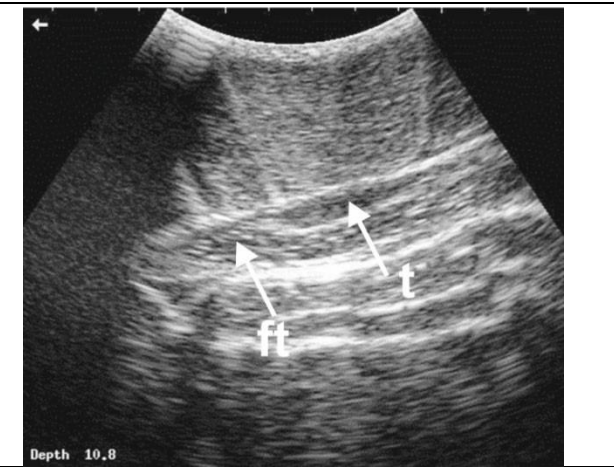
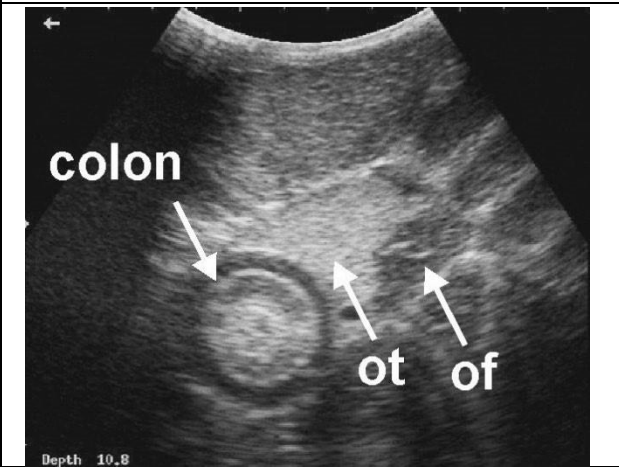
References for the use of ultrasonography as a technique to assign sex and stage of maturity in different species of sturgeon. Age and body weight ranges for individuals examined with a specific transducer are provided. Accuracy percent is for identifying sex and a range of percent values covers the different phases of gametogenesis. Data not reported is given as “n/a” (not available) and “wild” indicates wild-caught sturgeon with no available age and/or size data. Colombo et al (2004) reported the size of the wild shovelnose sampled to be 444-714 mm in fork length.

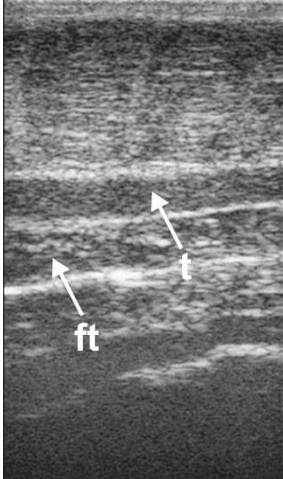
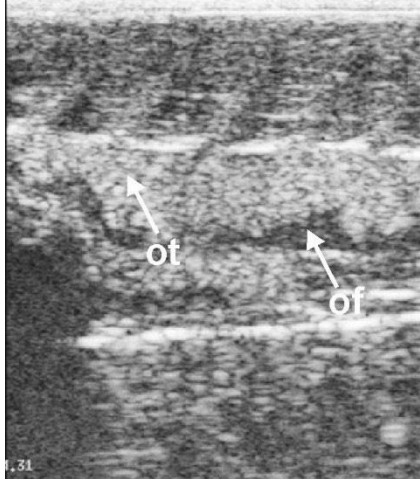
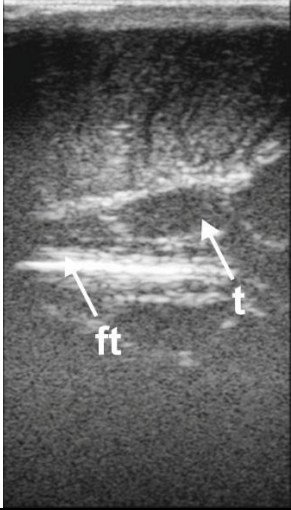
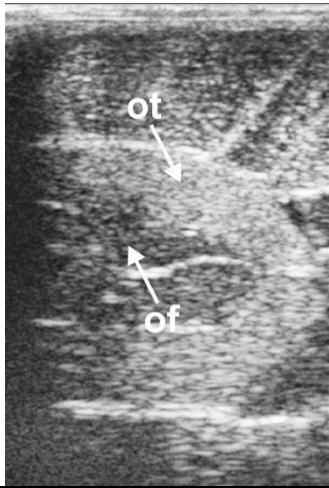
Common Name (Species)	Age (yr)/ Weight (kg)	Transducer	Accuracy (%)	Reference
<i>Huso huso</i>	1.5/4-6	Linear 9-13 MHz	81	Esmailnia <i>et al.</i> 2018
	3/3-6	Linear 6-13 MHz	98	Masoudifard <i>et al.</i> 2011
	3-5/7-12	Linear 5-10 MHz	100	Chebanov <i>et al.</i> 2004
	9-16/50 -118	Convex 2-3.5 MHz	100	Chebanov and Chmir 2002
	3-8/2-14		100	Chebanov 2005 Chebanov and Galich 2009
<i>Huso dauricus</i>	-/62-115 wild, farmed	Convex 2-3.5MHz	100	Galich E. and Chebanov M unpublished date.,2015)
<i>Acipenser schrenkii</i>	2/1.5-1.8	Linear 5-10 MHz	100	Chebanov and Galich, 2008
	-/13-27 wild/wild	Linear 5-10 MHz	100	Galich E. and Chebanov M. unpublished date,2015)
<i>Acipenser persicus</i>	13-45/16-48	Linear 5-7.5 MHz	100	Vajhi, et. al., 2013
	/ 8-25	Linear 5-9 MHz	100	Chebanov - workshop at ISS5, 2005
<i>Acipenser stellatus</i>	6-16/5-16	Linear 5-7.5 MHz	76-99	Moghim, et. al., 2002
	2-3/2-2.5	Linear 5-10 MHz	n/a	Chebanov and Galich, 2009
<i>Acipenser baerii</i>	3-4/0.8-3	Linear 3-10 MHz	88	Munhofen, et. al., 2014
	2-3/2-2.5	Linear 5-10 MHz	n/a	Chebanov and Galich, 2009
<i>Acipenser transmontanus</i>	10-17/6-7.5	Linear 6-15 MHz	49-65	Maskill, et. al., 2022
	wild/32-57	Linear 6-15 MHz	56-81	Maskill, et. al., 2022
<i>Acipenser medirostris</i>	9-12/20-49	Linear 5-10 MHz	100	Van Eenennaam, et. al., 2012
		Linear 5-10 MHz	100	
<i>Acipenser mikadoi</i>	7/5-8 wild/15-27	Linear 5-10 MHz	100	Galich E. and Chebanov M. - unpublished date,2015)
<i>Acipenser fulvescens</i>	wild/11-51	Linear 5-10 MHz	88-96	Chiotti, et. al., 2016
<i>Acipenser gueldenstaedtii</i>	10-11/3-13	Linear 7.5 MHz	100	Memiş, et. al., 2016
	1+3/2-2.5	Linear 5-10 MHz	n/a	Chebanov and Galich, 2009

	7-15/6-18 wild/wild	Linear 5-9 MHz		Chebanov et.al.,2004
	3-8/2-14	Linear 5-9 MHz		Chebanov and Chmir, 2002; Chebanov, 2005
		Linear 5-9 MHz		Chebanov and Galich, 2009
<i>Acipenser sinensis</i>	10-17/45-166	Convex 2-5 MHz	88	Du et. al., 2017
	12-21/37-215 4-8/9-27	Convex 2-3.5	100	Chebanov and Galich, 2008, 2009 a,b
<i>Scaphirhynchus platyrhynchus</i>	16-19/0.7-1.1 wild/wild	Linear 5-10 MHz	68	Wildhaber, et. al., 2005
		Linear 5-10 MHz	86	Colombo, et. al., 2004
<i>Acipenser ruthenus</i>	2.8/1.3-2.3 1-2/0.3-0.5 3-8/1-4.5	Convex 4.5-7.5 MHz	64-85	Igna, et. al., 2017
		Linear 5-10 MHz	100	Chebanov and Galich, 2009
		Linear 5-9 MHz	100	Chebanov and Chmir, 2002; Chebanov, 2005
<i>Acipenser naccarii</i> x <i>A. baerii</i>	6/9-13	Linear and Convex 3-7.5 MHz	n/a	Petochi, et. al., 2011
<i>A. gueldenstaedtii</i> x <i>A. baerii</i>	1+-2+/2-2.5	Linear 5-10 MHz	n/a	Chebanov and Galich, 2009
<i>H. huso</i> x <i>A. ruthenus</i>	2-3/2.5-3	Linear 5-10 MHz	n/a	Chebanov and Galich, 2009

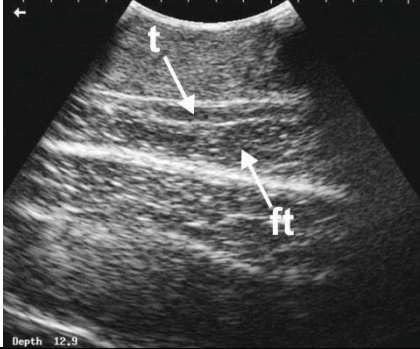
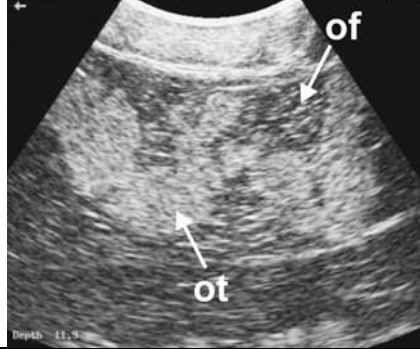
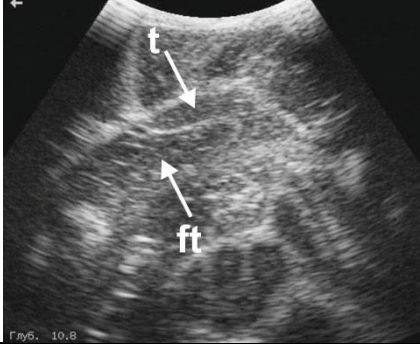
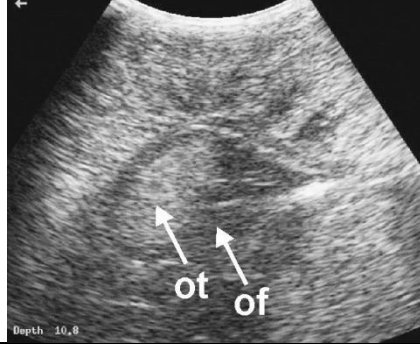
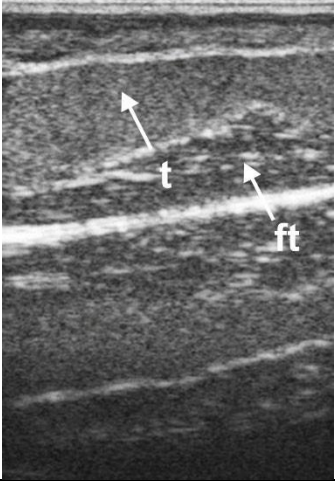
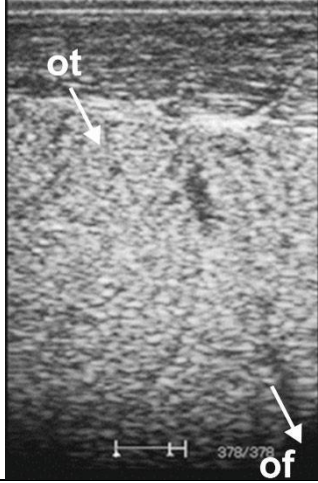
A detailed analysis of ultrasound images of different species of male and female sturgeon at different stages of sexual maturity has already been described in many available publications (Chebanov and Galich, 2009, 2011, 2018, etc.). Therefore, here only a brief atlas of the most typical ultrasound images of males and females during frontal and transversal scanning is provided, which are usually used to assess the reproductive status of sturgeon during seasonal assessment of broodstock.

Annex 8.2 Ultrasonography images for different stages of maturity in female and male sturgeons.

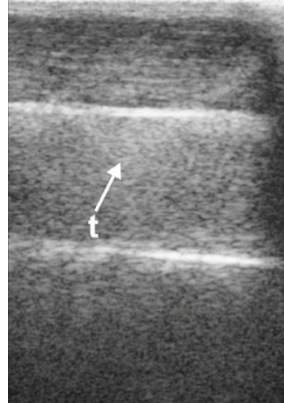
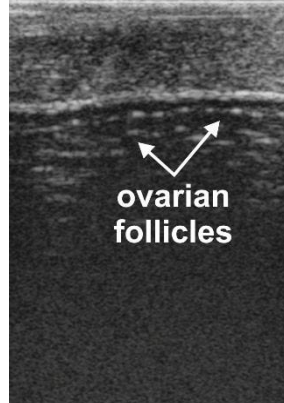
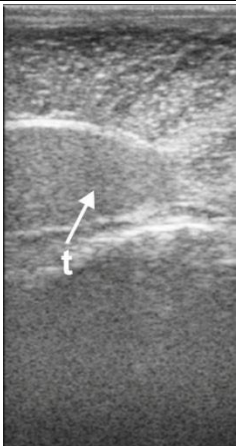
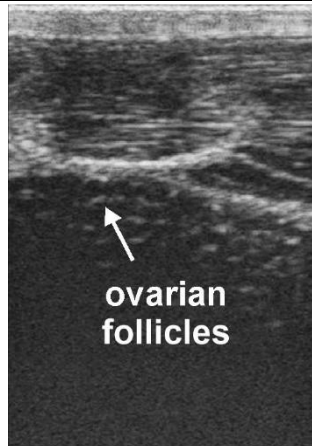

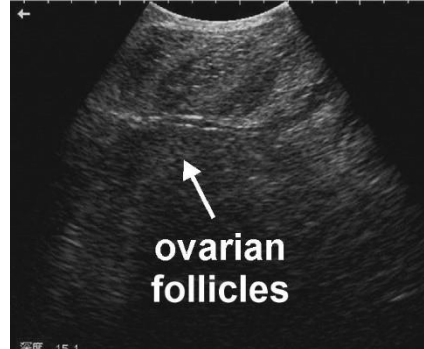
Male	Female
	
<p>Ultrasound <i>image</i> of frontal section of <i>H.huso</i> male at maturity stage II (M2) (t – testis, ft – testicular fat), Convex transducer</p>	<p>Ultrasound <i>image</i> of frontal section of ovaries at maturity stage II (F2) in <i>H.huso</i> individual (ot – ovarian tissue, of – ovarian fat), Convex transducer</p>
	
<p>Ultrasound <i>image</i> of transverse section of <i>H.huso</i> male at maturity stage II (M2) (t – testis, ft – testicular fat), Convex transducer</p>	<p>Ultrasound <i>image</i> of transverse section of ovaries at maturity stage II (F2) in <i>H.huso</i> individual (ot – ovarian tissue, of – ovarian fat), Convex transducer</p>

	
<p>Ultrasound <i>image</i> of frontal section of <i>A.gueldenstaedtii</i> male at maturity stage II (M2) (t – testis, ft – testicular fat), Linear transducer</p>	<p>Ultrasound <i>image</i> of frontal section of ovaries at maturity stage II (F2) in <i>A.gueldenstaedtii</i> individual (ot – ovarian tissue, of – ovarian fat), Linear transducer</p>
	
<p>Ultrasound <i>image</i> of transverse section of <i>A.gueldenstaedtii</i> male at maturity stage II (M2sf) (t – testis, ft – testicular fat), Linear transducer</p>	<p>Ultrasound <i>image</i> of transverse section of ovaries at maturity stage II (F2) in <i>A.gueldenstaedtii</i> individual (ot – ovarian tissue, of – ovarian fat), Linear transducer</p>

<p>Ultrasound <i>image</i> of frontal section of male <i>A. baerii</i> at maturity stage II fatty (M2f) (t – testis, ft – testicular fat), Linear transducer</p>	<p>Ultrasound <i>image</i> of frontal section of ovaries at maturity stage II fatty (F2f) in an <i>A. gueldenstaedtii</i> individual (ot – ovarian tissue, of – ovarian fat), Linear transducer</p>		
<p>Ultrasound <i>image</i> transverse section of male <i>A. baerii</i> at maturity stage II fatty (M2f) (t – testis, ft – testicular fat), Linear transducer</p>	<p>Ultrasound <i>image</i> of transverse section of ovaries at maturity stage II fatty (F2f) in <i>A. gueldenstaedtii</i> individual (ot – ovarian tissue, of – ovarian fat), Linear transducer</p>		

	
<p>Ultrasound <i>image</i> of frontal section of male <i>H.huso</i> at maturity stage II fatty (M2f) (t – testis, ft – testicular fat), Convex transducer</p>	<p>Ultrasound <i>image</i> of frontal section of ovaries at maturity stage II fatty (F2f) in <i>H.huso</i> (ot – ovarian tissue, of – ovarian fat), Convex transducer</p>
	
<p>Ultrasound <i>image</i> of transverse section of male <i>H.huso</i> at maturity stage II fatty (M2f) (t – testis, ft – testicular fat), Convex transducer</p>	<p>Ultrasound <i>image</i> of transverse section of ovaries at maturity stage II fatty (F2f) in <i>H.huso</i> (ot – ovarian tissue, of – ovarian fat), Convex transducer</p>
	
<p>Ultrasound <i>image</i> of frontal section of <i>A. nudiventris</i> male at maturity stage III (M3) (t – testis, ft – testicular fat), Linear transducer</p>	<p>Ultrasound <i>image</i> of frontal section of ovaries at maturity stage III (F3) in <i>A. nudiventris</i> (ot – ovarian tissue, of – ovarian fat), Linear transducer</p>

<p>Ultrasound <i>image</i> of transverse section of <i>A. nudiventris</i> male at maturity stage III (M3) (t – testis, ft – testicular fat), Linear transducer</p>	<p>Ultrasound <i>image</i> of transverse section of ovaries at maturity stage II– III (F2–F3) in <i>A. nudiventris</i> (ot – ovarian tissue, of – ovarian fat), Linear transducer</p>
<p>Ultrasound <i>image</i> of frontal section of <i>H. huso</i> male at maturity stage III (M3), Convex transducer</p>	<p>Ultrasound <i>image</i> of frontal section of ovaries at maturity stage II–III (F2–F3) in <i>A. schrenkii</i>, Linear transducer</p>

	<p>Ultrasound <i>image</i> of frontal section of ovary at maturity stage III (F3) in <i>H.huso</i>, Convex transducer</p>
	
<p>Ultrasound image of frontal section of <i>A. stellatus</i> male at maturity stage IV (M4) (t – testis), Linear transducer</p>	<p>Frontal ultrasound image of frontal section of an ovary at maturity stage IV(F4c) <i>A. gueldenstaedtii</i> individual, Linear transducer</p>
	
<p>Ultrasound image of transverse section of <i>A. stellatus</i> male at maturity stage IV (M4), (t – testis), Linear transducer</p>	<p>Frontal ultrasound <i>image</i> of transverse section of an ovary at maturity stage IV(F4c) <i>H. huso</i>, Linear transducer</p>
	

Ultrasound image of frontal section of <i>H.huso</i> male at maturity stage IV (M4) (t – testis), Convex transducer	Ultrasound image of frontal section of an ovary at maturity stage IV (F4c) in <i>A. sinensis</i> individual, Convex transducer
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It is important to note that ultrasound screening is not only accurate express method for sexing and staging juveniles and mature individuals, but it is especially important for optimization sturgeon brood stock management at *ex situ* facility (see Chapter 11).

For example, ultrasound monitoring of sturgeon broodstock allows to determine delayed maturation of females early in development. The 2nd stage of gonadal maturity (II SGM) is of the longest duration, both under natural conditions (Trusov, 1972) and in aquaculture (Akimova, 1985) and its duration determines the age of the first maturation of sturgeon females, as well as the duration of subsequent ovarian cycles. It has been revealed (Chebanov and Galich, 2019), that during rearing of sturgeon, a change in the feeding regime of females during the 2nd stage of maturity can either accelerate or alternatively significantly slow down the onset of vitellogenesis (stage 3) or even lead to heavy disturbances in gametogenesis (see Annex to Chapter 11) and results in low relative fertility of females. For this reason, ultrasound images of the 2nd stage of gonadal maturity are shown separately in the series of ultrasound images (above).

The extended feeding of sturgeon females during stage 2 of maturation with feeds with a relatively high fat content of more than 15-17% and a relatively low protein content of less than 48-50% which are used at stages 1 - 2 especially in broodstock at a constant temperature of 20–24°C, leads to a significant increase in the duration of stage 2 development. The same holds true for feeds that are unbalanced in content polyunsaturated fatty acids with a ratio of $\omega 3/\omega 6$ less than 2. In this case, after 2–3 years at the expected age of maturation under optimal conditions, only significant ovarian obesity (often irreversible) with a small number of oocytes is observed. This diagnosis can be obtained quickly using ultrasound and helps to establish the optimal feeding regime in compliance with the requirements of the animal.

Timely transition to a new feeding regime with feeds optimized for reproduction (50-52% protein and 9-12% fat, $\omega 3/\omega 6$ ratio of 2.0 or above) makes it possible to accelerate the onset of the stage 3, and further (along with optimal control of the water temperature regime) to reach stage 4 in a targeted timeframe. Thus, changing the feeding regime during this period allows for a shift in the ratio between somatic growth and generative metabolism in favor of the latter, while echograms serve as indicators for further separate holding of females and timely optimization of the feeding and water temperature regimes.

The key and most complex element of this approach is the timely and non-invasive identification of females with gonads at stage 2 with significant fat storage, since the

generative tissue in this period amounts to less than 10-20% of the gonad volume but which completely covers the gonad with fat. This considerably limits the possibilities of biopsy for to determination this symptom.

Optimizing the management of sturgeon broodstock to accelerate the maturation starts from the first ultrasound screening during the assessment of each generation of sturgeon (at age of 1.5–3 years, depending on the species). Here, it is necessary to divide all immature females (in accordance with their maturity stage) into two groups: (I – II-semi-fatty) and (II-fatty – III). Subsequently, these groups are supplied with feeds designed for the maturation stage (see above). The application of the scheme for controlling the maturation of females allows to significantly reduce the delay in the final maturation of females as compared to traditional feeding regimes.

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Chapter 9

Spawning and Gamete Processing

Joel P. Van Eenennaam, Molly A.H. Webb, Patrick Chèvre, James A. Crossman, Elene V. Galich, and Mikhail S. Chebanov

9.9 Introduction

There is a general similarity in the neuroendocrine regulation of reproduction between teleosts and chondrosteans (Figure 9.1; Doroshov *et al.* 1997; Moberg *et al.* 1995). Two forms of gonadotropin-releasing hormone, a mammalian GnRH1 (mGnRH) and a chicken GnRH2 have been identified in sturgeons (Lepretre *et al.* 1993; Lescheid *et al.* 1995; Sherwood *et al.* 1991). Synthetic mGnRHa is effectively used to induce ovulation and spermiation in sturgeon and paddlefish which acts on the pituitary gonadotropes to regulate synthesis and release of two pituitary gonadotropins (stGTH I and stGTH II). The stGTH I and stGTH II are molecular and functional homologues of mammalian follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) and leutenizing hormone (LH) in *Acipenser baeri*, *A. gueldenstaedti*, and *A. sinensis* sturgeons (Ceapa *et al.* 2002; Hurvitz *et al.* 2005; Quérat *et al.* 2000). The FSH controls the initiation of a gametogenic cycle and vitellogenesis in females (Moberg *et al.* 1991; Moberg and Doroshov 1992; Moberg *et al.* 1995), and LH stimulates events resulting in gamete maturation and ovulation and spermiation (Moberg *et al.* 1991; 1995). Little is known about regulation of gonadotropin release in sturgeon compared to teleosts (Zohar *et al.* 2010), although several studies have identified the inhibitory role of dopamine on male spermiation in *A. transmontunus* (Pavlick and Moberg 1997), and *A. stellatus* (Rzemieniecki *et al.* 2004; Rónyai 2009; Alavi *et al.* 2012), no studies to our knowledge have identified inhibitory role of dopamine in female sturgeon.

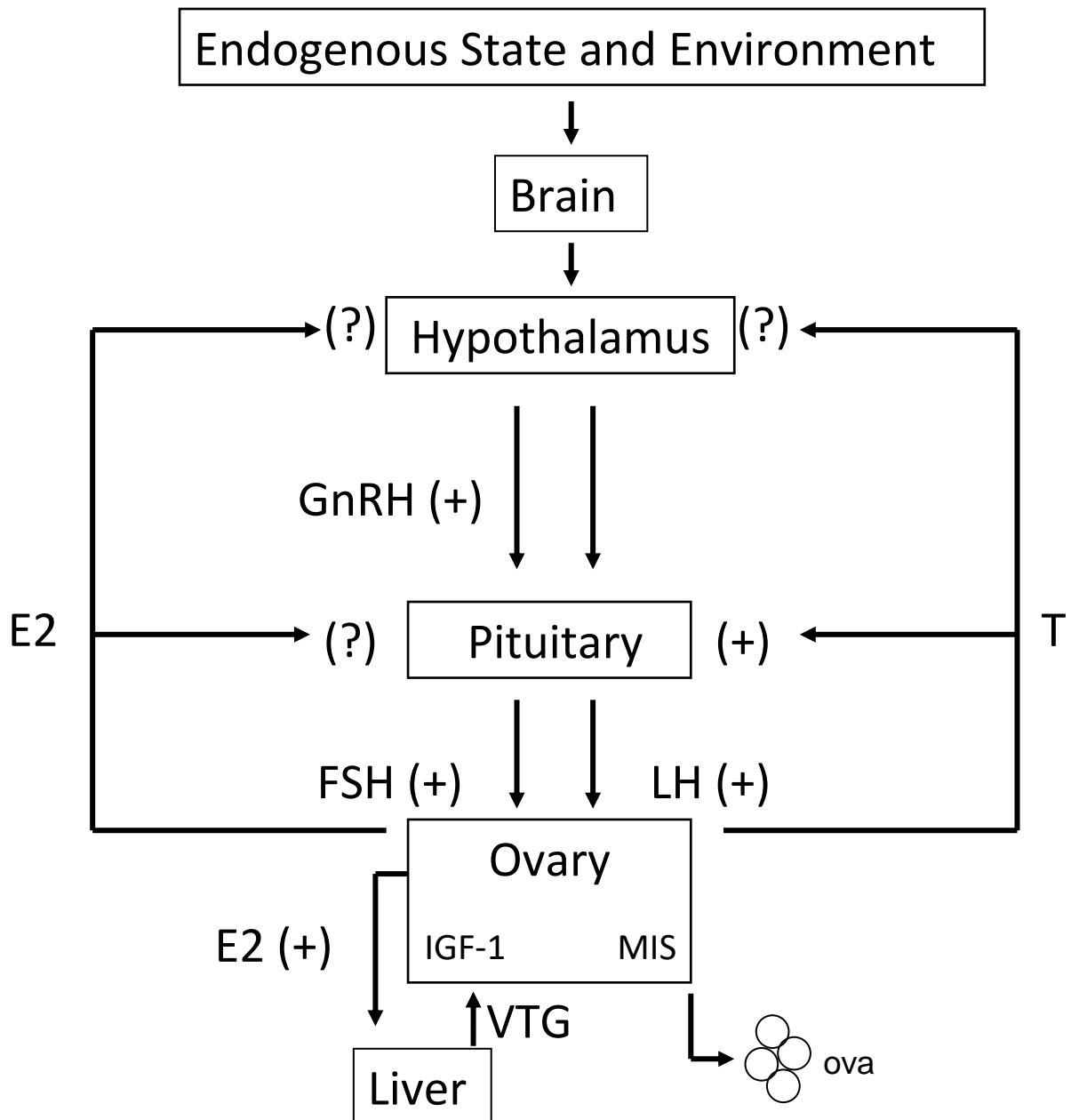


Figure 9.1. Hypothalamo-pituitary-gonadal axis in sturgeon females. The GnRH (mammalian GnRH1) stimulates the synthesis and release of follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) or leutenizing hormone (LH) and is used for induction of ovulation and spermiation in captive breeding of sturgeon. The FSH controls development and growth of ovarian follicle and vitellogenesis (vitellogenin, VTG) by stimulating secretion of estradiol-17 β (E2). The LH stimulates oocyte maturation and ovulation by stimulating synthesis of the maturation inducing steroid (MIS). The positive and negative feedbacks of sex steroids (testosterone (T) and E2) on the hypothalamus and pituitary are not well known, except of the positive effect of the exogenous T on accumulation of FSH and LH in the pituitary (modified from Webb and Doroshov 2011).

9.10 Hormonal Induction of Spawning

Hormone administration has been used to induce ovulation and spermiation in finfishes for almost 100 years, and the first attempts used ground pituitaries (common carp=CCP, sturgeon=SP) from reproductively mature fish, which contained gonadotropins. The use of pituitaries for induction of spawning in sturgeon was most popular through the early 1970's, but after that spawning induction methods began using the newly discovered GnRH, which induces the secretion of the fish's own gonadotropin from the pituitary. Soon after, the development of a highly potent, synthetic analogue of GnRH called GnRHa constituted the next generation of hormonal manipulation therapies (Zohar and Mylonas 2001). The most common GnRHa used to induce spawning in sturgeon are the des-Gly¹⁰- (D-Ala⁶)-GnRH and the des-Gly¹⁰-(D-Phe⁶)-GnRH.

Note that the GnRH and LHRH refer to the same hormone, and the different nomenclature exists based on regional preferences. The hormone was initially referred to as LHRH because of its role in regulating the release of LH from the pituitary in the final stages of maturation. As research continued, it was found that it also stimulated the release of FSH, and to reflect the broader scope of its utility, the hormone began to be called GnRH to encompass its role in regulating both LH and FSH release. The analogue, GnRHa, is now becoming more commonly used in scientific literature, although it is still often called LHRHa and is sold in many places as LHRHa (e.g., Syndel).

Surfagon has been used for hormonal stimulation of *A. stellatus* as this species is less sensitive to GnRH as compared to other anadromous species (Chebanov *et al.* 2004). For *A. stellatus* spawning, CCP injections are used, or at stable spawning temperatures, very high doses of surfagon (40 µg/kg and above) may be used.

9.10.1 Spawning Tanks

Spawning capable males and females, from the pre-spawning holding regime (Chapter 8), are typically moved into designated spawning tanks at the time of first injection. The spawning tanks, already at the optimal spawning temperature with > 80% oxygen saturation, should be covered or have a screen in place and be large enough, based on the species, so the fish can freely swim around the tank.

Although not always done, it is recommended that one injected female and at least one injected male be placed together in a spawning tank. While the other injected males to be used during the spawning session can be placed together into a different tank. One of the first reported possibilities of pheromonal communication between pre-spawning male and female sturgeon was by Kynard and Hogan (2002). The mixing of males and females pre- and post-injection could help initiate a more natural ovulation by an interaction between sexes, as the components of the ovarian fluid, including free and conjugated forms of sex steroids, can play a significant role in sturgeon pheromonal communication that regulates reproductive behavior (Bayunova 2016; Bayunova *et al.* 2011; Kasumyan and Mamedov 2011; Vizziano *et al.* 2006). Social interactions can have major consequences on spawning

for both female and male fish (Mylonas *et al.* 2010). Dettlaff *et al.* (1993) reported that during natural spawning, in the presence of a male, the female does not hold eggs. As ovulation proceeds, portions of eggs are released, but under conditions of keeping males and females separately, females do not display spawning behavior and unreleased ovulated eggs can accumulate in the body cavity resulting in *in vivo* aging of oocytes. Because oocyte aging is considered a factor in reduced egg quality and in the increased incidence of spontaneous autopolyploidy (see Chapter 6), at least in *A. transmontanus*, holding female and male broodstock in the same spawning tank is considered a best hatchery practice (Schreier *et al.* 2021).

9.10.2 Spawning Induction Administration and Dosages

Hormonal injections of CCP, SP, and GnRHa have all been used to stimulate oocyte maturation and ovulation in females and spermiation in males. Pituitary doses and the time interval between injections for several Eurasian species varied with water temperature (Table 9.1), and the priming dose was increased at higher oocyte polarization indices (Chebanov and Galich 2011). Males receive a single dose at approximately half or 1/3 the concentration of the female's total dose, and the injection may be given before the priming dose at approximately the same time as the females receive their priming dose or at approximately the same time as the females receive their resolving dose depending on the species and water temperature.



Figure 9.2. Intramuscular injection of hormone to induce spawning (FAO 558).

Hormone injections are given using a 1.0 to 3.0 cc syringe with a 23 to 25 gauge needle (~3.2 cm long). Injections are administered intramuscularly in females between the lateral and dorsal scutes and between the pectoral fin and midsection of the fish (Figure 9.2). Males may be injected intramuscularly or intraperitoneally. If injecting intraperitoneally, the

injection is administered between the pelvic fins and midsection of the fish. No more than 1.0 cc of solution should be administered at an injection site. If the injection volume is more than 1.0 cc of solution, the total dose can be split into smaller injection volumes and administered at different sites.

Table 9.1. Relationship between total pituitary dose, time interval between priming and resolving injections in females and water temperature for four species of sturgeon (modified from Chebanov and Galich 2011). The priming dose increases for females that have a higher polarization index (PI): PI 0.04=10%, PI 0.05=13%, PI 0.06=15%, PI 0.07=18%, PI 0.08=20%, PI 0.09=23%, PI 0.10=25%, PI 0.11=25%, PI 0.12=28%, PI 0.13=30%.

Water Temperature (C°)	Sturgeon Pituitary (mg/kg)	Common Carp Pituitary (mg/kg)	GnRH α (μ g/kg)	Time Interval Between Injections (hours)
<i>Acipenser gueldenstaedtii</i>				
10-12	2.5	4.0		18
12-14	2.0	3.0		15
14-18	1.5	2.5		12
>18	1.0	1.5		9
<i>Acipenser ruthenus</i>				
10-12	4.0	6.0		14
12-14	3.5	5.0		12
14-16	3.0	4.5		10
>16	2.5	3.5		8
<i>Acipenser stellatus</i>				
13-16	2.5	4.0		14
16-19	2.0	3.0		12
19-21	1.5	2.5		9
>21	1.0	1.5		7
<i>Huso huso</i>				
9-12	2.5	4.0		16
12-15	2.0	3.0		12
15-16	1.5	2.5		12
>16	1.0	1.5		10

In North America, it is common to use 10-20 μ g/kg of fish weight, and males are typically given a single injection of 5-10 μ g/kg of fish weight. The female dosage is given in two

injections: a priming dose equal to 10% of the total dosage, and a resolving dose equal to 90% of the total dosage, that is usually administered 12 hours after the priming dose. Males are typically injected at the time of the females first injection. Hochleithner and Gessner (1999) reported total dosages of GnRHa of 30 µg/kg for females and 80-100 µg/kg for males, and Chebanov and Galich (2011) reported even lower doses of GnRHa for induction of ovulation in *A. gueldenstaedtii* and *Huso huso*. The primer dose was 0.3-0.5 µg/kg body weight, followed by a resolving dose, 8-12 hours later, of 0.5-1.0 µg/kg, and *A. stellatus* were induced to ovulate after a single injection of 0.5-1.0 µg/kg. Males of all species were administered a single dose of 1-2 µg/kg of body weight.

The effects of different hormonal treatments on ovulation, fertilization and hatching success have been assessed in several species. Injections of CCP alone or after a priming injection of GnRHa in captive *A. transmontanus* had low fertility and hatch rates. These data resulted in the shift to the current use of GnRHa alone for hormonal induction of ovulation in this species. The general low quality of eggs obtained from using pituitary injections was also reported by Chebanov and Galich (2011). GnRHa is easier to prepare and inject than pituitary extract (product volume can be greatly reduced), and there is stability of hormone activity and less risk of adverse immune reaction in fish as pituitary gland contains a cocktail of hormones). However, ovulatory response to GnRHa in *A. ruthenus* is low, therefore CCP is used for this species.

9.11 Gamete Collection

Spermiation begins approximately 10 hours after injection, and milt is generally collected 18-24 hours after hormonal injection. It is recommended that males be injected at least 12 hours before females to allow time for determination of sperm viability before ovulation occurs. In some facilities, milt is collected immediately after the first ovulated eggs are found and in other cases milt is collected the day before expected ovulation. Collecting the day before allows for injection of additional males if only a few males spermiate and allows for detailed evaluation of milt quality using computer assisted semen analysis software (see sperm collection, storage, and assessment below).

Checking for ovulation every 1-2 hours begins approximately 4-6 hours before the earliest expected ovulation and then hourly. Ovulated eggs can be examined more closely by using a fine mesh aquarium dip net connected to a long pole for ease of scraping along the tank bottom for collection. It is better to begin checking earlier rather than later so a female ovulating early is not missed because the eggs could become overripe if not collected in a timely manner. Ovulatory latency is usually 10–24 hours after the resolving injection and is species-specific and water temperature dependent. Good quality eggs will be uniform in appearance and relatively firm and sticky, depending on how long they have been on the tank bottom. Marbled colored eggs could be a sign of overripe eggs.

After observation of the first released ovulated eggs, there is a period of time to wait before collection of eggs to ensure complete ovulation. The amount of time to wait until egg collection begins will depend on species, body size (larger females take longer), water

temperature (colder water results in longer ovulatory latency), and the number and rate of eggs being released into the tank or upon capture. If the rate of egg deposition increases from the time of first observation through the following 60 minutes, the female is typically ready for egg collection. If a female has only released a few dozen eggs after waiting an hour or more, the individual should be gently maneuvered into a tube-net, rolled ventral side up, and palpated for a large-soft abdomen indicating abundant ovarian fluid and ovulated eggs. Often, when handling a female, the capture and movement will result in release of hundreds to thousands of eggs from the urogenital pore, clearly indicating a fully ovulated female. Occasionally a female will be fully ovulated but does not release any eggs into the tank. In this scenario, after the expected time of ovulation has passed, the individual females should be captured and examined as described above. Lack of visible ovulation has primarily been observed with females held in their own separate tank. It has not been well studied but enough observational data is available to recommend holding at least one injected male with the female for pheromonal stimulation.

After the longest latency time has passed, any female that does not ovulate can be resampled following the same procedures for obtaining ovarian follicles for calculation of oocyte PI (see Chapter 8.). Ovarian follicles that are soft and marbled indicate atresia is occurring and that the female was likely injected too late after the last assessment. Oocytes with the GV still intact indicates that the female did not complete maturation likely because of the failure of temperature water regime, stress, dopamine inhibition, or was injected at too high of an oocyte PI. If oocytes quickly underwent GVBD but ovulation did not occur, meiosis was interrupted (the second meiotic division did not occur), which could be due to stress or incomplete hormonal processes.

Ovulating females and spermiating males should be captured and moved using a type of soft mesh dip net or tube-net to a stretcher or cradle to ensure fish welfare is maintained or, while carefully working directly in the spawning tank, the individual male or female should be guided directly into a stretcher or cradle, lifted out and moved to the gamete collection area. In some instances, gamete collection may occur in the same tank to ensure that handling time is reduced. Sufficient staffing levels are recommended for larger sturgeon species to ensure the physical stresses of the process on the individual are minimized during capture and while restraint is occurring during gamete collection. Collection of milt does not typically require anesthesia, but some facilities may choose to anesthetize large female when collecting eggs via minimally invasive surgical technique (MIST) or celiotomy (see Chapter 8).

9.11.1 Collection, Storage, Cryopreservation, and Quality Assessment of Milt

Collection of milt from large males (> 7 kg) is done using a 30-60 cc syringe with a 5-8cm length of tubing. The tubing diameter should be slightly smaller than the urogenital opening so not to cause any trauma to surrounding tissue when inserted. Smaller sized males can be hand stripped by flexing the body and directing the milt stream into a dry bowl (Chebanov and Galich 2011).

Individual males are placed ventral side up in a stretcher or cradle with a hose of freshwater placed above the mouth which helps calm the fish as it ventilates its gills with water. Anesthesia is not typically used, as the entire procedure only takes a couple minutes. During collection, the activation of sperm with water must be avoided. The area of the urogenital opening is blotted dry with a rag or paper towels, the tubing inserted just 2-5 cm into the urogenital opening and using the syringe plunger slowly extract milt (Figure 9.3). Common mistakes are inserting the tubing too far and withdrawing the plunger too quickly, as both can suck the walls of the spermatid duct into the tip of the tubing and possibly lead to contamination of the milt with blood. An alternative is to collect milt via the tubing directly into a plastic beaker. For this purpose, flexible tubing of about 25-30 cm is used and the beaker is placed below the fish to benefit from gravity. A gentle ventral massage can be performed at the same time. Milt with obvious contamination of blood, bile or other impurities should not be used.



Figure 9.3. Milt collection from the urogenital pore in male sturgeon

After milt is collected, the syringe full of milt is slowly ejected into a large volumetric flask or beaker to keep a thin layer (< 0.5 cm) exposed to air. Place the containers directly into a refrigerator (4°C) if available, or else into an insulated container maintained at a similar temperature with wet ice or gel packs. It is also recommended to not place containers of milt directly on wet ice. This storage will keep the milt viable for a typical spawning session (approximately 4-5 hours), and any longer than this, the milt should be rechecked for quality (see below) before using. Alternately, a syringe is filled just half-way with milt and the other half filled with oxygen. The syringe is inverted to mix the oxygen and milt and then stored lying flat in a refrigerator or in a chilled/insulated container. Make sure that no water comes in contact with the milt prior to use to ensure that the sperm are not activate.

In some cases, it is necessary to store the sperm for several days to 1-2 weeks. To maintain high survival and ability to fertilize eggs, it is best to store the sperm in a sealed container filled with oxygen (Dilauro *et al.* 1994) or a 1:1 mix of oxygen and air (Chebanov and Galich 2011) that is placed in a refrigerator (4°C) type environment with daily replenishment of oxygen. Using this method, fertilizing capacity has been obtained for up to 2 weeks (Conte *et al.* 1988; Dilauro *et al.* 1994; Ciereszko *et al.* 1996). The use of various extender solutions has also been utilized to improve the fertilizing ability and storage time of collected sperm (Mims 1991; Linhart *et al.* 1995; Billard *et al.* 2004; Park and Chapman 2005) but are primarily used in conjunction with cryopreservation (see below).

Sturgeon sperm cryopreservation is important for preserving genetic material, especially for sturgeon species that are threatened or endangered, and methods with different levels of success have been reported and reviewed (Billard *et al.* 2004; Cabrita *et al.* 2010; Yamaner *et al.* 2015; Chandra and Fopp-Bayat, 2020). However, it is beyond the scope of this publication to go into method details as research continues to improve and refine the technique. Numerous approaches for sturgeon have been reported focusing on different compounds or technical parameters used in cryopreservation, such as dilution with extenders, cryoprotectants (most commonly dimethyl sulfoxide, ethylene glycol, glycerol, methanol, dimethyl acetate), dilution rates, equilibration time, size of packaging, slow or rapid freezing, addition of antioxidants, thawing parameters, and using activation media (Yamaner *et al.* 2015; Igna *et al.* 2022; Kolyada *et al.* 2023). One of the more recent reported successes with cryopreserved sperm was by Fopp-Bayat *et al.* (2023) using beluga (*Huso huso*) males to cross with female sterlet (*Acipenser ruthenus*).

Sperm quality must be evaluated prior to use. Collected sperm will vary in concentration (<1 to 10 billion per cubic centimeter of milt; the color of non-fat milk to whole cream), and the average duration of motility is 2-5 minutes (Chebanov and Galich 2011). There are three ways sperm quality has been evaluated: the subjective technique, the objective technique, and the Persov's scale.

The subjective technique involves activating a small, diluted sample (1:50) on a microscope slide with hatchery water at the same temperature as the male was held at and estimating 1) the percent of sperm motile within a given microscope field at 30 seconds post-activation and 2) estimating time to 90% immotile (moving in a forward motion). This is typically repeated 3 times to confirm the observations and take an average of the three data points. In general, sperm with over 80% motility at 30 seconds post-activation and having over 2 minutes of motility duration (time to only 10% motile) is used for egg fertilization. However, if males are limited in availability or are needed to fit a specific genetic plan, sperm with 40-60% motility for only 1.0-1.5 minutes could be used.

The objective technique involves activating a sample, typically using dilution mediums and activation solutions, under a microscope with a high-resolution video camera, connected to a computer where it undergoes analysis by computer assisted semen analysis (CASA) software, like CEROS II Hamilton-Thorne (Gilroy and Litvak 2019a; 2019b) with details of the usual procedures to analyze spermatozoa activity provided in Gilroy and Litvak (2019a).

During the last 15 years, this technique has become the method of choice for studying fish sperm motility (Gallego and Asturiano 2019) and has been used on numerous sturgeon species, e.g., *A. gueldenstaedtii* (Igna *et al.* 2022), *A. baerii* (Barulin and Shumski 2022), *A. ruthenus* (Xin *et al.* 2020; Dzyuba *et al.* 2021), and *A. fulvescens* (Larson *et al.* 2020). It should be noted that the calibration of the device, in particular the number of frames per second, is essential for analysis (Caldeira *et al.* 2019).

Besides estimating the percent of motile sperm, the Persov's (1941) scale (translated in Chebanov and Galich, 2011) is used to score motility type. The point scale below is evaluated after diluting a sperm sample at a ratio 1:20–1:50 (sperm: hatchery water) while observing the sperm under a microscope. Ideally, sperm that score 4-5 points are used for fertilization, but sperm that score 3 points can be used if needed.

5 Points = rapid forward motion of all spermatozoa observed.

4 Points = rapid forward motion of most spermatozoa observed (but zigzagging and oscillating movements of spermatozoa are evident).

3 Points = rapid forward motion of some spermatozoa but zigzagging and oscillating movement prevails, and some immobile spermatozoa can be seen.

2 Points = forward movement is almost absent, some oscillating movement is observed, the percentage of immobile spermatozoa is high (up to 75%).

1 Point = all spermatozoa are immobile.

9.11.2 Collection of Ovulated Eggs

There are several non-lethal methods for collection of ovulated eggs (manual stripping, minimally invasive surgical technique (MIST), and celiotomy). The technique selected will depend on the species, body size and approximate quantity of eggs needed from each female. Stainless steel or plastic bowls of various sizes are used for holding the eggs from each female until fertilization with a general guideline of a 1-3 cm layer of eggs for each bowl, though it may be much less depending on the genetic plan and number of males to be used for each female. A thin layer of ovarian fluid should cover the eggs, so they do not dry out (which should be poured off before fertilization), and eggs should be fertilized promptly so their temperature does not rise or fall beyond 1-2°C, from the female spawning temperature. Eggs from multiple females should never be mixed for fertilization (see Chapter 8). Beware that holding ovulated eggs for too long before fertilization may lead to spontaneous autopolyploidy (Schreier *et al.* 2021).

Manual stripping collects fewer eggs than other techniques and should be initiated 2-3 hours after the first eggs are released into the spawning tank allowing time for the Mullerian ducts to fill with ovulated eggs. A female should be removed from the spawning tank as quickly and calmly as possible and either be placed into an anesthesia tank or stripped immediately.

Depending on the size of the female and how many eggs were released during capture and initial handling, 0.3-1.0 liter of eggs can be collected during the first stripping. This quantity of eggs may be entirely sufficient depending on the hatcheries genetic plan (see Chapter 6) or production and stocking targets. Subsequent stripping could be done approximately every hour. The disadvantage of manual stripping is the labor-intensiveness, repeated handling stress, its long duration, and lower quality of eggs in subsequently later stripping events.

To strip eggs from an ovulated female, place her on her back, tipped slightly to either the left or right side. Hands should be placed over the ovaries on the abdomen and gentle pressure anterior to posterior should be applied. Once the fish is freely expressing eggs, a slow anterior to posterior pressure applied directly to 20-30 cm of the abdomen immediately anterior to the vent will often sustain the flow of eggs. Generally, 2,000 to 80,000 eggs can be quickly removed from a female using this technique.

The most widely used and very effective technique to collect ovulated eggs when in a hatchery setting is the MIST, which requires the careful insertion of a scalpel into the urogenital opening, cutting through the oviduct (Figure 9.4), and then manual stripping the ovulated eggs (Podushka 1986). This technique has been used successfully with *Polyodon spathula* (Štěch *et al.* 1999; Mims *et al.* 2004); *A. stellatus* (Bani and Banan 2010,); *A. persicus* (Pourasadi *et al.* 2009; Kabir and Bani 2011); *H. huso* (Kabir and Bani 2011; Aramli *et al.* 2014); *A. baerii*, *A. gueldenstaedtii*, *A. ruthenus* (Chebanov and Galich 2011). The small size of *A. ruthenus* does present a challenge for this technique and should be strongly considered in employing this technique.

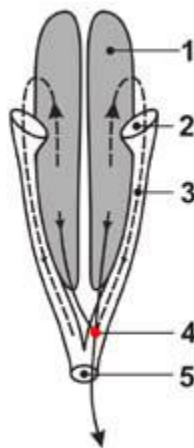


Figure 9.4. Schematic drawing illustrating the relative location of the ovaries and oviducts in sturgeon (modified from Podushka 1999 in FAO 588). 1-ovary, 2-oviduct funnel; 3-oviduct; 4-incision location; 5-urogenital opening. The dotted line represents the pathway of ovulated eggs at natural spawning, while the solid line represents the pathway of ovulated eggs after oviduct incision.

An anesthetized female is first placed ventral side up in a stretcher or cradle. For larger sized species, a finger is then inserted into the urogenital pore to stretch the opening, then quickly removed, and a scalpel (e.g., a number 11 straight blade) is carefully inserted blade-side up

about 1-5 cm (according to size of the fish) into the urogenital pore, and a 1-3 cm incision is made through the ventral wall of the Mullerian duct. When cutting internally be very careful not to cut laterally towards the GI tract. The exact size and type of surgical scalpel will depend on the species, body size and most importantly the diameter of the urogenital opening.

Ease of manual stripping will depend on the amount of ovarian fluid and amount of ovarian and adipose tissue that could block the incision. Often surgical spatula or long surgical blunt-nosed forceps can be inserted to help keep the incision unblocked and keep the eggs flowing freely. Up to 80-90% of the ovulated eggs can be collected in 5-15 minutes.

Females recover fully from this procedure in 3-4 weeks, and it has been used for more than 20 years with many species. Some individual females have undergone MIST and been stripped more than seven times using this technique (Chebanov and Galich 2011).

The MIST was compared with a modified version using a polypropylene catheter (external diameter 10-14 mm) inserted directly into the urogenital opening and pushed past the Mullerian oviduct valve, and into the oviduct funnel region. Eggs can then be stripped out through the catheter (Szczepkowski and Kolman 2011). The authors reported similar amounts of time to obtain similar quantities of eggs from both techniques for *A. baerii*, *A. gueldenstaedtii*, *A. baerii* x *A. gueldenstaedtii*, hybrid, and *H. huso* x *A. ruthenus*). The advantage is no scalpel is introduced, and it has been successfully repeated on individuals up to three times. Disadvantages were similar with MIST in that ovarian tissue can block the catheter, and females with little ovarian fluid are more difficult to strip, and species like *A. sterlet* have a urogenital opening that is too small to use this method.

The collection of ovulated eggs can also be done through an abdominal incision typically called caesarian surgery (Burtsev 1969; Doroshov *et al.* 1983; Conte *et al.* 1988; Mohler 2003; Van Eenennaam *et al.* 2004) or key-hole surgery (Parandavar *et al.* 2006), and this technique is still used at aquaculture facilities in North America. After anesthetizing the female, a 6-8 cm incision is made in the mid-body to lower third region of the abdomen, approximately midway between the abdominal midline and lateral scute line depending on the species and body size. The incision should be made in the region that has about 1.0-1.5 cm muscle thickness to ensure good vascularization for healing and for effective suturing. After the incision is made, the eggs are removed typically with a plastic spoon of various lengths. Caution is used when collecting in the anterior portion of the body cavity where the liver, gall bladder, spleen and other vital organs are located. Egg removal is completed in 10-20 minutes with approximately 70-90% of the eggs collected.

The incision is closed by internal and external sutures to ensure the peritoneum is closed and to help with apposition and rapid healing. The first is an internal suture used to bring the peritoneum and bottom half of the muscle together, and the second is an external suture for the top part of the muscle and skin. The internal suture is made using single interrupted stitches with a PDS #0 suture and a swaged-on CT-2 taper needle. The external stitches will use the same material but with a thicker (#1) suture and a larger swaged-on CP-1 or CPX

cutting needle for cutting through the tough skin. The best external suture is a special tension suture pattern called “far-near-near-far” pattern (Knecht *et al.* 1987). The advantage to this suture is that it apposes the skin edges and provides a degree of tension with the far and near suturing. After suturing, an injection of antibiotic may be administered (e.g., 200 mg/ml of oxytetracycline at a dose of 5 mg/kg body weight) for 1-3 days. The best to use is the slow-release oily formulation for cattle (e.g., Zoetis, Liquamycin® LA-200®). The females should be allowed to recover in a separate clean tank for approximately 4 weeks, and earthen ponds or raceways are not recommended due to potential pathogens from the soil-water interface.

Initial years of this surgery had some post-surgery mortalities related to improper suturing and prolonged exposure to anesthesia. However, with improved suturing and anesthesia monitoring, the occurrence of post-surgery mortalities, at least in *A. transmontanus*, is very rare (Van Eenennaam *et al.* 2004). A modified version of this technique is to make a smaller (3-5 cm) incision, about 5 cm anterior to the urogenital opening and slightly off center to not hit the lower GI tract, and then hand strip the eggs out of this incision (Williot and Chebanov 2018).

Both of these techniques are most applicable to broodstock that remain captive and are held under optimal water quality hatchery conditions for recovery, but they are not recommended for wild-caught broodstock from threatened populations, especially if they are to be released back into the wild.

The quality of ovulated eggs can generally be assessed by visual examination of the uniformity of coloration, shape, absence of marbled early atretic eggs, and presence of abundant, clear ovarian fluid. Time to eggs first becoming sticky after exposure to hatchery water may also be used as an egg quality assessment (Chebanov and Galich 2011), but the optimal time to stickiness of high-quality eggs will vary between species and with water temperature and would thus need to be established at each hatchery. Gorbacheva (1977), translated by Chebanov and Galich (2011), reported the optimal time to stickiness for *A. gueldenstaedtii* and *A. stellatus* egg to be 8-19 and 5-12 minutes, respectively, while time to stickiness of overripe eggs was only 4-6 and 2-4 minutes, respectively.

9.12 Egg Fertilization

In the past, pooled milt from several males was often used to fertilize a bowl of eggs to ensure the highest fertility rate as possible, but the probability of one male with the best quality milt fertilizing most of the eggs was high. Today, hatchery genetic plans call for the total amount of eggs collected from a single female to be equally divided between bowls, based on the number of males to be crossed with that female, creating full-sib matings. Review Chapter 6 for genetic considerations prior to collection of gametes and fertilization. Fertilization of eggs is usually done within 5-30 minutes after collection, depending on how long it takes to collect all the eggs and divide them between bowls. The eggs should be maintained at the spawning temperature and covered with a thin layer of ovarian fluid until

fertilization. Good quality eggs can still have good fertilization success, even after delaying fertilization for 2-10 hours, if the eggs are held under a layer of ovarian fluid in low light and maintained at or below spawning temperatures (Dettlaff *et al.* 1993; Gisbert and Williot 2002; Linhart *et al.* 2016). Beware that holding ovulated eggs for too long before fertilization may lead to spontaneous autopolyploidy (Schreier *et al.* 2021).

Insemination of eggs is usually performed using the semi-dry method (Dettlaff *et al.* 1993; Chebanov and Galich 2011) but care must be taken to remove any excess ovarian fluid prior to addition of milt because excessive amounts can interfere with insemination. If the ovarian fluid is very abundant and viscous, it is best to quickly (for 10-30 seconds) rinse the eggs in hatchery water to remove the fluid, and/or use a colander to drain off the ovarian fluid/water, which will improve fertilization rates (Van Eenennaam *et al.* 2008; Feledi *et al.* 2011). Milt (approximately 10ml/kg of ovulated eggs) is diluted 1:200 with hatchery water (e.g., 20 ml:4000 ml, depending on the volume of the bowl), and then without delay, the diluted sperm is added to the bowl of eggs.

The eggs and milt are gently mixed for 1-3 minutes or until just a few eggs start to stick to the sides of the bowl. Some female's eggs become sticky more quickly than others, and some species, like *A. sterlet*, become sticky often within 30 seconds. It is likely that most eggs capable of being inseminated are fertilized within the first 30-60 seconds (Chebanov and Galich 2011). The insemination solution is poured off, and a de-adhesion suspension is immediately added to the eggs.

9.13 Egg De-adhesion and Alternatives

Sturgeon eggs have an outer glycoprotein matrix (jelly coat) that hydrates upon contact with water at spawning and needs to be either covered with fine particles or chemically removed to prevent clumping during incubation. Although there have been various suspensions used to cover the sticky coating including talcum, milk powder, starch, mineral silt (bentonite), and pottery clay, the most effective and popular have been blue clay and Fuller's Earth (Chebanov and Galich 2011; Van Eenennaam *et al.* 2004). The use of whole milk powder can lead to an increase in bacterial infestation, and the use of Fuller's Earth can cause rupture of the chorion if crystalline material is present. The approximate proportion of dry material is 100-300 g per 4-5 liters of hatchery water, mixed by hand and then poured immediately and gently into the bowl of fertilized eggs. The eggs and de-adhesion solution are very slowly and very gently mixed by hand for large quantity of eggs (>1 liter) or by using a feather for small quantities of eggs. Being very slow and very gentle is crucial as it has been reported that too vigorously mixing eggs during de-adhesion can lead to variable rates of spontaneous autopolyploidy (Van Eenennaam *et al.* 2020).

The amount of jelly coat formation varies between females and between species, thus the length of time for egg de-adhesion will vary from 30-60 minutes. The process is also temperature dependent such that cooler water temperatures require a longer de-adhesion process. The de-adhesion suspension is changed every 10-15 minutes to maintain temperature and dissolved oxygen at optimal levels.

De-adhesion can be automated by using an upwelling flow (Monaco and Doroshov 1983; Chebanov and Galich 2011) or an aerated container (Dettlaff et al. 1993), but these systems could possibly be too vigorously mixing the eggs, which induced spontaneous autoploidy in *A. transmontanus* (Van Eenennaam, et al. 2020). However other species may in fact be more resistant to spontaneous autoploidy and thus the use of upwelling and aerated containers may not be an issue.

Methods for chemical elimination of the jelly coat are also available but are not as commonly used due to the potential of over treatment and resulting embryo mortalities. The most common have been urea, sodium chloride, tannic acid, and sodium hypochlorite (Kowtal et al. 1986; Bouchard and Aloisi 2002; Feledi et al. 2011; Pšenička 2016). Interestingly, the study by Pšenička (2016) illustrated the damaged chorions of treated eggs from both the use of sodium hypochlorite and tannic acid, which brings to light that prepared deadhesion mixtures should be checked prior to use, for optimal pH (6.5-7.5), to be sure it is not too acidic or basic for the fertilized eggs.

9.14 Tank Spawning

Hormonally induced *A. medirostris* have been successfully tank spawned since 2009, utilizing outdoor temperature controlled 3.7m diameter/0.7m deep circular fiberglass tanks containing 2-3 males and a single female (Van Eenennaam et al. 2012). The tank was kept turbid with constant addition of Fuller's earth using automatic belt feeders and eggs were collected from the tank bottom with a fine mesh dip net every 1-3 hours. The combination of low numbers of eggs released at each spawning bout, the exposure of fertilized eggs to Fuller's earth, and the fact that the adhesiveness covered only about one third of the egg, lead to minimal clumping of eggs (Van Eenennaam et al. 2012). Conceptually, a designed spawning tank with a false elevated bottom with proper sized openings, so fertilized eggs could fall through into some type of silting system, could be highly successful.

9.15 Embryo Incubation

After egg de-adhesion is completed, the de-adhesion material must be rinsed off by repeatedly adding clean incubation/hatchery water to the bowl, mixing, and then pouring off the water/de-adhesion material until all the material is gone. The clean eggs are then placed into egg incubation containers.

A sub-sample of the clean eggs should be measured volumetrically (average count of 3 samples of 5-15 ml of eggs) so the estimated quantity of eggs per ml can be calculated. The total volume (ml) of eggs placed in each container is then recorded for determining "fecundity" of each ovulated female. Alternatively, a gravimetric method of weighing and counting 3 subsamples of eggs and weighing the total amount of eggs collected can be used but requires draining the water from the eggs prior to weighing.

Various types and sizes of incubators are used to hold sturgeon embryos from post-fertilization through hatching. The most common systems utilize either horizontal (Yuschenko system, Osetr system) or vertical (Weiss jar, McDonald jar, Eagar upwelling jar)

flows of water and are described and pictured in detail by Chebanov and Galich (2011). Ideally, ultraviolet (UV) light sterilized ground water should be used that is semi-recirculated with a chiller if needed to maintain optimal incubation temperature. Oxygen levels should be at greater than 80% saturation. In general, the incubation systems should be in low light sections of the hatchery (< 100 lux) and never in direct sunlight, which can lead to developmental abnormalities (Chebanov and Galich 2011). It should be noted that some species of eggs may survive better in specific incubation systems. For example, it was found that the McDonald jars, typically used for *A. transmontanus* embryos, were too vigorously tumbling the thin-chorion *A. medirostris* embryos resulting in high mortalities compared to the gentler upwelling Eagar incubators (Van Eenennaam *et al.* 2008).

9.15.1 Embryo Densities

The volume or number of eggs placed into an incubation system will depend on the size of the section/box/jar, and species egg size (Chebanov and Galich 2011) and in general a Yushchenko section can have 150-260 thousand embryos, an Osetr box 100-250 thousand, a standard 6-liter McDonald jar 20-65 thousand and an 8-liter Weiss jar 20-35 thousand.

9.15.2 Monitoring Embryo Incubation

Continuous (or at least twice daily) monitoring of the water supply for flow and maintaining temperature and oxygen levels at optimal levels is critical during embryo incubation. Water flow rates through the incubation system will depend on the system and stocking density of embryos used. Initial flow rates are always lower during the initial sensitive stages (cleavage, gastrulation, to early neurulation) and are then almost doubled in flow rate after neurulation (50-70 hours post-fertilization depending on temperature). For the Yushchenko systems, initial flow rates are 1.2-2.4 liter/minute/100,000 eggs and increased to 3.3-5.5 liter/minute. The Osetr systems are initially at 2-3 liter/minute/100,000 eggs and increased to 4.5-6.2 liter/minute at later embryonic stages. McDonald and Weiss jars are initially at 3-5 L/min and increased to 7-10 L/min for approximately 1,000-1,200 ml of eggs.

Although proper UV treatment of water should reduce the incidence of fungal outbreaks from the genus *Saprolegnia*, twice daily removal of unfertilized eggs and dead embryos is important. When fungus begins on a dead embryo or unfertilized egg, it can quickly spread to live embryos. The advantage of the upwelling incubation systems is that any dead embryos that do become infected with fungus will be more buoyant than the live embryos and can be siphoned out of the incubators. This reduces the need to chemically treat the eggs for fungal infections, although there are several antifungal therapeutics that have been used on sturgeon eggs (see Chapter 11).

9.15.3 Estimating Egg Fertilization and Hatch Rate

Fertilization success is calculated at the 2nd or 3rd cleavage (4 or 8 blastomere stage), and the time for sampling depends on water temperature. Timing of sampling for fertilization

success at different temperatures for *A. gueldenstaedtii*, *A. stellatus*, *H. huso*, and *A. ruthenus* was given by Dettlaff *et al.* (1993) and reprinted in Chebanov and Galich (2011) (Dettlaff figure 80 here). A random sample of 100-200 eggs should be collected from each incubator and examined visually or under a dissecting microscope. All unfertilized, dead, activated and polyspermic eggs are removed and then the number of normally fertilized embryos in the total number of eggs in the sample counted to give the percent fertilization rate. A similar sampling and processing can be done at the late neurulation (Stage 23) to the stages of heart rudiment formation (Stages 26-28) (Dettlaff *et al.* 1993) which can typically give a good estimate of hatch rate in good quality eggs.

9.15.4 Duration of Embryogenesis

The chronology of embryonic development was presented by Dettlaff *et al.* (1993) and reprinted in Chebanov and Galich (2011) (include Table 7 from Dettlaff). The duration of embryogenesis is species and temperature dependent, ranging from 50-100 hours for *A. stellatus* and 160-240 hours for *H. huso* (Chebanov and Galich 2011). The temperature should be maintained within the optimal species-specific range and close to the optimal value (Chebanov and Galich 2011; include Table 26 from FAO 558).

9.16 References

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Chapter 10

Rearing of larvae, fry, fingerlings, and juveniles for release

Thomas Friedrich, Joern Gessner, Patriock Chèvre, James A. Crossman, Elena V. Galich, Mikhail S. Chebanov

10.1 Introduction

The target of rearing fish for release in *ex situ* programs is the release of animals that mimic the abilities of wild progeny with regard to high genetic diversity, traits to survive under natural conditions, ability to reproduce successfully and homing behavior to the targeted waterbody. Therefore, *ex situ* rearing conditions should mimic conditions in the wild as much as possible, taking increased mortalities through natural causes, such as hydrological events or predation, out of the equation. Enriched rearing conditions stimulate brain plasticity and adaptability while environmental cues of the river of release are important for imprinting and adaptation to local pathogens. Enriched rearing conditions can be applied through a variety of life phases, unfortunately, no conclusive studies have yet addressed the cumulative effects of enriched vs conventional rearing through a series of subsequent life phases.

10.2 Application of enriched rearing

Various means of enriched rearing can be applied, while not investigated yet in their cumulative effects, nevertheless enable beneficial traits in the fingerlings for release. Underlying experiments are described in more detail in Chapter 12. While further research and experiments may be required to fully understand some of the processes, the goal is to provide means for enrichment activities mimicking natural conditions best possible and applicable under hatchery conditions and operations. The application and feasibility of single enrichment activities have to be evaluated according to the local situation and can be grouped into different factors.

10.2.1 Water source and quality

While underlying mechanisms are not yet fully understood, the use of river water during the first life stages is considered a prerequisite for imprinting and hence homing behavior. In addition, the provision of river water can add other environmental clues and challenges for juveniles, such as changes in sediment load and turbidity, variations in water temperature

and quality, olfactory traces of predators and prey, the possibility of natural prey items being supplied through the water, etc. A thus enriched environment exposes the animals to a multitude of traits which are barely replicable in captive conditions otherwise. On the other hand, the approach can pose challenges and even risks to hatchery operation (e.g., water quality, algae blooms, hygiene), requiring failsafe mechanism and back-up options to guarantee the safety of the animals.

10.2.2 Tank design and hatchery operation

The light regime should follow the diel rhythm and tank colors and covers such as opaque acrylic sheets can be used to simulate lighting conditions similar to the natural environment and are easy to implement in the hatchery to foster timely melanophore reaction as adaptive response to changing environmental conditions (see Chapter 12.2.3.3).

Flow velocity variations and different flow patterns through structures in the tanks only require minimal additional worktime during hatchery operations and can significantly increase stamina and swimming capacity of individuals (see Chapter 12.2.5). Ideally structures can be removed, cleaned and varied in their location

The provision of substrates mimics conditions in the wild, as many prey organisms of sturgeons are typically buried in the sediments (see Chapter 12.2.4.4), and provision of feeds within sediments can be used to train fish accordingly. While easily implementable in natural ponds or raceways with earthen bottom, the use of gravel and sandy substrates in tank environments has its challenges with regard to hygiene, removal of feces and dead animals and has to be evaluated according to the local conditions.

The availability of substrates has also shown to be beneficial for energy content within eleutheroembryos in initial studies. McAdam *et al.* (2007) Boucher *et al.* (2011, 2013), Gessner *et al.* (2007) have shown that adapting the rearing conditions by simulation near natural habitat features through the provision of gravel or other substrate supporting thigmotactic behavior in these life phases results in vast differences in larval behavior, leading from altered fatty acid composition of larvae to increased stress levels and altered growth and increased energy reserves. As a result of the provision of coarse substrate for the eleutheroembryos, a delay in dispersal behavior (swim up and drift) prior to exogenous feed uptake was described (Gessner *et al.* 2007). Furthermore, settling fry also preferred structured substrate, minimizing energy expenditure. Timing of onset of feeding is impacted by the rearing conditions applied. By only providing eleutheroembryos with substrate until onset of feeding took place, swim up and dispersal as well as onset of feeding were happening up to 24 hours later than in substrate free rearing. Furthermore, the energy reserves of the individuals were greater and as such the onset of exogenous feeding had a wider window of opportunity. Interestingly, the individuals that were exposed to a lack of substrate were larger (10% increase in length) but revealed lower energy contents.

10.2.3 Feeding

The prolonged or additional administration of live or frozen feeds and a variation of feed items (see Chapter 10.6.1) as well as varying feeding times with high activity can be used to train fish to a multitude of prey items and avoid domestication effects through sole administration of compound diets as observed in salmonids. While similar effects have not yet been documented for sturgeons, benefits of natural feed items for acclimatization to natural prey and also with regard to the physiological development are highly likely. Still, potential risks depending upon feed source (pathogen transmission, environmental pollution) and economic feasibility have to be addressed on a case by case basis

10.2.4 Egg Incubation

Under controlled conditions, facilitated reproduction, including the application of breeding plan, the selection of breeders, and the collection and admixture of gametes in the fertilization process play a vital role for the quality of offspring, as outlined in Chapter 7.

The differences in the incubation techniques applied with regard to the impact upon the embryos differ widely since the natural embryonic development would take place in an egg that is attached to the substrate, where it stratifies and the embryo polarizes. This incubation process could only be closely resembled in hatching trays while all other methods only differ in the degree of agitation that the embryo experiences. A systematic study on the effects of the different incubation techniques on the quality of offspring is still lacking.

10.3 Hatching and holding of larvae

10.3.1 Dispersal and conditions of larval holding

The onset of hatching is characterized by the occurrence of single floating free embryos in the incubation system. The hatching larvae are transported to the rearing tanks. This can happen by autonomous dispersal of the animals from the used incubation system using flow and light, utilizing the phototactic behavior of the fry. Otherwise the larvae are collected in a hatching tank and are subsequently manually dispersed into the rearing tank. In this case collection of the embryos should happen several times per day during the hatch period in order to separate the healthy larvae from egg membranes, dead eggs, individuals with anomalies and collecting debris from river water timely. Another possibility is to use hatching troughs equipped with barriers to retain the egg membranes. Larvae are moved from those troughs to clean ones with a syphoning system.

With large numbers of larvae, enumeration is hard to perform individually with regard to effort as well as handling trauma to the animals and therefore the count is routinely determined by rough estimation. Commonly the numbers are estimated by comparison with a container holding 500 individuals) or by weighing. A few norms related to density of larvae, water level and water quality in tanks or trays are presented in Table 28. If the number of larvae exceeds the available hatchery space, it is not recommended to increase given density

numbers but to either disperse the surplus to other facilities or release at suitable locations (See Chapter 14).

After stocking of larvae into the subsequent rearing tanks, remaining membranes, dead eggs and individuals with anomalies should be removed subsequently over three days using rubber siphon or forceps.

Table 10.1. Maximum larval stocking density in tanks and trays per m² (modified from Chebanov & Galich, 2011).

Parameter	Density
Stocking density, individuals/m ²	
Very large species	4 000
Large species	5 000
Medium species	6 000
Small species	7 000



Figure 10.1. Tanks for larval holding and larval grow out

10.3.2 Behavior during endogenous feeding

Some behavioral traits of larvae during the first days of life should be noted. After hatching, they disperse in the water column, making periodic movements up to the water surface and then drifting down to the bottom of the tank. During natural spawning, such a behavior of sturgeon larvae lets them, firstly, avoid siltation and secondly, by running along the current, reach the zones with high concentrations of food organisms (Chapter 2). At transition to branchial respiration and at the stage of alimentary system formation a period of aggregation-can be observed in captive conditions in which larvae are deposited at the bottom of the tank, forming groups of different types. This behavior may be associated with the search for shelter in the wild, and was not observed in larvae reared in tanks with sediments (REF). If these aggregations are located in zones with poor water supply, mortality induced by oxygen deficiency may occur as oxygen consumption is several times higher during this period as compared with embryonic development (Zhukinsky, 1986).

Figure 10.2. Aggregation of sturgeon larvae in tanks **A** – stellate sturgeon; **B** – Russian sturgeon.

The mass mortality of larvae at this stage may be related to the hatchery quality of eggs and unfavorable rearing conditions. Upon reaching these stages, larvae with morphological defects such as developmental anomalies of the respiratory organs and/or digestive tract are not capable of further development and die. The overall mortality during the period of endogenous feeding should not be higher than 5–10 percent (depending on species). Therefore, sampling of larvae (30–50 live and dead individuals) should be performed every



three days to control the development of the larvae and evaluate their quality (Figure 10.3).

Figure 10.3. Sample collected to assess quality of larvae during the periods of larval holding in tanks,

It is essential to provide consistent control of seasonal temperature and oxygen conditions. The regular cleaning and timely increase of mesh size of the filter screen at the outlet of the tanks is of importance. In the course of larval growth, the mesh size of the outlet screen should be gradually increased from 1 to 7 mm depending upon the size of the larvae to prevent impingement and escapement.

10.3.3 Transition to exogenous feeding

Transition to exogenous feeding is associated with changes in the respiration, metabolism, growth rate and survival of sturgeon larvae. At the onset of exogenous feeding, the cellular partition that closes the passage from the oral cavity to the gullet in larvae resolves and simultaneously the melanin (fecal) plug is extruded from the anal opening. These pigment plugs are visible as small black extrusions on the tank bottom. At the moment of initiation of exogenous feeding, prelarvae that have been in a quiescent state exhibit bottom grouping while searching for feed. In conventional hatchery protocol (Dettlaff, Ginsburg and Schmalhausen, 1993), the appearance of single melanin plugs serves as an indicator to initiate first feeding, which should be performed at melanin plug extrusion in 2–3 percent of larvae. The period of melanin plug extrusion can take about 3–4 d. Untimely feeding may cause damage and loss of larvae; this is most characteristic for larvae of carnivorous sturgeon species (*Huso sp.*). At the same time, past experience has shown that administration of feed in small doses stimulates the transition to exogenous feeding and significantly increases both survival ability of larvae and growth rates (Mironov, 1994). The opinion that melanin plug extrusion may not be a criterion for timing of feeding initiation has been expressed by Gisbert and Williot (2002) and Williot *et al.* 2006 and Nekrasova (2006). The time of transition to exogenous feeding depends on the water temperature (Table 10.2.).

Table 10.2. Duration of sturgeon larval development in several species before transition to exogenous feeding in relation to water temperature.

Water temperature, °C	Duration (d) by sturgeon species							
	<i>A. gueldenstaedtii</i>	<i>A. stellatus</i>	<i>H. huso</i>	<i>A. ruthenus</i>	<i>A. oxyrinchus</i>	<i>A. sturio</i>	<i>A. transmontanus</i>	<i>A. medirostris</i>
12	20	—	18	20	—	—	15-17	—
13	18	—	16	16	—	—	13-14	—
15	12	—	12	12	—	—	11-12	10-15

17	9.5	12	10	10	7	11-12	9-10	
19	8	9	8	-	6-7		7-8	
21	7.5	8	7	-	6			
23	-	6.5	-	-	5-6			

Water supply depends upon achieving the required water quality parameters ($>6\text{mg/l O}_2$, $<0.05\text{ mg/l NH}_4$) and tank form as well as the swimming capacity of the larvae (See also Chapter 5). Total exchange of the tank volume should be between 2 - 5 times per hour during the period of transition to exogenous feeding. Sharp variation in water temperature should be avoided. Temperature drops, despite melanin plug extrusion, can cause refusal of larvae to feed due to a delayed process of fat resorption in the alimentary system.

During the period of transition to exogenous feeding, the number of dead specimens tends to increase, mostly due to mortalities of larvae having morphological defects. The most frequently occurring anomalies during the larval period are malformations (of functional, structural and mechanical character) in body shape, in external and internal organs etc. (see the more detailed description given in Chapter 11). Mortality of sturgeon larvae at the transition to exogenous feeding is primarily due to poor quality of gametes and sub-optimal rearing and incubation conditions (Semenov,1965).

10.3.4 Feeding with live prey items

It is common practice to use the following live foods in sturgeon larviculture to stimulate normal growth and formation of the digestive system during the first days of feeding: nauplii of brine shrimp (*Artemia*), small cladocerans (*Daphnia magna*, *Moina macrocopa*), copepods (Copepoda), branchiopods (*Streptocephalus torvicornis*), rotifers (*Rotatoria*), chironomids (*Chironomus plumosus*), gammarids (Gammaridae), and minced oligochaetes (*white worms* – *Enchitreus albus*), tubifex (*Tubifex tubifex*) and Californian red worms (*Eisenia foetida*) (Table 31). While it is possible to start directly with compound diets in some sturgeon species (Gisbert and Williot, 2002) others react poorly. It is generally not recommended for fish intended for release programs as it may foster traits not beneficial for survival in the wild and induce artificial selection, favoring animals feeding better on compound diets. It has to be noted, that exclusive use of some live feed types such as *Daphnia sp.* may not work with some sturgeon species e.g., *A. oxyrinchus*.

During the first days of transition to exogenous feeding, it is recommended to lower the water level in the tank when administering live food to 5-10cm, thus increasing the density of prey organisms, decreasing the energy expenditure of fry while seeking feeds and

avoiding loss of live organisms with water draining from the tank. The feeding of larvae starts with nauplii of *Artemia*, minced oligochaetes or a small portion of zooplankton on the basis of 10% of larval weight for stimulation and then according to Table 10. 3.. It is very important to avoid overfeeding during the first days due to uneaten feeds accumulating in the tank and affecting the hygiene regime; thus, small portions of feeds should be used. Considering that it is normal behavior for sturgeon fry to rise to the water surface at night, it is recommended to feed them with zooplankton in the evening, while feeding with oligochaetes, etc. in the morning and afternoon.

The daily live food consumption rate (Table 31) is calculated by taking into consideration the target growth and feed conversion rates (*Artemia nauplii*, 3–4; *Daphnia*, 6; Oligochaeta, 2).

Table 10.3. The daily live food consumption rate in % of stocked larval weight (modified from Chebanov & Galich, 2011).

Feed organism	Ratio of live weight (%)
<i>Artemia nauplii</i>	30-60
<i>Daphnia, Moina</i>	60-80
<i>Tubifex sp.</i>	20-40
other oligochaetes	30-50
<i>Chironomous spec.</i>	20-40

Tubifex and other oligochaetes are fed in minced form (the amount depending on the fry weight) diluted with water and administered along the tank wall (perimeter) in two or three portions. When fed the correct quality and amount, *A. gueldenstaedtii* larvae can usually reach 80–90 mg after 5–6 d, while *A. stellatus* can reach 50–60 mg and *H. huso* – 100-120 mg during the same period. The subsequent feed ration is formulated taking into consideration the objective of the fry rearing. Note that the prolonged exclusive use of live food is recommended if further grow out of larvae is intended with subsequent release to the wild.

Figure 10.4. Automatic feeders for live feed

Frequency of feeding with live food depends on the rate of nutrient digestion, which is species specific. The rate of digestion of oligochaete worms and *Artemia nauplii* in *A. gueldenstaedtii* is 1.5-fold less than in *A. stellatus* at the same temperature. This process

takes 5–6 h on average, thus the daily ration for *A. gueldenstaedtii* may be administered in four portions, while that for stellate sturgeon may be given in six to eight portions. *A. transmontanus*, *A. ruthenus*, *Huso sp.* and probably other species show high degrees of cannibalism over more than 5 hours without feeding, hence it is necessary to work in shifts or use automatic feeders suitable for live feeds (see Figure 10.4). Orange or pink bellies after feeding show sufficient food intake by the post-larvae when using *Artemia*. Prior to each feed administration, silt, dead larvae and feed debris should be removed from the tank. This is essential for successful grow out of fry considering the important role of olfaction in sturgeon feeding. In order to correct the daily ration in each tank, the dead larvae are enumerated and subjected to teratological and morphological analysis.

10.3.5 Instructions for Artemia preparation

Artemia cysts can be obtained from multiple sources and locations. It is recommended to use high grade cysts with hatching rates above 90% and conical tanks for easy harvest (see Figure 10.5.) A good hygiene regime is required, such as disinfecting tanks after each harvest, in order to maintain high hatching rates and avoid nauplii die-offs. It is recommended to start *Artemia* incubation five to seven days before the expected transit to exogenous feeding to be able to start timely feeding. Unused *nauplii* can be frozen as back-up for shortfalls.

Figure 10.5. Conical Artemia hatching jars

For incubation:

- Mix freshwater and uniodized/seawater salt in a ratio of 40:1 (add 25-36g Salt/l H₂O)
- Add 1,5-2,5g of Artemia cysts per l
- Temperature of 26-29°C (depending on cyst origin. 30°C should not be exceeded)
- Provide constant aeration and light
- Hatching and harvesting after 24-26h

After hatch the nauplii can be harvested. It is important to separate live nauplii from unhatched cysts and empty egg-shells, as the intake of eggs/shells by the sturgeon larvae can lead to constipations in the digestive tract and high mortalities. While empty shells float, unhatched cysts will aggregate at the bottom of the tank, with live nauplii in the layer above. By using conical jars, it is possible to drain the different layers, separating the entities. Aeration should be turned off for 15-20 minutes before harvest. Another time-saving option to obtain very clean nauplii is the use of cysts readily covered with iron particles and using magnets to separate live nauplii from unhatched cysts and shells.

The nauplii can then be rinsed with freshwater in a sieve with a mesh size of 150µm, then fed immediately or transferred to holding tanks or automatic feeders with cool fresh saltwater to avoid depletion of the nutritional value of the cysts due to high metabolism rates at incubation temperature.

10.3.6 Transition between feed types and further feeding regime

The long-term application of live food (especially of one prey species) is not feasible in terms of economic efficiency and can hamper the further transition of fry to artificial feeds which is normally desired in commercial aquacultures. Therefore, the portion of live food in the ration is gradually reduced from 100 percent to 0–10 percent after 12-15 days with formulated diets replacing the live food.

To train juveniles intended for release to the wild to natural diets, an intermediate step can be the prolonged additional administration of live or commercially available frozen prey organisms depending on the species preferences and juvenile size, such as *Daphnia sp.*, *Mysis sp.* Chironomidae, Chaoboridae, Culicidae, Gammaridae, Tubificinae, adult *Artemia salina* or marine krill until the release. Depending of the release date and duration of rearing, a sole use of these feeds can become economically unfeasible for release programs at a certain point due to the feed conversion rate and may also be logistically challenging due to the high amounts needed. Therefore, a mix of both administration of live/frozen feeds and artificial diets may offer a solution. A weaning to formulated diets at a TL of 50-60mm and a subsequent ratio of 1:1 frozen food to formulated diets until a TL of 100mm, succeeded by a weekly reduction to 1:9, considering the different feed conversion rates, has proven to be economically feasible for *A. ruthenus* in a river water rearing facility and did not result in any changes in performance in the captive environment.

Fingerlings destined for broodstock replenishment have to be weaned on dry feeds as outgrowing with live/frozen feeds cannot be accomplished in an economical way. Still, occasional feeding with live/frozen feed may contribute to health and gonad development in all species. When available, excess fish (e.g., Cyprinidae, Gobiidae, Percidae) from pond farming or fisheries for predatory sturgeons such as *Huso sp.*, as well as invertebrates from commercial harvest can be used to rear animals for broodstock replenishment, however security of supply as well as possible adverse effects of the administration of live or frozen natural diets such as quality issues, transfer of parasites or pathogens as well as environmental pollution have to be taken into consideration.

Weaning the fish to formulated diets works best with semi moist feed since it resembles the texture of the natural diets. The protein and lipid concentration ranges in larval compound feeds should be 50–60 percent and 9–16 percent, respectively (Ponomarev *et al.* , 2002). For accurate ration formulation, one can follow the feed rations recommended by producers of special sturgeon compound feeds. Generally, compound sturgeon feeds are composed of

Table 10.4. Feeding outline from fingerling size. Feeding amounts, frequency and pellet sizes may vary between species, temperature and local situation (modified from Chebanov & Galich, 2011; Steinbach, 2021).^{1,2}

Fish size, g	Min. feed rate, %BW/d	Max. Feed rate, %BW/d	Feeding frequency, times/d	Pellet size, mm
0.5-2 g	5	10		0.5-0.8
2-5g	4	5		1.2
5-10g	3.5	4.5		1.2-1.5
10–50	3	4.5	10	1.5
50 –100	2	3	8	2.0
100–200	1.5	2	6	3.0
200–800	0.5	1.2	4	4.5
800–1–500	0.3	0.8	4	4.5
1 500–3 000	0.2	0.8	3	6.0
3 000–5 000	0.1	0.5	2	6.0
5 000 –10 000	0.1	0.4	2	8.0
> 10 000	0.1	0.4	1	8.0-12.0

¹ This feeding advice is a guideline based on an optimal water quality and oxygen levels.

² BW = body weight.

around 45% high quality raw protein, 10-20% raw fat and 15-20% carbohydrates. However, the rearing targets in commercial farms (fast growth, caviar yield) and *ex situ* hatcheries (fitness in the wild, long term broodstock development) differ and hence the selection of suitable compound feeds has to take the local situation, species and rearing target into account. For some species such as *A. sturio* however, diet composition remains a bottleneck for successful reproductive broodstock development. Commercial compound feeds need further development for optimal health gonad development and target species specific requirements.

The daily feeding rates for compound feeds are age dependent and are thus calculated every week, considering the temperature, average weight and fish number. The determination of mean weight can be performed on a subsample to adjust feeding rates more precisely. The original stocking number and subsequent mortalities should be documented to calculate feed ratios. At transition to larger particle size, the larger pellets should be gradually mixed with those of previous sizes depending on juvenile size.

After each feeding delivery, checking of the feed consumption should be performed. If a large quantity of uneaten feed is recorded, the feeding schedule and the state of the fish should be checked. The daily rate should then be adjusted after determination of possible causes of the weak feeding activity. Recommended frequencies of feeding and particle sizes are presented in Table 10.4.

Small automatic feeders (Figure 10.5.) equipped with a control for regular supply of feed into the tanks have been routinely used at large hatcheries. After each feed administration, the rate of feed consumption should be monitored. If a considerable amount of uneaten feed is found, feeding regime as well as the state of the fish and the daily ration are checked for possible causes of weak feeding activity.

Regardless of feed types, it has to be made sure that particles do not float on the water surface as several sturgeon species then tend to feed inverted from the surface, swallowing air in the process, which can lead to air bubbles being entrapped in the body. Fish with air bubbles often develop malformed spines, leading to the loss of ability to feed and hence mortality.

Figure 10.5. Automatic feeder system with controller

10.3.7 Control of feed consumption and fry sorting

In the process of grow out, the stocking densities and size structure of the sturgeon in each tank should be monitored. Once substantial variations in sizes within one tank can be observed due to increased feed competition, sorting should be performed. The timely sorting allows:

- increased growth rate;
- decreased size variation of fry;
- improved FCR, hence better feed availability for fry; and
- decreased trauma associated with feed competition.

Sorting of fish very much depends upon the design of the *ex situ* program (e.g., keeping families/cohorts separate or not) and the available tank infrastructure (especially if small

mobile systems at the river banks are used). While there are automatic graders for sorting fish, it is generally more practical to separate the different size classes visually by hand, especially in smaller streamside facilities. It has to be pointed out, that fish with slower growth and hence poorer performance in the hatchery may not automatically perform poor upon release in the wild. Therefore, if fish are being kept for broodstock replenishment, it is advised to keep animals from all grades.

10.3.8 Tank rearing and stocking densities

Sturgeons are benthophagic fishes with an active feeding response. This is manifested through their feed search behavior during which the fish search the available habitat by moving in concentric circles during which the bottom is investigated by contact with the barbels. The stocking density of sturgeon in tanks, net cages and small ponds are given in Chapter 5, Table 3. The numbers given are maxima derived from commercial production, for juveniles intended for release and systems running with river water, it is recommended to operate at 50-70% of the given values.

At the given stocking densities, it is essential to provide a water exchange rate of tanks of 2-5 times per hour at transition to exogenous feeding, up to 10 times per hour at rearing up to 2–5 g. Oxygen content in this case should be above 6.0 mg/liter; concentrations under 3.0 mg/liter cause death in early life stages. The threshold concentration of ammonium should be as low as 0.05 mg/liter. Excessive free ammonia resulting from pH elevation during the process of fry rearing causes serious cases of autotoxicosis, which can manifest as gill necrosis and damage to the skin and fins and can lead to mass mortalities.

The rearing of fingerlings generally follows the given feeding regimes and stocking densities but may be adapted to species specific traits and requirements as well as to local conditions. As most species jump frequently, tanks have to be covered with lids or nets. In order to simulate diffuse light conditions at the river bed, opaque acrylic sheets can be used as lids. Handling of the animals should be reduced to the necessary minimum and follow along the outline given in Chapter 4.

10.3.9 Rearing for broodstock replenishment

If the *ex situ* program depends upon or intends to build a captive broodstock, it is necessary to maintain the genetic diversity of the progeny. Hence a share of each reproduction will be kept to act as broodstock replenishment. In accordance with different conservation units and population segments (see Chapters 6 and 8) it is necessary to differentiate the various families. In order to take a random sample of each family, it is recommended to only separate the broodstock candidates prior to the release of the cohort. Ideally a 50:50 sex ratio is maintained. While sexing in most species was not possible at young ages in the past, the use of genetic sex markers (Kuhl *et al.* , 2020) now enables more targeted and efficient broodstock replacement but requires differentiation of individuals through individual tagging. Double tagging, such as color tagging with VIE for families/cohorts and PIT tags for

the individuals can ease hatchery operation (see also chapter 13 on tagging). Numbers of animals to be maintained to replace one fish, considering mortalities are given in in Chapter 5. For species on the very brink of extinction or with very long maturation cycles, the numbers to be kept can be significantly higher. On the other hand, later surplus animals can be included in release programs or shared with other entities. It is recommended to divide broodstock replenishment to several locations as failsafe measure.

10.4 Rearing of broodstock

Replenishment of broodstock by offspring of controlled reproductions follows the general principles of sturgeon farming (Chebanov & Galich, 2011; Hochleithner & Gessner, 2012) and can be carried out in tanks, raceways or ponds, with stocking densities similar to those of broodstock in Chapter 8 and conditions that prioritize welfare of the animals. Safety protocols and risk reduction as well as handling and fish welfare have to follow along the lines of broodstock holding in order to safeguard the genetic entities. As the main goal is the provision of high-quality gametes through the broodstock, special emphasis has to be given on the feeding regime of broodstock candidates. In general, high quality formulated diets with low fat content are used and overfeeding has to be avoided to avoid excessive fat accumulation in gonadal tissues and a day of fasting per week is regarded as beneficial (Steinbach, 2021). It can be favorable or even required to supplement formulated diets with natural items.

10.5 Monitoring, hygiene and health control

The provision of adequate water quality and hygiene regime is the prerequisite for healthy animals. Water quality parameters follow the standards of cold-water aquaculture (Chebanov & Galich, 2011; Hochleithner & Gessner, 2012) with the most important parameters given in Chapter 5.

Strict daily documentation of several water parameters such as temperature as well as mortalities, fish transfers, feeding regime, cleaning activities help to identify problems and improve hatchery operation.

Weekly tests of alarm- and back-up systems ensure that the systems are up-and running during emergency situations. A cleaning schedule for filter systems, intake structures and piping can solve problems before they occur. Frequency has to be adapted to local conditions (frequency of floods, high organic load, high sediment load, etc.).

Regular observation of the fish is crucial in order to identify irregularities which can lead to problems and hence its necessity cannot be overstated. Unfortunately, daily hatchery routines and maintenance often leave little time, therefore it is recommended to make time in the schedule to focus on watching the animals. Fish with unusual behavior or altered

external appearance can easily be detected and can be inspected more closely. For larvae, as well as smaller animals <3cm TL it is recommended to check a subsample of 20-100 animals on a white laboratory tray or dish for behavior and appearance every three days. Regular supervision through local veterinarians either through visits of the facility and periodic provision of a few animals to a veterinarian lab for routine controls on pathogens and parasites should be budgeted for a best-practice modus operandi.

Hygiene standards are obligatory and must be executed carefully. This concerns daily cleaning of tanks, disinfection of equipment and hands and prevention of cross-contamination between rearing units. Dead fish, debris, uneaten feeds and faeces should be removed at least twice daily. During the summer months it is recommended to clean the biofilm in the tanks on a daily basis, while in winter once to twice per week may be sufficient depending on fish sizes, stocking densities and water temperatures. An option is the use of a sponge soaked in 0.01% peracetic acid solution and wiping the surfaces of the tanks slowly from the inlet to the outlet. During the early rearing phases cleaning has to be conducted very carefully in order not to crush any larvae. During the yolk-sac-stage photoactivity can be used to lure the larvae to certain spots for easier facilitation of the cleaning process.

The use of chemicals and disinfectants is subject to local laws and regulations. In the case of a stream-side hatchery, in most cases it is necessary to obtain a permit for water use, further specifying usable treatments. See also Chapter 11 on fish health.

Gear such as handnets, sponges, tubes etc. should be disinfected for at least one hour with a suitable disinfectant and then rinsed with water after each use or before being transferred to another hatchery unit. Ideally, often used gear is assigned to individual tanks and not transferred in between.

10.6 References

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Health Assessments and Treatments

Joel P. Van Eenennaam, Mikhail S. Chebanov, Elena V. Galich, Molly A.H. Webb

11.9 Introduction

The objective of this chapter is to provide a general overview of potential diseases and health issues that may arise in an *ex situ* facility while holding and rearing sturgeon. Pathogens are found among both wild and captive populations of sturgeon. The severity of the diseases that can manifest from pathogens can range from mild effects with perhaps minor impacts on growth, to diseases that can cause significant mortality. The majority of sturgeon diseases (environmental, viral, bacterial, fungal, protozoal) are similar to those affecting other cultured finfishes, and their diagnostics, prevention and treatment are reviewed in detail, in many published works (e.g., Dar *et al.* 2022; Hadfield and Clayton 2021; Smith 2019; Austin 2012; Noga 2010).

An important component in health assessment of your fish is the required daily observations of normal fish behavior in each tank of your facility. Depending on the type of rearing systems utilized this may be accomplished by an initial facility walk through while checking on each tank for water flows, aeration, clogging or broken internal standpipes, etc. or it can be done in combination with another daily activity, like flushing the tank or adding feed to feeders. Once the facility staff are experienced in seeing the normal behavior of their sturgeon species, the clinical signs of disease (see descriptions in Tables below) are usually quite apparent, and always check for decreased feeding activity (waste feed on the tank bottom) which could be an initial sign of the onset of a problem.

Biologists with a general knowledge of fish diseases and access to reference texts and a basic laboratory with a compound microscope can identify most parasites and some bacterial infections, but in most cases, especially for viruses, diagnosis requires analysis of moribund individuals taken to a properly equipped fish disease laboratory or the submission of tissues samples (e.g., collected from large broodstock).

11.10 Prevention and Management

The priority in any fish culture facility is to prevent disease outbreaks in the first place by implementing biosecurity measures, sanitation and disinfection protocols, and to reduce any environmental and handling stressors, including:

- Use of quarantine tanks for any new fish brought to the facility, with subsequent monitoring and/or disease diagnostic testing, depending on the facility and program guidelines/requirements.
- Implement rigorous disinfection protocols, including foot baths before entering and exiting each building.
- Avoid cross-contamination of equipment (e.g., nets, tank scrubbing poles, gloves, waders); use disinfection baths before reusing in a different tank.
- Reducing pathogens in the water source. Whether ground water or surface water, treating with fine filtration and then UV for disinfection will significantly reduce the pathogen load. Recirculating aquaculture systems (RAS) should have a disinfection system installed after the mechanical and biological filtration. Maintain UV sterilizers by regular bulb changes, as the manufacturers recommend, and schedule regular cleaning of the quartz sleeves.
- Regular flushing or siphoning of tanks for removal of organic matter (feces and waste feed). For smaller fry-fingerling tanks, the standpipes, tank sides and bottom should be scrubbed as needed (when algae, biofilms are obvious), although larger (> 3 m diameter) tanks can usually be designed for self-cleaning.
- Prompt removal and disposal of dead or moribund fish.
- Providing optimal water quality parameters (see Chapter 5).
- The RAS systems have unique protocols to maintain optimal water quality (e.g., regular removal of captured solids, backwashing filters, proper aeration of biomed).)
- Low stocking densities.
- Live feeds are an important source of nutrients and are needed for training fish for release, but they may also be a source of pathogens.
- Store commercial feeds in cool and dry conditions and use before expiration dates to avoid potential loss of nutrients and buildup of mold or other toxins.
- Minimize and optimize handling and transport of fish.
- Applying health assessments using ultrasound and established “normal” hematological and biochemical reference value intervals (Annex 11.1).

11.11 Environmentally caused diseases

The most common non-infectious/environmental diseases are related to water quality and include dissolved oxygen, gas supersaturation, temperature and pH stress, and toxicity from ammonia, nitrites, nitrates, chlorines, heavy metals, hydrogen sulfide, and pesticides (Hadfield 2021). Prevention of these environmental issues is addressed through facility design, and diagnosis can occur through water quality testing and monitoring (Table 11.1).

Table 11.1. Clinical signs, diagnosis, and prevention of common environmental diseases in sturgeon culture (modified from Hadfield 2021a). Sudden and extreme changes in the environmental conditions can result in high rates of mortalities in both flow-through and recirculating aquaculture systems (RAS).

Environmental Disease	Clinical Signs	Diagnosis	Prevention
Low Dissolved Oxygen	Lethargy, flared opercula, gasping at the surface.	Routine monitoring with a dissolved oxygen meter.	Maintain adequate aeration, and/or direct oxygenation. Consider packed column aerators, aeration cones or Venturi oxygen injectors.
Gas Supersaturation	Gas emboli visible in the skin or fins, lethargy.	Use of a total gas pressure meter.	Use of a degassing apparatus which is required for groundwater sources.
Temperature Stress (primarily elevated temperatures)	Increased or decreased activity, decreased feeding.	Daily water temperature monitoring.	Add heat exchangers or chillers, change to a cooler water source.
pH Stress (primarily in RAS)	Increased activity or tremors, rapid breathing, increased mucus production.	Routine monitoring of pH and alkalinity.	Partial water changes, add calcium hydroxide or sodium hydroxide slowly and monitor closely.
Ammonia Toxicity (primarily in RAS)	Lethargy, inappetence, rapid breathing, increased mucus production.	Routine monitoring of total ammonia nitrogen and then calculation of the unionized form based on pH and temperature.	Daily removal/flushing of organic matter, increase nitrifying bacteria biofilters (in RAS), reduce stocking densities. Short-term: adding zeolite (freshwater systems).
Nitrite Toxicity (primarily in RAS)	Rapid breathing, tan or brown gills.	Routine monitoring with commercial test kits.	Denitrification filters should be planned for the maximum bioload.
Nitrate Toxicity (primarily in RAS)	Lethargy, inappetence, rapid breathing, gills pale or tan-colored.	Routine monitoring with commercial test kits.	Denitrification filters should be planned for the maximum bioload.
Heavy Metal Toxicity	Variable: lethargy, loss of equilibrium, inappetence, rapid breathing, acute or chronic mortalities.	Water sources should be tested in a commercial lab prior to use.	Water high in heavy metals should be run through activated carbon, zeolite, or other ion-exchange filters.
Hydrogen Sulfide Toxicity	Lethargy, inappetence, rapid breathing, acute	Distinct sulfide (rotten egg) smell. Levels can be measured with test	Groundwater should be degassed and aerated prior to use. Pond water sources

	mortalities.	kits.	should be monitored for bottom sediment stirring and mixing of anaerobic conditions.
Pesticide Toxicity (usually runoff into ponds)	Inappetence, erratic swimming, seizures, rapid breathing, acute mortalities.	Monitor runoff into ponds from nearby agriculture fields.	Prevent runoff from entering ponds (e.g., higher levees, bypass channels).

11.12 Parasites

Sturgeons are hosts to many ectoparasites, many of which are common to other species of fish. Protozoan parasites (single cell eukaryotes) often infest the skin and gills of sturgeon and are detected in fresh scrapings of the skin or mounts from sampled portions of gill lamellae. More common parasitic diseases in sturgeon are caused by *Trichodina* spp., *Chilodonella*, *Costia*, *Epistylis* (Radosavljević *et al.* 2019), and an extensive review on the numerous potential parasites of sturgeon was conducted by Bauer *et al.* (2002). Most recently, Barzegar *et al.* (2023) reviewed 26 known parasitic protozoan species from freshwater fish across Iran, including the bloodborne *Haemogregarina acipenseris* and *Trypanoplasma acipenseris* in both *Acipenser persicus* and *A. stellatus*. These authors also reported the less commonly found (for sturgeon) *Ichthyophthirius multifiliis* in these two *Acipenser* species and *H. huso*.

Metazoan parasites (multicellular eukaryotes) including species of Monogenea, Trematodes, Cestodes and Nematodes have been found only occasionally in sturgeon (Bauer *et al.* 2002), but most recently, a pallid sturgeon mortality event at an *ex situ* hatchery was due to the Monogenean (flatworm) *Gyrodactylus coneii* (Leis *et al.* 2023). Some of the more common clinical signs and treatments for parasites are given in Table 11.2. Any immersion treatments that have not been successfully used before should be tested with a small number of fish in a separate tank to ensure the dose and duration do not result in any direct mortalities, as some species and life stages could require lower dose treatments. Appropriate personal protection equipment must be used when handling any hazardous chemicals, such as formalin. Prophylactic UV treatment of the facility water at 26-318 mJ/cm² will inactivate many parasites (Yanong 2009).

Table 11.2. Potential clinical signs and treatment guidelines for protozoan and metazoan diseases in sturgeon culture. Treatments are through a prolonged immersion (or bath) that are repeated as needed. Ensure that the treatments are approved within the region and prescribed by a veterinarian where appropriate.

Clinical Signs	Treatments	References
Inappetence, flashing, erratic swimming, fin and gill damage, hyperactivity, increased mucus production, increased ventilation rate, hemorrhagic areas (erythema) or skin ulcers, secondary infections may occur.	Formalin (37%, Formacide-B, Parasite-S®), 100-200 mg/L for 1 hour.	Vergneau-Grosset and Lair 2021 Leis <i>et al.</i> 2023
	Chloramine-T, 2.5-20 mg/L for 1 hour.	Vergneau-Grosset and Lair 2021
	Iodine-free salt (NaCl) 0.5-1.5% for 1 hour.	Hochleithner and Gessner 1999
	Hydrogen peroxide 3-100 mg/L for 30 minutes – 1 hour.	Vergneau-Grosset and Lair 2021

11.13 Bacterial Diseases

Most bacterial diseases reported for sturgeon are opportunistic infections of gram-negative bacilli (*Acinetobacter* spp., *Aeromonas* spp., *Flavobacterium* spp., *Pseudomonas* spp., *Citrobacter* spp., *Vibrio* spp., *Yersinia* spp., *Pasteurella* spp., *Serratia* spp.), gram-positive bacilli (*Mycobacterium* spp., *Bacillus* spp.), and gram-positive cocci (*Streptococcus* spp., *Lactococcus* spp.) (Kayaş *et al.* 2017; Santi *et al.* 2019).

Antibiotic treatments in sturgeon culture are primarily delivered orally using medicated fish feed and require an antibiogram before treatment. Immersion treatments have been successfully used on small fingerlings with bacterial gill disease (*Flavobacterium* spp.; Table 11.3), but this requires large volumes of water, and the potential human health and environmental issues when handling and disposing must be considered. Sturgeon will often have reduced feeding activity as a bacterial disease proceeds, so early diagnosis and treatment are important to ensure the infected fish consume the medicated feed. Long-term or repeated use of antibiotics must be considered carefully, as there is the potential for antibiotic resistance to develop. Prophylactic UV treatment of the facility water at 4-22 mJ/cm² will inactivate many bacteria (Yanong 2009).

Table 11.3. Potential clinical signs and treatment guidelines for bacterial diseases in sturgeon culture. Ensure that the treatments are approved within the region and prescribed by a veterinarian where appropriate.

Clinical Signs	Treatments	References
Lethargy, abnormal behavior (floating, immobile), inappetence, hemorrhagic areas (erythema) or skin ulcers on various parts of the body (Figure 11.1), gill damage, pale or dark body color, pale gills, fluid accumulates in the body cavity, increased mucus production, poor body condition (emaciation), secondary infections (e.g., viral, fungal parasitic) are common.	Immersion: oxytetracycline 10-100 mg/L, 1 hour, for 4 days.	Goodwin <i>et al.</i> 2005
	Immersion: hydrogen peroxide 60-110 mg/L, 1 hour, for 5 days.	Rach <i>et al.</i> 2000
	Immersion: chloramine-T 20 mg/L, 1 hour, for 4 days.	Gaikowski <i>et al.</i> 2008
	Diet: florfenicol 10-15 mg/kg of fish, for 10 days.	Vergneau-Grosset and Lair 2021
	Diet: oxytetracycline 60-80 mg/kg of fish, for 10 days.	Durborow and Francis-Floyd 1996
	Diet: oxytetracycline 10-15g/100kg feed, for 10 days.	Hochleithner and Gessner 1999
	Injection: oxytetracycline, 40 mg (active ingredient)/kg, same dose booster injection 2 days later.	Mohler 2004
	Injection: oxytetracycline, ?? mg (active ingredient)/kg, same dose booster injection 2 weeks later.	Webb <i>et al.</i> 2016
Injection: florfenicol, ?? mg/kg, same dose booster injection 2 weeks later.	Webb <i>et al.</i> 2016	
Injection: Amoxicillin, 10 mg/kg.	Webb <i>et al.</i> 2016	



Figure 11.1. Multifocal haemorrhages and ulcers on the ventral side and base of the fins of an *Acipenser baerii* due to the bacterial pathogen *Flavobacterium psychrophilum*. Taken from: Chinchilla *et al.*, 2023. First detection of *Flavobacterium psychrophilum* in juvenile Siberian sturgeons (*Acipenser baerii*) and description of the pathological findings. *Journal of Fish Diseases* 46: 887-894. John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

11.14 Fungal Diseases

The most frequent fungal diseases in sturgeon are caused by Saprolegniaceae, and primarily occur during egg incubation. Bauer *et al.* (2002) reported the most common fungal pathogens of sturgeon to be *Saprolegnia* spp., *Achlya*, spp., *Dictyuchus* spp., *Aphanomyces* spp., and *Zeptolognia* spp.

One of the most recently identified emergent fungal diseases in sturgeon (especially white sturgeon) is *Veronaea botryosa* which is the causative agent of systemic mycosis known as “fluid belly” (Yazdi and Soto 2021). The authors recommend proper disinfection of equipment and facilities due to the lack of effective prophylactic and therapeutic methods to combat this fungus. They suggest a dose of at least 75 mg/L iodine for 5 minutes, 390 mg/L sodium hypochlorite (household bleach) for 5 minutes, or 3.75% hydrogen peroxide for 30 minutes as being sufficient. Another recently reported infection was the identified yeast species, *Candida manassasensis*, which resulted in mass mortality of *A. baerii* (Kim *et al.* 2022).

Fungal disease during egg incubation can be controlled when using upwelling incubators, as the infected egg is more buoyant and can be siphoned out of the incubator before it spreads

to other eggs and can eliminate the use of chemical treatments. However, this method of removing infected eggs is not as effective for Yushchenko and other horizontal-style incubators (Ghomi *et al.* 2007). Prophylactic UV treatment of the facility water at 10-40 mJ/cm² will inactivate many *Saprolegnia* spp. (Hadfield 2021d).

Table 11.4. Potential clinical signs and treatment guidelines for fungal diseases in sturgeon culture. Ensure that the treatments are approved within the region and prescribed by a veterinarian where appropriate.

Clinical Signs	Treatments	References
For eggs/embryos, they appear covered in whitish-grey cotton wool.	Embryos: hydrogen peroxide (30%) at 1 ml/L, 10 min/day, as needed.	Ghomi <i>et al.</i> 2007
For fish, skin lesions are grey white, raised, and with a cotton wool appearance. Inappetence, erratic swimming or loss of equilibrium, and gill damage can also occur.	Embryos: hydrogen peroxide (35%) at 0.5 ml/L, 15 min/day, as needed.	Bouchard III and Aloisi 2002
	Embryos: formalin (37%, Formacide-B, Parasite-S®), 0.8-1.5 ml/L, 30-45 min/day, as needed.	Rach <i>et al.</i> 1997; Abtahi <i>et al.</i> 2006
	Embryos: Pyceze (bronopol, 2-bromo 2-nitropropane 1,3 diol), 50 mg/L, 30 min/day, as needed.	Sudova <i>et al.</i> 2007
	Fish: hydrogen peroxide (35%, Perox-aid®), 75 mg/L, 1 hour, every 48 hours for 3 treatments.	Hadfield 2021d
	Fish: chloramine-T, 20mg/L, 15 min/day, for 18 days.	Ghazvini <i>et al.</i> 2012
	Fish: Pyceze (bronopol), 20 mg/L, 30 min/day, up to 14 days.	Sudova <i>et al.</i> 2007
	Fish: Iodine-free salt (NaCl), 5-15g/L, 1 hour/day, as needed.	McEnroe and Cech 1985

11.15 Viral Diseases

Reports on viral infections in sturgeon have increased due to improved testing and biomolecular methods to identify the causative agent, although a virus can still be challenging to diagnose as there is often a lack of specific clinical signs. The risk of introducing a virus into a facility can be reduced using appropriate isolation and quarantine protocols, and transmission to and from wild and cultured fish is possible with all viruses and is often known as spill-over or spill-back (Hadfield 2021e). The two main groups of sturgeon viruses, sturgeon nucleocytoplasmic large DNA viruses and herpes viruses, will be described here while the less common *Adenoviridae*, *Rhabdoviridae*, *Nodaviridae*, *Birnaviridae*, and *Reoviridae* have been reviewed by Mugetti *et al.* (2020a).

There are no vaccines available for any of the viruses listed below and the best treatment, as described above, is to prevent an outbreak in the first place, to the extent that it is possible. Often a viral outbreak is not noticed until secondary infections occur (bacterial, fungal, parasitic), and those can be treated as described above. If the behavior of a potential virus is observed in a tank of fish (lethargy, abnormal behavior, lack of feeding), try to improve water quality (e.g., increase oxygen levels, water turnover) and check that all other water quality parameters are optimal. Feeding can be reduced or stopped depending on feeding activity observed, and then slowly resumed after the virus has run its course. Treatments of salt are often used to reduce stress, increase mucus production, and help to heal damaged skin tissue. Dosages (5-15 g/L for 1-3 hours) will vary depending on species and life stage, as small fingerlings are less tolerant than adult fish. Prophylactic UV treatment of the facility water at 100-150 mJ/cm² will help to inactivate many viruses (Yanong 2009).

11.15.1 Sturgeon Nucleocytoplasmic Large DNA Viruses (sNCLDV)

These are the most numerous and heterogeneous group of viral agents causing disease in sturgeon (Mugetti *et al.*, 2020a), including:

- White Sturgeon Iridovirus (WSIV) was first reported on several northern California *A. transmontanus* farms (Hedrick *et al.* 1990), with high stocking densities and stressors (e.g., pump failure, frequent handling and transport) identified as factors for the disease onset (Georgiadis *et al.* 2001). The clinical signs are primarily lethargy and lack of feeding (La Patra *et al.* 1994), and other species of *Acipenseridae* can also be susceptible.
- Missouri River Iridovirus (MRSIV) is associated with *Scaphirhynchus albus* and *S. platyrhynchus*. Symptoms included lethargy, emaciation, skin and fin inflammation (Mugetti *et al.* 2020a).
- Shortnose Sturgeon Virus (SNSV) was initially identified by LaPatra *et al.* (2014) as an irido-like virus, and was later verified and named SNSV (Clouthier *et al.* 2015).

- British Columbia White Sturgeon Virus (BCWSV) was identified by Raverty *et al.* (2003) and symptoms included inappetence, lethargy and lack of reactivity.
- Namao Virus (NV) was identified in hatchery reared *A. fulvescens* and the symptoms included inappetence, anorexia, erratic behavior, skin redness, and excess gill mucus (Clouthier *et al.* 2013).
- Acipenser Iridovirus-European (AvIV-E) outbreaks have occurred in several European countries involving *Huso huso*, *A. baerii*, *A. gueldenstaedtii*, *A. naccarii*, *A. stellatus*, and *A. ruthenus* (Ciulli *et al.* 2016; Bigarré *et al.* 2017; Mugetti *et al.* 2020b). Symptoms can differ between outbreaks, species and body size, and can include anorexia, lethargy, erratic or swimming impairment, skin ulcers, excessive gill mucus, and swollen abdomens causing them to float upside down (Mugetti *et al.* 2020a, 2020b).
- Frog Virus 3 has been rarely reported for *Acipenseridae* but was identified in a mortality outbreak of *S. albus* juveniles (Waltzek *et al.* 2014). Clinical signs included high rates of mortality (95%) with haemorrhagic lesions on the skin.

11.15.2 Herpesviruses

These belong to the *Alloherpesviridae* family and are the next most common viral diseases in farmed and wild sturgeon (Mugetti *et al.* 2020a). Symptoms vary from few or no obvious skin lesions to small whitish blisters or patches, to obvious skin ulcers, and include the following:

- Acipenserid Herpesvirus 1 (AciHV-1) was first reported in mortalities of captive *A. transmontanus* juveniles but with no external clinical signs (Hedrick *et al.* 1991).
- Lake Sturgeon Herpesvirus 1 (LSHV-1) identified from four rivers in Wisconsin was determined to be like AciHV-1, yet distinctly different, and Walker *et al.* (2022) proposed the name lake sturgeon herpesvirus.
- Lake Sturgeon Herpesvirus 2 (LSHV-2) was isolated from infected wild *A. fulvescens* (with grossly apparent skin lesions), from the Lake Huron and Lake Erie watersheds, and was similar to LSHV-1 (Johnston *et al.* 2022).
- Acipenserid Herpesvirus 2 (AciHV-2) was first reported from farmed *A. transmontanus* ovarian fluid, with the fish showing no clinical signs (Watson *et al.* 1995) but more commonly the ulcerative skin and fin lesions are present (Figure 11.2; Soto *et al.*, 2017). This virus has been verified throughout North America, and in other species, including *A. brevirostrum*, and *A. fulvescens* (Kurobe *et al.* 2008; Lapatra *et*

al. 2014). It has also been identified in European species (e.g., *A. baerii*, *A. ruthenus* x *H. huso* hybrid) (Doszpoly *et al.* 2017; Shchelkunov *et al.* 2009; Eelev *et al.* ,2016).

- Acipenser Herpesvirus 3 (AciHV-3) was recently detected in hatchery-reared *A. fulvescens* displaying skin lesions that resembled blisters on the ventral surface of the pectoral fins and abdomen, but no unusual mortality was observed (Clouthier *et al.* 2023).
- Cyprinid Herpesvirus 3 also known as Koi Herpesvirus, has been reported in *A. oxyrinchus*, *A. gueldenstaedtii*, and the hybrid *A. ruthenus* x *H. huso* (Kempter *et al.* 2009). The fish had clinical signs of weak swimming, haemorrhagic lesions at the base of the fins, with pale to grey gills covered with a grainy deposit.



Figure 11.2. Multiple ulcerative skin and fin lesions from an *Acipenserid herpesvirus 2* infection of *Acipenser transmontanus*. Taken from: Soto *et al.*, 2017. Co-infection of *Acipenserid herpesvirus 2* (AciHV-2) and *Streptococcus iniae* in cultured white sturgeon

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Annex 11.1. Health Assessment using Hematological and Plasma Biochemistry Indices

The use of hematologic and biochemistry analyses of blood and plasma could help to identify changes in the health of sturgeon, and these diagnostic tools could also be useful in identifying the early stages of a disease outbreak or for assessing a response to a suboptimal environmental condition.

The problem is the very limited number of “normal” reference value intervals available for sturgeons, and only a few studies provide a comprehensive set of analyses (Table 11.1.1 and 11.1.2). But more importantly to consider is the numerous extrinsic (e.g., water quality, season of the year, feed contents, capture and handling stress) and intrinsic (e.g., species, population, age, life stage, gender, captive or wild) factors that can shift the “normal” reference intervals established. In addition, past studies have used different types of analytical procedures, different statistical analysis (e.g., parametric versus robust methods to determine reference intervals), and different presentation metrics (e.g., number of monocytes per microliter of blood, or as a percent of total white blood cell count) making comparisons between and within a species challenging (see Table 11.1.1 and 11.1.2 for the variability). The other limiting factors of using blood and plasma indices is the required handling/stress to collect the blood samples, and the cost involved in having a commercial laboratory conduct the analyses. If a program is going to pursue using this diagnostic tool, it is recommended that each facility establish their own “normal” health assessment indices for their species, under their culture or wild conditions, for different life stages and gender, to be able to compare to potential or identified “unhealthy” individuals.

There are a variety of reference intervals (some with only a few parameters measured and some more extensive) available for wild and captive sturgeon: captive (*Sepúlveda et al.* 2012) and wild *A. fulvescens* (*Sepúlveda et al.* 2012; *DiVincenti et al.* 2013), captive *S. albus* (*Djokie* 2020), captive (*Knowles et al.* 2006) and wild (*A. brevirostrum* (*Matsche and Gibbons* 2012; *Matsche et al.* 2013) captive *A. gueldenstaedtii* (*Cassle et al.* 2021), wild *S. platorynchus* (*Sepúlveda et al.* 2012), captive *A. oxyrinchus oxyrinchus* (*Matsche et al.* 2014), wild *A. stellatus* (*Shahsavani et al.* 2010), captive *A. persicus* (*Bahmani et al.* 2001; *Milad et al.* 2016), captive *A. schrenckii* (*Shi et al.* 2006), captive *A. sinensis* (*Shi et al.* 2006), captive *H. huso* (*Bahmani et al.* 2001; *Asadi et al.* 2006), and captive *A. naccarii* female x *A. baerii* male hybrids (*Di Marco et al.* 2011).

Table 11.1.1. Hematology reference intervals for some species of sturgeon. Packed cell volume (PCV), mean corpuscular volume (MCV), mean corpuscular hemoglobin (MCH), mean corpuscular hemoglobin concentration (MCHC) is a measurement of the average amount of hemoglobin in a single red blood cell (RBC), white blood cell (WBC), ratio of total neutrophils to total lymphocytes (N:L). Data are from: 1) Matsche *et al.* 2014 (combined data from three different facilities), 2) Knowles *et al.* 2006, 3) Matsche and Gibbons 2012 (combined genders and data from all years), 4) Cassle *et al.* 2021.

Analyte	Captive <i>Acipenser oxyrinchus</i> ¹	Captive <i>Acipenser brevirostrum</i> ²	Wild <i>Acipenser brevirostrum</i> ³	Captive <i>Acipenser gueldenstaedtii</i> ⁴
PCV (%)	21-26	26-46	23-56	16-34
Hemoglobin (g/dL)	5.0-6.2	5.7-8.7		3.9-9.7
RBC count ($\times 10^6$ cells/ μ L)	0.90-1.24	0.65-1.09		
MCV (μ m ³)	196-256	307-520		
MCH (pg)	45-68	66-107		
MCHC (g/dL)	22-27	15-30		
Total WBC count (cells/ μ L)	21,000-33,700	28,376-90,789	2,028- 8,749	5,440- 13,770
Total lymphocytes (cells/ μ L)	12,500-22,700			1,650- 7,500
Small lymphocytes (cells/ μ L)	11,400-20,600	9,063- 56,656	178- 1,614	
Large lymphocytes (cells/ μ L)	800- 1,700	2,122- 10,435	0- 1,342	
Neutrophils (cells/ μ L)	1,600- 7,900	3,758- 33,592	459- 5,208	850- 4,470
Monocytes (cells/ μ L)	300- 1,000	0- 7,137	0- 410	63- 560
Eosinophils (cells/ μ L)	0- 4,600	0- 1,544	0- 522	20- 1,640
Thrombocytes (cells/ μ L)	28,300-40,700	32,205- 122,179		
N:L ratio	0.12-0.58	0.68-1.03	0.21-3.63	

Table 11.1.2. Plasma chemistry reference intervals for some species of sturgeon. Aspartate transferase (AST) in units per liter (U/L), creatine kinase (CK), lactate dehydrogenase (LDH), plasma alkaline phosphatase (ALP), creatinine phosphokinase (CPK). Data are from: 1) Matsche *et al.* 2014 (combined data from three different facilities), 2) Knowles *et al.* 2006, 3) Djokie 2020, and 4) hybrid sturgeon: *Acipenser naccarii* female x *Acipenser baerii* male; Di Marco *et al.* 2011 (data are the 2.5th-7.5th percentiles).

Analyte	Captive	Captive	Captive	Captive
	<i>Acipenser oxyrinchus</i> ¹	<i>Acipenser brevirostrum</i> ²	<i>Scaphirhynchus albus</i> ³	Hybrid Sturgeon ⁴
Total Protein (g/L)	27-39	27-53	24-35	18-72
Albumin (g/L)	10-15	8-17	8-14	8-25
Glucose (mmol/L)	0-1.6	2.1-4.1	2.6-4.6	2.6-13.3
Urea (mmol/L)	2.4-7.0			0.7-1.1
Calcium (mmol/L)	1.9-2.0	1.7-3.0	1.3-3.1	1.9-7.2
Phosphorous (mmol/L)	2.6-3.6	1.6-2.6	2.6-4.8	1.7-5.8
Sodium (mmol/L)	135-151	124-141	108-128	135-142
Chloride (mmol/L)	116-118	106-121	90-114	87-121
Potassium (mmol/L)	2.6-3.4	2.9-3.7	2.0-3.7	1.7-2.5
Globulins (g/L)	17-24	18-37		
Osmolality (mOsm/kg)	258-299	232-289		
Creatine (mg/dL)		0.0-1.4		0.01-0.57
Total bilirubin (mg/dL)		0.0-0.1		0.15-1.86
Cholesterol (mg/dL)		42-133	64-199	40-238
AST (U/L)	110-277	90-311		17-406
CK (U/L)	10-840			389-5,559
LDH (U/L)	1,811-4,223		90-434	724-4,040
ALP (U/L)		47-497	52-203	39-415

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Annex 11.2. Health Assessment using Ultrasound Diagnostics

11.2.1 Introduction

In *ex situ* holding and breeding of sturgeon species that are in danger of extinction, monitoring the individual state of the internal organs of brood fish and the sub-adults of long-lived and late-maturing sturgeon species is important. Some of these non-contagious disorders are associated with hereditary causes, feeding with artificial feed, water quality and exposure to toxicants. The difficulty in preventing or identifying these diseases is often the lack of any external manifestations for a long period of time.

11.2.2 Diagnostics

Chebanov and Galich (2011, 2018a, 2018b, 2019) provide the detailed descriptions of the procedures for assessment, identification, and visualization of the main signs and degree of pathological anomalies and diseases of various sturgeon species, based on the interpretation of ultrasound sonograms. It should be noted that only a trained and experienced ultrasound technician in sturgeon anatomy can accurately identify some of the disorders described below, especially the diseases of the internal organs.

This Annex will review the most common disorders that are currently used in Russia as a basis for culling specimens from *ex situ* broodstocks in accordance with a new regulatory document (Ministry of Agriculture of the Russian Federation 2020).

11.2.3 Common Disorders

11.2.3.1 *Fatty ovarian tissue and decreasing reproductive capacity*

Fish held at a constant high temperature and fed a high fat diet, often have degeneration of germinal tissue and its subsequent replacement with adipose tissue and a sonogram reveals imitation egg-bearing ovigerous folds (Figure 11.2.1).

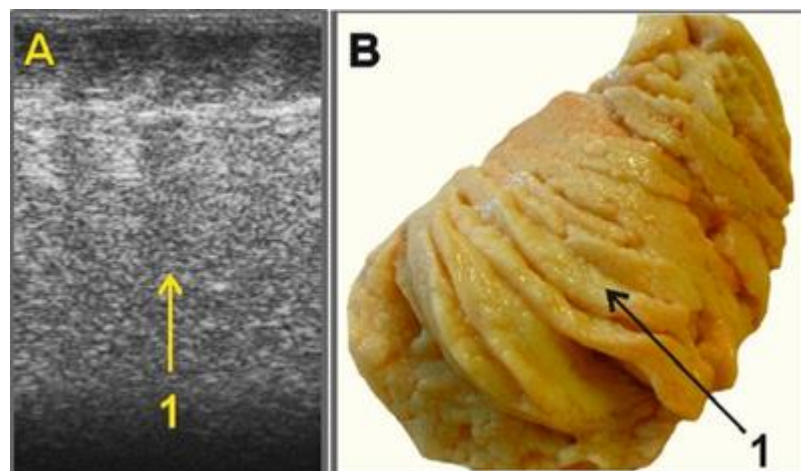


Figure 11.2.1. Frontal scanned ovary of *Acipenser baerii* with fatty degeneration (A) and a necropsy fragment of the ovary (B), arrows (1) indicate fatty ovarian tissue.

The incidence of fatty degeneration of Russian sturgeon gonads, in the Volga-Caspian region in the mid-1990s was quite high, ranging from 8-12.3% of the fish sampled (Romanov *et al.* 2001). Another sonogram of an ovary with excessive adipose tissue shows that the ovary has lost its typical structure (Figure 11.2.2).

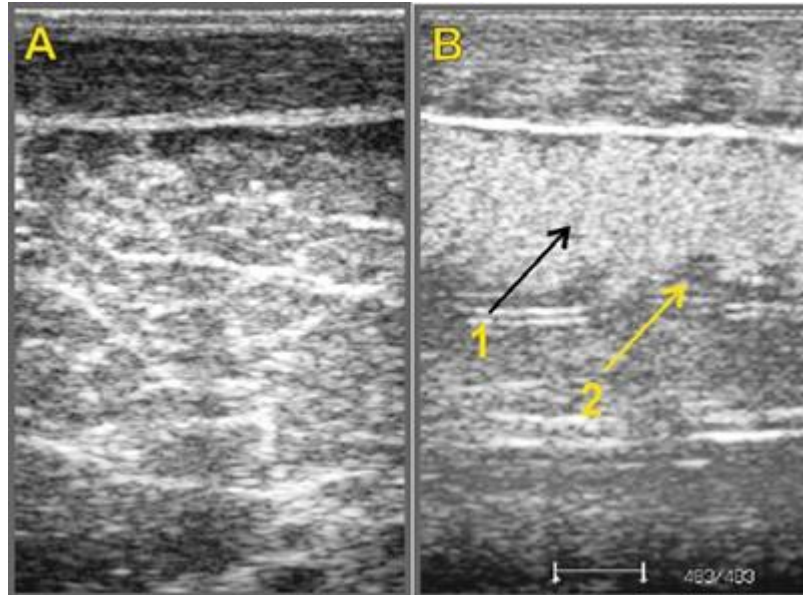


Figure 11.2. Sonogram of a female *Acipenser ruthenus* ovary in a state of degradation (A) and a normal previtellogenic ovary (B): arrow 1 indicates ovarian tissue (whitish), and arrow 2 ovarian fat (dark areas).

11.2.3.2 *Asynchronous gonadal development*

A serious disorder of gonadogenesis is the asynchronous development of the ovarian tissue (Figure 11.2.3). Kornienko (1998) reported its occurrence in the Azov basin and discussed how it could lead to a decrease in fertility and most likely the skipping of the next potential spawning. If this condition is prevalent on a sturgeon hatchery it indicates unfavorable conditions for fish and the urgent need for optimization of rearing conditions (e.g., feed and feeding regime, fish density and grading, seasonal changes in temperature or wintering) and then subsequent ultrasound monitoring of these fish, because depending on the degree of asynchronous development, this is not always a reason for culling females.

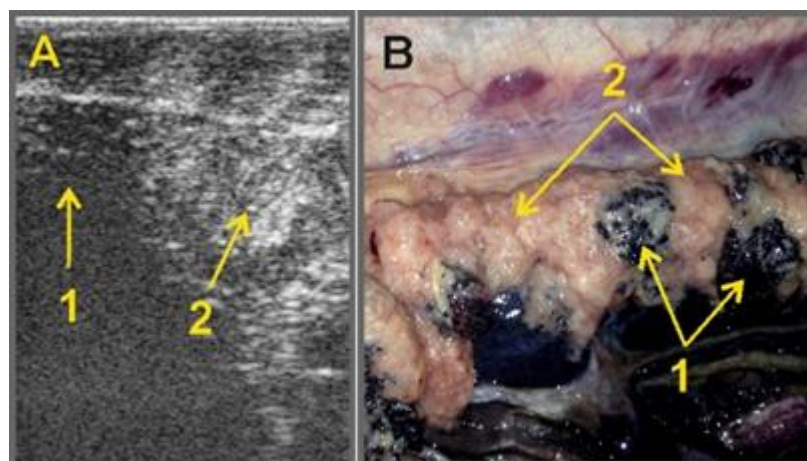


Figure 11.2.3. Asynchronous development of an *Acipenser baerii* ovary. The sonogram (A) and the necropsy view of the ovary (B) reveal post vitellogenic regions of the ovary (1) and early vitellogenic regions (2).

11.2.3.3 *Atresia of spawning capable oocytes*

In recent years in the Azov hatcheries the sensitivity of mature *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* females to warming temperatures has resulted in the increased incidence of atresia. Clearly, one of the factors influencing this is climate-related warming and an increase in average monthly water temperatures during the winter and spring months of 1.5-2.0 °C. Timely, accurate identification of atresia in maturing fish is important for sturgeon hatcheries, and the use of ultrasound has been successfully used to identify this condition.

As can be seen in Figure 11.2.4, in the upper part of the ovary, the echogenicity increases (compared to typical sonograms of mature females) (Chebanov and Galich 2011), the rows of oocytes are disrupted (white stripes are reflection off the egg shells), which indicates deformation of some of the eggs, and the light (gray) areas indicate already resorbed oocytes. These females are allowed to complete another cycle of maturation under improved rearing temperature regimes, and culling is advisable only if atresia occurs repeatedly.

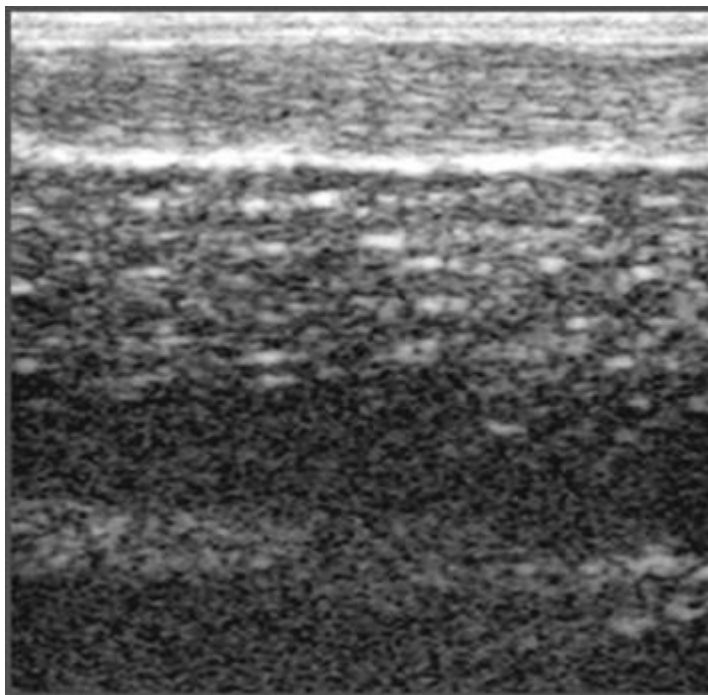


Figure 11.2.4. Sonogram of an *Acipenser stellatus* ovary undergoing atresia.

11.2.3.4 *Replacement of ovarian tissue with connective tissue*

The replacement of ovarian and testicular tissue with connective tissue (Figure 11.2.5) in various sturgeon species in natural water reservoirs was described in detail earlier for: *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* in the Caspian Sea (Romanov *et al.* 1990, 2001; Romanov and Sheveleva 1992); *Acipenser baerii* (Akimova and Ruban 1992); *A. gueldenstaedtii* and *Acipenser stellatus* in the Sea of Azov (Kornienko 1998); *Acipenser schrenckii* and *Huso dauricus* sturgeon (Koshelev *et al.* 2009). It has been established that this can lead to a decrease in their reproductive ability, and potential formation of tumors.

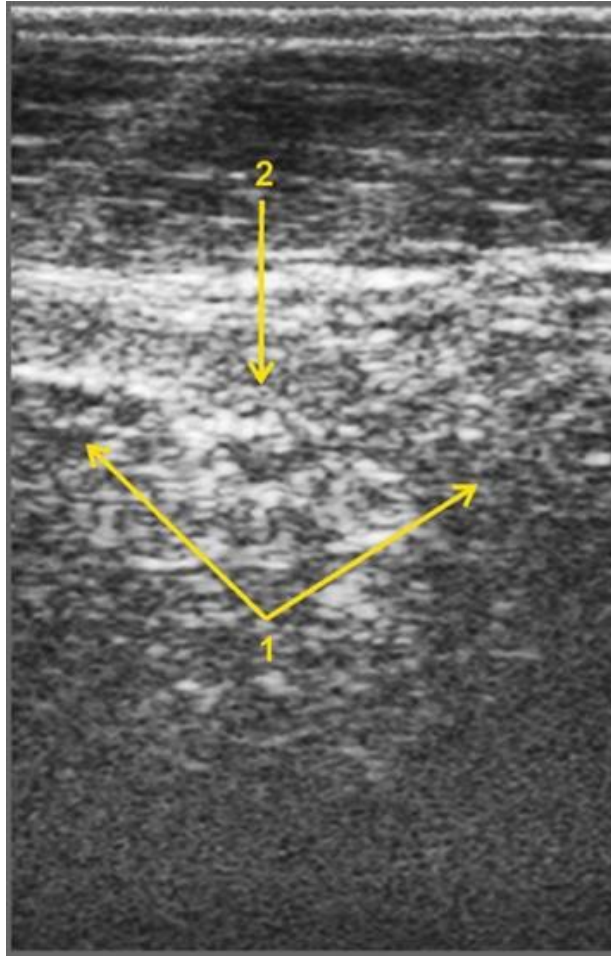


Figure 11.2.5. A frontal scanned sonogram of an *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* ovary with connective tissue (2; whiter streaks) within the ovarian tissue (1; darker regions).

11.2.3.5 Cysts in the gonads

Cysts are typically filled with liquid and have been observed in the ovaries of 1–3% of the Azov *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii* (Kornienko 1998). Those formed in the process of fatty degeneration of the egg-bearing ovigerous folds were organotypic tumors (Moiseyeva *et al.* 1997). The frequency of their occurrence in the Northern Caspian Sea in 1988, in relatively young individuals (5–6 years old) and first-spawning females (16–20 years old) was 8%. In *Acipenser stellatus*, the proportion of females with a similar pathology was 11% (Romanov *et al.* 2001).

Cysts found in sturgeon can be single or multiple (polycystic). As shown in the sonogram of an *Acipenser ruthenus* (Figure 11.2.6A), the cyst is visualized as a round anechoic (dark) area, encapsulated in an echogenic (white) envelope. However, the decision to cull females from the broodstock depends on the size of the cysts and their number. In cases of numerous mega cysts (Figure 11.2.6B), the individual would be culled.

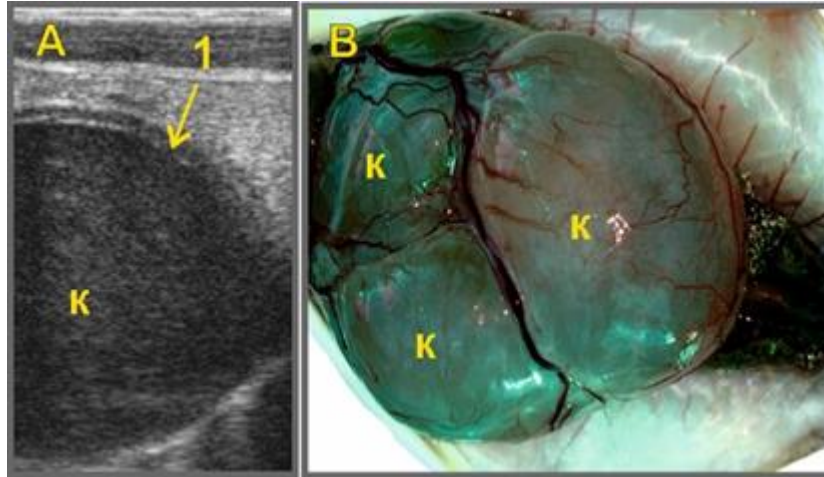


Figure 11.2.6. Ovarian cysts in *Acipenser ruthenus*. The sonogram (A) shows the large dark mega cyst (K) surrounded by the white cyst envelope (1) and the necropsy photo (B) reveals a three-chambered, highly vascularized mega cyst (K).

11.2.3.6 *Abnormalities of gonadogenesis in sturgeon males*

Often in sturgeon hatcheries the monitoring of male maturation is carried out less carefully than that of the females, which may lead to having fewer males reaching spawnable conditions. When holding males, it is important to maintain optimal temperature conditions in accordance with the stage of maturity, proper stocking densities and feeding regimes. It is important to limit the use of feeds with high quantities of soybean products as they can potentially be sources of phytoestrogens that can cause endocrine disorders in males (Bennetau-Pelissero and Le Menn 2017). Degeneration of the testis is visualized on sonograms as a hypoechoic area with a disturbed structure (Figure 11.2.7), while the medial edge of the gonad is hardly evident due to greater absorption of ultrasound by adipose tissue (Chebanov and Galich 2009, 2011).

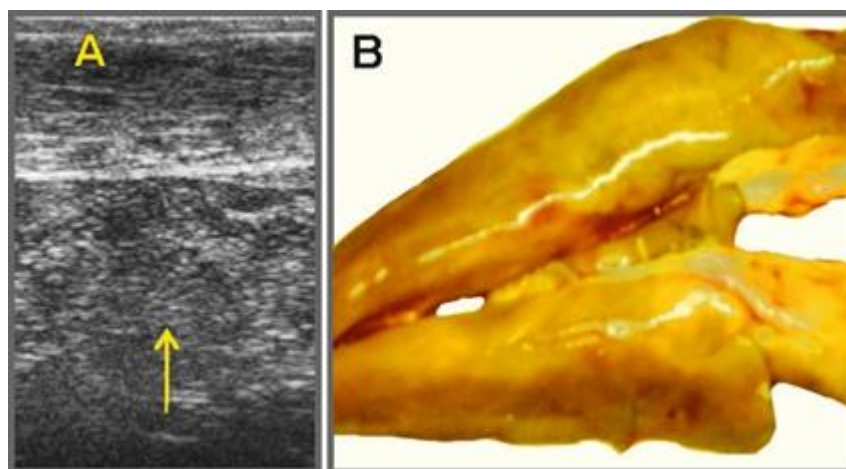


Figure 11.2.7. Sonogram revealing fatty degeneration (arrow) of testes in *Acipenser baerii* (A), and a necropsied view of the testes (B).

11.2.3.7 Hermaphroditism

The appearance of hermaphrodites among sturgeon is usually associated with disruption of hormonal regulation and an increase in endocrine disorders caused by the accumulation of toxic substances. The occurrence of hermaphrodites of various sturgeon species in natural water reservoirs and sturgeon farms has ranged from 3 to 10% (Chebanov and Galich 2017b), and in the Azov Sea basin, the occurrence of hermaphrodites 25 years ago reached 4% (Kornienko 1998). Hermaphroditism usually reveals itself as areas of ovary and testis (ovotestis) on the same gonad. Less common are fish in which one gonad is ovary and the other is testis.

There are synchronous and asynchronous forms of hermaphrodites. The asynchronous (non-functional) form manifests itself, for example, when small areas of testicular tissue are formed in a mature ovary (Romanov *et al.* 2001) or when small areas of ovaries with previtellogenic oocytes are found in the mature testes (Figure 11.2.8). For this reason, in some cases, ultrasound scanning of just small sections of the gonad can lead to erroneous determination of the sex of sturgeon. Scanning the entire length of both gonads is important.

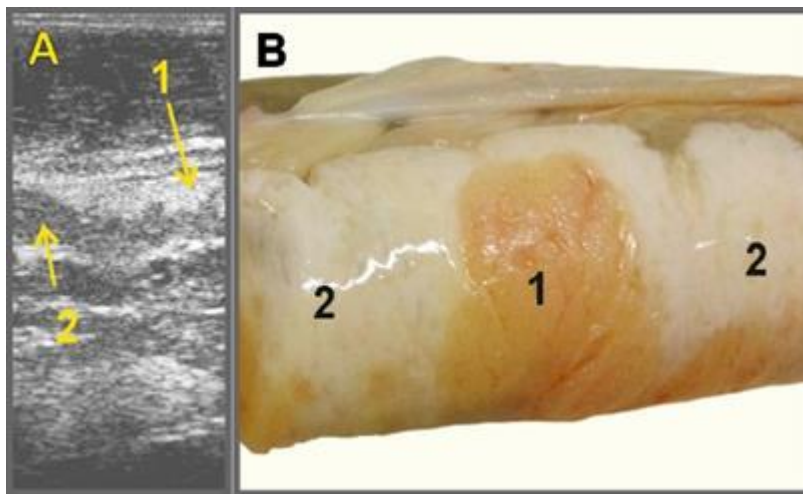


Figure 11.2.8. An asynchronous hermaphrodite of *Acipenser baerii*. The sonogram (A) has distinct regions of ovary (1) and testis (2), and the necropsy photo (B) clearly reveals the ovarian (1) and testicular (2) tissues.

In a synchronous ovotestis (functional form), sections of spawning capable ovary and testes are observed (Figure 11.2.9). The “bilateral” hermaphrodite of the *Acipenser baerii*, when one gonad is an ovary and the other is a testis, is shown in Figure 11.2.10.

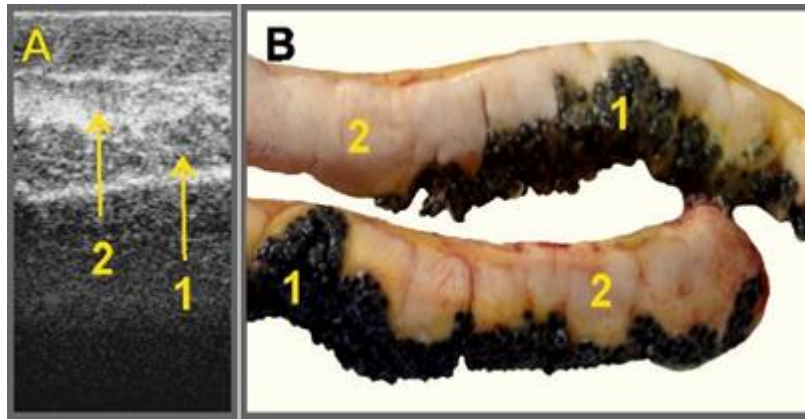


Figure 11.2.9. The sonogram of a synchronous functional hermaphrodite from an *Acipenser ruthenus* (A) and the ovotestes necropsy photo. Oocytes (1) and testis (2).

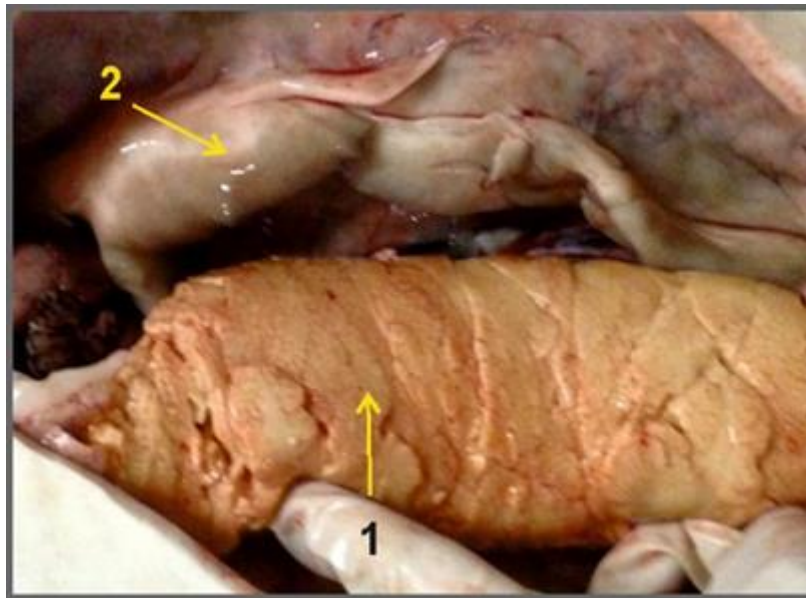


Figure 11.2.10. Necropsy view of a bilateral hermaphrodite of *Acipenser baerii*. Ovary (1) and testis (2).

11.2.3.7 Hermaphrodite with numerous neoplasms

After the resorption of oocytes in hermaphrodites, connective tissue growths are formed in the testes, which can transform into various neoplasms (Figure 11.2.11), cysts, tumors, and teratomas (Romanov *et al.* 2001). The interpretation of echograms for such developmental disorders is like that for cystosis (Chebanov and Galich 2018a, b, 2019).

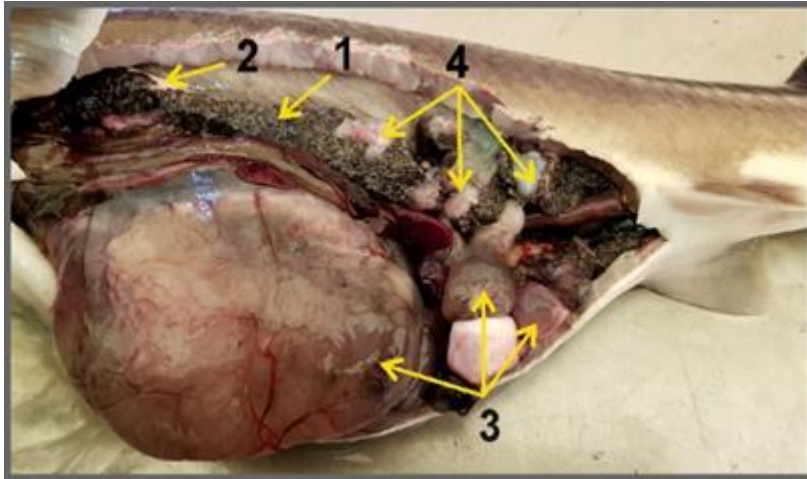


Figure 11.2.11. View of a hermaphrodite (intersex) *Acipenser ruthenus* with numerous neoplasms. Ovary (1), testis (2), cysts (3) and other neoplasms (4).

11.2.3.8 Diseases of the internal organs

The liver plays an important role in the synthesis of vitellogenin which is required for the normal development of oocytes. Therefore, early ultrasound monitoring of the liver in females, starting from 2–3 years of age, is of great importance for timely treatment or culling of sick individuals. The metabolism of lipids in the liver is affected by the composition of feed, feed rate and the rearing water temperature. Rearing of fish in constant warm recirculating aquaculture systems can lead fat infiltration of the liver, which is caused by the thermal effect on the process of phospholipid conversion (Figure 11.2.12).

Rearing of sturgeon of different sizes or species together (not recommended), especially at high stocking density, can instigate fatty liver in larger fish, which can subsequently lead to cirrhosis, profound shifts in calcium metabolism, and significant fluid build-up in the body cavity (ascites). Therefore, with cirrhosis (Figure 11.2.13), echo-negative ascites is evident around the liver (due to impaired metabolic processes, lymphatic drainage, etc.). Comprehensive diagnostics of the state of the liver of female sturgeons allows timely identification and elimination of errors in fish feeding or culling of fish with severe pathology.



Figure 11.2.12. Sonogram of the right lobe of a fatty liver (3) of a *Acipenser baerii*. Muscle layer (10), gall bladder (2) and liver parenchyma (3).

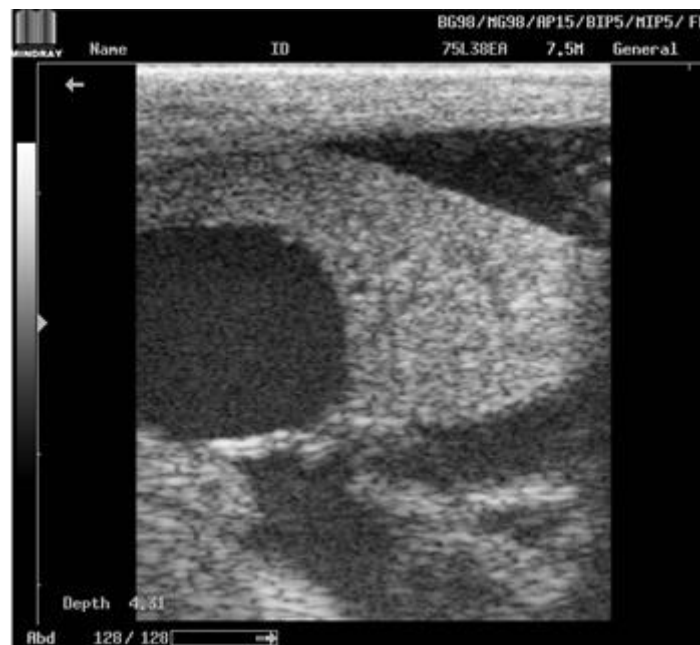


Figure 11.2.13. Sonogram of liver cirrhosis in a *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*. Gall bladder (1), liver (2), ascites (3).

Abnormalities in the kidneys are potential bioindicators of the level of environmental pollution, or possibly some internal parasitism or viruses. A population of 1-year old *Huso huso x Acipenser ruthenus* (150-300g body weight) on a fish farm had a 1% incidence of unilateral and bilateral abdominal distention and upon necropsy examination large nephroblastoma was observed that originated from the posterior kidney (Rahmati-Holasoo *et al.* 2018), similar to Figure 11.2.14A which illustrates a large heterogeneous neoplasm in

the posterior kidney of an *Acipenser ruthenus*. On the sonogram of the kidney area of this specimen (**Figure 11.2.14C**), a hypogenic (dark) area with bright hyperechoic septa is evident. Ascitic fluid is formed during transudative processes (accumulation of colorless fluid in body cavities and tissues), due to disruption of metabolic processes (Figure 11.2.15).

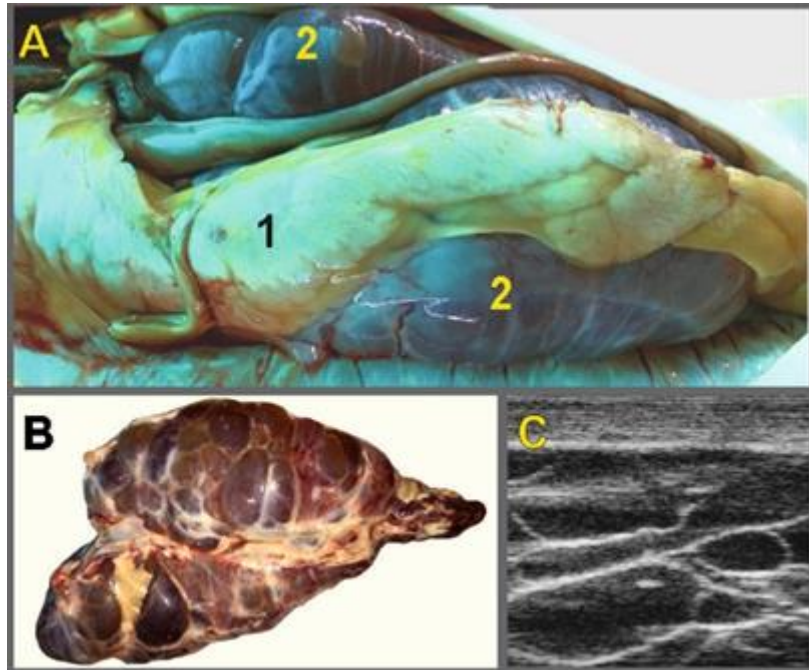


Figure 11.2.14. A large neoplasm in a male *Acipenser ruthenus*. A necropsy view of the abdomen (A) reveals the testis (1) and the grossly enlarged neoplasm in the kidney (2). Photo B shows the dissected-out kidney, and the sonogram of the neoplasm (C).

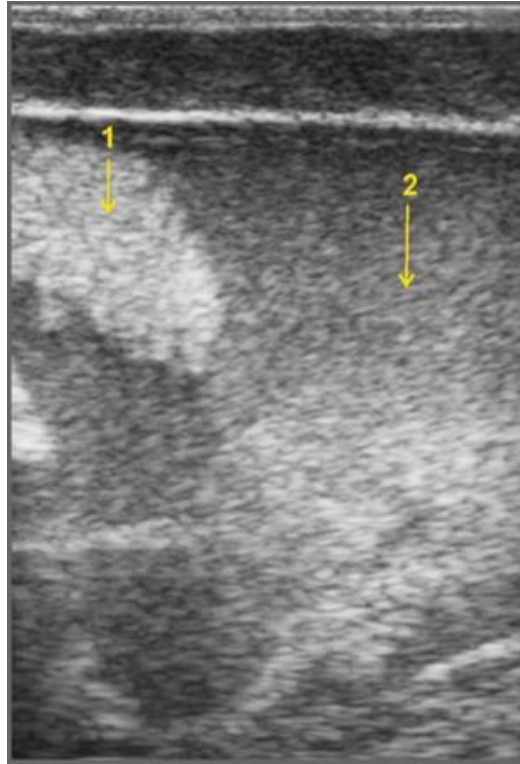


Figure 11.2.15. Sonogram of a female *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*, with ovarian tissue (1) and ascitic fluid in the body cavity (2).

Ultrasound scans of the heart can potentially identify heart pathologies like cardiac obesity (Figure 11.2.16), neoplasms, and pericardial effusion (Figure 11.2.17; Chebanov and Galich 2018b). In addition, it makes it possible to identify abnormalities in the heart functioning (e.g., bradycardia when reared at high temperatures). Guarda *et al.* (1997) showed that the most likely causes of spontaneous steatosis of *Acipenser transmontanus* during the intensive warm water rearing in Northern Italy were the unavailability of vitamin E and/or the insufficient antioxidant protection in the feed, resulting in the hepatotoxic effect of oxidized fish fat.

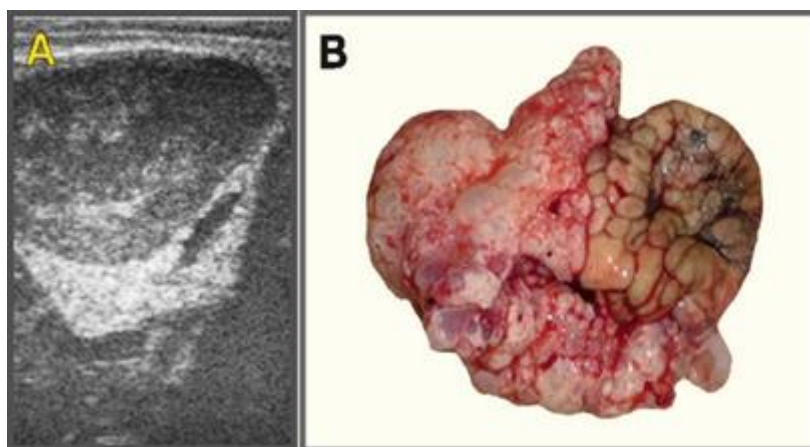


Figure 11.2.16. Sonogram (A) of a heart from an *Acipenser baerii* with a fatty ventricle, and the necropsy photo (B) of the removed heart.

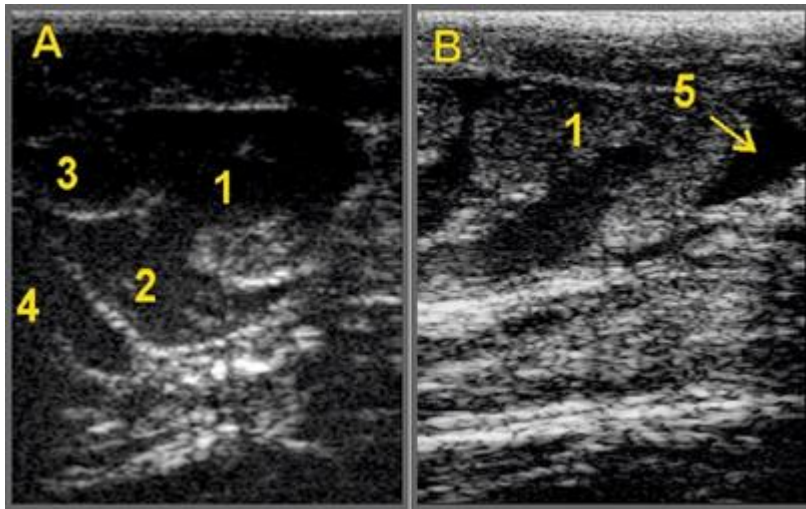


Figure 11.2.17. Sonograms of a normal heart of an *Acipenser ruthenus* (A) and a *Huso huso* heart with effusion in the pericardium (B). Ventricle (1), atrium (2), conus arteriosus (3), venous sinus (4), effusion (5).

The early diagnosis of neoplasms (tumors) with ultrasound can allow a hatchery to possibly isolate these individuals into a separate “hospital” tank and conduct scheduled examinations to follow the tumor(s) progress, although there are no established treatments for neoplasms in sturgeon. In fact, there have been very few cases of any type of surgical removal of tumors, or chemotherapy used on fish (Ferraro *et al.* 2024). An example of a sonogram from an *Acipenser baerii* ovary with neoplasms is presented in Figure 11.2.18.

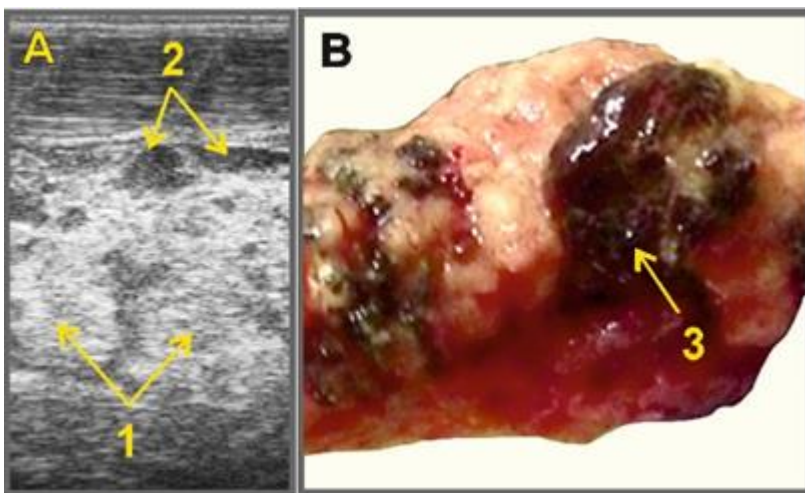


Figure 11.2.18. Neoplasm (3) in the ovary (B) of an *Acipenser baerii*. The sonogram (A) identifies some hyperechoic inclusions (1) and hypoechoic inclusions (2).

In addition to the cases reviewed above, ultrasound scanning also allows to quickly identify disorders of the digestive system, such as an intestinal obstruction (ileus) and other diseases (not manifested externally), and some of those have been described earlier (Chebanov and Galich 2009, 2011, 2018b).

The use of ultrasound to conduct health assessments of valuable broodstock, especially those that are endangered, could non-invasively identify some internal diseases (anomalies), and potentially allow time to implement measures for their possible treatment (e.g., change culture conditions, diet, water quality) or lead to the decision to cull fish with serious untreatable pathologies.

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Chapter 12

Assessment of fitness for release

Marie-Laure Acolas, Mikhail S. Chebanov., Thomas Friedrich, Elena V. Galich, James A. Crossman, Joern Gessner

12.1 Introduction and rationale for fitness assessments

The term fitness developed within evolutionary biology and corresponds to the adaptive capacity of an individual. It can be defined as its ability to transmit its genes, i.e., to reproduce and give fecund offspring. While there is no universal definition of fitness (Stearns, 1976) reproduction along with other performance metrics (e.g., growth and survival) are typically considered as criteria for fitness.

The performance of the fish results from a combination of their genetic properties and the effects of the rearing environment. Limiting domestication selection is a key objective of this guideline since domestication can negatively affect the performance and survival of individuals after release and therefore impact the status of populations under natural conditions (Araki *et al.* 2008; Sulak *et al.* 2014). It may decrease the resistance to diseases (Lukyanenko *et al.* 1984) and the adaptation to environmental fluctuations (Johnsson *et al.* 2014), and induce malformations of the reproductive system (ref), as well as causing behavioral deficiencies (Huntingford 2004, Shumway 1999, Kellison *et al.* 2000). In their natural habitats, fishes experience environmental challenges and adapt their physiology and behavior in order to cope with them effectively. Much of this flexibility is supported and influenced by cognition and neural plasticity (Ebbesson & Braithwaite 2012; Salvanes *et al.* 2013).

Over the last ten years the evidence for adverse impacts of hatchery practices upon fitness has increasingly been documented. In an attempt to improve the responsiveness of fish that have been reared under hatchery conditions, several approaches to improve the behavioral plasticity and resultingly the adaptability have been used. Enrichment of the rearing environment (e.g., variability of rearing conditions) have been the prime target of such attempts (Anderson *et al.* 2022; Johnsson *et al.* 2014) as highlighted in Chapter 10.

It is proposed, that fitness related metrics can serve as indicators of performance for juveniles produced within *ex situ* programs upon release. In order to evaluate the potential of the juveniles produced, tests have to be established that address relevant metrics and

provide meaningful results that are indicative for their ability to survive upon release. Their relevance needs to be assessed through monitoring of the performance of the tested fish after release.

The assessment of the fish upon release is an ambitious target that requires a rigid experimental design and substantial effort to discriminate different treatments, performances in the hatchery and upon release through recapture and monitoring. In contrast, the performance of the fish produced should be determined using criteria that provide an indication of the adaptability in the wild to improve the rearing practices and thus the quality of the fish to be released.

These assessments may include:

- Assessment of different rearing environments (e.g., enriched vs traditional),
- Assessment of performance of different life stages, genetic groups, and year classes,
- Incorporation of post-release monitoring results into the *ex situ* program to continually improve rearing methodology.

12.2 Performance based metrics and indicators

A list of fitness related metrics composed of survival and growth parameters as well as morphological, behavioral and eco-physiological characteristics is presented here which are used for the assessment of the adaptability of an individual. Their appropriateness may vary according to the life stage and metrics considered. The metrics proposed are commonly used as a proxy for fitness for pre-release in different species while their relevance may not have been fully verified (Chebanov and Galich 2010).

In order to be applied, the tests need to be easy to conduct, repeatable and address the objectives.

They can be part of the regular facility practices (i.e., survival assessment) and be assessed directly by hatchery staff through routine tasks. Some tests can be more difficult to implement (i.e., experimentation) and may require scientific support and/or legal permits. In order to be able to compare the performance between the years, it is important to have standardized structured tests, that are adjusted using post-release monitoring results or new research results.

12.2.1 Survival under hatchery conditions

Survival represents the direct response of fish to the hatchery environment and practices and the quality of the progeny. Survival, especially when compared between different batches and years, might nevertheless be used as an indicator for the performance under the given conditions.

While important for the output of the hatchery, it may not predict success in the wild since the behavioral properties of the individual to survive in any of the given conditions will vary considerably (see Chapter 3).

In the hatchery, daily accounting of dead fish and estimate of a survival rate is a common process. For enriched rearing in extensive structures, such as ponds, the daily mortality cannot be assessed precisely and assessments should be carried out periodically during the rearing process and prior to release. This metric can be integrated with post-release monitoring results when the success of the group in the wild has been assessed.

12.2.2 Growth and condition under hatchery conditions

The growth of the fish in the controlled environment allows further assessment of the response of fish to hatchery rearing conditions. This can be calculated as an absolute growth rate between different time points, or as a comparison of growth relationships (e.g., weight-length) among different groups or hatchery environments. The regular assessment of weight and length during rearing is common and should be completed on an individual level. This allows the relative condition of different rearing groups or environments to be compared directly.

Growth and condition of the fish following release indicates the adaptation to the conditions in the wild as well as the availability of the food base. An increased condition of an individual at release may result in initial higher survival. The verification of this context requires substantial post-release monitoring over a long time period to ensure differences between different year classes and conditions can be evaluated. Ideally, these values can be used to compare performance post-release to fish in the hatchery.

12.2.3 General morphology: malformations, morphology and body colors

Morphological metrics have been developed during Soviet times as indicators for the adaptability of the fish produced in hatcheries upon release as summarized by Chebanov & Galich (2011). Since their assessment focused mainly on the Ponto Caspian species, the comparable information is lacking for other species. The significance and the applicability therefore should be verified to ensure relevance for the species in question. The assessment of the morphological metrics can be simplified by sampling the fish prior to the release. This reduces the amount of handling and allows for a combined image analysis.

12.2.3.1 *Malformations*

Malformations are a key indicator for genetic or rearing-related effects adversely affecting the development of the embryo. Several symptoms have been described in detail (Akimova *et al.* 2004) while the underlying causes for malformations were reported in rare cases only (Igumnova 1989; Krasnodembskya 1989). The developmental processes involved have a genetical and an environmental aspect that contribute to the phenotype observed. As such, the utilization of malformations is considered more of a quality assessment for the selection

of matching broodstock as well as the handling practice in the hatchery while the impact upon the survival in the wild might be unclear in many cases.

For larvae and juveniles, the most prevalent abnormalities in the body shape include malformation of head shape, curvature of body and tail; underdevelopment of pectoral fins; structural abnormalities in the fin fold, absence of one or both eyes, too short gill covers, underdevelopment of barbels, schistasis of the nasal bridge, underdevelopment of the olfactory pits (Akimova *et al.* 2004). However, the impact of these deformations upon fitness varies (e.g., schistasis, and absence of one or both eyes). Malformations such as oedema, skeletal axis deformations and heart malformations are indicators oxythermal stress (Delage *et al.* , 2020).

For yolk-sac larvae, the height to length ratio of the yolk sac (in *H. huso*, *A. gueldenstaedtii* and *A. baerii* in the range of 0.55–0.69) is described as an important indicator of larval deformations. For malformed (pear-like or oval) yolk sacs, this range is decreased to 0.29–0.44 (Belyaeva, 1983). Despite of individual and species-specific variability a low yolk-sac size indicates that endogenous reserves are insufficient to provide normal growth and development until transition to external feeding, while large yolk-sac size during the differentiation of the alimentary system delays the secretory function of the epithelium (Gerbilsky, 1957; Bogdanova, 1972).

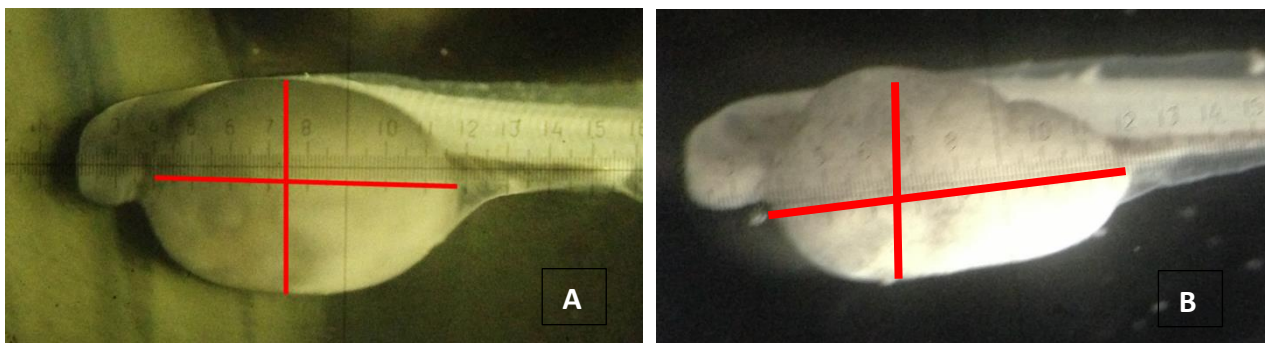


Figure 12.1. Height-length assessment of yolk sac (*A. stellatus*) in normal embryo (A) and underdeveloped endogenous reserves (B)

While the symptoms have been described for 3-4 species of sturgeon only, the underlying causes for the malformations and their impact upon fitness after release have not been fully understood.

When assessed for each group (i.e., genotype, cohort, rearing practice) intended for stocking as part of the hatchery rearing process the assessment of these malformation or might be used for differential assessment of compatibility of crossings and the suitability of the rearing conditions.

12.2.3.2 Body shape

Apart from malformations as an indicator of adverse impacts during ontogeny, the overall phenotype of the fish can influence performance such as swimming capacity and stamina. It

has been noted in several studies that predator presence increases gross morphology in Percid and Gasterosterid fishes resulting in longer, deeper caudal region and shallower, shorter anterior region which increases burst swim speeds (Walker 1997; Walker and Bell 2000; Spoljaric and Reimchen 2007). In *A. ruthenus* it is described that pre-anal length and pectoral fin length are larger for wild specimen (Lenhardt *et al.* 2012).

In young of year the body height as well as the protrusions of the scutes are stimulated by exposition to predator scent (Gessner *et al.* 2023), (see Figure 12.2.) a response that is common for instance in cyprinids and a variety of other families of fish too (Langerhans 2010; Domenici *et al.* 2008; Brönmark and Miner 1992; Andersson *et al.* 2006; Johansson and Andersson 2009; Poleo *et al.* 1995).

12.2.4 Behavior

The development of behavior is closely linked to the environmental conditions during early ontogeny. Variable environmental stimuli enhance neural development and behavior al plasticity (Johansson *et al.* , 2014; Salvanes & Braithwaite, 2006), rendering them prime additions for conservation rearing. Metrics linked to behavior can be complex to assess. They require video tracking which depends upon specialized equipment (i.e., Daniovision, swimming chambers) or computer-based assessments programs (i.e., ethovision (Biarlanova 2016); Behavioquant (Staaks *et al.* 2004) to ease the assessment. Also, AI solutions provide promising tools for increasingly complex analyses.

Further metrics such personality types (bold versus shy) (ref) or predator recognition, are not proposed here since they are too difficult to be implemented routinely.

12.2.4.1 *Escape response*

The test for the escape response assesses the responsiveness of the central nervous system (CNS) in juveniles to rapid environmental changes. It allows to assess the control over the locomotory activity upon the exposure to strong sensory stimuli (visual, tactile, hydrodynamic). The locomotor response is considered a proxy of the ability to avoid predators (Tikhomirov & Khabumugisha 1997; Chebanov & Galich 2011). In the literature two antipredator behaviors are described: freezing or escapement (Ref). If the individual does not change its behavior or if there is a delay in its reaction, chances of survival are decreased.

Escape movement upon stimulus exposition can be assessed visually in real time or by using video tracking. The trials assess the juvenile response to external stressors (light, sound of various frequencies, tactile stimuli). The test has been established and standardized for the Ponto-Caspian species utilizing a circular aquarium (1 m diameter for a 3-month old juvenile for example), with its bottom divided into eight sectors (Chebanov & Galich 2011). The mean number of sectors crossed over time by a fish during the acclimation period is determined as acclimation locomotory activity (AA, N/min). When the locomotor activity reaches a constant value, the mean number of zones crossed is considered as a background activity

(BA, N/min). After exposure to the stressor, the reactivity (RA, N/min), an average number of crossed zones during the subsequent 30 seconds, is determined. During this assessment, the juveniles can show both negative and positive response to external stressors. Applying video tracking software provides increased numbers of parameters such as total distance covered, swimming velocity, turn angle etc. before and after the stimuli (Carrera-Garcia *et al.* 2017; Benhaim, Millot).

12.2.4.2 Exploratory behavior

The rearing process and the associated environmental cues shape the cognition and the behavior of the fish. Its response to new stimuli largely depends upon the past experience and the responses they triggered. The response of an individual upon the encounter of a new environment potentially has a massive impact upon the probability of predator encounter. Flight upon predator presence is the ultimate response while behavior types are impacting the probability of the encounter in the first place. Cautious fish reveal a lower encounter probability than bold fish. It has been shown that fish from enriched rearing are more cautious and capable of orienting in a new environment (Radomska *et al.* subm.). Therefore, the assessment of the behavior in a new environment is tested in a y-shaped maze (Fig. 1/2) and the behavior is recorded to determine the utilization of the available areas, the preference for sheltered or open areas and the exploration of new, confined regions of the tank. While the results are closely correlated with the expression of genes in the telencephalon region of the brain (Ruiz *et al.* 2018), the assessment requires to sacrifice the fish. For this reason, the gene expression is not included in this set of criteria.

Increased boldness results in more movement in open spaces and as such increases the chances to find food but is associated to the costs of increased predation risk. While general differences were noted between groups reared under different conditions (Gessner *et al.* 2023), these results are revealing high variability due to personality types of the different individuals (Roy *et al.* 2022; Wolff *et al.* 2022). But the lack of reference value for those complicated tests lead the choice not to select them here; globally research and reference values for wild fish are lacking for sturgeon species.

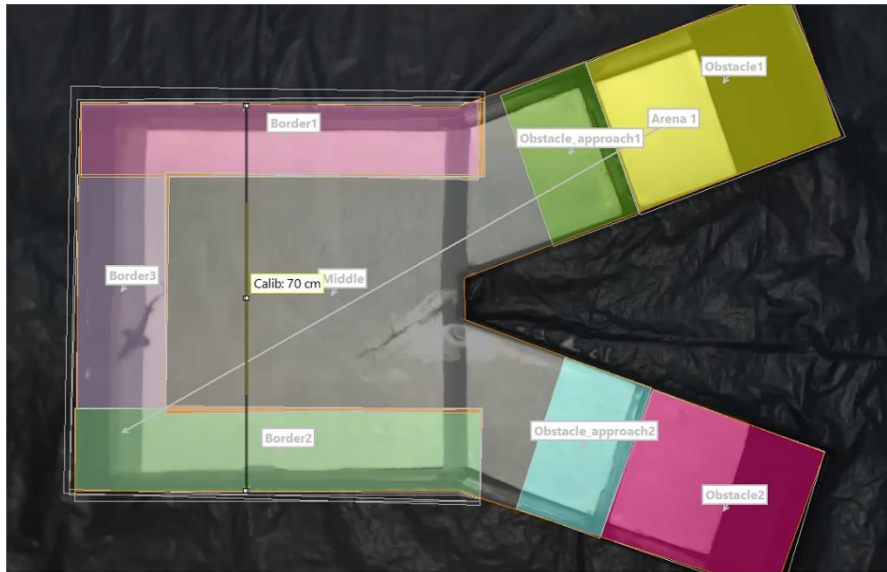


Figure 12.2. Maze for behavioral testing of juvenile sturgeon; the borders of the open and protected spaces as well as the areas that were separates by obstacles (vents) are color-coded

12.2.4.3 Evaluation of adaptive abilities in the “Open space test”

The “open space” test is designed to assess fitness of juveniles, their response to stimuli (visual, tactile, hydrodynamic) on the basis of the response of the central nervous system (CNS) (Tikhomirov and Khabumugisha, 1997). The trials involve the estimation of experimental juvenile behavioral response to different external stressors (light and sound of various frequencies). The juveniles should be placed in a round aquarium (1 m diameter), with its bottom divided into eight sectors (Fig. 12/3). The number of bottom lines crossed by a fish during a certain period is to be recorded.

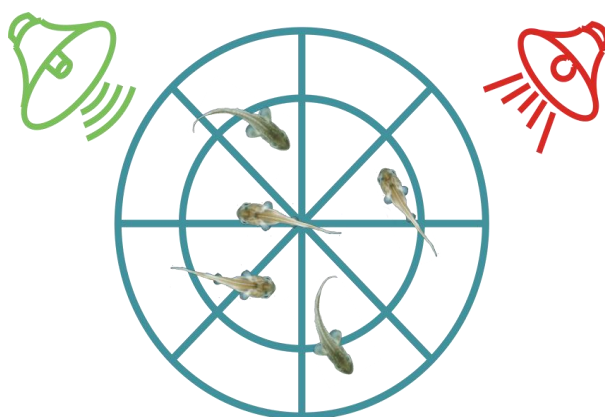


Figure 12.3. Schematic drawing of the Open Space Test setup with segments being marked on the tank bottom to assess locomotor activity of the fish tested

When (3- 5 min) the locomotory activity becomes more or less constant, the mean number of bottom segments that are crossed per time interval is considered as the background activity (BA, unit/min).

Table 12.1. Chronological setup of the Open Space test

Time, min	Stages of the test
1 - 3	Adaptation of the fish to new conditions
3 - 5	Post-adaptation period
Exposure to low-frequency noise	
5 - 7	Observation of noise response
Exposure to high frequency noise	
7 - 9	Observation of noise response
Exposure to constant light (5000 lx)	
9 - 11	Observation of illumination response
Exposure to short-term light	
11 - 13	Observation of illumination response

Following the successive exposure to noise and light, the respective reactivity (RA, unit/min) is calculated on the bases of the average number of crossings during 30 s after the exposition. On the basis of the gained absolute characteristics, **the relative indices** are calculated as follows:

$$IA\% = AA/BA \times 100\%$$

$$IR\% = RA/BA \times 100\%,$$

where:

IA% – activation index;

AA (unit/min) – approximate locomotory activity;

BA (unit/min) – background locomotory activity;

IR – reactivity index;

RA (unit/min) –activity following exposition to challenge.

Data for the comparative analysis of the locomotory activity have been established in the Open Space Test for *A. stellatus* juveniles for a domesticated form and for fish obtained from wild breeders collected in the Sea of Azov (Chebanov *et al.* 2008). The results are presented in the Table 12.2.

Table 12.2. Reference values for the Open Space Test results exemplified in offspring of domesticated and wild *A. stellatus* (after Chebanov, Galich and Merkulov, 2008).

Group	AA	BA	IA	IR1	IR2	IR3	IR4
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wild	34.5	13.2	261.3	110.2	132.9	99.5	89.7
domesticated (farmed)	39.7	19.7	201.5	88.9	71.3	57.5	42.9

With:

AA – Approximate locomotory activity;

BA – Background locomotory activity;

IA – Activation index;

IR1 – Reactivity index during the first 30 s after exposure to low-frequency noise;

IR2 – Reactivity index during the first 30 s after exposure to high-frequency noise;

IR3 – Reactivity index during the first 30 s after the exposure to constant;

IR4 – Reactivity index during the first 30 s after exposure to light flashes

A refined approach to the Open Space Test is suggested by Tikhomirov and Khabumugisha, (1997) including the determination of swimming capacity of juveniles and their differentiation by hydrodynamic traits under hatchery conditions which would result in easier the application of the test when using a system specifically designed for the purpose (“Ichthyotest”). While the long-term analysis of data allows to assess the effects of the rearing conditions and if properly planned allows the optimization of the biotechnology of controlled reproduction and rearing of sturgeon, the link to post release survival remains undetermined for the time being.

Full installation of the “Ichthyotest” module contains the main classical physiological experimental methods used in studies of the receptor complex and the reactivity of the Central nervous system as a response to the specially selected stimuli (Tikhomirov, 2016). The device is intended for express-diagnostics of the individual batches of sturgeon of different age groups.

The module includes the following tests:

- “open space” - evaluation of reactivity of the Central nervous system: new environment, vibro-acoustics stimulus, the model predator – 3 parameters;
- “conditioned reflexes|”; - the rate of the reflex, the time of remembering the conditioned stimulus, the rate of extinction of the reflex - 3 parameters;
- “hydrodynamic tube”; - the assessment of muscular endurance: resistance to the flow of water at increasing speeds – 3 option;
- “chemical test” - reactivity of chemoreception organs in food and chemical irritants – chemicals found in the natural environment: the involvement (attractant) or avoidance (repellents) camera setup with the stimuli.

As a result of series of tests to derive a comprehensive assessment of the quality of the party of sturgeon juveniles in the form of the ratio of environmental compliance (REC).

While the long-term analysis of data allows to assess the effects of the rearing conditions and if properly planned allows the optimization of the biotechnology of controlled reproduction and rearing of sturgeon, the link to post release survival remains undetermined for the time being.

12.2.4.4 *Feeding behavior (novel prey test, buried prey test)*

Rapid food uptake following release is an important factor to ensure the fast acclimatization to the new environment and sufficient reserves to cope with the increased energy requirements caused by feed search and aversion of predators. Prey organisms typically are associated with or buried within the sediment.

To evaluate these capacities, tests in the hatchery can be implemented in simple tanks such as novel prey tests (Carrera-Garcia *et al.* 2017) or buried prey test (Acolas & Gesset 2014; Camara-Ruiz *et al.* 2019; Gessner *et al.* 2023). Video analysis can be applied to assess the onset of food search attempts and the total number of attempts of feed uptake over time. The effectiveness of the feed search is verified by the recovery of the feed items. The earlier the feed search behavior starts, the more targeted the feeding attempts are (overlap of prey sites and feeding attempts) and the higher the success rate, the better the fish are prepared for release and subsequent survival. The approach requires to develop a set of metrics for the given species and the conditions under which the experiment takes place to define thresholds for effective and ineffective feeding.

The search for feed in the sediment and its acquisition can be enhanced in the hatcheries by providing live prey or by training juvenile to search for preys at the bottom (c.f. training schools see Camara-Ruiz *et al.* 2018). Since sturgeon are benthic-demersal and feed on the ground, the way to distribute the food on the bottom of the tanks results in increased effectiveness of feed uptake (Camara-Ruiz *et al.* 2019) which has also been tested in flounder species (Takahashi *et al.* 2013). This method furthermore, has the potential to also limit avian predation in the wild since fish when released will not search for food at the surface.

12.2.5 Ecophysiology

12.2.5.1 *Swimming capacity and metabolic rate*

The development of ecophysiological metrics such as stamina during swimming also depend upon the rearing conditions encountered during ontogeny. The swimming capacity (e.g., the duration an individual swims at a certain speed) does not only relate to the training it encountered with regard to current velocity but also to the variability of other rearing conditions such as temperature fluctuations (Camara-Ruiz *et al.* 2017).

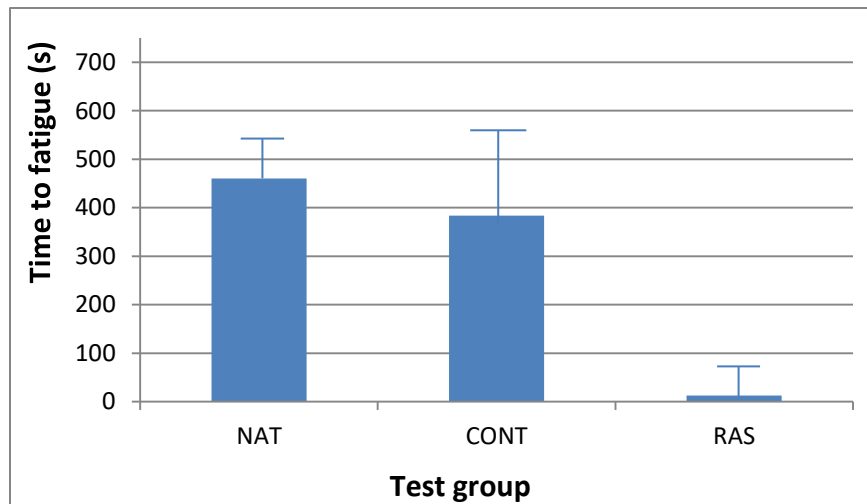


Figure 12.4. Duration of swimming in juvenile *A. oxyrinchus* from near natural, control (well water flow through) and RAS rearing at a current velocity of 3 bl/s (after Gessner *et al.* 2023)

Swimming performance can be differentiated into different categories such as constant or sustained, elevated and burst swimming capacity. For the survival in a new environment, the burst swimming capacity is most important since it determines the capacity of the individual to avoid or escape a predator. Direct observation or video tracking is used to assess the behavior while the use of swimming chambers (ref), adapted to the size of the fish tested, provides information about the metabolic rate and the critical swimming speed (U-crit) values per batch (average, variability). The outcome of the assessment provides a relative measure to compare the performance of different batches of offspring or rearing background. Since the performance is largely size and age related, the metrics as well as the thresholds for fitness need to be determined for each species separately, which largely limits the applicability of the metric under practical conditions.

12.2.5.2 Adaptation of pigmentation

The reaction of melanophores (pigment cells) in response to a change of background color is indicative for the responsiveness of the neuroendocrine system (Yarzhombek & Zhukova 2019) to light and changing background color following the exposition in different environments (see Figure 12.5). Since the melanophore reaction is an adaptive response to changing environmental conditions, it has an adaptive significance allowing the fish to blend in with its environment (Svanback & Eklov, 2011) and thereby reducing predator contact and enhancing survival in the wild

(Krasnodembskaya 1978, 1994) .



Figure 12.5. Setup of the challenging test for pigmentation and melanophore response (after Chebanov, 2006)

In sturgeons, primary (diurnal) and secondary (background) melanophore reactions were studied at different periods of the larvae and fry life. The primary ones are daily changes in the functional state of melanophores at changes in light intensity between day and night. The secondary reactions of melanophores to the background (white or black) of the containers (tanks), in which they are assessed, appear later at the age of 10 dph and are especially clearly manifested at the age of 25 dph.

To assess the aggregation and dispersion of melanophores a scoring system with five levels from 1 (minimal) to 5 (maximum extent of melanophore extension) has been developed in the Ponto Caspian species to describe the melanophore response (Figure 12/6) The adaptive response of melanophores varies between body regions. It has been shown that its significance is highest when tested at 6.5 days post hatch (dph) at temperatures of 21-22°C on the rostrum and lateral body surface, or between 11 and 25 dph in the pectoral fins (Krasnodembskaya, 1978, 1994; Galich, 2000a; Galich and Chebanov, 2004). The larvae were placed in plastic containers (10 L) with a light bottom and inner sides and a dark bottom and inner sides (see Figure 12/5). The metrics for the melanophore reaction needs to be verified on a species-specific level with regard to timing of the responsiveness and the extent of the response.

The period of complete adaptation to a light background in a physiologically healthy sturgeon larva corresponds to 45-60 min., while that to a black background – to 75-120 min. The dermal melanophores of the head are first to change their functional state; further the melanophores of the lateral surface of the body change (Krasnodembskaya, 1978).

To avoid a shortage of oxygen dissolved in the water, that lead to persistent aggregation of the pigment, regardless of the background coloration, the water was constantly aerated and the oxygen content was recorded every 15 min.

The optimal time for experiments conducting is about noon – 2 pm – to prevent the overlap of “primary” (diurnal) and “background” reactions, which have the opposite direction under certain conditions.

The assessment aims at 70% of the fish assessed after the transfer to white tanks reveal a mi-Index of 1 or 2; after exposition in the black tank 80% of the fish should reveal a mi-Index of 4 or 5.

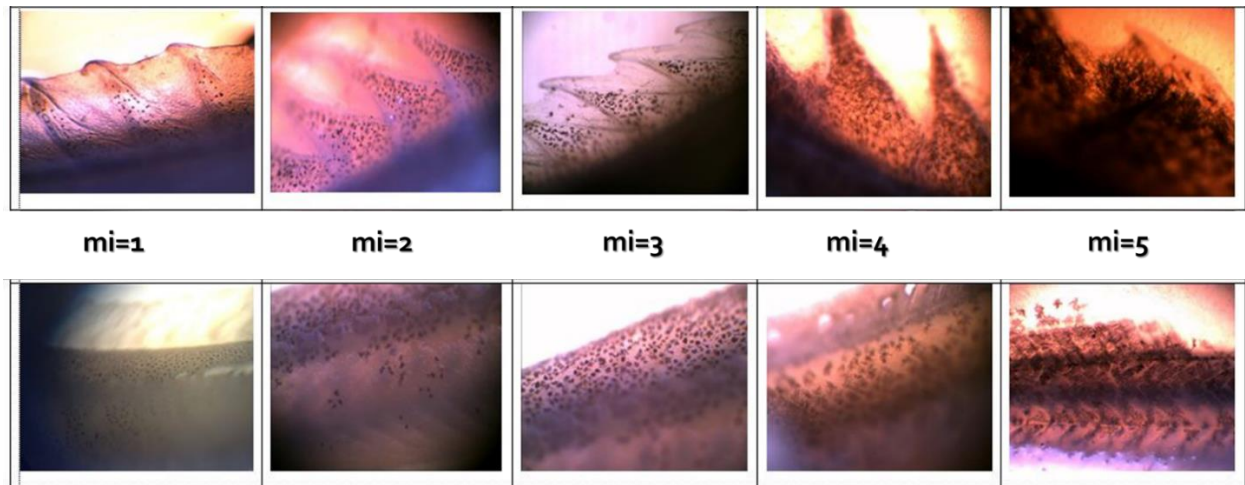


Figure 12.6. Index to characterize melanophore development to light/dark tank coloration for juvenile (26dph) sturgeon with mi=1 being minimal pigment aggregation (light body color) and mi=5 being maximum dispersion (dark color) on the dorsal scute surface (upper row) and the lateral body surface (lower row) (after Chebanov, 2016)

The determination of the general morphological metrics prior to release (body shape, scute shape, color) can be simplified by proper photographic documentation during the embryonic development for all batches and rearing conditions. This provides the advantage to be able to go back on the pictures once new parameters of relevance are identified. This task can be carried out by the hatchery team or support teams (i.e., scientific teams, NGO ...). Open source image analysis for measurement are also available (i.e., Imagej ©). The individuals subsampled for the pictures need to be anesthetized (see Chapter 6) and can be released afterwards.

12.3 Synthesis of the metrics proposed to assess fitness related metrics before release

In Table 12.3, the metrics proposed to assess fitness are summarized. Part of the metrics are already part of the rearing practice in most hatcheries (i.e., survival, size, malformations rate assessment) which make them relatively easy to implement; provided that their measurement is standardized and that each group (genotype, cohort, rearing practice if applicable) dedicated to be released is assessed independently.

The assessment and interpretation of behavioral metrics still under development and reliable metrics are still unavailable for most species. We have selected here the metrics that are the most straight forward to interpret (i.e., diel behavior for larvae and juvenile, swim-up behavior of larvae, feeding behavior, swimming behavior and escape response).

Reference values are available only for a few parameters provided in Table 12.1. However, those indicators should be analyzed all together and not separately to take in account potential confounding factors. For example, body shape parameters as well as swimming speed should be analyzed together with the individual size.

We suggest to carry out the tests only a few days or weeks before release (except the parameters that are part of the rearing routine i.e., survival, size/growth and malformation) to have a reference of the state of the fish representative of its performance at release. For fish released older than larvae, we acknowledge that it would be relevant to have test results at different moment of the ontogeny since some skills can be acquired in a stepwise manner but that would be part of a research program.

Assessment of fitness related metrics does not interfere with the breeding plans that aim at maintaining as much diversity as possible (see Chapter 6). The results can be used as a first assessment of the phenotypic plasticity of the different crosses obtained in the hatcheries under different rearing practices. But this approach can be highly dependent upon the perception and expectations (norms and beliefs) of the persons running the tests while the comparison with results derived from other species with differing ecology might also be misleading (e.g. Salmonids).

Thresholds to absolutely determine the impact of the metrics tested upon survival are lacking completely. The fate of fish with low performance in the tests described remains unclear. As such, their exclusion cannot be justified while training schools might have a beneficial effect on the post release behavior (Camara-Ruiz *et al.* 2018). In this respect, establishing absolute thresholds for some of the metrics described will be a long and tedious process. Indeed, impacts upon behavior will already be manifested as a result of mate choice, fertilization process (Kynard *et al.* 2010), carry through the incubation of fertilized eggs and the free embryo phases (Mc Adam *et al.* 2008, Boucher *et al.* 2014, Gessner *et al.* 2004) and continue through the juvenile rearing phases (Carrera-Garcia *et al.* 2018). All of these impacts have the potential to adversely affect the adaptability and as such the fitness of an individual of a group of fish. As such a stepwise approach is necessary to determine the dimension of alterations that are impacting the potential adaptability throughout ontogeny.

Table 12.3. Synthesis of the metrics proposed to assess fitness related metrics.

Fitness related metrics	Parameters measured	Purpose/ Relevance	Ease of assessment	Comments
Performance under captive conditions				
Survival	Number of dead individuals to calculate daily survival for different life stages during the rearing process	Evaluation of the group performance under rearing condition. Low survival in the hatchery condition may not imply a low survival in the wild and vice-versa.	++	No reference values.
Size / Condition Growth	Individual weight or weight per batch, individual length, Fulton condition factor	Values to compare between batches (genetic or rearing conditions) or to wild conspecifics of the same age. Conditioned fish may experience lower initial mortality after release due to elevated reserves, allowing for a longer period until active feeding.	++	No reference values
Morphological/morphometric characteristics				
Malformations	malformation of head shape, curvature of body and tail; underdevelopment of pectoral fins; absence of one or both eyes, too short gill covers, underdevelopment of barbels, schistasis of the nasal bridge, underdevelopment of the olfactory pits	Evaluation of genetic suitability of crosses and rearing conditions; implications for post release survival and performance uncertain	+ + O ++ ++ + ++ O	Reference values for Ponto Caspian species (Akimova <i>et al.</i> 2004). Implication for post release effects are variable or lacking.
Yolk sac shape	height to length ratio of yolk sac		+	Developmental indicator, post release effects unknown.

0.55–0.69	Normal development
0.29-0.44	Nutrient deficient
>0,65	Excess nutrients

Fitness related metrics	Parameters measured	Purpose/ Relevance	Ease of assessment	Comments
Behavior				
Escape response	Reaction to an external stimulus	Assess fish respond to a stimulus by basic antipredator behavior	++	
Exploratory behavior	Utilization of new environment	Utilization of open spaces makes fish vulnerable to predation, orientation in new environment decreases predator encounter	+	
Open Space Test	Motility in response to visual and acoustic cues	Testing responsiveness to environmental cues as a proxy for fitness	+	Reference data established for <i>A. stellatus</i> ; More complex test regime proposed as “Ichthyotest” incorporating swimming performance
Feeding	Ability to find and utilize buried preys and or on novel preys	Decreases the time of adaptation to feeding in the wild	+/-	Behavior can be enhanced by training schools with buried feed over 10 days (Carmona-Ruiz <i>et al.</i> 2019) to ensure fish can feed in the wild will increase survival
Eco-Physiology				
Swimming capacity and metabolic rate	Swimming performance, position holding, max. swimming speed; metabolic rate associated to swimming capacity in BL/s	Ensure fish can maintain position in the current or escape from predators in the wild	-	Swimming speed can be enhanced by temperature fluctuations and structural diversity, increasing the responsiveness to external stimuli
Color	Light exposition test	Ensure the fish released are able to	++	

melanophore reaction

adapt to the background color. The adaptation of the melanophore helps camouflage from predators especially during nocturnal migration.

In cases when supplementary stocking is carried out while the natural population is still present, the quality of the fish released can be compared to their wild conspecifics. To optimize the assessment of fitness related metrics, there is a need to compare the metrics measured under enriched and standard rearing practice with those observed in wild conspecifics. However, the availability of such controls can be severely limited in endangered species, solely relying on theoretical assumptions of what metrics might be beneficial with regard to fitness. Transfer between sturgeon species will be inevitable to conclude basic principles and adopt progressive approaches that have shown improvements in other species. Overall, to determine the performance of the fish released, a close coordination with the monitoring of the population is indispensable. The most relevant criteria to measure before release should be decided collectively to focus the effort on metrics considered most promising or relevant. The development of optimized rearing practices requires a close cooperation between working groups in the field to effectively evaluate the impacts at different life cycle phases and to develop improved rearing technologies.

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Chapter 13

Tagging and Marking of fish prior to release

M.L. Acolas, T. Friedrich, J. Gessner

13.1 Introduction

Identification of certain groups of fish or recognition of individual fish requires the fish to be marked or tagged. This can be the case in the hatchery to follow batch or individual growth and survival and for release to distinguish the fish that were stocked from fish born in the wild in order to allow monitoring of the stocked individuals. For these purposes, tagging can be implemented at the hatchery before release or in the field during the monitoring of the population. Tagging always requires the recapture of the fish to be able to make use of the information inherent to the tagged individual. The recapture can be directed (research) or accidental (bycatch). The latter case requires the implementation of an information campaign to ensure fishers are aware of the tagging program and where to report which set of data.

Tagging methods have to be adapted to the species and to the fish size. Depending on the purpose (individual identification, mass marking, temporary marking ...), one needs to choose and adapt the best method.

Tagging or marking fish involves treatment and handling, which may disturb and possibly stress the fish, so careful handling is most important when undertaking such procedures (see Chapter 4). From a general point of view, scientific research objective, difficulty of the tagging method (qualified trained technician), retention rate, country regulation concerning animal welfare and cost have to be considered when implementing the tagging strategy.

There is an abundant body of literature, which deals with methods, limits and advantages of tagging fish (e.g. Begout *et al.* 2016; Bridger and Booth, 2013; Hastein *et al.* 2001; Macaulay *et al.* 2021). Ideally the behavior, growth and survival of tagged and untagged fish should be similar.

External tags and marks can be used for visual identification, whereas internal passive or transmitting tags or marks usually require specialized equipment for detection and identification. The following chapter summarizes the methods that have successfully been implemented in sturgeons or other fish species. For all type of mark, tagging method chosen, it should be checked in the literature if there is any impact on behavior or fish health for the size chosen for the marking/tagging. Especially for colored marks or external tags the predation risk can be increased and should be assessed.

13.2 External marks

An external mark may be defined as a visible mark on the exterior of the fish that is used to identify individual fish or to distinguish between groups of fish. External marks may be natural such as phenotypic traits (Stringwell *et al.* 2014). Morphological traits like scute pattern, bent fins or other individual characteristics can be helpful for identifying individuals on a small scale but require standardized photography of animals. In general, they are not always easy to assess, pictures and further morphometrics analysis would be required and may be subject to interpretation.

For external dye marking, Alcian blue dye can be applied on the ventral surface of the fish (Sanchez-Lamadrid 2001) or on the pectoral fins (ref salmonids). Such marks are often simple, cheap and quick to apply, but provide limited information due to limited variability of marks and short persistence.

External marks such as fin clipping have been used in several species. Since fins are regenerated it can only be used for a temporary marking of batches. Moreover, injuries of the fins can conceal the mark and fin clipping reduces the maneuverability of the fish thus we do not recommend this practice.

Advantages: low cost, relatively easy to implement.

Drawbacks: batch marking (no individual tagging because the combination are limited), variable retention, potential impacts on fish health.

13.3 External tags

External tags are visible structures that are attached to the fish by piercing tissues (Winter 1996). The advantage of such tags, which may carry an individual code, batch code or visible instructions, is the ease in detection without specialized equipment and the versatility of individual segregation. External labels have to be easily visible, allowing observation during handling and facilitate qualified reporting of bycatch.

External tags include ribbons, threads, wires, plates, discs, dangling tags, straps or T-bar anchor tags (McFarlane *et al.* 1990; Morgan and Walsh 1993). By permanently penetrating the skin, the tag may provide a potential access route for infection. Furthermore, depending upon size and mounting technique, they have the potential to adversely affect swimming motion and swimming speed. Depending upon color and movement in motion, they could also attract predators. As such, the tag should be adapted to the conditions and the size of the fish to be tagged.

In the hatchery, the use of external tags should be limited due to the risk of abrasion in the tanks, but in the natural environment it can be useful to easily detect recaptures. Thus, fish can be externally tagged at the hatchery a few weeks or days before release.

Before inserting the external tag, skin disinfection is recommended as well as the disinfection of the tag. Diluted (1:10) H₂O₂ or iodine can be recommended but those substances should not come in contact with fish gills. Floy tags can be applied with an

“attachment gun” (Figure 13.1.). In sturgeon, usually the tag is applied at the base of the dorsal fin and is inserted between the radiae. The tag is twisted slightly upon attachment to ensure that the T-bar has been set in place correctly. The application in the fin base instead of the musculature provides a highly increased retention rate.

Wire-On-Tags (WOT) can be inserted using a hollow needle through which the wire is inserted. When the needle is removed and the two ends of the wires are twisted to secure the fixation (Figure 13.2.).



Figure 13.1. Floy tag injection on *A. oxyrinchus* (© S. Henneberg)



Figure 13.2. Hall print WOT tag fixed on *A. sturio* (© Inrae ML Acolas).

Advantages: individual identification feasible, readily recognizable, readable without tools, depending on the tags a minimal size is required.

Drawbacks: can cause skin abrasion and infection in a hatchery environment. Fouling can be observed in external tags, hampering readability, larger, rigid or bulky tags are increasing the risk of entanglement (for instance in fishing nets), leading to tag loss.

13.4 Internal marks and tags

The need to identify fish, individually or by group, with minimal influence on behavior, health or survival has led to the development of internal tags. In the case of internal tags,

the identification of a tagged individual requires specialized equipment (readers or tissue sample analysis). This excludes the fishery from actively participating in the reporting of tagged individuals. On the other hand, internal tags are commonly used in the hatchery to identify fish during the subsequent grading and handling steps. In these cases, mainly individually coded internal tags are applied.

13.4.1 Chemical Marking

13.4.1.1 *Permanent stains*

Stains are utilized to mark groups of fish with a chemical that is incorporated into the hard structures of the fish. The fish are immersed in a solution of the stain over a period of time to ensure the stain is incorporated. For this purpose, the fish are exposed to a bath of the chemical of choice (e.g. Alizarin Red S using NaOH buffer to avoid pH decrease, Oxytetracycline) (Fig 13.3.).



Figure 13.3. Balneation tank with OTC solution (© Inrae P. Jatteau)

Using oxytetracycline hydrochloride (OTC) (Fig. 13.3.), a study in shortnose sturgeon confirmed the marks on both sagittal otoliths and first-ray pectoral fin spines one month after 12h balneation in 750-mg/L OTC baths (Crompton *et al.* 2012). But Lochet *al.* (2011) tagged *A. baerii* at one month old between 300 ppm or 600 ppm OTC and conclude that auto-fluorescence of OTC and ontogenic formation in pectoral fin rays can cause mark detection deficiencies in this hard structure. Alizarin red S solution may provide better results but it is not recommended to rely on pectoral fin rays (Lochet *et al.* 2011). The incorporation of the chemical is made by balneation for a certain amount of time, controlling for physical-chemical parameter (pH, oxygen, temperature). Verification of the effect on the batch (absorption of the stain and presence of a clearly discernible mark) is recommended since water chemistry and status of the fish might affect the quality and thus the persistence of the stain.

Detection of the stains is performed under using a fluorescence microscope. Since the stains are fluorescent, they can be detected in smaller fish without the need to remove hard tissue. Similar to the age reading, slices of bony material (fin rays, scutes, and otoliths) are used to

verify the presence of stains in the calcified structures to determine the exact timing of marking.

Analysis of the hard structure follows the protocol given above and presence of mark is tested using UV light of 380 -400nm. In small fish of less than 15 cm TL the mark is readily visible without removing hard structures when exposing the fish to the light source in a darkened chamber.

Advantages: An advantage of internal marks, such chemical marking of bony structures, is that they can enable large numbers of fish to be marked at an early age. Mass marking has been used to identify hatchery reared individuals from naturally spawned fish.

Drawbacks: The staining of juveniles has a series of disadvantages. The most obvious drawback is the fact that only batch marking can be performed, and that specialized equipment is required for the analysis. Moreover, the stain can be aggressive and thus affect the nerve endings and receptors for more than a week (Kasumyan, pers. comm.). There are also variable results on retention on non-lethal sampling structure. The restructuring of pectoral fin ray material at an early age does limit the persistence of the stain. Using lethal sampling such as otoliths is also not recommended for endangered species in addition to the fact that sturgeon otoliths vary from those of many teleosts in structure and do not absorb the stain the same way, thus limiting the results obtained by marking. It must also be noted that the disposal of large volumes of antibiotics (OTC) or stain (Alizarin Red) is cost intensive.

13.4.1.2 Microchemistry

Differences in isotope composition of O, N, S and C are commonly used to determine food web interactions or habitat use (e.g. Boecklen *et al.* 2011; Hobson 1999). Gradients in certain elements such as Sr, Ba, Ca, Mg, S, and B exist in regions of different salinities, temperatures, and bedrock influences and can be used to assess habitat changes (Chang *et al.* 2013. Pracheil *et al.* 2014).

Marking by isotopes may occur naturally or by deliberate manipulation of the concentration of specific elements (e.g. Munro *et al.* 2009; Loepky *et al.* 2020) to create recognizable elemental signatures in the hard structures of fish (e.g., otoliths and fin rays).

In a study on *Acipenser fulvescens* (ages 1-7), elemental signatures in the fin rays of known hatchery-released individuals were quantified to assess whether the ambient water chemistry in a groundwater-fed hatchery would create an elemental signature (Loepky *et al.* 2020). The concentrations of trace elements, particularly Mn, within the first growth band of hatchery-reared fish were significantly different from those of wild conspecifics, allowing to accurately classify hatchery- versus wild-spawned individuals with 99% success. Induction of a combination of isotopic signatures could also enable hatcheries to track the success of families or stocking groups within a single year-class or across multiple year-classes. 24-h immersions in Sr-86 and Ba-137 were tested with successful reading on fin rays 2 month after marking (Loepky *et al.* 2020).

The analysis of hard structures to quantify trace element is made via laser ablation (LA) inductively coupled plasma-mass spectrometry (ICP-MS). Spectrometry allows to record the changes in isotope composition over time. The LA allow to evaporate material of the hard structure in small increments, allowing to associate the ablation to an age reading in the structure. As such the bony structures serve as a recording of past life history. Special preparations to mount structures for laser ablation must be carried out in preparation of the analysis. These should be conducted together with the specialist carrying out the analysis. Otoliths are most often used in microchemical analyses of fishes since, unlike scales or skeletal bones, there is no potential for resorption or remodeling of this structure. However, otoliths are not the most recommended structure to analyze for sturgeon. Although fin rays have the potential for remodeling, researchers have shown the stability of elemental signatures in fin rays over time, suggesting they are stable structures appropriate for use in microchemical analyses (e.g. Sellheim *et al.* 2017) as well as scutes (e.g. Altenritter *et al.* 2015).

Advantages: Relatively easy to apply marking method with high retention rate.

Drawbacks: no individual identification, only batch marking, labor intensive and costly analysis with experimented staff.

13.5 Genetic tagging

Genetic tagging is referring to developing genetic markers at the hatchery before releasing the fish. Then when a fish is caught in the wild, using fin clipping and genetic analysis, it can be attributed to the hatchery or even to the parents/cohorts (e.g. Dehaan *et al.* 2008; Roques *et al.* 2018). It requires minimal impact on the fish but needs the development of genetic markers. Microsatellite or SNP have been successfully used for sturgeon species (e.g. Dehaan *et al.* 2008; Roques *et al.* 2019).

Advantages: high retention rate, limited manipulation of the fish, no size limit

Drawbacks: level of identification depending on the specificity of the markers, cost of the genetic analysis for parental assignment

13.6 Visible internal tags and marks

Tags that are applied subcutaneously and remain visible by eye. One example is the visible implant tag (VIT), or the visible implant alphanumeric (VI alpha) tag. Such tags were developed to combine the advantages of external tags with those of internal tags.

VIT are made of plastic strips and VI alpha are made of medical-grade silicone rubber, often with the addition of fluorescent material. These tags are providing printed information and are to be placed in transparent tissue like behind the eye (Begout *et al.* 2016).

An alternative which can be used for batch tagging comes with the visible implant elastomer tags (VIE). These tags consist of a biocompatible two-part fluorescent silicone elastomer material that is mixed and injected into tissue as a liquid with a hypodermic syringe. After 24 h at room temperature it cures into a pliable solid, providing an externally visible internal mark. The fluorescent elastomer is available in several colors. Recognition of individuals is possible through the use of different body locations and colors (Frederick 1997, Olsen and Vollestad, 2001). To increase the visibility a UV-lamp can be used.

Depending on the number of batches, the tagging plan should be prepared in advance. By combining colors and injection site, several batches can be distinguished. It is recommended to use a two-mark combination per batch in case of timely resorption of a mark.

The elastomer should be prepared just before the tagging since the time until it begins to harden is limited. To inject it, the needle is inserted subcutaneously for a few millimeters, the elastomer is injected while starting to retract the needle. Injection is discontinued before removing the needle to avoid the elastomer to expel.

The site of injection most frequently used in previous studies is the rostrum but injection under the eye, in the opercula or within the scutes for small fish are promising (Figure 13.4, Figure13.5). In *A. oxyrinchus*, Kapusta *et al.* (2015) find a survival above 90% and a retention rate of the VIE of 100% in the rostrum and of 93.5 % at the base of the pectoral fin 8 weeks after tagging; tagged fish were between 10 and 17 cm. In pallid sturgeon the minimal size recommended is 7 cm (USFWS 2019). Kozlowsky *et al.* (2017) tagged fish as small as 5 cm with a 90% retention rate in the rostrum after 70 days; the survival rate was similar with controls but it was low (40%).

Advantages: tagging small fish, discriminating batches, individual identification in low numbers of test animals, mid- term retention rate,

Drawbacks: level of identification per batch, some colors can be difficult to distinguish after tagging, resorption is variable

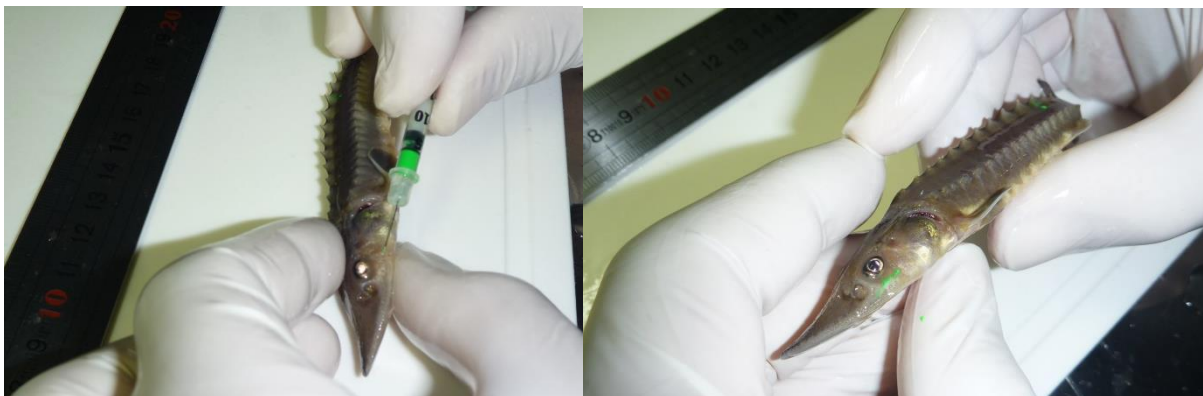


Figure 13.4. Injection of VIE below the eye *A. sturio* (© Inrae M.L. Acolas)

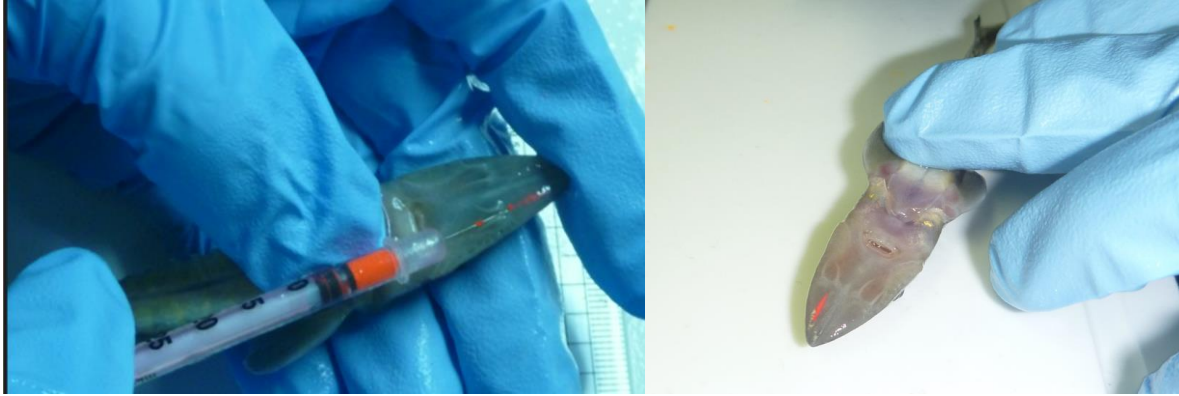


Figure 13.5. VIE tag in the rostrum *A. sturio* (© Inrae L. Jacob)

13.6.1 Internal tags

Internal tags are defined as solid objects inserted or injected into tissues or implanted into the body cavity, muscle or cartilage, and can be used to identify individuals or groups of fish. The group of tags comprises plastic or glass tubes, metal plates and small pieces of magnetized stainless steel that may have a binary code of Arabic numbers engraved or laser etched on their surface. The coding is either electronically or mechanically and thus can be identified either by a reader that induces the signal to be emitted (PIT Tags) or by removal of the tag and the inspection under a dissectoscope (CWT).

13.6.1.1 *Coded Wire Tags CWT*

Coded wire tags CWT correspond to small size (0.5–2.0 mm × 0.25 mm) magnetized stainless steel with a unique code. They are normally injected into the snout of a fish, often in combination with an external mark to aid recovery (Schurman and Thompson 1990). Such tags are extensively used for identifying large numbers of fish and due to their small size can be used on fish of a large range of sizes.

In sturgeon they can be inserted into the rostrum or under the scutes (USFWS 2019) or into the first pectoral fin ray (Paraschiv *et al.*, 2006). To be detected, a handheld metal detector is required and to be read the tag should be removed from the fish. For pallid sturgeon the CWT can be put on 5 cm individuals (USFWS 2019). CWTs are also used for several species of sturgeon in the Caspian Sea from 3g (Fadaee, 2007).

Advantages: tagging small fish, high retention

Drawbacks: they must be removed from the fish to retrieve the codes, detectors can be very sensitive in some environment and lead to false results, can only be detected by personnel with appropriate equipment

Figure 13.6. CWT tagging (Parachiv 2006)

13.6.1.2 Passive Integrated Transponder (PIT) tags

RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) tags often called passive integrated transponder tags (PIT-tags), can be read by an external reader transmitting an impulse to activate the tag to emit its code which in turn is collected by the antenna within the reader. Since the tags do not depend upon an internal energy source, they have an unlimited life. Once implanted, they provide a non-invasive means of individual identification (Baras *et al.* 2000; Downing *et al.* 2001; Barbour *et al.* 2012; Gibbons and Andrews, 2004) by hand-held readers and in-stream antennas located on the bottom of rivers or fish passes. Each PIT-tag has an individual alphanumeric code and tag retention is variable, depending on the implant location and species but usually is high (e.g. Barbour *et al.* 2012, Burnett *et al.* 2013, Thiem *et al.* 2013).

For sturgeons the optimal location for PIT tagging is below the 2nd or 3rd anterior dorsal scute on the fish (Briggs *et al.* 2019). To insert the PIT-tag, the use of sterile/disinfected needles is required. For the application different techniques are available. The standard method utilizes an applicator that pushes the tag out of the hollow needle into the tissue. The second option is an applicator (Trovan ©) that retracts the needle while leaving the tag in place. In both cases it is recommended to insert the needle with the point on the inside (towards the chorda and the opening towards the skin to prevent the needle to break the glass body of the tag when the fish muscle contracts. The first option has the disadvantage that the disruption of the tissue when the tag is pushed forward, while the second option has the disadvantage of the applicator being somewhat clumsy and more difficult to handle (Figure 13.7.). Afterward tagging, verification of the tag function and code with a hand reader is recommended.

PIT-tags are available in various sizes, the bigger, the higher the detection range. Individuals above 25 cm can be equipped below the dorsal scutes with 12 mm long PIT-tag (2 mm in diameter, weight 0.10g). Moser *et al.* (2020) described that below a total length of 20 cm, the tag retention rate is only 50% for *A. oxyrinchus* when the PIT-tag was placed posterior to the dorsal fin, where tissue growth is least (Moser *et al.* 2020) which was also observed for *A. ruthenus* (Friedrich, pers. comm.). When applying the tag in the dorsal musculature in fish of 18 cm TL the tag retention was >95% in *A. sturio* (Gessner, pers. comm.). In *Scaphirhynchus platyrhynchus* an 8.4 mm PIT-tag was successfully used for fish exceeding 8 cm in fork length (Schuman *et al.* 2017), when inserted in the abdominal cavity (retention rate above 80%). Very small microtags are also available and could be useful in the hatchery to identified very small fish. A study on *A. baerii* highlighted a retention rate of 77% of microtags in the abdominal cavity for fish of 14 cm, but as the study had a different focus (Carrera-Garcia *et al.* 2017), this result can be improved for sturgeon as it is successful on other species (Cousin *et al.* 2012). The distance of detection in microtags is very small at

present and they may not be detectable once the fish has grown, especially in fixed antennas within streams and hence are considered temporary tagging.

Different locations to set the PIT tag have been tested. In pallid sturgeon Hamel *et al.* (2013) tested insertion into the operculum and along the base of the dorsal fin of age-1 individuals. After 189 days, retention rate was 83% for tags inserted into the operculum (mainly for fish around 26 cm and during 60 days after tagging) and 85% for tags inserted near the dorsal fin (mainly for larger individuals 30 cm and continually during the experiment). The position below a front dorsal scute seems to be the one with the highest retention rate (99%) in Briggs *et al.* (2019) for *A. fluvescens* but the smallest fish tagged were 60 cm. The region below the pectoral fin is also used for PIT tagging of broodstock (Chebanov and Galich, 2010)

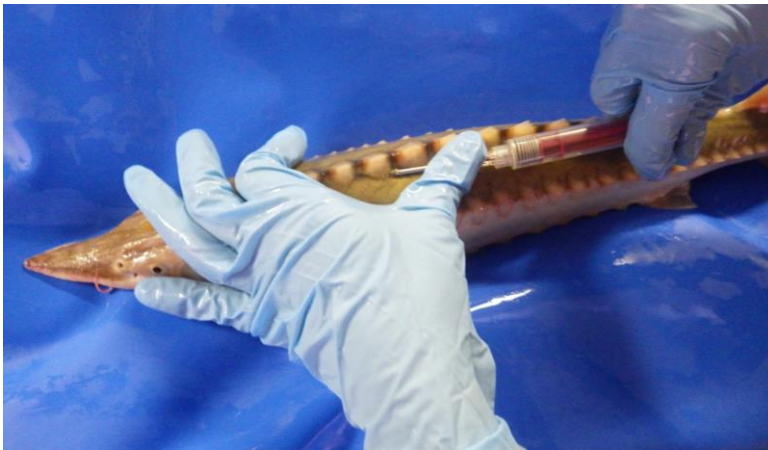


Figure 13.7: Insertion of a 12 mm PIT-tag in *A. sturio* (© Inrae R. Le Barh).

Advantages: individual identification, high retention rate, minimal effect of the tagging procedure, small fish >20 cm safely to be tagged for long term retention

Drawbacks: Tags can be fragile and should not be subjected to mechanical stress, can only be detected by appropriate equipment

13.6.2 Transmitting tags

Transmitting tags are usually used in the wild for monitoring purpose. But the fish can be equipped at the hatchery before release or they can be used for behavior assessment in captivity. Transmitting tags can be mounted externally or internally. A large and growing array of electronic transmitter tags is available (see Begout *et al.* 2016 for more general details). Radio tags, can only be used in water of very low salinity. They are useful because radio waves are less affected by physical obstacles, turbidity, turbulence and thermal stratification than acoustic, non-electromagnetic waves. Radio signals also radiate through the water surface and can be detected at great distances, because there is little loss of signal strength in air. Receivers can be placed in boats, aircraft or at land-based listening stations. Radio tags operate at high frequencies (30–300 MHz), so there is little signal drift. Acoustic tags are mostly used in seawater or in deep waters because sound is transmitted over long distances in salt water, whereas radio waves are attenuated very rapidly. Frequencies of 20–

500 kHz are used. Pulsed acoustic tags emit signals that can be detected using a simple receiving system comprising a hand-held directional hydrophone, a portable receiver and headphones. Both for radio or acoustic tracking, to get an accurate position of the fish, it requires triangulation using an array of fixed hydrophones or multiple mobile hydrophones (Fredrich *et al.* 2008).

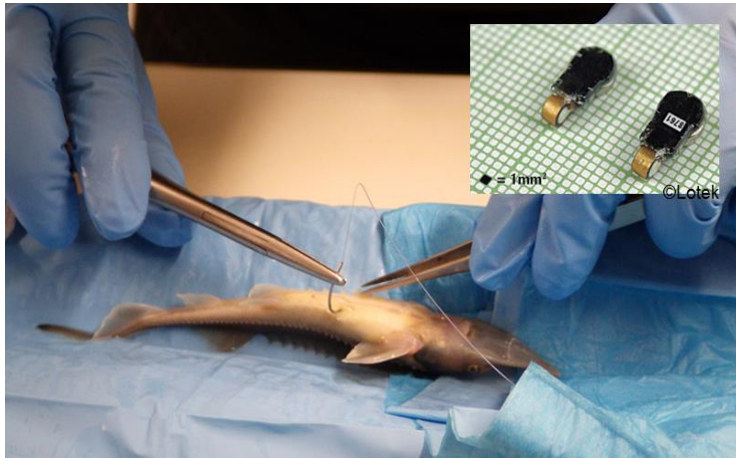


Figure 13.8. Implantation of an acoustic transmitter tag into the body cavity of an *A. sturio* juvenile (INRAE M.L. Acolas)

Apart from signals that identify the position of the fish, some tags carry sensors that collect additional data, such as depth, swimming direction and speed, heart or respiration rate or information about muscle contraction. Such electronic tags are larger than PIT tags and require an internal battery to power the transmitter and microchip. The lifetime of the tag, depends on transmitter size, power supply, range and rate of signal transmission. Microchip technology allows for specific instructions to be placed onto a tag, allowing it to be switched on or off under a given set of conditions. For example, tags may transmit only under certain conditions of water chemistry or light intensity and such selective use can increase the longevity of the tags.

13.6.3 Data Storage tags

Tags that are capable of storing measurement data on environmental variables such as temperature, salinity or depth come as archival tags or Data Storage Tags (DST) with or without transmitting capabilities (multi-sensor loggers, tri-axial accelerometers, miniaturized geopositioning systems). The majority of the tags are mounted externally on the fish. They are retrieved either when the fish is caught or they are mounted with a release system that detaches the tag from the fish at a predefined time and floats to the surface to be collected at shore to retrieve the data (pop up tags) or it emits the stored data via a satellite link when reaching the surface (pop-up satellite tags); *e.g.* Bograd *et al.* 2010, Block *et al.* 2011, Schaefer *et al.* 2011, Hazen *et al.* 2012. The shelf life in these data loggers depends upon battery size, data acquisition intervals and temperature. The logging intervals in most tags are freely adjustable, depending upon the research question to be addressed. Fish can be equipped at the hatchery before being released for monitoring in the wild, such tags can be placed at the basis of the dorsal fin or within the dorsal scutes (Figure 13.9.).



Figure 13.9. External mount of DST Tags on Atlantic sturgeon dorsal fin base and T-Bar anchor tag (left) © U. Schütz and through the scutes (right) on *A. sturio* (INRAE M.L. Acolas)

Under hatchery conditions, these sensor tags be they archival or transmitting offer new impulses for the assessment of fish behavior in controlled environments such as ex situ facilities, especially the systems equipped with sensors for heartbeat rate, accelerometers or other vital functions

Advantages: individual identification, medium retention rate, multiple information to be obtained under captive conditions to improve rearing

Drawbacks: Substantial effect of the tagging procedure, can only be detected by appropriate equipment, expensive, tag size defines size of fish to be tagged

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Chapter 14

Transport and Release

Thomas Friedrich, Joel P. Van Eenenaam, Mikhail S. Chebanov

14.1 Transportation

The transportation of fish, either within the hatchery, between different farms or to release sites needs to operate along standardized protocols to guarantee safety and animal welfare (see also Chapter 4). General principles of health management for responsible movement of live aquatic animals are described in FAO (2007). Transportation may be performed in hermetic (airtight) or open containers. The main criterion for successful fish transportation is proper densities within the transport containers, which depends upon the size, age and species of the fish and the intensity of metabolism at the selected transportation temperature regime. Feeding of the fish selected for transportation should be stopped for an adequate time, depending on life stage, prior to loading.

14.1.1 Transportation of embryos

Plastic bags are routinely used for transportation of eggs, embryos, and larvae, but they can be used for small numbers of large fish as well. Plastic bags should be doubled, rigid, water tight, and have rounded corners to not crush progeny. Oxygen is added to the bags and a minimum ratio of water to oxygen should be 1:2. The air is released from the bags and replaced with pure oxygen via a flexible hose. The bag is closed by either a clamp, cable ties or rubber clamping rings. The closed bags are then placed in a box covered with heat-insulating material (padded polyester, foam plastic, Styrofoam, etc.). During the hot season of the year, boxes with bags should be protected from direct sun light, and considerable water temperature elevation prevented by the use of containers with ice (Figure 14.1.).

Figure 14.1. Protection of transported fish through screening and active cooling

During transportation it is essential to avoid prolonged holding of the embryo bags in a stable (motionless) state, both during stopping and in the course of packing and unloading of embryos. The duration of possible holding of embryos in a stable state depends upon the density of loading in the bags and the water temperature and ranges from 10–15 min on average at a density of 5–6 kg per bag, and 1–1.5 h at 2–2.5 kg per bag (both at 15–17 °C). At low loading densities (1 kg and less) and optimal transportation regime, the time of embryo tranquility can reach 2–3 h. A light, 40–60 s shaking of the bags every 40 min is recommended in the case of longer stops. Exceeding the above-mentioned time of embryo tranquility may cause their mass mortality, which can reach 50 percent. The optimal loading density of fertilized embryos in bags depends of their development stage, the

temperature regime and the transportation duration (Table 14.1.). During transportation, the water temperature should be maintained within the life stage specific range for the species (See Chapter 9).

Table 14.1. Recommendations for stocking densities (kg) of sturgeon embryos for transportation in plastic bags (40 L) at different temperatures (Orlov *et al.* , 1974).

t, °C	Duration of transportation, h							
	5	10	15	20	25	30	35	40
At stages from early gastrulation to lateral plates fusion								
10	6.0	6.0	6.0	5.3	4.5	3.9	3.4	3.1
15	6.0	6.0	4.8	3.8	3.2	2.7	2.4	2.1
20	6.0	5.6	4.1	3.3	2.7	2.3	2.0	1.8
At stages of rotating embryo								
10	6.0	5.1	3.7	3.0	2.5	2.1	1.8	1.6
15	6.0	4.3	3.1	2.4	2.0	1.7	1.5	1.3
20	6.0	3.7	2.7	2.1	1.7	1.4	1.2	1.0

14.1.2 Transportation of larvae

Transportation of larvae uses the same approach as the transportation of embryos, ideally using similar plastic bags.

Larvae in packed bags may be transported for up to 24–30 h. Perpetual motion of the water surface is required to ensure a proper oxygen regime. In the hot season of the year, boxes with bags should be protected from direct sun light, and considerable water temperature elevation prevented by the use of airtight, insulated containers with ice or cold packs. During long stops, the bags should be placed horizontally to increase oxygen diffusion. If the transportation takes more than 30 h, the oxygen reserve in the bags should be renewed. The stocking densities at 15 °C are shown in Table 14.2. At higher temperatures, a lowering coefficient of 0.25 per each 5°C should be used, while at lower temperatures, a similar elevated coefficient is used. Transportation temperatures should be within the species-dependent range but it is not recommended to exceed temperatures of 20 °C for longer periods.

Table 14.2. Densities (kg) for transportation of sturgeon larvae and small juveniles in plastic bags (40 L) at 15°C (Orlov *et al.* , 1974; Hochleithner & Gessner 2012).

Individual weight, g	Duration of transportation at 15 °C water temperature, duration of transport (h)									
	5	10	15	20	25	30	35	40	45	50
0.01–0.03	0.15	0.15	0.15	0.15	0.15	0.15	0.15	0.15	0.14	0.12
0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.18	0.15	0.13	0.12	0.1	0.09
0.5	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.27	0.21	0.18	0.15	0.13	0.11	0.1
1.0	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.4	0.32	0.27	0.23	0.21	0.18	0.16
2.0	0.7	0.7	0.53	0.4	0.32	0.27	0.23	0.21	0.18	0.16
5.0	1.0	1.0	0.7	0.5	0.4	0.33	0.29	0.25	0.23	0.2
10.0	1.5	1.0	0.7	0.5	0.4	0.33	0.29	0.25	0.23	0.2
20	1.8	1.0	0.76	0.57	0.46	0.38	0.33	0.28	0.25	0.23
100	1.8	1.2	0.9	0.85	0.8	0.75	0.7	0.65	0.6	0.5
>500	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

At determination of optimal stocking density, not only fry oxygen demand should be considered, but also the threshold level of dissolved carbon dioxide that can cause fish mortality. For larvae ranging from 10–30 mg in weight, this level is 40 ml/liter, while for larger fry, it is 20 ml/liter. At 15 °C, the mean release of carbon dioxide by fish is 150–200 ml/kg/h, while at 20 °C, it is 300–450 ml/ liter/h.

14.1.3 Transportation of juveniles

Juveniles and even larger fish can also be transported in plastic bags, especially when transporting small numbers over large distances. The same rules as for the other stages apply, however the bags should be placed horizontally in order to maximize oxygen exchange. Due to the sharp scutes in some species, using two bags in double-layered fashion is especially important. Open containers include flasks, cans (canisters), canvas bags and vats (typically used for in-house transportation), and live-fish tanks (with or without thermal insulation), fitted to truck transport and live-fish vans are all appropriate (see Figure 14.2).

Figure 14.2. Transportation devices for juvenile sturgeons

Transportation of fish in specialized live-fish tanks should be accomplished by use of constant water aeration or oxygenation. The tanks are ideally insulated and need to be free of sharp edges and the aeration outlet fixed to the bottom to avoid oxygen free zones and the risk of fish getting stuck below the diffuser. Tank size should allow the fish to move, while a large enough outlet and a full-size top lid (preferably to be fixed in open position to ease handling) ease loading and unloading. The filling of containers with water is performed immediately before the loading of fish. The aeration system should be operated after the filling of a container (not later than 15 min prior to fish loading).

A high rate of mucus formation is typical for sturgeon that are being kept out of water (even short-term) and subjected to mechanical stressors. Because of this, after loading, fish should be “rinsed” by replenishing the water in the tanks for up to 20–30 min to remove excess mucus from the transport containers. To reduce the effects of stressors on juveniles and adults, it is advisable to add unionized salt (3–5 ‰) during transportation. Throughout the transportation, it is essential to control the water level in the container, the water temperature and the oxygen concentration, which should be 5 mg/liter or above (only a short-time drop to 2 mg/liter is permissible) regularly, especially during long transports. Stocking densities of sturgeon species in various transport containers are presented in **Table 14.5**. For transports that take over 15 hours an exchange of the water is required due to accumulation of metabolites. Loading and unloading has to be carefully executed due to risk of injuries of men and animal by their bony scutes. For larger fish the use of forklifts and/or stretchers is highly recommended.

Table 14.5: Stocking densities for transporting sturgeons in tanks. For transports over longer periods it is recommended to lower the densities. (modified from Chebanov & Galich, 2011; Hochleithner & Gessner 2012; Steinbach, 2021).

Fish size (g)		Stocking density (kg/m ³)				
		1 g	10 g	100-200 g	1000 g	10000 g
Water temperature	10°C	50 kg/m ³	70 kg/m ³	100 kg/m ³	200 kg/m ³	500 kg/m ³
	20°C	20 kg/m ³	30 kg/m ³	50 kg/m ³	100 kg/m ³	200 kg/m ³

14.2 Release strategy

Release of early life stages depends on the seasonal dynamics of feed organisms in the river, estuary and mouth area, as well as observations on the survival and growth of sturgeon juveniles. This information can help optimize the release strategy that incorporates size, age, locations, and timing (Chebanov, 1996c; Chebanov and Savelyeva, 1999; Chebanov *et al.*, 2002). In order to reduce intraspecific feeding competition and avoid possible consumption by predators at release, juveniles should be dispersed at release. When releasing feeding juveniles in river sections with predominant rip-rap bank structures and high abundances of speleophilic predators/invasives (e.g., *Neogobius sp.*, *Babka sp.*, *Ponticola sp.*), special attention should be given to releasing in small lots distributed widely.

Acclimation to the physicochemical conditions of the water at the release site is required. Temperature, pH, and dissolved oxygen are important parameters to check. Acclimation should occur by gradually gently pouring river water in the bags or tanks. The duration of the acclimation depends on the difference of the transport and river water.

Cages for acclimation have been tested but require further evaluation to determine if they can improve performance post-release. They have the advantages to let the fish acclimated to the sites for a few hours/days and to observe the fish before their release (to estimate their mortality).

14.2.1 Release site and time

Release of juveniles is carried out in defined locations that have been selected in accordance with the biological requirements of the released sturgeon species. This information is ideally collected through monitoring of existing wild fish where possible. The primary factors for identification of release sites are the consistent availability of sufficient food organisms and the state of the bottom (hard, sand or slightly silted beds) to avoid crowding of juveniles within limited areas. Release of juveniles into rivers and adjacent to river mouth/sea areas should be spread out in terms of area and time. It is important to consider the state of shoreline vegetation, size of main feed items, lack of predators and pests. With the main activity window under ambient day-light (Chiasson *et al.* , 1997), it is recommended to do releases during late day or early night hours.

14.2.2 Release conditions

Release conditions should ideally match the requirements of the life stage and species in question. Salinity plays an important role in the selection of proper sites for the release of sturgeon into natural waterbodies. In the wild, migrating sturgeon juveniles encounter areas of increasing salinity and older larger juveniles possess more developed mechanisms of osmotic and ionic homeostasis. The level of morpho-functional development that determines the level of osmotic regulation in sturgeon juveniles is primarily size and weight dependent. At large fish size, relationships between the surface area of the body and its weight and volume tend to change, as well as those between blood system size and blood volume, and gill epithelium and number of chloride secreting cells. The developed osmoregulatory system in juvenile anadromous sturgeons is characterized by the ability to transit swiftly from a hypotonic to a hypertonic type of osmoregulation, resulting in a decrease in blood serum osmolarity in water of various salinity to basal level (Krayushkina, 2006). In the process of sturgeon adaptation to salt water, activation of the excretory function of the gill's chloride cells, which remove excess univalent ions, occurs. The functional activity of endocrine glands (interregal and thyroid) also tends to increase in the course of adaptation (Dyubin and Kiseleva, 1983).

Water temperature influences the ability to osmoregulate and releases should target locations where temperature and salinity are within species capabilities. Nutritional status is also an important factor that facilitates the successful adaptation of juveniles to the wild environment. The above-mentioned size- and species-specific differences in salinity adaptation are essential for selecting optimal sites for release of hatchery-produced juveniles into natural waterbodies.

14.2.3 Release numbers and sizes

Specific release numbers are a critical component of the adaptive management of the *ex situ* program long-term. The exact number of fish released, at each life stage, is very important for further monitoring, especially when estimating survival (see monitoring chapter/guidelines).

When releasing large numbers of early life stages, larvae can be enumerated by volume, weight or individual count. The enumeration of larvae can be performed using measuring capacity (not less than 0.5 liter). Various automatic fish counters developed for commercial farming are available and may be suitable depending on life stage and species. They typically use light barriers/infrared light but their cost makes them only feasible when producing large quantities of fish. Recently, AI- based assessment techniques have been developed, such as the Fishexpert count. This video-based analysis system assesses the number of fish in a tank through the tracking of individuals. As such, after a calibration phase, it reduces the necessary handling effort for the counting of fish. Subsamples still need to be assessed for weight and length to determine overall numbers and biomass to be released. It is recommended that all released fish are marked (Figure 14.3., see also Chapter 13).



Figure 14.3. Marked *A. oxyrinchus* prior to release

The size-at-release has to take several ecological and logistic aspects into consideration:

- persisting bottlenecks in habitat

- persisting bottlenecks in survival such as risks of predation, fishery, mortalities through other adverse impacts
- Genetic risk of overstocking
- Impact on remaining wild population
- domestication and epigenetic effects through prolonged rearing in the hatchery
- hatchery capacity
- resources for rearing
- tagging strategy

Hence the decision process on release sizes and quantities depends very much on the local situation and has to be evaluated on a case-by- case basis. In most programs, a mixed approach of releasing various sizes from larvae, age-0 juveniles, and older juveniles (1+/2+) is common practice (Anderson *et al.* 2022).

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Chapter 15

Future outlook and important considerations in the success of *ex situ* programs for recovery of sturgeons

James A. Crossman, Molly A.H. Webb, Thomas Friedrich, and Joern Gessner

Ex situ measures have experienced considerable change over the past decade with an increasing awareness about the adverse impacts of interventions that solely depend upon the release of juveniles. It is widely accepted now that the prioritizing habitat protection and restoring habitats where necessary are essential elements of species conservation. The reversal or mitigation of the impacts that led to the species decline must be an overarching principle when facilitating recovery of endangered species. *Ex situ* measures should only be considered in cases when population abundance is insufficient to facilitate recovery and should be implemented in a manner that is specifically addressing the shortcomings in natural recruitment. Nevertheless, *ex situ* measures, including the establishment of captive broodstock, might be necessary where the success of *in situ* measures remains questionable or is uncertain in a temporal aspect to prevent genetic heterogeneity and as such adaptation potential of the population from being lost. The availability of improved genetic techniques and methodology supports the selection of rare genotypes and helps establish reproduction plans that avoid the most common drawbacks of genetic in- and outbreeding.

The awareness of administrators, conservationists, and management agencies managers around the different options that *ex situ* measures offer, and the prerequisites required to apply them effectively, is one key element to increase conservation success. The second key element is the adaptation of *ex situ* measures to local conditions that consider species-specific biology and their adaptation to the environment where recovery occurs. Scientific experimentation and analysis of the key features and requirements is essential for success during reproduction, rearing, and release. Standardized documentation of conditions and methods applied, adaptations performed, and their outcome is essential to continuing to refine and adapt rearing conditions to be as representative of the natural environment as possible. The same holds true for the documentation of the conditions and results that are associated with processes occurring in wild populations where possible.

Future success of *ex situ* programs depends on an adaptive framework that incorporates monitoring results directly into ongoing decision making informed from working groups comprised of all entities essential to the species recovery (e.g., multi-national; inter-governmental, Indigenous Nations, industry, etc.). While the notion of adaptive management is not novel (citation), the life history characteristics for sturgeons require a

management timeframe for *ex situ* programs that exceeds many fisheries managers or scientists' careers. Accordingly, success is predicated on development of objectives for *ex situ* programs that are both clearly established to achieve specific outcomes yet remain flexible to change and allow for the integration of monitoring results on a frequent basis. An ecosystem-based approach to adaptive management is likely most practical for sturgeons but requires considerable collaboration with other regional conservation actions. While the magnitude of results may vary across populations or species, biological responses may be similar due to many species having similar life history and biological requirements. Accordingly, inter-species comparisons and collaborations will only benefit sturgeon recovery. At a minimum, incorporation of information from adjacent programs for other regional species should be considered whenever possible. There are cautionary tales from *ex situ* programs for other species (e.g., Salmonids; Ref.) while the rate of learning for sturgeons is remarkably slower in comparison due to their longevity and generation time. Therefore, we recommend *ex situ* programs take a precautionary approach that is founded by best available evidence. This is especially important when it comes to release numbers and the potential for overstocking due to insufficient monitoring data or societal pressures to release rather than cull to specific targets.

Effective management of *ex situ* programs relies on structured post-release effectiveness monitoring that can reduce uncertainty and provide direct feedback to meeting stated objectives. There is a suite of important measures that require evaluation and are well defined in other literature (see Table 2 in Anderson *et al.* 2022) but generally consider factors associated with trends in survival and growth, life stage specific diets, post-release genetic measures, and habitat use. Post-release monitoring results are as important as producing and releasing fish and *ex situ* programs need to ensure a rigorous design is incorporated this holds true especially if the effect of different rearing strategies upon post release survival is to be assessed. This includes careful consideration of how fish are marked, where they are released, and how post-release sampling efforts will be balanced over the life of the program. If post-release monitoring is limited due to insufficient resources, *ex situ* programs could consider pausing to allow time for data collection to inform next phases of the program. In certain cases where wild populations still exist, this requires more attention to ensure negative effects are not occurring (e.g., growth) (Crossman *et al.* 2024). It is recommended that effectiveness monitoring is developed in concert with the appropriate entities (e.g., government, academia, industry, indigenous nations) to ensure results can inform both modifications to *ex situ* programs but also responses that will inform other conservation actions integral to population recovery (e.g., habitat restoration, flow regulations, etc.). Lastly, we must leverage results across different sturgeon species to facilitate our learning and reduce negative outcomes from *ex situ* programs.

Climate change is expected to significantly impact future recovery of sturgeon and will present challenges for *ex situ* programs and requires urgent attention. The net effect from climate change, existing modification of natural flow regimes from regulation, and increasing water management actions for human interests will complicate population recovery in some

rivers and present multiple bottlenecks for *ex situ* programs. Climate change may complicate *ex situ* facilities water security, influence the thermal profiles at facilities reliant on natural river water, impact wild spawning timing and success (i.e., broodstock or progeny collection), interfere with population adaptation under natural reproduction conditions through a mismatch in larval occurrence and feed availability, negatively impact the success of releases, or question the suitability of *ex situ* for recovery of the species in some cases. Given climate stressors are an immediate global pressure, this requires actions by new and existing programs and needs incorporation into overall recovery program design (Ganapathi *et al.* 2020). Similar to effectiveness monitoring, mitigation of climate stressors will be best informed through cross-population and -species dissemination of results and information exchange.

Despite considerable attention on *ex situ* practices for sturgeons in recent decades, a number of uncertainties still require additional research. Imprinting and straying of released fish has been, and remains, an area of concern for most programs. To the extent possible, continued efforts to determine how to reflect natural conditions during rearing remains an overarching component of *ex situ* success. This includes additional research to understand how enhancements to increase complexity during rearing can influence outcomes (survival, maturation timelines) following release in the wild. Integral to these enhancements includes work to improve diets during rearing. In particular, a better understanding of species-specific optimal feeds during the larval and young of year stages, how to produce natural feed as part of hatcheries infrastructure, and research in the wild to identify prey items as a basis for the development of optimized formulated diets to inform these actions within the *ex situ* program is needed.

To ensure future genetic integrity, measures of genetic diversity at the time of release remains a key research focus and continued work to describe post-release genetic diversity measures as hatchery-origin fish mature should be an important component of research. In addition, the mechanisms underlying mate choice are poorly understood not only in sturgeon. The determination of criteria for and the effects of mate choice on fitness of the progeny must be intensified to ensure that reproduction plans are enabled to mimic natural processes for the benefit of the fitness and survival of offspring.

While considerable work has been done to investigate size at release, results have generally favored older, larger sizes as they are more reliably detected in post-release monitoring and allows for predator avoidance. Continued efforts to optimize release size to ensure domestication effects are reduced to the extent possible remains a priority.

The overarching goal for *ex situ* programs is to not be required anymore. In a simplified approach, it could be postulated that the continued proof of the self-sustaining status of a population over at least half a generation time is the ultimate prerequisite for the termination of the *ex situ* measures. Termination of *ex situ* measures including the infrastructure and the associated work often meets substantial opposition due to the

associated socio-economic effects (Loire-Allier Salmon sauvage, 2018). This reluctance is further enhanced by the fact that the determination of program end points is complex and depends on restoration and alleviation of other bottlenecks to population or species viability. *Ex situ* is only one component of sturgeon recovery and cannot be successful without concurrent in situ program development and implementation to address other impediments to successful recovery. Even in this case, the fate of the *ex situ* stock remains open since it is a unique resource that would be a backup device in case of adverse conditions repeatedly affecting the population in the wild. If an ecosystem-based approach to recovery is taken, it can reduce socio-economic pressures of closing hatcheries as multi-species objectives can be considered and existing facilities can support other species recovery objectives. Further work to explore the human dimensions of recovering endangered species will be important to ensure a balance between recovery goals and eventual human use for recreation or harvest.

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