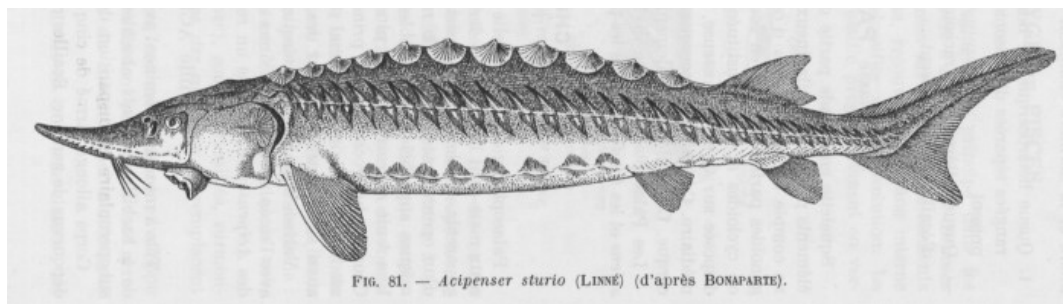


HEADING REPORT(H)A: The theatre of nature and the world

In memory of “so great wonder”: a sturgeon in the Tagus river in 1321

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Poll, M. (1947) - *Poissons marins*. Musée Royal d'Histoire Naturelle de Belgique: Brussel.

In the year of 1321, a specimen of a fish offered to the king D. Dinis (1261-1325) was considered a “so great wonder” for its dimensions that was worth to be officially registered to serve as “memory for those who will come”². The fish was a sturgeon (*Acipenser sturio* L., 1758), caught in the month of February, in the Tagus River, near Montalvão, 100 kilometers upstream from the river mouth in Lisbon. The sturgeon size was compared to the one of a dolphin, measuring approximately 3.75 meters in length and weighting 275 kg. Such an event was witnessed by “men of many places and different nations (...) who had never seen a specimen as big, nor as well done as this”, which justified a documental record, certified by a long list of signatures.

More than two centuries later, the work of the humanist André de Resende (1500-1573), *De antiquitatibus Lusitaniae* (1593), included an entire chapter devoted to the sturgeon and its presence in the Portuguese rivers. The scholar describes that sturgeons found in the Minho River were larger and had more quality than the ones in Lima River. In Douro River this species was harder to find, as also in Tagus River, where

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² “Certificate, ordered by the King D. Dinis, to register the fishing of a sturgeon with a big size in the Tagus river, near Santarém” - Torre do Tombo, Gavetas, Gav. 2, mç. 1, n.º 4, 1321-02-06 (available at <https://digitarq.arquivos.pt/viewer?id=4637072>).

it was even rarer. In Guadiana River sturgeons of moderate size could be easily found from March to summer time. Considering its consumption, André de Resende explains that the sturgeons “seek fresh water where they gain weight and loose the bitter of the brine, becoming very pleasant to the taste, after cooking”. The commercial value of this species is also acknowledged by the scholar, who affirms that it is considered “a capital crime not to deliver the fish to the king who then offers it to whoever”. The presence of sturgeons in the Portuguese rivers, namely in Tagus and Guadiana, is also corroborated in the work *Descrição do Reino de Portugal* (“Description of the Portuguese Kingdom”, 1610) by Duarte Nunes do Leão (1530-1608).

In the late 18th century, the scholar Constantino Lacerda Lobo registered in its *Memória sobre o estado das pescarias* (“Memories on the state of the fishing”, 1790), the practice of sturgeon fishing in Guadiana River and the nets used for its capture.

Today, the notice would be, not the size of the sturgeon, but its presence, given the status of extinction in the Portuguese territory.

The sturgeons are characterized by a great longevity and late maturation, with distinctive features, such as a caudal fin similar to sharks and an elongated body and smooth skin. Some specimens can grow considerably, ranging from 2 to 3 meters in length. Most of the sturgeons spend their lifetime feeding in estuaries, swimming upstream to spawn.

In the past, sturgeons entered the larger Iberian rivers from the Minho to the Guadalquivir, although their spawning could only be proved in the Douro, Guadiana, and Guadalquivir Rivers. Three different species of Acipenseridae, namely *Acipenser sturio* L., 1758, *A. naccarii* Bonaparte, 1836, and *Huso huso* (L., 1758), have, in the past, been recorded in the Iberian seas and rivers. However, examination of specimens housed in zoological collections has clearly proved that just one, the Atlantic sturgeon *A. sturio*, is native to the Iberian Peninsula (accordingly to Almaça and Elvira, 2000). Given this evolution, historical records, like this one, are important indicators of analysis.

Research suggests a regression of the species in Portugal and Spain, notable from the middle of the 20th century. The Atlantic sturgeon has always been a commercially important species, both for its flesh and for its ripe eggs (caviar), being one of the most valuable commercial fishes. Nowadays, sturgeons are greatly depleted

in number due to overfishing, damming of rivers, and pollution. The world population of *A. sturio* is so depleted that this species is threatened with extinction and has been placed in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, in the group of the ‘Critically Endangered - CR A2d’, and considered as an endangered species by several European countries.

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