



Press release

The River Danube is home to a fish that grows larger than the Great White Shark. Although it leads a secretive life, the Beluga Sturgeon – the King of the Danube – produces the most prized food in the whole world. For over 200 million years, the 8-metre long fish had no enemies, and yet today it is on the verge of extinction. Evolution did not prepare the fish for pollution, river regulation and overfishing. Beluga caviar is traded for up to 20,000 dollars per kilogramme. Ironically, the high price of this precious product could save the animals from a premature disappearance from planet earth.

“Billion Dollar Fish” tells the tale of a giant survivor from prehistoric times and the desperate fight of a handful of scientists to save it from extinction. Radu Suciuc works for the Danube Institute. His mission takes him along vast stretches of the river, from the Black Sea through the Danube Delta and to the Iron Gate. He studies a world about which we know no more than of the surface of the moon – the bottom of the Danube. In the deep, murky water, the belugas swim upstream to their spawning sites. To keep track of them, Radu Suciuc needs high-tech equipment such as ultrasonic underwater cameras. “The beluga is the most valuable fish in the world, but it is also the most difficult to research.” Suciuc has dedicated 20 years of his life to study the fish. His life revolves around them. “I simply love these fish. They are absolutely unique, marvellous creatures“, he enthuses.

As little as 50 years ago, 2,000 tons of sturgeon were fished from the Danube every year, but by 2005 the catch had plummeted to 20 tons. Romania has decreed a blanket ban on fishing sturgeons until 2015 to give the population a chance to recover. A restocking programme has also been launched to help the threatened fish. Businessman Robert Raduta breeds sturgeons on behalf of the Romanian government – not least to harvest the caviar later on: “I want to do both”, he explains. “Earn money and save the animals from extinction”. Raduta is the operator of the



only fish farm on the Danube where beluga sturgeons are bred for restocking. He employs Arcadie Vedrasco, a reproduction biologist from Moldova and one of the world's leading specialists in the artificial reproduction of this prehistoric fish. He thinks the fish is in dire straits: "This is the first film about the beluga, but it may well be the last. The animal is already history!"

Once belugas spawned in all the big rivers that flowed into the Black Sea or the Caspian Sea. Today they only occur in the Danube, and even here on a stretch that is just a few hundreds of kilometres long. It is their last retreat.

Scientists know only few spawning sites, and these require absolute and urgent protection. A navigation project poses major threat for the last remaining habitats of the belugas. For easier river navigation, the Danube is to be made deeper in some places, and in others the water is to be redirected. This would not only spell the end of the spawning sites, it would also deprive the young belugas of their hunting grounds and the places where the belugas hibernate in the river. Using satellite technology and sonar, Radu Suci is looking for these precise spots. "With our project, we want to ensure that the navigation project will not destroy much of the last refuges of the belugas!"

Cameraman Rolando Menardi and director Alfred Schwarzenberger created this tragic portrait of a fish that populated the rivers long before the first dinosaurs walked the earth, but is now in grave danger of falling victim to greed and ruthlessness. Their film follows the scientists in their race against time and offers new insights into the lives of the fishermen along the river Danube. In fascinating images full of sadness and beauty, they document the life of what may well be the last remaining belugas.

"I can only hope that what we saw is not another chapter in the extermination of the species. It was fascinating and at the same time moving to see the sheer determination with which the researchers and fishermen are fighting for the beluga",



says Rolando Menardi about the shooting. “For them, the beluga is much more than a fish that supplies caviar. It is part of their identity; they carry it in their hearts. The beluga is the king of the Danube. Losing it would mean that the Danube loses its soul!”

“Everybody knows caviar, but nobody knows the sturgeons. It was exactly the same for me!” says director Alfred Schwarzenberger. “I was really surprised that nobody had yet made a film about the world’s biggest freshwater fish. But this is exactly the problem of the belugas. They live a life, unseen, in the depths of the river. It is only when their eggs are mentioned that people start taking notice. This is why we have countless films about caviar. Somehow it is unfair! But its valuable eggs are the only chance it has. Its reproduction strategy will hopefully help it to survive, even though this certainly wasn’t what nature had in mind!”

Production details

1x 52min, 5.1 & stereo

Written by: Jeremy Hogarth

Directed by: Alfred Schwarzenberger

Producer: Michael Schlamberger

Executive Producer: Sabine Holzer

A Terra Mater Factual Studios production made by ScienceVision.

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