

Sturgeon – Endangered Species

12/07/22

A few weeks ago, I asked readers to send suggestions for article topics that interested them. One reader asked about the Sturgeon in the St Lawrence River. This is what I have learned.

As long as I can remember, the sturgeon has been the biggest fish in the river and the most elusive. At one time, they were plentiful and fished almost to extinction. I have seen many old photos of fishermen hoisting their large sturgeon catch for the photographer. Are there any in the river now? Why don't we see those photos of the large catch anymore? Here are some insights.

Sturgeon are ancient fish with a primitive appearance. A mature adult can be between 3-5 feet in length and 10-80 pounds in weight but can occasionally grow to 7 plus feet and 300 plus pounds. Their body is a torpedo shape with five rows of bony plates, one along the top, and two rows along the sides. Body color is dull gray with a cone shaped mouth. The lake sturgeon is one of the longest-lived and slowest to mature freshwater fish species. In 1953, a 154-year-old lake sturgeon was caught in Lake of the Woods, Canada. It weighed 208.5 pounds. The largest sturgeon on record was a beluga female captured in the Volga Delta in Russia in 1827, measuring 23 ft 7 in long and weighing 3,463 lb. Most sturgeons are bottom feeders which migrate upstream to spawn but spend most of their lives feeding in river deltas and estuaries. They use their barbels to locate food and then suck it into their mouth. They eat leeches, snails, clams, other invertebrates, small fish, and algae.

In New York, lake sturgeon has been collected in St. Lawrence River, Niagara River, Oswegatchie River, Grasse River, Lake Ontario, Lake Erie, Lake Champlain, Cayuga Lake, and in the Seneca and Cayuga canals. Many sturgeons leap completely out of the water, usually making a loud splash that can be heard a half mile away on the surface and probably further underwater. It is not known why they do this, but suggestions include group communication, catching airborne prey, a courtship display or to help shed eggs during spawning. I found a medical journal article about the leaping sturgeons in Florida: *"We have recently noted an increase in patients injured by an unusual mechanism and source: leaping sturgeon. We present our experience with eight cases of sturgeon related injuries. Between January 2006 and June 2007, there were eight patients evaluated at our Level I trauma center for sturgeon related injuries. Injuries included isolated fractures, liver lacerations, severe facial trauma, and a closed head injury."*

In the 1800's three species of sturgeon were fished to near extinction due to overfishing and dam construction. The Lake Sturgeon, Atlantic Sturgeon and Shortnose Sturgeon are on the federal endangered list and are illegal to catch and keep. Sturgeon was harvested for their roe (eggs) which are processed into caviar. This was a lucrative trade and brought the species to critical endangerment. At the turn of the century, commercial production of sturgeon caviar in the United States and Canada was ended by regulatory protections and conservation efforts. A US federal moratorium ended all commercial fishing for Atlantic Sturgeon in 1998.

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Memory story by Dean Senecal: “My father was tellin' me years ago that he was out there with one of his uncles, and they didn't have that big of a boat. I guess my grandfather was with them too, and they had a sturgeon on there, probably ten feet long, and they, they didn't get it in the boat. They finally ended up losin' it, yeah. But most of them men had pretty good sized boats, and once you got 'em in the boat, they had a big gaff hook and you could handle it. One man alone, though, if he had a two hundred pound sturgeon, it'd be kinda hard! But a lot of times there'd be two guys in the boat. I can remember when we was kids. hell, just one guy, he's been dead for years, Boodie Joyner, him and another old guy, they used to catch a lot of sturgeon in the spring. That's when they were thicker, and they had these big wooden fish cars they'd keep 'em in, you know, until they had so many and they'd dress 'em off and take 'em over to Redwood and ice 'em down and ship 'em to to New York. I mean, you just didn't bother shippin' one fish. You'd wait 'til you got enough to make it worth your while, you know.”

Lake sturgeon have been on the state's threatened species list since 1983. To address the declining populations, the DEC started its lake sturgeon restoration program in 1993 by stocking four sites. Now in 2022, the Lake Sturgeon Recovery Plan is increasing the sturgeon population each fall.

The Lake Sturgeon Recovery Plan was first written in 2018. It set the goal of “establishing or maintaining sufficient self-sustaining populations of lake sturgeon within six of the seven management units to warrant removal of lake sturgeon from the list of threatened species in New York.” The Plan is set to continue through 2024.

Each October, the DEC restocks several areas with young sturgeon. They have a schedule of locations and times where you can go to see the young before, they are released into freshwater. Some of the 2022 viewing areas were Carpenters Brook Fish Hatchery, Elbridge, NY, Seth Green Island in Rochester, Port of Rochester Marina Parking Lot, Cayuga Lake State Park, Seneca Falls, NY, Tompkins Shelter, Aquarium of Niagara, Nicandri Nature Center in Massena NY, Pier 84 at Hudson River Park, NY, NY. These locations offer an opportunity to see young sturgeon up close and learn from educators and scientists from DEC, NYSEG, New York Power Authority, US Fish and Wildlife Service, US Geological Survey, Aquarium of Niagara, Seneca Park Zoo and New York Sturgeon for Tomorrow (NYSFT) (check out their website for recent catch and release photos). These individuals are eager to share their knowledge and educate the public. This information was listed on the DEC website and might be something to mark on your fall calendar for next year.

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On October 13, 2022, state and federal agencies met in Ogdensburg to boost the St Lawrence River's Lake sturgeon population. With the Ontario Power Generation (OPG), the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) added 18,000 fingerling sturgeons into the St Lawrence River near the mouth of the Oswegatchie River. This is done each year and surveys after the 2021 release indicated that the lake sturgeon population in the Upper and Lower St Lawrence River areas have exceeded 'crucial metrics' for spawning and juvenile recovery. Specifically, both locations on the St Lawrence had over 750 spawning adults in a five-year period and met the adult and reproduction goals set by the Lake Sturgeon Recovery Plan.

What should you do if you catch a sturgeon? **Keep the sturgeon's head in the water at all times.** You can have multiple people hold the fish, but the head should stay low and let the water support the Sturgeons weight. Remove all hooks or cut the line. Support the fish in the water until it is able to swim away.



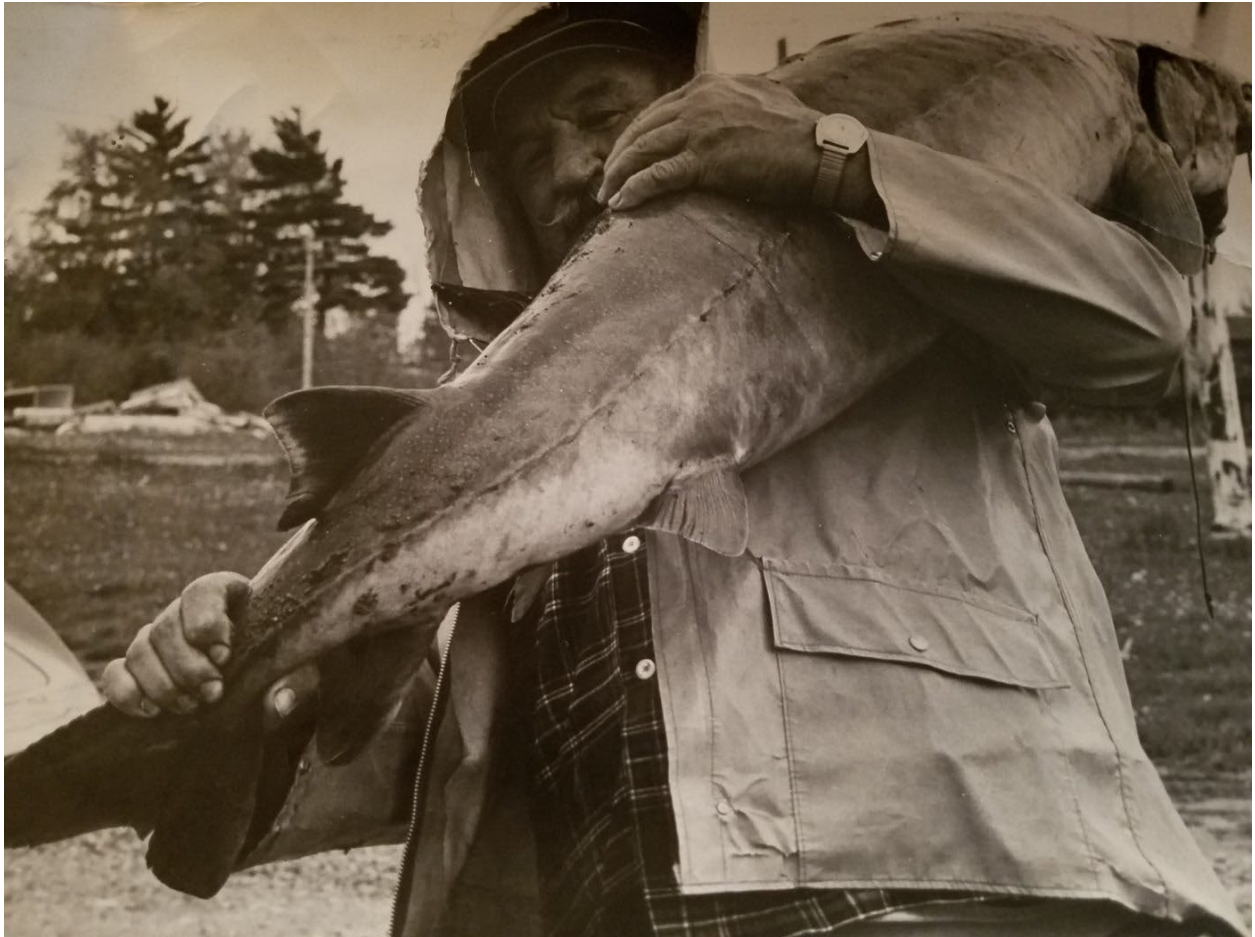
I found this to be an interesting topic and thank the person who suggested it. I see hope in the future that we all may some day see a sturgeon or more photos of catch-and-release sturgeons. We don't have a sturgeon on display at the museum, but we do have a large Muskie and several photos of fishing men and women. Stop on down to view them.

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Ernie Mance with a Sturgeon over his shoulder



Sturgeon fingerling to be released