

White Sturgeon Recovery Initiative

White sturgeon, North America's largest freshwater fish, is an intriguing and mysterious member of an ancient lineage. In 2003, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) designated white sturgeon as an endangered species (see www.cosewic.gc.ca). In August of 2006, four of the six populations of white sturgeon found in British Columbia were listed under the federal Species at Risk Act (SARA) including the Kootenay, Columbia, Nechako and Upper-Fraser populations (see www.speciesatrisk.gc.ca). Given these decisions, federal and provincial agencies are working together to address how sturgeon fisheries will be managed into the future in B.C.

SARA prohibits the capture or harming of listed species, so directed fisheries will not be permitted on the listed populations. The Nechako, Columbia, and Kootenay rivers were previously closed to sturgeon fishing due to declining populations and a lack of reproductive success. These populations have been the subject of extensive recovery efforts to prevent their extinction (see www.uppercolumbiasturgeon.org and www.nechakowhitesturgeon.org). The Upper Fraser population (upstream of the Nechako River confluence) was listed under SARA because it is very small and inherently vulnerable. **The closed area for white sturgeon fishing on the Fraser River will extend from the headwaters, downstream as far as the mouth of Williams Lake River.** This area includes the upstream portion of the Middle-Fraser population as the numbers of fish in this part of the river are also very low and will not support a sustainable fishery.

In addition to the sturgeon fishing closure, **a bait ban is being considered for all or part of this closed portion of the Fraser River** to reduce the chance of these fish being caught by anglers fishing for other species. The Ministry would like your input on this proposal, and would like to understand how you might be affected by a bait ban in this area (see below).

The Lower and Middle-Fraser River sturgeon populations are not listed under SARA, and the popular "catch and release" fisheries will remain on the Fraser River and its tributaries downstream of Williams Lake River, given that the populations in this part of the watershed are robust enough to support sport fishing. However, the Lower and Middle-Fraser populations are still



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Juvenile sturgeon raised at the Kootenay White Sturgeon Conservation Hatchery

considered to be at risk, in part because of habitat loss and historic harvest levels, so the management strategy for recreational fishing must be consistent with rebuilding or maintenance of these populations. A **conservation plan** for the Fraser River populations was recently completed (see <http://frasersturgeon.com>) which identifies some of the opportunities for future management. Anglers are requested to take extra care when catching and releasing these fish; please refer to "Releasing Sturgeon" at: www.env.gov.bc.ca/fw/fish

To help gain important information on fishing effort and success, **the Ministry is considering instituting a Sturgeon Conservation Surcharge Stamp**, similar to the one in effect for steelhead fishing (see page 7). All, or a portion of the revenue from this stamp could be used to support sturgeon management and recovery efforts. The Ministry would like your input on this proposal (see below).

As required by SARA, a single recovery strategy is currently being developed that will identify the recovery needs for the species as a whole. This and previous plans have been developed with participation from government agencies, First Nations, and stakeholders, and will guide future recovery actions, management, and research. Planning efforts support the need for ongoing research that examines factors such as the effects of hydroelectric dams, the loss of floodplain habitats, the impacts of pollution, and (for the middle and lower Fraser) the impacts of commercial, food, and sport fishing.

For the populations outside the mainstem Fraser River, declining numbers and reproductive failure have made conservation-based fish culture necessary. Artificial rearing of white sturgeon is being pursued in carefully designed breeding plans and has resulted in the successful reintroduction of juvenile sturgeon into these waters. Monitoring of released fish will answer key questions and support the recovery of naturally reproducing populations.

Sturgeon anglers are encouraged to provide feedback on the bait ban and Conservation Surcharge Stamp proposals. Please forward your comments to:

White Sturgeon Regulations,
Ministry of Environment, Fish & Wildlife Branch,
PO Box 9363, STN PROV GOVT, Victoria, B.C. V8W 9M2



MARC LAYNES, CASCADE FISHING ADVENTURES



RAY BILLINGS, FFSBC

Left: **Catch-and-release sturgeon fishing in the lower Fraser River still generates once-in-a-lifetime experiences**
Right: **A wild adult Nechako River white sturgeon being gently handled in the pilot conservation fish culture recovery program of the Freshwater Fisheries Society of B.C.**