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Agencies combine to try and save fast-disappearing sturgeon

Outdoors

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A surprisingly large number of state, federal and provincial agencies are cooperating to save from extinction the white sturgeon in the upper Columbia River drainage.

The living fossils, once so plentiful that anglers hooked several a day, are vanishing.

Nearly all the youngest adult sturgeon in the American and British Columbia sections of the Columbia and its tributaries, fish biologists say, are more than 30 years old.

The sturgeon are producing some fry, but few survive to become adults. Fisheries officials want to know why.

Early this year, the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission enacted a regulation banning the fishing for sturgeon in Lake Roosevelt and Rufus Woods Lake. Fishermen are not supposed to deliberately hook and release them, but a ban on that kind of fishing is not spelled out clearly in the regulation, leading a few fishermen to believe they can hook and release the fish.

The regulation stunned guides and anglers who had assumed they could continue to fish for the big, old fish, or at least catch and release them. Some don't believe the sturgeon population is in trouble and a few continue to fish big holes where the sturgeon are known to live. Most who fish illegally do so surreptitiously.

Several fisheries officials in Eastern Washington are involved in the long-term program to save the sturgeon, including John Whalen, Spokane regional fish biologist for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, and Deanne Pavik, fisheries program manager for the Spokane Indian tribe.

Twenty-five state, federal and Canadian agencies, Indian tribes, environmental organizations, power-producing firms and lumber firms are members of the Upper Columbia White Sturgeon Initiative (UCWSI), created to study sturgeon and develop ways to save them.

The umbrella organization has set up teams to evaluate the existing population of sturgeon, attempt to analyze factors that are responsible for the steady decline in sturgeon numbers, why very few young sturgeon apparently survive to become adults, what can be done to reverse the trend and persuade all groups to cooperate in a recovery program.

In addition, officials of the sturgeon-saving program want to get the general public involved in saving the fish that looks like it is a survivor of the dinosaur age, which it is.

"There's a lot of public concern for the sturgeon," Whalen commented.

So far, officials of UCWSI have been cooperating as enthusiastically as can be expected of people who have divergent opinions of fish-saving programs.

"One of the major problems, if not the major one, will be to learn why there has been very limited production of sturgeon in Lake Roosevelt the last 25 to 30 years," Whalen said. "The survival rate of young sturgeon has been extremely small."

Biologists believe only about 1 percent of the fry survive, or not enough to sustain or rebuild the sturgeon population.

Whalen said Columbia River conditions have changed dramatically the last 30 years or so. The major change was the construction of several dams, which altered the flow patterns of the river. Another change was the release of pollutants into the river by cities, and mining and logging and other firms.

"Sturgeon spawn in June and early July," Whalen said. "That's when the runoff is at its peak. The flow could be affecting the spawning.

"Sturgeon have a preferred temperature range, a quick window from egg to fry, a matter of 10 days. The temperature of the water may affect spawning."

Whalen said the Columbia is clearer than it was 30 years ago primarily as the result of the building of several dams. It's still not as clear as the St. Joe River, for example, but it's clear enough for predator fish to find and feed on sturgeon eggs.

Predation is a factor that will be considered by the teams that will try to evaluate the reasons why sturgeon above Chief Joseph and Grand Coulee dams are failing to produce enough young fish to sustain the population.

Among the predators are squawfish, walleyes, carp and rainbows. The white sturgeon is one of several sub-species of sturgeons throughout the world. Some green sturgeon, which are smaller than the white sturgeon, are in marine waters and some coastal streams. The Atlantic sturgeon is in some streams along the northeast coast.

White sturgeon once were plentiful in the Columbia and Snake rivers, but overfishing, dams and pollution have reduced their populations dramatically. As a result, state fisheries agencies have enacted stringent fishing regulations the last few years.

The white sturgeon can live more than 100 years, but it's unlikely, as the result of overfishing and other factors, there are any that are more than 50 years old. Every year fishermen hook and release sturgeon in the Hells Canyon section of the Snake River that are more than 10 feet long.

Idaho hasn't allowed fishermen to keep the sturgeon they hook for several years. In fact, the regulation pertaining to sturgeon says that "Any sturgeon caught may not be removed from the water and must be released immediately. Barbless hooks are required."

Washington and Oregon permit anglers to keep one sturgeon a day along the lower Columbia. The only sturgeon that can be kept must be between 42 and 60 inches long. Washington anglers can't keep any sturgeon they hook along the Snake above Lower Granite Dam.

Only a few years ago fishermen could keep several 36- to 60-inch sturgeon a day along the lower Columbia River. Numerous Washington and Oregon guides made a living taking anglers to known sturgeon holes at the Columbia's mouth.

Those days are history.

If the long-lived fossil is to survive in the Northwest, agencies will have to set regulations that will allow the sturgeon to survive and thrive.