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OUTDOORS NOTEBOOK: BIG WOES FOR UPPER COLUMBIA STURGEON

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By ALLEN THOMAS, Columbian staff writer

The handwriting on the wall is pretty clear for 2003 and beyond: There's going to be about a 25 percent reduction in sturgeon harvests for sports and commercial fishermen in the lower Columbia River.

While no one's thrilled about that, consider the plight of the sturgeon in the upper Columbia River.

The sturgeon population upstream of Grand Coulee Dam has had virtually no successful spawning for 30 years.

In Lake Roosevelt, the massive reservoir behind Grand Coulee, only 1.5 percent of the sturgeon population is less than 4 feet in length.

By comparison, 99 percent of the population in the lower Columbia are sturgeon less than 4 feet.

Let's see, the population is aging and there are very few young: It sure sounds like a recipe for extinction.

Between 2,500 and 5,000 sturgeon are in the Columbia between Grand Coulee Dam and the Canadian border, said John Whalen, a Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife biologist.

There are about 1,400 fish in the Columbia between the border and Keenleyside Dam.

Even catch-and-release fishing for sturgeon is prohibited in the upper river.

Sturgeon face a plethora of habitat problems in the upper Columbia.

"Above Lake Roosevelt, there are several dams in Canada that affect flows and habitat conditions for these fish, as well as dams in the Pend Oreille (River) that affect water quality," Whalen told the state Fish and Wildlife Commission Friday. "There are several contaminant issues relative to chemical operations up in Trail (British Columbia) and pulp mill plants, as well as heavy metal contaminations and PCBs."

Completion of Keenleyside Dam in 1968 appears very significant.

"When Keenleyside Dam came in, it apparently caused a real problem," he said. "We started to see a lack of reproductive success."

Brad James, the department's sturgeon biologist in Vancouver, has worked with the upper Columbia population.

"We have a very large population of adult fish," he said. "But there's definitely something wrong with that population. It only supplies one or two female spawners per year. This is the exact opposite of what you find in a healthy population."

Spawning apparently happens only where the Pend Oreille River flows into the Columbia, Whalen said.

But the dams also trap sediment, improving water clarity in the upper Columbia and making it easier for predators to find the few sturgeon produced.

James said models indicate the upper Columbia population will decline by 75 percent during the next two decades.

"We'll not have a large enough viable population to even go out and collect adults to initiate or support a hatchery operation," he said. "The Canadians are starting a hatchery operation right now.

"Those fish are being released, but it will be 30 years before the females would even be of mature size. It's that 30-year period when we essentially run out of viable natural fish before any reintroduced fish are available to tap to continue the hatchery program."

Lisa Pelly, Fish and Wildlife Commission member from Bainbridge Island, summed it up pretty appropriately: "I don't know how more dire we can get here."