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Lake Sturgeon Restoration Looks Promising in North Country

Stocking of Four Month Old fish to Bolster Efforts

Lake sturgeon are being stocked in two North Country waters again this year as part of a restoration program, according to Sandra LeBarron, Region 6 Director of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). On September 24th, 1,200 fingerlings (four month old, 5 to 8 inch long fish) were released into the St. Regis River, town of Brasher and Black Lake, town of Morristown, both sites in St. Lawrence County. Previous stocking efforts in the Oswegatchie and St. Regis rivers have shown great results.

"This magnificent fish species is classified as threatened in New York State, and stocking will help remedy population declines which occurred early in the last century," LeBarron commented. "This summer's sample netting of the St. Regis turned up 4-year old sturgeon that were up to 29 inches in length, an outstanding rate of growth on these long lived fish."

The lake sturgeon is one of New York's largest freshwater fish. Mature adults average between 3 to 5 feet in length and 10 to 80 pounds in weight, but can occasionally grow as large as 7+ feet and 300+ pounds. Lake sturgeon once flourished in waters along New York's northern border and even provided large commercial harvests near Buffalo. In 1885, harvests totaled 1,800 tons. These large fish inhabited all areas of our border waters on the west, north and northeast, including Lake Erie, the Niagara River, Lake Ontario, the St. Lawrence River, Lake Champlain and in several St. Lawrence River tributaries up to 60 miles upstream.

Today, only four areas with distinct and reproducing lake sturgeon populations remain. Those areas include the St. Lawrence River downstream of Massena, the Niagara River above the Falls, the Niagara River downstream of the Falls and the Grasse River in St. Lawrence County. Two of these areas, to the north, have maintained their low level populations through the years without the precipitous declines from over-fishing. In contrast, the Niagara River populations were devastated by over-fishing and fish were rarely caught or seen from 1940 to the 1980's. Now, they are recovering to some extent, after DEC initiated protection from harvest in 1976.

Activities to increase lake sturgeon populations and, hopefully, remove them from the New York threatened species list include: protection from fishing harvest, habitat improvement, stocking of fingerlings, evaluations of these efforts and educational programs. In order to cover all these activities, DEC is cooperating with affiliated groups and federal agencies including Cornell University, New York Power Authority, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service offices in Amherst, NY, and North Chittenden, VT and the U.S. Geological Survey in Cortland, NY to make this restoration successful. These partnerships have focused in three areas: 1) population surveys and evaluations in the St. Lawrence River, Oswegatchie Rivers and Oneida Lake, 2) spawning habitat studies in the St. Lawrence and Genesee Rivers, and 3) raising the sturgeon in hatcheries.

DEC activities have focused on protection, hatchery rearing, planning and education. Hatchery fingerlings are produced for three northern New York waters which have been chosen as the best prospects for restoration. Stocking is a five-year program, releasing about 1,000 fingerlings/year for each water. One of the anticipated signals of program success will be when the fish reach maturity and we will again see lake sturgeon spawning in these historic waters.

Progress can be seen from these hatchery efforts by the frequent reports by fishermen and from the 2001 sample netting in Black Lake and the Oswegatchie River in 2002. While sampling this summer in the St. Regis River, fisheries staff caught 10 sturgeon that were 3, 4 and 5 years old, indicating good growth and survival of fish from each of the stockings in 1998–2000.

There has been a heightened public awareness and watchfulness for this magnificent fish. Many public aquariums in Northern New York have hatchery fingerlings on display. People can see them at the Thompson Park Zoo in Watertown, Wellesley Island State Park near Alexandria Bay, St. Lawrence Aquarium and Ecological Center at Massena and Robert Moses State Park near Massena.

Inquiries about this threatened fish restoration program and other similar projects can be directed to DEC, Bureau of Fisheries in Watertown, New York. The telephone number is (315) 785-2262. Additional information on lake sturgeon can be found on DEC's website at www.dec.state.ny.us/website/dfwmr/wildlife/endspec/lakestur.html.

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