



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Connecticut River Coordinator's Office

Restoring Migratory Fish to the Connecticut River Basin

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Description

The shortnose sturgeon (*Acipenser brevirostrum*) is one of two sturgeon species in the Connecticut River; the other is the Atlantic sturgeon. The shortnose is the smaller of the two, growing to be 2 to 3 feet in length and about 14 pounds in weight. Sturgeons are an ancient species with fossils dating back 65 million years. They are very distinctive, looking like a prehistoric cross between a shark and a catfish. Sturgeons lack teeth and scales but have a unique body armor of diamond-shaped bony plates called scutes. Some have been found to be over 60 years old.



Life History

Shortnose sturgeon are typically anadromous, migrating from the ocean to fresh water specifically to reproduce. However, of the two populations in the Connecticut River system (formed by the construction of dams), one is considered to be partially landlocked and the other is likely to be

amphidromous, moving between fresh and salt water. Shortnose reproduce in the spring. They broadcast their eggs in areas with rubble substrate. Once hatched, the young fish drift downstream and may eventually swim to brackish water.

Distribution

Shortnose sturgeon are found along the Atlantic coast of North America in estuaries and large rivers. In the Connecticut River, there is a partially landlocked population above the Holyoke Dam up to the Turners Falls Dam in Massachusetts, and another population in the estuary. Shortnose sturgeon rarely venture into the river's larger tributaries, and they are usually found in the mainstem Connecticut river.

Status

The shortnose sturgeon is the only fish in the Connecticut River basin that is nationally endangered. It is listed as an endangered species by the Federal government and all State governments throughout its range. As such, it is protected under the Endangered Species Act. The severe decrease in populations is attributed primarily to over-harvesting in the 1800's and early 1900's. Sturgeon were harvested for their meat, skin, swim bladders, and eggs (or roe). Shortnose taken commercially were often the bycatch of Atlantic sturgeon fisheries. Dams and pollution also contributed to the decline. The populations in the Connecticut River are considered to be stable, estimated at 1200-1500 individuals.

Restoration Efforts

The shortnose sturgeon is a Federal trust fish, meaning that the Federal government has some responsibility for its recovery. The National Marine Fisheries Service has the lead role in the management of this species. Populations are closely monitored, but much information still needs to be learned about this species. Current research on the behavior of these fish and their fish passage requirements is providing valuable information for the development of management strategies. A recovery plan for the species is under development.

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