



VISION

That sturgeon populations in the Fraser River are strong, healthy, and sustainable for future generations

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RECAPTURE CONFIRMS WHITE STURGEON MIGRATIONS BETWEEN MAJOR US AND CANADIAN WATERSHEDS

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Vancouver, BC – A tagged white sturgeon, captured in the Fraser River near Chilliwack by a research volunteer on May 13, 2004, was originally tagged and released in the Columbia River near Astoria, Oregon, in 1999. This recapture reaffirms that some white sturgeon migrate between the major northwestern watersheds, and highlights the importance of having greater collaboration between the US and Canada on sturgeon conservation issues.

The juvenile white sturgeon traveled a minimum of 600 kilometers between the release and recapture locations over a period of five years. This is the second recapture event in the Fraser River in less than two years of a sturgeon that was previously tagged in the Columbia River. Details of the first recapture event, which occurred in October 2002, closely parallel those of the second event. Both recaptured sturgeon were tagged in the Columbia River near Astoria, Oregon, and both were recovered in the Fraser River near Chilliwack approximately 5 years later. In addition, both sturgeon were approximately the same length (112 and 120 centimeters, respectively), and both fish were recaptured in the Fraser River by the same individual, Anthony Sprangers, a volunteer with the Fraser River Sturgeon Conservation Society (FRSCS).

The FRSCS is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the conservation and restoration of wild Fraser River white sturgeon. The society manages a volunteer-driven white sturgeon monitoring and assessment program in the lower Fraser River. Volunteers like Sprangers inspect captured sturgeon for the presence of tags, take length and girth measurements, make a record of any observed injuries, and assess the general condition of each sturgeon prior to release back into the Fraser River. Volunteers that contribute to the society's monitoring program are true stewards of the resource; recreational, First Nation, and commercial fishers, angling guides, enforcement personnel, test fishery operators, and fishery monitors. By law, all captured sturgeon must be released alive.

"The recapture of a tagged sturgeon from the Columbia River is an uncommon event," said Troy Nelson, Executive Director of the FRSCS and project manager for the lower Fraser River sturgeon monitoring and assessment program.

"In fact, this is only the second confirmed Columbia River migrant in our sample of over 22,000 sturgeon inspected for tags since 2000," Nelson said. "Recapture data from our study suggests that the high majority of white sturgeon are resident within the Fraser River watershed; however, these cross-border recapture events prove that there is some level of mixing between Columbia and Fraser river sturgeon stocks," Nelson said.

According to FRSCS founding member and Chairman Rick Hansen, the recapture events are significant and confirm the interactive behavior of white sturgeon stocks across the US-Canada border.

“White sturgeon are a tough and adaptable species,” Hansen said. “In the Fraser, they spawn well upstream of the estuary, and we know that stocks in the upper Fraser and Nechako River can reside in fresh water their entire lives.”

“However,” Hansen said, “white sturgeon that can readily access the ocean may migrate between fresh and salt water environments several times in their lives. The confirmations of these migrations between the Columbia and the Fraser River are not isolated events, and will be of interest to fisheries managers on both sides of the border.”

According to Hansen, white sturgeon are the largest freshwater fish in North America. They can attain lengths of 6 meters (19 feet), weights of 620 kilograms (1360 pounds), and live for more than 150 years. The species is slow to grow and mature; females may be over 25 years old and 170 cm in length before they spawn.

Both of the tagged sturgeon traveled great distances through diverse marine and freshwater environments over their years abroad.

“If they traveled in strait lines from their respective release locations in the Columbia River, north through the open Pacific Ocean, east through the Strait of Juan de Fuca, into the Strait of Georgia, and up the Fraser River to the points of recapture, they traveled a minimum of 600 kilometers,” Nelson said.

“It is not known if these fish were leaving home or returning home,” Nelson said. It is possible that these fish were spawned in the Fraser River, and migrated south to the Columbia when they were very young, perhaps 3-8 years old, where they spent some amount of time before returning to the Fraser. It is also possible that these fish were spawned in the Columbia River, and that they migrated north to the Fraser. Based on their lengths, both sturgeon were likely 12-18 years old when they were recaptured.”

Hansen said that the population model developed by the FRSCS to estimate sturgeon abundance in the lower will be strengthened by the information provided from tag recaptures such as this. The model estimates the current population of white sturgeon (40-220 cm in length) in the lower Fraser River) is approximately 62,600. The sturgeon population model provides the ability to track changes (increases or decreases) in the population size and structure over time; according to Hansen, this feature is key to the long-term monitoring and assessment of sturgeon stock status against management actions.

“The precision of population estimates produced from our monitoring and assessment program is extremely high,” Hansen said. “High precision provides high confidence, and in turn provides useful and meaningful information. I am confident that our credible sturgeon research in BC will continue to work in concert with research being conducted in the US. Increased collaboration between the US and BC white sturgeon authorities will advance both research and stock conservation initiatives on both sides of the border. The confirmations of the recent recapture events are testaments to the power of partnerships.”

The world spawning populations of white sturgeon are limited to three of the largest rivers on the west coast of North America – the Sacramento, Columbia, and Fraser rivers. In Canada, white sturgeon have recently been designated as an endangered species by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC).