



VISION

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

For Immediate Release - February 16, 2004

FRASER RIVER STURGEON CONSERVATION SOCIETY CONFIRMS TAGGED STURGEON RECAPTURED IN THE FRASER RIVER WAS PREVIOUSLY RELEASED IN THE COLUMBIA RIVER, OREGON

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Executive Director

Mr Troy Nelson
3299 137 A Street
Crescent Beach, BC V4P 2B5
Tel 604-535-1768
Fax 604-535-1769
Email: tnelson@lqi.com

Executive Assistant

Ms Jane McIvor

Administrative Correspondence

Jane McIvor
2000 - 1066 W. Hastings St.
Vancouver, BC V6E 3X2
Tel 604.893-8800
Fax 604.893-8808
Email: jane@mcivor-communications.com

Vancouver, BC – A tagged white sturgeon, captured in the Fraser River near Mission by a research volunteer in October 2002, was originally tagged and released in Columbia River near Astoria, Oregon, in 1997. The juvenile white sturgeon traveled a minimum of 600 kilometers between the release and recapture locations over a period of five and a half years.

The Fraser River Sturgeon Conservation Society (FRSCS), a non-profit organization dedicated to the conservation and restoration of wild Fraser River white sturgeon, manages a volunteer-driven white sturgeon monitoring and assessment program in the lower Fraser River. On 10 October, 2002, FRSCS volunteer Anthony Sprangers captured a juvenile white sturgeon in the Fraser River about 9 kilometers upstream of the Mission Bridge. Upon inspection, Sprangers observed a yellow “spaghetti” tag attached to the fish at the base of its dorsal fin. Springer recorded the numbers on the tag, applied a tiny electronic tag to the sturgeon, and measured its length and girth, prior to releasing the fish alive and in excellent condition back into the Fraser.

“When I received Anthony’s data and saw the recapture information for an external tag, I immediately searched the release records for Fraser River sturgeon,” said Troy Nelson, Executive Director of the FRSCS and project manager for the sturgeon monitoring and assessment program.

“There was no match in the BC data base,” Nelson said, “so I added the number to a short list of other tag numbers that did not have matches, which was eventually sent out to BC, Washington, and Oregon sturgeon researchers with a request to check for matches.”

According to Nelson, several months passed without a confirmed match for the mysterious yellow tag. In November 2003, Nelson sent out an updated list of tags with unknown release information – the now-famous yellow tag was still on this list. In December 2003, Nelson received a message from a sturgeon biologist with Washington Fish and Game that confirmed the release history for the yellow-tagged sturgeon.

“The sturgeon was originally tagged and released in the Columbia River by an Oregon-based research crew on May 9, 1997, about 18 kilometers upstream from the bridge at Astoria, Oregon, which is about 40 kilometers upstream from the mouth of the river”, Nelson said. “If it traveled in straight lines from this point 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 point of recapture, it traveled a minimum of 600 kilometers.”

According to FRSCS founding member and Chairman Rick Hansen, the recapture event is significant and confirms 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 sturgeon recapture from the Columbia is not an isolated event, 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 25 years old and 170 cm in length before they spawn.

Nelson said that the tagged sturgeon was 83 cm in length when it was released in 1997. “It grew 39 cm over its 65 months abroad,” Nelson said. “This growth rate fits the high end of the average growth ranges observed in Fraser sturgeon samples for fish in this size range, which suggests that sturgeon that go to sea likely feed and grow quite well.”

Hansen said that the 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 that, currently, there are approximately 53,000 white sturgeon (40-220 cm in length) in the lower Fraser River. The model also 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 confirmation of the recent recapture event is a testament 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 recommended to be designated as an endangered species by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC).

Since 1999, FRSCS program volunteers have tagged and released over 15,000 sturgeon in the lower Fraser River downstream of Yale. Project volunteers, who are trained to carefully inspect captured sturgeon for the presence of tags, apply tiny electronic tags, and take measurements prior to releasing the fish alive, have currently sampled over 20,000 sturgeon.

The Society has charitable status. The award-winning, volunteer-driven sturgeon tagging program, which commenced in October 1999, has gathered sponsorship and support from provincial, federal, and aboriginal governments, plus non-government institutions, associations, and foundations. The program has successfully coordinated activities and in-kind contributions from true stewards of the resource: sport fishing guides, recreational, commercial, and aboriginal fishermen, test fishery and enforcement personnel, various fishery monitors.

Major support for the Society’s sturgeon monitoring and assessment program is provided by the Habitat Conservation Trust Fund (HCTF); the mandate of HCTF is to protect British Columbia’s biological diversity and ecosystem integrity. Other sponsors include the Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection, Environment Canada, the Rudy and Patricia North Foundation, the Vancouver Foundation, the Willow Grove Foundation, the Canadian National Sportsmans Shows, and the Nature Trust of BC.