

Fraser River White Sturgeon

by Rick Hansen

As a kid, I grew up along the Fraser River, fishing whenever I could. Weekends or after school, I was out the door and down to the riverbank, loaded with enthusiasm and anticipation, packing an old fishing pole and a can of dew worms. One day I hooked and landed a really big fish - a white sturgeon. I was simply blown away by the look and feel of it - prehistoric, with whisker-like barbels in front of a tough, toothless mouth, rows of sharp, armored plates down its back and sides, and the size! The experience left a deep impression, and today, I'm still hooked on sturgeon.

White sturgeon (*Acipenser transmontanus*) are ancient creatures; they have outlived the dinosaur and survived two ice ages. They are the largest freshwater fish in North America, and can attain lengths of 6 meters (19 feet), weights of 620 kilograms (1360 pounds), and live for more than 150 years.

Historically, by the late 1800's, a commercial fishery for sturgeon was established on the Fraser, and several million pounds were harvested in just a few years. As a result, the sturgeon population collapsed. Over the next several decades, limited fisheries continued to apply significant pressure to the remaining sturgeon population. In 1994, as a precaution, the province imposed catch-and-release sport fishing regulations, and Fraser First Nations elected voluntary retention moratoriums.

A 5-year research initiative for the species was developed and implemented in 1995 by a team of provincial fisheries biologists. In 1998, a group of volunteers from the lower mainland rallied around this initiative and formed the Fraser River Sturgeon Conservation Society (FRSCS). In 1999, with the help of BC Fisheries, the Habitat

Conservation Trust Fund, and LGL Limited, the FRSCS initiated a significant volunteer-driven sturgeon tagging program in the lower Fraser River. By January 2000, over a hundred trained volunteers, including guides, recreational and First Nation fishermen, and test fisheries personnel, had worked together to tag and release close to 5,000 sturgeon.

For me, sturgeon are more than a mere curiosity or prehistoric relic. The fact that they are still present and tenaciously holding their own is a reassurance to personal concerns regarding the state of our natural resources, our environment, our world. Every time I cross one of the bridges that span the Fraser River, I can't help but peek down, knowing that right below me, deep in that mighty river, there are living dinosaurs.

And who knows - maybe I'll see a kid

down there, with an old fishing pole and a can of worms, wide-eyed with anticipation and wonder.

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Dave Doroghy