

Sturgeon Stories

(Tom McCauley—White Earth Nation)

I cannot put enough emphasis on the importance of interrelationship of the movements of early Native Americans to the area and the fish migrations. The movements of large numbers of fish each spring, cumulatively in the millions, contributed greatly to the seasonal patterns and subsistence-related activities of the early Native Americans. The fish provided an easily procured and highly nutritious form of sustenance with a minimal amount of time and effort. Earlier accounts speak of the fish being so plentiful in the river that it appeared to them you could walk across the river on the backs of the fish which were on the surface.

Each spring, prior to the spawning runs, Native Americans would gather to predetermine locations. It was a time of celebration and practicing of ceremonies. It also allowed the chiefs of the different groups the opportunity to sit down together and make decisions pertaining to the overall welfare of the group, and discuss tribal politics for the upcoming season. It was also during this gathering when decisions would be made as to what groups would fish where along the river so there was no trouble over fishing or getting in one group or another's way.

The first people had, originally, seven clans, and each clan identified by an animal, emblem, or a totem. Each clan was given a different and unique duty to meet the need of the nation. The clans worked together and cooperated to achieve the needs and goals of the people. The clans' system had built in equal justice, voice, law, and order, and it reinforced the teachings and principles of a sacred way of life. Namé [pronounced "nah **may**"], or the sturgeon, its existence within the clan system came between the Crane and Loon clans, which were given the power of chieftainship. When the chiefs came to an impasse in making a decision, they would, inevitably, seek the advice of the sturgeon clan, who were not only educators, prophets, and teachers, but they also solved disputes. The sturgeon clan, or Namé, played a very significant role in not only the sustenance of the people within the clan system and within the hierarchy of the people. So there's much more to the sturgeon story than just a fish that swims in the water.

(Pat Brown—Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians)

The main thing here is the lake sturgeons were lost. Probably in the 1940s or 1950s were probably the last time they were even seen around here, but there is archaeological evidence that they were used very heavily by the Red Lake people back at the turn of the century, the 1900s or 1800s. The Red Lakes were a typically big prairie lake up here. The two of them together is about 283,000 acres of water. They're relatively shallow. They're turbid. What I was feeling like we could do here is use this as a nursery area. We're hoping to get a population of the Red Lakes. As they go down the stream of that, they'll be able to start populating seventy miles of the Red Lake River, which we currently don't have lake sturgeons in. So we're hoping we can become a source of lake sturgeons for the rest of the river base.

We get our fish. They start with the Rainy River First Nations. We buy the eggs from those individuals. Then they're transported down to the Genoa National Fish Hatchery. Their staff down there is able to hatch the eggs. They raise them up to a fingerling size, which is really somewhere between 5-7 inches, and then they bring them up here in October and release them. All of the fish that we've stocked have been marked by those individuals down there with coat wire tags, which will allow us in the future, if these fish are harvested somewhere off the reservation, we'll be able to tell if they came from Red Lake or not.

On the reservation, we've put a travel resolution in place that basically says that if you catch a lake sturgeon, you have to put it back. There's no harvest. Some fish are accidentally harvested with our commercial fishery, and those fish are taken into schools for educational purposes, so we can tell the kids about what's going on. A lot of kids haven't seen lake sturgeons before. We go to the Red Lake High School, Panema Elementary, Red Lake Elementary, and Red Lake Middle School also. They think they're pretty historical, almost like a dinosaur or sharks. So it's pretty neat. They're pretty excited about this partnership between White Earth, ourselves, Rainy River, Fish and Wildlife Service. Without all of these individuals working together on this thing (we're actually taking an eagle system approach or a watershed-based system approach on this whole issue), and I feel that we've got a lot better chance of being successful.

(Aaron Woldt—U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

Our role is to help our partners rehabilitate those species, and we do that through a lot of ways. We have our Fish Passage Program. Lake sturgeons do live in the lakes, but they spawn in the rivers and streams. So, with all of the dams we have dotted all over the landscape across the Midwest, that really fragmented those fish, basically separate them from their lake adult habitat and their river spawning habitat. So we use the Fish Passage Program to work with our partners to kind of reconnect those lake and stream habitat. We also are involved in rearing sturgeon in our facilities, like at the Genoa National Fish Hatchery.

We also have gotten involved with streamside rearing with our partners, where we have trailers that sit right alongside of the stream. We collect sturgeon—juvenile sturgeons that are either drifting down, or are sometimes as eggs in the stream. We bring them into these trailers. We pump that river water from that stream into the trailers, so that they are cultured in their own water. They imprint on that water, and then, when the fish are large enough as juveniles, we put them back in the water, right in that same stream that they were from. Between our hatchery work, our streamside assessment work, our fish passage work, we also, at our Fish and Wildlife conservation offices, do a lot of monitoring. Mainly the monitoring involves a lot of either working with commercial fisherman or working with our own assessment gear and tagging these fish so that we can see where they go all over the Great Lakes. That's pretty amazing. We've tagged fish before in Saginaw Bay that have shown up in Milwaukee before. So they do have quite a big range that they do swim across their lives.

(Scott Yess—U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

We have two main lake sturgeon projects that are going on. Both projects are involved with restoring populations that were depleted in the Red River drainage, Minnesota, and then on the Menominee Reservation. Both projects are partnership projects, not only with the tribes, the White Earth tribe in Minnesota and the Menominee tribe in Wisconsin, but we work a lot with the state DNRs (Department of Natural Resources) in Minnesota. We also work with Rainy River First Nations.

In the Red River drainage, there is habitat improvement that we're looking at working on. That's primarily involving fish passage projects. Our focus for this office has been on the White Earth reservation. We have completed three fish passage projects, and we're currently working on one this year.

They're [lake sturgeons] a great indicator of the quality of the river, because they are a migrating fish, and they do need those specific habitats. So, if they can reestablish, the real hope is that we can stop stocking and they'll maintain their population through natural reproduction. That'll give us an indicator that the system's revitalizing.

Ideally, we'd be getting stock from the Red River, but, seeing as though there's no sturgeon left in that system, we want to get the closest genetic strain to that system, in that Red River and the Rainy River both drained to Hudson Bay.

(Tom Groshens—Minnesota Department of Natural Resources)

We're trying to restore their habitat, restore the water quality for them, and restore the connectivity. They need access to their spawning areas, but they also access to go down there over wintering areas. If you think of a low head dam, where you have an instant drop there, and the fish can't navigate upstream in that drop, modification basically takes that dam face and, in most cases, we leave the dam intact. Then we put rocks and boulders immediately downstream of that, and, essentially, turn that dam into a nice, gentle riffle with a five percent float.

We started the reintroduction of lake sturgeon. We started that in 1997. In 1998, we released some juveniles and tagged them just to see where they would move throughout the system. And since then, they have a target of 200,000 fry and 8,000 fingerlings that we stock through various lakes and rivers throughout the river basin.

One of the things, when we get together in this partnership, is to keep each other informed on what we're doing and right advice to each other, some of the best methods and what we can do. We think we've made a lot of progress in a number of different aspects in lake sturgeon restoration. From sampling some of our lakes, we're starting to see some lake sturgeon in our gill net catches.

(Joe Hunter—Rainy River First Nations)

Sturgeons were important to us for generation. It continues to go on today. Our community has always been [involved] in the historical connection and significance of its fishery and property across the

community. When they talk about recovery, and sustainable harvest, and that sort of thing, for us, we understand that. That's part of our life. Whether it be fishing, whether it be hunting, whether it be planting trees or whatever, the basic concept in our way of life is that when you take something, you have to offer something back. Take only what you need.

The Rainy River First Nations up until 1995 held a commercial sturgeon license. In 1995, the leadership and the elders in the community announced that their own moratorium was gone now and the commercial sturgeon license also to participate in the recovery of the sturgeon.