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Partnership for Restoration: The St. Clair–Detroit River System

By Justin Chiotti

The 2015 St. Clair – Detroit River System (SCDRS) Annual Meeting was held on February 4th at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory in Ann Arbor, Michigan. For the past 11 years partners conducting research and restoration activities in the St. Clair River, Detroit River, and western Lake Erie have been gathering to share information about projects being conducted in this system and how we can work together to achieve common goals. The SCDRS Partnership Agreement Signatories include 15 tribal and government agencies, academic institutions, and non-profit organizations along with 17 other supporting organizations. In 2013, the SCDRS Initiative received the Department of the Interior *Partners in Conservation* award, one of the highest recognitions bestowed on organizations by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior.

This year the theme of the meeting was “Establishing Priorities for Coordinated Action, 2015-2023”. Fish biologists James Boase and Justin Chiotti represented the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Alpena Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office. James serves as co-chair of the SCDRS Steering Committee and Justin is co-chair of the Science and Monitoring subcommittee. Sixty-five people were in attendance at this year’s meeting which focused on establishing objectives for addressing environmental priorities (beneficial use impairments, improve water quality, increase biodiversity, increase fish production, and reduce AIS threats) that have been established for the system. All participants were asked to rank a predetermined set of objectives and this scoring exercise was used to identify a final suite of key objectives for the system to be included in a 10-year science and monitoring strategy.

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Top: Participants at the 2015 St. Clair –Detroit River System Initiative Annual Meeting held in Ann Arbor, MI. Bottom: Dr. Bruce Manny is presented an award by James Boase for a lifetime of service conducting research in the St. Clair and Detroit Rivers. Photo credits: Kathe Glassner–Shwayde, NOAA.

At the conclusion of the meeting Dr. Bruce Manny, retired fisheries research biologist at the U.S Geological Survey Great Lakes Science Center was acknowledged for his 43-year professional contribution aimed at restoring the St. Clair and Detroit River Areas of Concern (AOCs). James Boase presented Dr. Manny with a wood carved lake sturgeon with the engraving "To Dr. Bruce Manny, Godfather of the Detroit River, spiritual and scientific mentor of all of us that have had the pleasure of working with you on the river", which received a standing ovation by everyone in attendance.

Lake Sturgeon 101

By Andrew Briggs

A critical goal of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is to engage today's youth in the importance and conservation of our natural resources. Today's youth are the future of natural resource conservation; however, with the expansion of urban areas, fewer youth get to experience nature first hand. At Waldon Middle School in Lake Orion, Michigan, 8th grade students in Mr. Jon Gray's classes are getting the opportunity to raise lake sturgeon and chinook salmon. They are participating in the Sturgeon and Salmon in the Classroom programs, run by the St. Clair-Detroit River Chapter of Sturgeon for Tomorrow and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. These programs give the students a hands-on opportunity to learn about the life history and habitat requirements of lake sturgeon and chinook salmon.

To further educate his students on lake sturgeon physiology, biology, and conservation, Mr. Gray invited fish biologist Andrew Briggs of the Alpena Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office (FWCO) – Waterford substation to speak to his four classes. Aside from information on lake sturgeon, Andrew also discussed what the Alpena FWCO is doing to assess and improve habitat and combat the spread of invasive species. For the many students that had an interest in future jobs in biology, Andrew discussed the tasks that he completes as a fish biologist and the steps he took to become a fish biologist.

The SCDRS including its tributaries contains six AOCs as defined by the Canada – United States Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement. Great Lakes Restoration Initiative funding has provided an opportunity to address many of the beneficial use impairments in this system and the SCDRS Initiative provides a venue for partners to share information about these projects and others taking place in one of the largest metropolitan areas of the United States. For more information about the SCDRS Initiative please visit: <http://www.huron-erie.org/>.



Fish Biologist Andrew Briggs speaks to a group of 8th graders at Waldon Middle School in Lake Orion, MI. Photo credit: Jon Gray, Waldon Middle School.

Students took great interest in Andrew's presentation and had the opportunity to ask questions during and after his talk. Questions included how big was the largest lake sturgeon that Andrew had ever caught, what is the most lake sturgeon Andrew has caught in one day, and how did invasive species get to Michigan. The 100 students that heard Andrew speak came away with a better understanding and appreciation of lake sturgeon and became aware of some of the career opportunities that are available to them in biology.

Spreading the Word: Fish Biologist Speaks to Local Aquarium Society

By Andrew Briggs

Presenting to local groups allows the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) to inform the public on the important work being conducted in their area. Not only do the members of these groups build an appreciation for the nature and the work being done right in their backyards, but they often spread the word or even volunteer to help conserve nature on their own. Fish biologist Andrew Briggs of the Alpena Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office (FWCO) – Waterford substation was recently invited to speak to one of these groups, the Greater Detroit Aquarium Society (GDAS). The mission of the GDAS is to further the study of all forms of aquatic life, to promote interest, to exchange ideas, to distribute information concerning the hobby and to encourage the breeding and displaying of aquatic life. Members of the GDAS take part in raising and even breeding tropical and native fish species.

During his presentation, Andrew discussed the research and restoration involving lake sturgeon in the St. Clair – Detroit River System (SCDRS). After a brief introduction on lake sturgeon life history, the presentation focused on the work being done by the Service and partners to combat the loss of habitat in the SCDRS. This includes the construction and evaluation of artificial reefs to increase native fish species spawning habitat that was removed in the 1900's to facilitate commercial shipping traffic. Five artificial reefs have been constructed since 2004, two in the Detroit River (Belle Isle and Fighting Island) and three in the St. Clair River (Middle Channel,



Fish Biologist Andrew Briggs speaks to the Greater Detroit Aquarium Society at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Royal Oak, MI. Photo credit: Greater Detroit Aquarium Society.

Marine City, and Algonac). The construction of these reefs has been identified as restoration targets for the “Loss of Fish and Wildlife Habitat” and “Degradation of Fish and Wildlife Populations” Beneficial Use Impairments (BUIs) in these two Areas of Concern (AOCs). Andrew also discussed other projects the Alpena FWCO is conducting involving lake sturgeon, including a lake sturgeon movement study and utilizing ultrasound to determine the sex of lake sturgeon. Members of the GDAS came away impressed by the amount of effort being put into restoring lake sturgeon in the SCDRS and thanked Andrew for taking the time to speak to the group.

Adult Lake Trout Dissection at Alpena’s Ella White Elementary School

By Chris Olds

Alpena Public School teacher Bob Thomson frequently invites Alpena Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office (FWCO) biologists to come in and give talks about the work they do. However, on December 9, 2014 fish biologists Chris Olds and Adam Kowalski brought their

work to Mr. Thomson’s class of 5th graders. Mr. Thomson’s class raises lake trout from eggs to the “fingerling” stage in collaboration with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. Some students, however, had never had the opportunity to see or

handle an adult lake trout. So Chris and Adam brought six adult lake trout collected during the FWCO's fall lake trout assessment at Six Fathom Bank Refuge for the kids to examine and dissect. Needless to say the kids were a little overwhelmed at the sheer size of the lake trout, but that amazement quickly turned to all smiles as they began to go through the dissection process.

The dissection process followed the same format as that used by the FWCO's Lake Huron Fisheries Assessment Unit when collecting biological information from lake trout captured during surveys on Lake Huron. The students examined the external surface of the fish for fin clips, sea lamprey wounding, and any

abnormalities on the surface of the fish. Then they looked at the gills, and all internal organs identifying form and function of each. Plus, as an added bonus the kids were able to find different parasites in the swim bladder, stomach, intestine, and pyloric caeca. Parasites were placed on slides and viewed under the microscope to examine the anatomy and the function of the parasites while in its host. If the big fish didn't get the kids excited the large intestinal tapeworms and nematodes in the swim bladder definitely did. By the end of the day all the kids left with a better understanding of fish anatomy and biology and had rejuvenated their enthusiasm about their own lake trout culture program in class.

Let's Celebrate Wetlands!

By Andrew Briggs

On February 2nd, 1971 on the shores of the Caspian Sea, Iran's Game and Fish Department held a conference where the "Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat" was agreed upon. Twenty-six years later on February 2nd, 1997, the first World Wetlands Day was celebrated and has been an annual event on February 2nd ever since. In 2010, Humbug Marsh within the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge became a "wetland of international importance" making it the only international wetland in the State of Michigan. This led to an annual celebration of World Wetlands Day that has taken place every year at Carlson High School in Gibraltar, Michigan, only two miles away from Humbug Marsh.

This year on February 4th, staff from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Alpena Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office (FWCO) – Waterford substation participated in the 6th annual World Wetlands Day celebration at Carlson High School. The event was postponed from the usual February 2nd date due to a snow storm that shut down most area schools. The event allowed students to learn about the importance of wetlands and the organisms that live in or benefit from these unique areas. The Alpena FWCO staff brought with them two young-of-the-year lake sturgeon, pictures of adult lake



Jesse McCarter and Jessica Loughner of the Alpena FWCO discuss lake sturgeon and the tags used to study them in the St. Clair-Detroit River System with students at Carlson High School in Gibraltar MI. Photo credits: USFWS.

sturgeon caught in the field, Asian Carp mounts, equipment they use while out in the field, and brochures, stickers, and tattoos that the students could take home with them. Other groups presenting information at the event included the Detroit International Wildlife Refuge, U.S. Forest Service, Detroit Zoological Society, DTE Energy, Friends of the Detroit River, Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, Carlson High School's Earth Club, Gibraltar Duck Hunter's Association, Pointe Mouillee Wildlife Refuge, Lake Erie Metropark, Wyandot of Anderdon Native American tribe, and Ducks Unlimited. Approximately 1,500 middle and high school students attended this year's celebration.

The booth occupied by the Alpena FWCO staff was one of the more popular stations of the event, with students flocking to observe the live lake sturgeon. Many students thought that the young-of-the-year lake sturgeon were baby sharks upon first glance and could not believe how much lake sturgeon grow over their lifetime. The Alpena FWCO staff informed the students about the life history of lake sturgeon, the methods used to catch lake sturgeon and the data collected from them, and what is being done to combat the spread of invasive species. The Alpena FWCO staff enjoyed interacting with the students, who went home with an appreciation for a native and endangered fish species many of them had never heard of before, let alone seen.



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The Friends of the Lake Huron Watershed group holds their monthly meeting on the third Wednesday of each month at 4:30 pm. The group meets at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office at 480 W. Fletcher Street in Alpena, Michigan. All are welcome to attend!