

# Sturgeon comeback: 'It is truly a breakthrough'

BY SHARON HILL, THE WINDSOR STAR    MAY 27, 2009



This is a photo of a lake sturgeon fish fry hatched from eggs taken off a spawning bed that was built off Fighting Island in the Detroit River. The fish fry showed the spawning beds built last year worked and were the first proof in 30 years that lake sturgeon are successfully spawning on the Canadian side of the Detroit River. for Sharon Hill story

**Photograph by:** Jeff Allen, U.S. Geological Survey

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LASALLE, Ont. -- For the first time in 30 years, lake sturgeon are spawning on the Canadian side of the Detroit River.

"It is truly a breakthrough," Matthew Child, director of watershed restoration with the Essex Region Conservation Authority, said Tuesday.

Child said the four different kinds of rock bottoms built as spawning beds between Fighting Island and LaSalle were only completed last fall and scientists were prepared to wait to see if they'd be used.

The proof came this spring when the sturgeon spawned four times off Fighting Island. Scientists in the binational project collected eggs off the spawning beds and reared the fry in an Ann Arbor, Mich. lab. As further proof, biologists were able to catch small sturgeon larvae in a fine net a week ago Tuesday near midnight off Fighting Island.

James Boase, a fishery biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service who was in the boat, called it a "eureka" moment. "Everybody was giving a high five. It's a Holy Grail."

He said the eggs surviving was a big step. If the fish survive it will be another 15 to 20 years before this hatch may return to the area to spawn.

Lake sturgeon, which can grow to six or seven feet long and live up to a century, used to be so plentiful in the Detroit River, 4,000 adult fish would be caught in the spring in the late 1800s and there are stories of them being stacked up on the Amherstburg shore like cordwood.

Overfishing and habitat loss — channels were dug through their spawning beds - has left the Detroit River with about one per cent of the former sturgeon population.

An acre of spawning beds constructed last year between Fighting Island and LaSalle marked the first time the United States and Canada had worked together to restore fish habitat in the Great Lakes. ERCA and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service were two of the 17 partners in the project that included BASF Corporation, the owners of Fighting Island.

The spawning beds cost more than \$250,000 and used four different kind of reefs. The sturgeon preferred a mixture of rock off the northeast corner of Fighting Island.

The sturgeon larvae tell scientists what spawning bed worked best and give hope that the lake sturgeon population can be restored. And the spawning bottom feeders show the Detroit River is cleaner.

"If it's cleaner for fish that means it's cleaner for you and me," said John Hartig of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Hartig said 10 years ago what looked like torpedoes appeared in aerial photographs off Fighting Island. Scientists knew they were lake sturgeon.

The sturgeon have been found spawning off Zug Island on the U.S. side but this was the first time they were found spawning on the Canadian side.

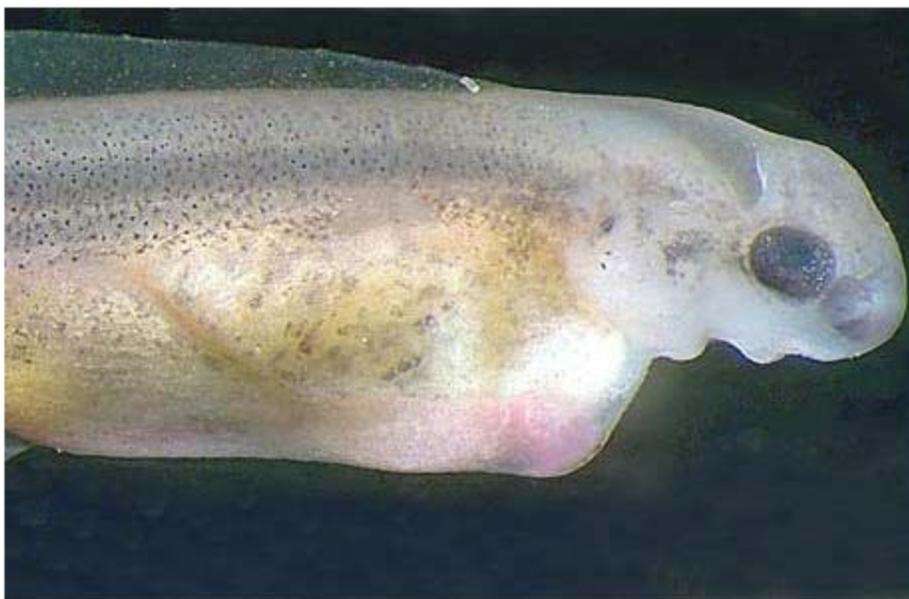
Spawning beds build near Belle Isle, McKee Park in Windsor and Fort Malden in Amherstburg were not successful.

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