

Sturgeon comeback

Enormous fish are appearing again in Detroit River

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Two female lake sturgeons caught near a \$25,000 spawning bed made just for them near Fort Malden this spring are an encouraging sign for the international effort to bring back the threatened fish.

The researchers who caught and released the sturgeon can't say for sure the fish spawned successfully on the rocks, but their presence in the area shows that the pre-historic-looking fish have discovered the spawning spot created two years ago.

Just seeing a lake sturgeon, the largest fish in the Great Lakes, was an experience for Matthew Child, habitat and aquatic resource co-ordinator at the Essex Region Conservation Authority.

"It's exciting as anything," he said Thursday. "It's one of awe and admiration to see these fish at close range."

Lake sturgeon can live to be 100 to 150 years old. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service says the largest recorded lake sturgeon was 7.5 feet long and weighed 310 pounds.

Overfishing, habitat loss and pollution led to their dramatic decline.

Jim Boase, a fishery research biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said there are likely one per cent of the lake sturgeon left compared to their numbers 150 years ago.

Last November, Boase caught two small lake sturgeon at the southern end of Fighting Island that were the first juveniles caught and documented by researchers in the river in more than 40 years. It's another sign the fish are spawning somewhere.

The recovery effort has a long way to go but Boase hopes one day the population is large enough for sturgeon to be a sport fish again. Right now, that's banned on both sides of the Detroit River.

"I think we've hit a turning point."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Geological Service and the Essex conservation authority are working together on the first bi-national lake sturgeon habitat restoration project on the Detroit River.

Using funding from Environment Canada, ERCA teamed up with researchers on the U.S. side in a \$34,500 project to study the sturgeon before creating more spawning areas for the fish at the north end of Fighting Island. Child said that spawning bed could be built in 2008 at a



CREDIT: Special to The Star

Lake sturgeon like this 60 plus pound one caught near Fort Malden on the Detroit River in early May are a promising sign for the threatened species. Shown holding the pre-historic looking fish are Aime Bourdon of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Matthew Child of the Essex Region Conservation Authority and Jim McFee of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

cost of more than \$100,000.

Spawning spots have already been built at Belle Isle, Fort Malden and McKee Park near the Ambassador Bridge.

More than 100 years ago, lake sturgeon were so plentiful, Child said there are reports of sturgeon stacked up like cordwood on the Amherstburg docks as fuel for steamboats.

Boase said by the late 1800s the sturgeon were fished out both for their caviar and because their size simply got them caught in nets.

This spring researchers caught 80 sturgeon in the Detroit River, mostly on the Canadian side, and tagged them with microchips like those put in pet dogs, before releasing them. In the future, Boase said he'd like to use transmitters and track the movement of sturgeons in the water. The work that will continue in the fall will help researchers know where to place the Fighting Island spawning bed.

Lake sturgeon are picky spawners. They like crushed limestone, stones of all sizes and coal cinders dumped by boats more than 100 years ago. They need depths of more than 15 feet and a swift current.

It takes 15 years for males to reach sexual maturity and females won't lay eggs until they are 20 to 25 years old. The eggs can be a third of her weight so after spawning it takes two to seven years for the fish to spawn again.

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