NEWS
from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

August 11, 1998

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ENDANGERED PALLID STURGEON RELEASED IN MISSOURI, YELLOWSTONE RIVERS

Moving to rescue one of the world's most ancient fish from extinction, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and its partners released 750 endangered pallid sturgeons into the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers near Williston, North Dakota, on August 11. These young fish will bolster a remnant population of aging sturgeon, which otherwise are expected to die out within 20 years.

"We cannot sit by and watch as this ancient species fades into extinction," said Jamie Rappaport Clark, director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in a prepared statement. "The pallid sturgeon has survived everything nature has thrown at it over millions of years. It would be a shame to see it disappear because of human activities during the past 50 years or so."

A number of other officials interested in the effort, including Senator Kent Conrad; Dr. Joseph W. Westphal, Assistant Secretary of the Army (Civil Works); Dean Hildebrand, Director, North Dakota Game and Fish Department; Larry Peterman, Fisheries Administrator, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks; and Kirk Koepsel, Northern Plains Regional Representative of the Sierra Club, were on hand to celebrate and help with the release.

The pallid sturgeon was listed as endangered in 1990 after biologists concluded that the population was declining drastically toward extinction. A strategy was developed to boost the population with young sturgeon raised in hatcheries, followed by efforts to restore enough of the pallid's habitat to allow them to reproduce in the wild. The 750 young pallids were bred from wild sturgeon captured in the Missouri River. The few remaining wild pallid sturgeons in the region have not reproduced in at least 20 years and are nearing the end of their life cycles.

"Endangered means there's still time--and this stocking effort today buys us even more," said Skip Ladd, assistant Mountain Prairie regional director. "We need that time to restore side channels and backwater areas so the habitat more closely resembles the original free-flowing river this species prefers. We believe there are ways to operate dams that are more favorable to pallid sturgeons and other wildlife."

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LIVING DINOSAURS

Pallid sturgeons were swimming in these rivers during the Jurassic Period when dinosaurs roamed the shores. They have bony plates instead of scales, and a reptile-like tail. The fish, grayish-white on the back and sides, can weigh up to 80 pounds and reach 6 feet in length. Their mouths are toothless and positioned under the snout for sucking small fishes and invertebrates from the river bottom. Pallid sturgeons can live up to 50 years but mature and reproduce slowly.

Pallids thrived even as the dinosaurs died out and have survived every climatic and geological shift that has occurred since. Native Americans consumed pallids for centuries. As recently as the 1940s, the upper Missouri River may have contained more than 100 pallids per mile. Now they are nearly extinct.

DAMS CHANGED THE RIVERS

In 1937, the era of dam building began and all 3,350 miles of the pallid sturgeon's river habitat changed more in a few decades than it had in the previous 150 million years. To provide water supplies, facilitate shipping, and control flooding, the Missouri and the Mississippi rivers were engineered into a series of reservoirs connected by deep, straight channels. This has been hard for pallid sturgeon and other big-river fish, which require the diversity of depths and current formed by braided channels, sand bars, sand faults, eroding banks, and gravel bars.

The pallid sturgeon was the first and is still the only fish species of the Missouri, Yellowstone, and Mississippi rivers listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act, but other big-river native fish species are in trouble, too. Many of the actions that contribute to pallid sturgeon recovery will also benefit species such as the sturgeon chub, sicklefin chub, and sauger.

THE LONG ROAD TO RECOVERY

"The stocking won't be the end of efforts to restore the pallid sturgeon," said Mark Dryer, a fisheries biologist and former leader of the pallid sturgeon recovery team. "We plan to monitor these young fish and repeat the stocking process in the next 6 years but the long-term fate of the pallid sturgeon depends on continued protection and restoring its habitat."

The August event in North Dakota will mark the first time young pallid sturgeon have been placed in the upper reaches of the Missouri River. The release is the culmination of many years of intense effort and cooperation among Federal and state biologists to spawn pallid sturgeons from the upper Missouri River. In June

1997, Gavins Point National Fish Hatchery at Yankton, South Dakota, was successful after 9 years of attempts. The 10- to 14-inch fish going into the river next month are the offspring of five adults captured in western North Dakota in the fall of 1996 and reared at the Gavins Point and Valley City (North Dakota) national fish hatcheries.

Some pallids have been stocked in the lower Missouri River, the Mississippi River, and the lower Platte River. These sturgeon were reared in Missouri at Blind Pony State Fish Hatchery near Sweet Springs, the only other facility to successfully spawn and rear pallid sturgeon at the time.

"There is no way the Service or any other public agency can single-handedly conserve our Nation's fish and wildlife resources," said Ladd. "I want to thank the states of North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, and Missouri for working with us to reach this milestone in the recovery of the pallid sturgeon and helping us rescue this remnant of the dinosaur era from extinction."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service's nearly 93 million acres include 514 national wildlife refuges, 78 ecological services field stations, 66 national fish hatcheries, 50 wildlife coordination areas, and 38 wetland management districts with waterfowl production areas.

The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, administers the Endangered Species Act, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes Federal excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state wildlife agencies. This program is a cornerstone of the Nation's wildlife management efforts, funding fish and wildlife restoration, boating access, hunter education, shooting ranges, and related projects across America.

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