

US Fish & Wildlife Service FieldNotes

Lake Sturgeon Have Arrived!

Region 3, May 30, 2009



Larval lake sturgeon captured at Fighting Island during spring sampling on the Detroit River, photo by Jeff Allen (USGS) - Photo Credit: n/a

Less than one year after a man made reef was constructed at the head of Fighting Island, lake sturgeon have spawned there. This is the first time in 30 years that spawning lake sturgeon, a threatened species in both Michigan and Ontario, has been confirmed in the Canadian waters of the Detroit River. It was just over one year ago that United States (U.S.) and Canadian

partners met at Fighting Island to announce Phase 2, construction of a new lake sturgeon spawning reef at Fighting Island in Lasalle, Ontario, Canada. The new spawning reef, constructed at Fighting Island in October 2008, was celebrated as the first Canada-U.S. funded fish habitat restoration project in the Great Lakes. The strong partnership between the U.S. and Canada and the dedication of everyone involved in protecting our shared natural resources made this project a reality.



Fishery Biologists James Boase and Jim McFee lift an adult lake sturgeon captured at the head of Fighting Island in the Detroit River during spring assessment work, photo taken by Dr. Bruce Manny. - Photo Credit: n/a

By early winter 2008, the reef design was already showing evidence of success as lake whitefish were the first of many species to begin using the reef. This spring, fish species found spawning on the reef included lake sturgeon, walleye, various native suckers, and white bass. Also found using the reef at Fighting Island was the Northern madtom, a fish that is endangered in Michigan and Ontario and never before found in the lower sections of the Detroit River. Northern madtoms were also discovered on the spawning reef constructed at Belle Isle in 2004, indicating that this type of habitat restoration is important for sustaining threatened and endangered native fish populations. The fact that lake sturgeon, lake whitefish, and the northern madtom, three indicator species of ecosystem health, are utilizing the reef, provides scientific evidence that this restoration project was a success and further validates the binational pollution prevention and control efforts implemented through the water quality agreements crafted in the early 1970s (e.g., the U.S.-Canada Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement). Assessment of the reef at Fighting Island needs to continue for at least two more years to fully understand the benefits of such a project for fish and other aquatic species.

As Canadian Member of Parliament Jeff Watson describes “we are indeed so proud to be part of this international success story of recovery of lake sturgeon in our shared Great Lakes waters. These results provide concrete evidence of the benefits of using sound science and unique public-private partnerships to improve our Detroit River ecosystem.”

“It is so heartening to see the amazing success of this sturgeon habitat restoration for the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge,” notes Congressman John D. Dingell. “No one thought this degree of success was possible only 30 years ago. It truly validates the decades of international cooperation on pollution control and conservation efforts in the River and throughout the Refuge. I want to give my special thanks to all the Canadian partners who made this possible and I look forward to continuing this important work with them in the future.”

The lake sturgeon is a remnant of the dinosaur age and can grow to over eight feet in length and weigh over 200 pounds. It is listed as either threatened or endangered in 19 of 20 states within its original range in the U.S. In Canada, it was identified as threatened by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife. Lake sturgeon is endemic to the Great Lakes, and historically, the Huron-Erie Corridor was one of the most productive waters for lake sturgeon in North America. In 2001, lake sturgeon spawning was documented in the Detroit River for the first time in over 30 years, but their numbers are estimated to be only one percent of their original population. Based on recent research, scientists have determined that

lack of spawning habitat is one of the factors limiting lake sturgeon population growth. Over the past six years, habitats have been constructed off Belle Isle in Detroit, off McKee Park in Windsor, and off Fort Malden in Amherstburg to increase available spawning habitat for lake sturgeon and other native fish.

Historically, the area surrounding Fighting Island was well known as an important spawning and nursery area for lake sturgeon and thus was targeted as a potential habitat construction site in 2008. Finding fertilized lake sturgeon eggs and collection of lake sturgeon larvae from the reef at Fighting Island this spring indicates that this restoration strategy is yielding very positive ecosystem results, and that this small, remnant population of native lake sturgeon may one day be restored to a higher level of abundance in the Detroit River.

The Detroit River has the distinction of being the only International Wildlife Refuge in North America and the only river system in North America to hold both American Heritage River and Canadian Heritage River designations. This project is being undertaken in direct response to the sturgeon spawning habitat restoration objective in the Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge.

For more information please go to the following links:

<http://www.fws.gov/midwest/DetroitRiver/documents/FightingIslandSturgeonReef.pdf>

http://huron-erie.org/sturgeon_restoration.html

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6xR9czENWM>

<http://www.windsorstar.com/Technology/Lake+sturgeon+larvae+Holy+Grail+area/1633412/story.html>

<http://toledoblade.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090529/COLUMNIST22/905290378/-1/SPORTS06>

<http://www.thenewsherald.com/articles/2009/06/07/news/doc4a2ab65f47c0c198097320.txt>

Contact Info: James Boase, 248 889-5619, James_Boase@fws.gov