

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service



News Release

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Once Believed Gone Forever from the Potomac River, the Endangered Shortnose Sturgeon Delivers a Surprise

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No one knows for certain, but the shortnose sturgeon may simply have been a victim of the company it kept. Never a primary target of the 18th century fishing industry, it was swept up anyway, often with schools of its larger cousin, the Atlantic sturgeon. And while the shortnose sturgeon managed to survive in several other waterways, scientists have long since concluded that it disappeared from the Potomac River about 100 years ago.

That makes it easy to understand why U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Steve Minkkinen was excited last April when one of the fish in the Potomac was captured in a gillnet, radio-tagged and tracked, was full of eggs and on a spawning run. Since then, a second female has been tagged.

That, said Minkkinen, is significant. Little information on shortnose sturgeon existed before Minkkinen's project took place. Tracking has revealed where essential seasonal habitats occur and where potential spawning may take place. Minkkinen's work has also shown where shortnose spend their time; that will help pinpoint future sampling in hope of tagging more fish.

Here's a fish, after all, that came into great demand decades ago both for its eggs, marketed as caviar, as well as its smoked meat. Like many early fisheries, the more sturgeon the more demand increased for still more fish. That level of fishing, coupled with dams and the dumping of sewage and other pollutants, took a fast toll.

Now there is at least a glimmer of hope that the shortnose sturgeon could be reclaiming one of its early homes. "They are obviously not abundant, but there are enough to provide hope," said Minkkinen. "I think they have a fighting chance."

Since 1996, in fact, a total of 10 shortnose sturgeon have been counted in the Potomac River, but it's not possible to know where they came from, how they got there, or if they have been there all along.

Still, Minkkinen and his partner, Matt Breece, are careful to note other encouraging signs; the two egg-laden females, said Minkkinen, behaved like resident fish. In other words, like they lived in the river for awhile.

Still, neither Minkkinen nor Breece - nor any other researchers, for that matter - can say that they know for certain that the female shortnose sturgeon that seemed on a spawning run, did in fact, spawn.

Minkkinen notes that collecting eggs is the surest way of knowing that fish have spawned; at about the time the females could have deposited their eggs, that part of the Potomac was subject to a sudden, heavy flow, curtailing sampling efforts.

Now the team will be looking at other parts of the Potomac bottom to see if they can find suitable spawning sites that they may want to revisit in the future.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 547 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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John Burke

4/2/07

Current Event in Fish ecology

1. What is the focus of this news story?

This news story describes the recent reoccurrence of shortnose sturgeon in the Potomac river.

2. How is this story related to fish ecology?

The story profiles the demise and possible rise of a heavily fished species within a largely urban-impaired watershed.

3. Who are the main human and nonhuman “players” in this story?

Human fisherman in the 18th century over fished the species to the point of its disappearance in the Potomac River. Nonhuman players such as the pollution of the river system and dams blocking the spawning routes of these fish greatly inhibited their fitness in the Potomac River system.

4. What socioeconomic issues are embedded in this story?

Fishing for Atlantic sturgeon in the Potomac was a very profitable trade. Unfortunately the shortnose sturgeon, which was much smaller than the Atlantic, had the desired caviar and smoked meat of the day. Although it was never specifically targeted, the market for these fish was economically significant.

5. Does the reporting of this story appear to be accurate and unbiased?

Due to the notoriety of the organization reporting the findings, I feel that the story is accurate; however I do not believe there are “sides” to be taken and therefore the story is free of bias.

6. What kind of fish-ecology knowledge would help in this situation?

It is important to understand what life strategy this species employs. This would indicate how hard or easy it would be for the species to fully recover in such an adverse environment. The prevalence of non-native species in the Potomac such as snake heads are also more common now than in the 18th century. How would these new species inhibit the repopulation of shortnose sturgeon?

7. What could/should a fish ecologist do to help resolve this issue?

Fish ecologists should monitor fish individuals within the river system to determine where they are spawning. It is necessary to protect the spawning habitats of the shortnose sturgeon in order to encourage its growth.