

Look-alike sturgeon may get protection

October 8 2009, By Terry Hillig

Good news for shovelnose sturgeon may be bad news for this region's commercial fishermen, who sell them to make caviar.

The shovelnose are not endangered, but their relatives, the pallid sturgeon, are. Because a young pallid can be mistaken for a shovelnose, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently proposed declaring the shovelnose a threatened species in areas where the two types overlap, giving it regulatory authority.

The areas include the Mississippi River from Alton downstream and the Missouri River from Montana to the Mississippi River. Arkansas, Mississippi and Louisiana ban all [commercial fishing](#) of shovelnose sturgeon.

The Fish and Wildlife Service said the commercial harvest of shovelnose in the Mississippi increased to 23,000 pounds in 2007 from about 6,600 pounds in 1995.

Sturgeon are a living link to the distant past. Experts say they first appeared about 150 million years ago, when dinosaurs still roamed Earth.

Rob Maher, a commercial fisheries biologist with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, said the Mississippi River is the world's most abundant fishery for the shovelnose type.

They are used for their roe, or eggs, which are processed and sold as

caviar. Demand for domestic roe surged after the near-depletion of European fisheries in the late 1990s. Prices shot up to \$80 or more per pound but fell back to below \$60 when the nation's economy tanked late last year.

It remains "a lucrative business for a very few people," said Dave Herzog, a resource specialist with the Missouri Department of Conservation. He said the state issued 18 licenses for roe harvest last year. Missouri has about 260 commercial [fishermen](#); Illinois has about 1,200.

The Fish and Wildlife Service bases its proposal on a section of the [Endangered Species Act](#) that authorizes protection of a species if its appearance is so similar to that of a protected or endangered species that law enforcement is difficult.

Pallid sturgeon can live for more than 40 years and weigh as much as 65 pounds. Shovelnose live about 20 years and seldom exceed 5 pounds. But young pallid sturgeon are difficult to distinguish from shovelnose. The shovelnose are said to outnumber the pallid variety 80-to-1.

"It's a pretty big deal," Maher said of the proposal. "We have a robust commercial fishery. It certainly would have an impact."

There is substantial commercial sturgeon fishing along the Mississippi from Wisconsin to Tennessee, as well as some areas of the Ohio and Wabash rivers. Experts said most sturgeon fishing in the Missouri River in Missouri is recreational.

Several years ago, Illinois restricted shovelnose fishing to a season from Oct. 1 to May 31. Missouri's season runs Oct. 15 to May 31.

Maher said he is not sure federal action is necessary.

"We have implemented effective management strategies," he said. Commercial fishermen must attend certification classes and demonstrate they can distinguish between pallid and shovelnose sturgeon. He said a fisherman who harvests a pallid sturgeon illegally loses eligibility for a state permit for three years, and faces additional federal penalties.

"There's a lot at stake," Maher said. "These guys are making pretty good money, and it would be foolish for them to jeopardize that."

Jim Garvey, director of the Fisheries and Illinois Aquaculture Center at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, has been concerned about sturgeon populations in the [Mississippi River](#) for several years.

Garvey, who has studied the sturgeon for nearly a decade, said he believes the numbers of both types have fallen significantly as fishing has increased.

He said the proposed regulation would help the sturgeon populations recover but likely would mean more fishing for shovelnose on the Ohio and Wabash rivers and the Mississippi upstream from Alton, and probably increase roe fishing for paddlefish.

Garvey said pollution, dams and levees have had a greater impact on the pallid sturgeon population than fishing.

He said he believes poaching of pallid sturgeon is rare. He said they are caught along with the shovelnose, but most fishermen do the right thing and put them back.

"I think most people are honest and conscientious," he said. "There are a few people who aren't and they make it more difficult for everyone."

The Fish and Wildlife Service will accept comments and scientific

information regarding its proposal until Nov. 23.

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