

Endangered sturgeon fish flourishing in Wisconsin

April 23 2010, By CARRIE ANTLFINGER , Associated Press Writer



In this April 16, 2010 photo, Colt Christopherson, left, a fisheries technician with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources along with Chris Cahill, President of the Student Fisheries Society at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, wrangle a sturgeon on the Wolf River in Shawano, Wis. They were tagging the fish while they spawned near the shores. (AP Photo/Carrie Antlfinger)

(AP) -- It's been a tough fight for the whisker-snouted sturgeon.

The [fish](#) survived whatever killed the [dinosaurs](#) and have struggled against habitat destruction and overfishing. Now many of its 25 species

are endangered, but a small pocket in upper Wisconsin boasts of having one of the world's largest concentrations of the fish.

The success is because of the state's strict spearing limits, poaching laws, restocking efforts and the popular - and well-protected - spring spawning, which mostly finished last week.

"If we can restore the [sturgeon](#) population in the [Great Lakes](#) and manage the current population effectively, then we know we are doing a pretty good job of managing the other aspects of the aquatic community," said state sturgeon expert Ron Bruch.

In [Lake Winnebago](#) there are now around 40,000 lake sturgeons, likely where the population was in the 1800s, Bruch said. In the 1950s, it was 10,000. Whereas in the Great Lakes system, there are now about 156,750, less than 1 percent of what it was in early 1800s, said Rob Elliott, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist.

Thousands from around the state and elsewhere visit the Lake Winnebago system tributaries to watch the enormous fish writhe and splash as they lay eggs in shallow, moving water. The fish, which grow up to 300 pounds and look like a cross between a catfish and shark, are close enough to touch.

"Some people say they are awful homely, awful bad looking, but to me ... they are beautiful fish, just like a beautiful blonde," said 73-year-old Pat Wudtke, who's speared sturgeon for 50 years during the state's annual season.

For the past decade, Wudtke also has been among the hundreds who volunteer to protect the fish from poachers.

"I'll do everything I can to preserve them," Wudtke said.

People love the animals because of their unique look, that the species is prehistoric and their size, Bruch said.

"This is the only place really in the world that you can see them to this extent," he said.

The spawning spectacle pumps \$350,000 into three nearby cities, some of which have signs directing people to the spawning sites.

The fish's success in Lake Winnebago has Bruch concerned. Though only a few cases of poaching are reported each year, he worries there will be more since other areas have a sturgeon shortage and demand is high. And he thinks the taste of lake sturgeon caviar compares with the high-priced kind.

There also are reports of poaching of white sturgeon in California as its caviar has grown more popular, said Ellen Pikitch, executive director of the Institute for Ocean Conservation Science in New York. It is illegal to fish wild white sturgeon in California and sell its meat or eggs, but people can sell farm-raised white sturgeon. It's also illegal in the U.S. to sell lake sturgeon meat and its eggs from the states.

In the Black and Caspian Seas the beluga sturgeon is overfished for its caviar, which costs up to \$5,000 a pound.

Wisconsin does allow sturgeon spearing, with thousands huddled in shanties on a frozen Lake Winnebago. Spearers are allowed one sturgeon per person. Most get none. The DNR ends spearing when 5 percent of the population is taken.

The spearing is why the group, Sturgeon for Tomorrow, started in 1977, because they wanted to keep that tradition alive, said a founder, Bill Casper. Bruch credits the group for part of the sturgeon's success. It runs

the sturgeon guard program and raises funds for research and hatcheries, among other things.

But some say even one speared sturgeon is too many.

"If they were not removed from the water," Pikitch said, "They would have opportunity to spawn many, many times in a long lifetime."

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