



AN ANCIENT FISH

Sturgeon have changed little since prehistoric times. With bony plates surrounding their body, it's easy to imagine them swimming in ancient waters even before dinosaurs roamed the Earth. The sturgeon's body is torpedo-shaped. Its snout is wedge-shaped and short. Distinguishing characteristics are the sturgeon's toothless tubular mouths, which they use to suck food off the bottom of rivers and lakes, and dangling barbels that are on the underside of their snout, just before their mouths. Sturgeon eat small fish, clams, algae, leeches, crayfish and aquatic insects.

Among the largest of fishes, some sturgeon species can grow 19 feet long and weigh 2,500 pounds. Sturgeon breed at age 25 or so and are among the longest-lived of the fishes, some to over 100 years.

The lake sturgeon is a North American temperate freshwater fish. This is the sturgeon species found in the Great Lakes and river systems such as the Mississippi, St. Croix, Chippewa and the St. Louis River. Its scientific name is *Acipenser fulvescens*. *Acipenser* means "sturgeon" and *fulvescens* means a "dull yellow color." Lake sturgeon can grow to 8 feet long and weigh over 300 pounds.



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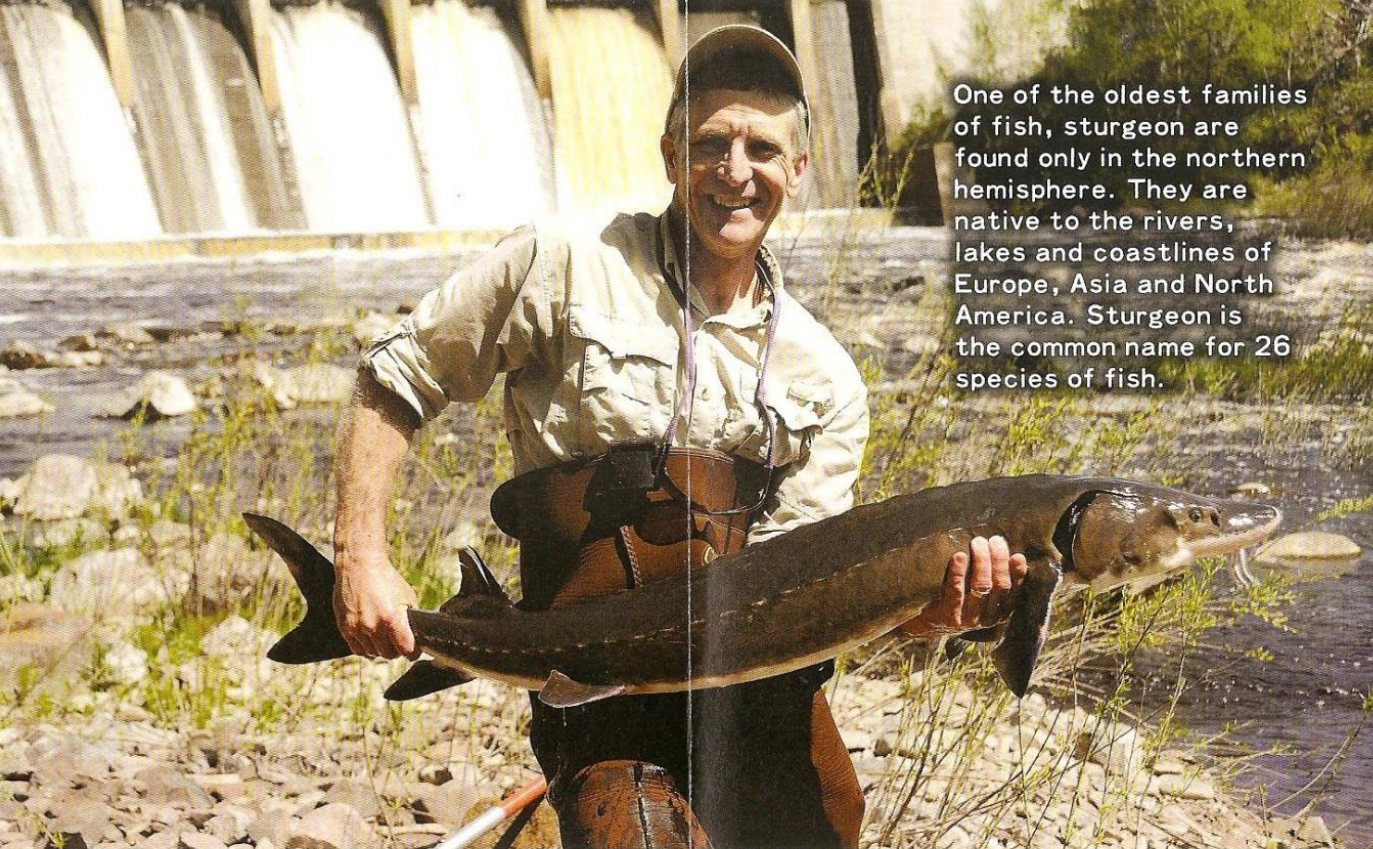
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Lake Sturgeon

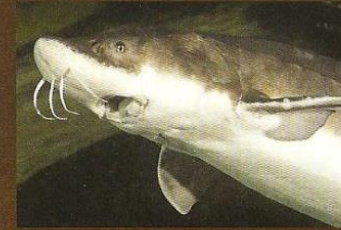
IN THE ST. LOUIS RIVER





One of the oldest families of fish, sturgeon are found only in the northern hemisphere. They are native to the rivers, lakes and coastlines of Europe, Asia and North America. Sturgeon is the common name for 26 species of fish.

STURGEON IN THE ST. LOUIS RIVER



Sturgeon were plentiful in the St. Louis River until the early 1900s. In addition to overharvesting, their populations declined from river

pollution and dam construction. Efforts to reestablish sturgeon in the St. Louis River began in 1983 with a sturgeon fingerling stocking program by the Wisconsin and Minnesota Departments of Natural Resources, which lasted until 2001. The oldest of the stocked fish have reached breeding age.

To improve sturgeon spawning habitat, rocks and boulders were placed downstream of the Fond du Lac Dam during 2009 by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and The Nature Conservancy. It is hoped that sturgeon and other native fish will spawn in the riffles and pools. In 2011, four young sturgeon were collected in a different area below the dam by Fond du Lac tribal biologists - the first evidence of sturgeon reproduction in the river in many decades.

Sturgeon recovery is tied to the recovery of the St. Louis River. The river is a designated Area of Concern (AOC). AOCs are places throughout the Great Lakes that were polluted by common past practices of dumping untreated waste on land and water. One of the issues associated with the St. Louis River AOC is degraded fish and wildlife populations. Progress to increase populations of native fish species such as the sturgeon will help address this issue. The St. Louis River Alliance, a local non-profit organization, is working with many governmental agencies and organizations to protect and restore the river's environmental quality with the ultimate goal of removing the AOC designation from the St. Louis River.

STURGEON AND PEOPLE

Lake sturgeon were once abundant in the Great Lakes, so common they filled rivers during spawning and were discarded when caught by commercial fishermen. In the mid-1800s, the European taste for the meat caused a rise in demand for sturgeon. In addition to smoked sturgeon, lake sturgeon were used for leather and their swim bladders were used to make isinglass, a high-quality gelatin used for waterproofing, pottery cement and clarifying wine and beer. The increased harvest, combined with habitat destruction and water pollution, caused their populations to decline rapidly. Today, ongoing projects seek to restore sturgeon populations. Sturgeon numbers are slowly increasing, however, it will take years before their populations rebuild to sustainable levels.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

There is no open season for lake sturgeon in the Wisconsin and Minnesota waters of the St. Louis River Estuary, so angling for them is prohibited. If you catch a sturgeon while fishing for other legal fish species, you should release it as quickly and gently as possible. The prohibition on angling for sturgeon is likely to continue until the two states determine that the breeding population is at sufficient levels to allow for harvest.

Limited sturgeon fishing is allowed in other locations of Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan where sturgeon populations are stable. Check fishing regulations for each state for more information.