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Contact: Lori Severino
(518) 402-8000

DEC'S LAKE STURGEON RESTORATION EFFORTS ACHIEVING SUCCESS

New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Commissioner Joe Martens today announced another milestone in the state's Lake Sturgeon restoration efforts. Researchers from Cornell University and the U.S. Geological Survey have captured two wild juvenile sturgeon in two different locations.

"This is a truly significant event," said Commissioner Martens. "DEC staff and partners in this effort have been eagerly awaiting this news ever since egg-bearing female sturgeon were first detected in stocked locations one year ago. It is a great example of how, with good science and great partnerships, we can restore a species that nearly disappeared from our state."

On June 12, a researcher at the U.S. Geological Survey's Tunison Laboratory of Aquatic Sciences captured a young sturgeon in the Oswegatchie River near the outlet of Black Lake. The 2 ½-pound, 25-inch fish was determined to be five years old. This fish is the only small wild sturgeon caught here for over 30 years and it may have originated from remnant wild fish in the system or from adult fish stocked into the Oswegatchie system over 20 years ago.

Jim Johnson, director of the Tunison Laboratory of Aquatic Sciences, said, "U.S. Geological Survey staff fulfills its scientific mission by partnering with states in restoration work like this. We are thrilled to be reporting this milestone."

On July 30, a second young sturgeon was captured in Oneida Lake by researchers at Cornell University's Shackleton Point Biological Field Station. That sturgeon, determined to be two years old was just over 19 inches long and weighed one pound. The capture of this fish indicates successful reproduction by fish stocked as six to ten-inch fingerlings. More than 8,000 Lake Sturgeon were stocked into Oneida Lake between 1995 and 2004. Biologists at the field station predicted that Lake Sturgeon would begin to appear in their walleye sampling nets once the sturgeon were about two years old.

Lars Rudstam, Director of Cornell University's Shackleton Point Biological Field Station, said "Our staff has worked closely with DEC to monitor the health and growth of the sturgeon population in Oneida Lake. We are proud to be able to move into this new phase of study with DEC."

Lake Sturgeon are the largest fish native to the Great Lakes and can grow up to seven feet in length and may weigh more than 300 pounds. Once abundant throughout the Great Lakes, St. Lawrence River and Lake Champlain, overfishing and the impacts of dams and dredging nearly drove them to local extinction by the turn of the 20th century. Sturgeon harvesting, primarily for caviar, peaked in 1885 when tens of thousands of sturgeon were taken from Lake Erie. The commercial fishery for Lake Sturgeon was closed in 1976 and it was listed as a New York State threatened species in 1983.

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Scientists estimate that Lake Sturgeon populations in the Great Lakes area are at about one percent of their pre-1850 numbers. DEC has been actively working with federal, tribal and university partners to protect and restore Lake Sturgeon throughout New York. DEC has raised and released more than 65,000 juvenile Lake Sturgeon since 1995. In 2012 and 2013, DEC received assistance from the US Fish and Wildlife Service's Genoa National Fish Hatchery in raising sturgeon for release in tributaries to the St. Lawrence River.

In addition to stocked fish, some natural recovery has been observed across the Great Lakes, the Niagara River and the St. Lawrence River. In 2009, Lake Sturgeon began using spawning beds created by the New York Power Authority near Iroquois Dam in St. Lawrence County.

“While we are pleased with the increasing numbers of Lake Sturgeon reported by scientist and anglers across New York, I want to remind everyone that these fish are listed as a threatened species in New York and fishing for them is prohibited,” said Commissioner Martens. “Lake Sturgeon take a very long time to mature and reproduce. We ask our anglers to continue their role as environmental stewards and avoid targeting these fish.”

There are simple steps anglers can take to prevent harm to Lake Sturgeon. First, avoid catching a Lake Sturgeon by staying away from locations where they gather for late spring spawning. Avoid bottom fishing with worms in areas where sturgeon are found. If one does hook a Lake Sturgeon, it must be released unharmed immediately. Avoid bringing it into a boat or out of water if possible and minimize its time out of water. If it must be removed from the water, support its body horizontally; never hold it vertically or by head, gills or tail. The hook may be removed with pliers.

If a sturgeon is tagged, it is important to note the tag number and call the contact number on the tag or call DEC at 518-402-8924. For more information on Lake Sturgeon, visit DEC's website at <http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/26035.html>.

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