

White Sturgeon

Acipenser transmontanus

Natural Resources
Conservation Service

Fact Sheet

April 2011



Official Status: **Endangered.**

Endangered species are species that are in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of their range. It is unlawful to kill, harm, or harass endangered species.

Listed

Federal Register; September 6, 1990.

Historical Status

The Kootenai River white sturgeon has been genetically isolated from other white sturgeon population in the Columbia River Basin for over 10,000 years. White sturgeon population not blocked by dams are anadromous, that is, they spend part of their life at sea and ascend rivers (from Northern California to Alaska) to spawn.

Present Status

The Kootenai River population of white sturgeon is restricted to about 168 miles in the Kootenai River, from upstream of Cora Linn Dam in British Columbia to Kootenai Falls, 31 miles below Libby Dam in Montana. White sturgeon reproduction since 1974 has been very limited.

Habitat

White sturgeon are adapted for living close to the bottom of large, cold rivers.

Life History

White sturgeon probably reach sexual maturity at age 10-15 years. Spawning occurs during May to July. Eggs sink and adhere to bottom gravels, hatch in 1-2 weeks, and the fry (young) seek shelter in shallow backwater. This species may live to 60-70 years of age. White sturgeon eat fish, crustaceans, mollusks, worms, and plant material.

Montana



Present Distribution of the White Sturgeon

Aid to Identification

The range of the white sturgeon does not overlap that of the pallid and shovelnose sturgeon. White sturgeon are large, grayish cylindrical shaped fish with 5 rows of bony shields along the body, four barbels under the short, flat, rounded snout and an opening (spiracle) above and behind the eye. The caudal peduncle (section of body between the tail fins and anal fin) is short and thick compared to the long, slender caudal peduncle of the pallid and shovelnose sturgeon.

Reasons for Decline

Operation of Libby Dam for hydropower and flood control has reduced river flows during the May to July spawning season.



Diking along the river banks downstream of Libby Dam may have eliminated backwater juvenile habitat. It is possible that Libby Dam has created a nutrient sink resulting in reduced food availability to juvenile white sturgeon.

Recommendations

White sturgeon caught in Montana must be released immediately. Provide a natural resource agency with information on any white sturgeon you catch.

Comments

White sturgeon are an ancient species, as evidenced by their skeleton of cartilage rather than bones. Their eggs are highly valued as a source of caviar.

References

The White Sturgeon Recovery Plan is in preparation by the Montana State Office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. *Fishes of Montana* by Dr. C. J. D. Brown (Big Sky Books) is a valuable reference.

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