

# HSBC Fraser River Sturgeon Education Program



## Commercial Fisher Stakeholders

More than any other factor, it was the commercial fishery of white sturgeon that decimated the original stock of this species on the Fraser River watershed. For decades, beginning in the 1870's, there were no regulations limiting the harvest of this slow growing fish. White sturgeon was harvested for its valuable roe which was sold as caviar on the international market.

Thousands of fishers were engaged in the Fraser River fishery. A variety of methods were employed, including building fish weirs and gill netting. Many species were targeted, but salmon were by far the most valuable and highly prized. Indeed, millions of tons of these fish were extracted from this ecosystem in an unsustainable fashion for many years. Early communities such as Steveston, with its cannery business relied on the annual harvest of many fish for its economic growth and development. Thousands of people were employed in this industry. Eventually the commercial catch of white sturgeon was reduced to the point where it was no longer lucrative to fish for them.

In more recent times the commercial fishery has exercised much greater concern for the survival of this renewable resource. They have become partners with government fishery regulators who have attempted to curtail the detrimental impact of fishing practices on all species. The federal Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) limits fishing to specific openings on the Fraser to ensure that salmon stock are able to return to their spawning grounds. The most lucrative methods of harvesting salmon using traps and weirs were made illegal many years ago. Test fisheries constantly attempt to monitor the numbers of fish in certain runs and regulate the harvest as carefully as possible. However, the collapse of the sockeye salmon run in the summer of 2009 is just another piece of evidence that the commercial salmon fishing industry is in dire straights. Many argue that the DFO's management of this valuable resource is failing.

The commercial fishery has gone through some stormy waters. An aggressive license buy-back program reduced the numbers of commercial fishers in the last 20 years. In 1990, commercial fishers accounted for just over 0.4% of total employment and just under 0.4% of the province's GDP. At present, less than 0.1% of both GDP and employment originates in the commercial fishery.

Commercial fishers have adapted by fishing for different species, relying less on salmon than before as they attempt to evolve as an industry. Many complain that the salmon farming aquaculture industry has done great harm to existing wild salmon runs as Atlantic salmon escapement threatens indigenous salmon stocks. In addition, disease from sea lice (that are abundant due to salmon farming practices) poses risks to wild salmon stocks. As wild salmon stocks become increasingly threatened the negative impacts on sturgeon increase. These species are inextricably linked in a complex web of interdependency. Diminished salmon runs reduce a vital food source of the sturgeon.

In the early 1990's, the recreational fishery for white sturgeon fishery became strictly catch and release. This supports a vibrant sport fishery in the entire lower Fraser River, from the estuary all the way upstream to Hell's Gate in the Fraser Canyon. Commercial fishers have taken seriously their role in protecting this species. However, the by-catch in gill nets during seasonal openings continues to be a factor effecting sturgeon mortality. At present, white sturgeon populations appear to have stabilized, but are critically low.