

# DFO cracking down on sturgeon poachers to protect fish

## Concern about decline in numbers of the endangered species prompts department to hand out 'precedent-setting' fines in 2009

BY GRAEME WOOD, VANCOUVER SUN DECEMBER 21, 2009

Sturgeon poachers on the Fraser River were handed "precedent-setting" court fines in 2009 as the Department of Fisheries and Oceans tries to preserve the endangered Fraser River stocks, said Herb Redekopp, the conservation and protection chief of the Lower Fraser area.

"What we've found is the judicial community is quite concerned about declining stocks, so we're seeing some significant fines that are acting as a deterrent," Redekopp said.

The fines are being levied to protect the prehistoric fish that are both culturally and economically important to communities along the Fraser River and facing increasing threats such as pollution, dams and dikes.

The largest fines came in February, when five recreational anglers were fined a total of \$22,500 under the Fisheries Act for poaching white sturgeon.

According to the DFO, Han Ly and Raymond Ouyang paid \$7,500 each after pleading guilty to molesting and injuring a sturgeon, and possession of a dead sturgeon. Hung Nguyen and David Boriboune also pleaded guilty to molesting and injuring a sturgeon. Boriboune was fined \$3,500 while Nguyen was fined \$3,000. Ly, along with a fifth man, Charlie Tran, both pleaded guilty to fishing without a licence and were fined \$500 each.

The men, who were also banned from fishing for one year, were caught by

conservation officers in August 2008, under the Alex Fraser Bridge cooking a sturgeon over a camp fire. Remnants of other mutilated sturgeon surrounded the area as well. Photos of a man shoving his fist inside a sturgeon's mouth were also seized by the officers.

A separate incident under the same bridge in 2008 led to a man being fined \$5,000 in May 2009 for possessing a 1.5-metre-long sturgeon cut in half and shoved in a garbage bag.

Another case this year involved a man caught at the Kerr Street docks in Vancouver with a cut-up sturgeon hidden in the trunk. He received a \$2,000 fine and a five-year fishing prohibition.

The poachers are believed to be after the sturgeon's flesh and potentially valuable caviar sold on the black market both domestically and internationally, Redekopp said.

"Any sturgeon we see harvested is one too many," said the veteran conservation officer, who has patrolled the Fraser River for 25 years.

While sturgeon poaching is nothing new to him, he said the department issued 33 new violations related to sturgeon poaching in the lower Fraser River from April to September, including 11 court appearance notices for serious violations.

"Most of the individuals fishing for sturgeon have no regard for the law," Redekopp said.

He said violations have risen in the last three years, but this may be attributed to increased funding within his department to enforce the area with tools such as infrared technology, high power spotting scopes and helicopters.

"The federal government has been able to provide more of a budget to conservation protection so the volume and frequency of our patrols has increased," Redekopp said.

White sturgeon are bottom feeders and considered a cultural icon of the Fraser River. In 2007, Canada Post made a white sturgeon stamp and the fish is also symbolic among many first nations. Resembling a shark, they are the longest-lived freshwater fish in North America, having survived two ice ages. They are also known to live for more than 100 years and grow up to six metres in length.

White sturgeon are officially endangered in the upper Fraser River under the Species at Risk Act. And although the act doesn't apply to the sturgeon in the lower Fraser River, they are still considered endangered by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada, a group of wildlife experts that assesses and designates which animals are endangered.

According to the Fraser River Sturgeon Conservation Society, there are only 8,900 mature sturgeon (males over 15 years old, females over 25 years old) in the lower Fraser River. The target is to have more than 10,000.

Only mature sturgeon are able to reproduce and even then they only do it every decade on average. "Those are the fish that are quite coveted among poachers," said Sarah Sugiyama, the society's executive director.

Sugiyama said mature stocks are in a "holding pattern" with small variations in the past 10 years. "I think there's a lot that still needs to be done. We know poaching is a challenge. It's important those fines help support the species and recovery programs. Our long-term vision is that this fishery is long-term and sustainable. We're nowhere near that," Sugiyama said.

According to the Ministry of Environment, a poacher can receive fines anywhere from \$1,000 to \$100,000 and/or one year in prison for offences related to the killing of an endangered species.

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