

## Sturgeon Noosing

Source: <http://www.bcsturgeon.com/article-sturgeon-noosing.htm>

Sturgeon fishing has become extremely popular. In fact, more pictures of sturgeon seem to be taken than ever before, showcasing the immense size of these freshwater giants. In the past, you would never see coarse rope wrapped around a sturgeon's tail, while beaming anglers proudly displayed their catch. But due to the methods incorporated during the sturgeon study, many feel its the thing to do. Lets set the record straight right here and now. Whether you're a weekend angler, or a professional guide, there no justifiable reason to endanger or cause harm to a sturgeon by putting a rope around a sturgeon's tail to retain the fish. Dragging a fish backwards is a good way to kill a fish and improper noosing can result in permanent damage to the fish's notochord (backbone) and skin.

My first experience with nooses was when I became involved with the Fraser River White Sturgeon Spawning Study in 1995. Noosing was only permitted under the authority of a Scientific Collection Permit, issued by the Ministry of Environment. I was at first shocked by noosing, and so were many other fishing guides at that time. As the study progressed, noosing was used less and less, usually to hold a fish for tagging. Out of necessity, the study team was properly equipped and trained to put a noose around the tail of a sturgeon. This rope was not your average "bailing twine". It is thick, finely braided, soft cotton rope that would reduce the pressure on the skin and muscle tissue due to its thickness, and would not cause rope burns because of its very fine braid and soft material. It was very smooth rope indeed and I've never seen it in any local shops. When the study team used setlines, or had a number of boats angling with them, inevitably, more than one fish would be caught and be ready for tagging at the same time. However, only one fish can be tagged at a time, and therefore, tethering or noosing the fish to the boat allowed us to tag the most fish in the study period. It was less than perfect, but a serious attempt to reduce harm to the fish was implemented. We never liked it then, and we don't like seeing it now.

As a professional guiding operation, I would never think of noosing a fish for our clients. First of all, noosing can cause severe damage to the sturgeon if not properly used. Secondly, its detracting from the photograph. We are experienced enough to handle a fish properly and safely without a noose, and still get the "wallhanger" picture that has become the trademark of sturgeon fishing. If the fish gets away, well, that's fishing. With all the pictures of noosed sturgeon, anglers get the wrong impression that "tailing" is an absolute necessity for getting a sturgeon photograph. Nothing could be further from the truth. It sends the wrong message.

In Washington State, it is illegal in some rivers to pick up or retain a sturgeon for photographic purposes. You get to bring the fish to the boat and that's it, cut the line. Period. I dread the fact that sooner or later, with the poor handling techniques being "promoted", that could happen to us. One damaged, or dead fish with a noose on its tail, is all it will take. Who wants to be responsible for that? A recent message on an internet discussion board relates the story of a Columbia river angler that landed a 9 foot sturgeon that did not fight very well. No wonder he claims, the sturgeon was without a tail! I doubt this fish would live to 9 feet if it was born without a tail. Apparently, noosing is a common-place method in the lower Columbia, and it sounds like it is

becoming a problem with fish being dragged all over the river. My guess is that this fish was either noosed too tightly creating blood vessel damage and subsequent amputation, or, the fish got away while the tight noose was still attached to him, and the lack of blood flow caused amputation. You may be thinking to yourself, 'I wouldn't tighten the noose on my sturgeon'. Well, what if the fish did it itself by taking a run for freedom while attached to the noose? Job done.

To properly handle a sturgeon, use the leader to bring the fish toward you, or to lead the fish to shore and to hold the fish in position. Often, most played out sturgeon will lay on their backs. When this happens, hold the fish firmly by the mouth. Most often, the sturgeon will hardly move when they're on their backs as this seems to calm them and keep them docile. Don't lift a fish, particularly larger fish, by the tail. You can damage the fish permanently. Avoid lifting or holding a fish by the operculum (gill plate) as you may damage the sensitive gill filaments and reduce the fish's ability to take in oxygen. To get that ultimate picture, firmly grab the fish around the caudal peduncle (the "wrist" in front of the tail) with one hand, and support the belly behind the pectoral fins with the other. Larger fish may require two or more persons. Be quick, be gentle, and that fish will swim away with no harm done to be caught again by another lucky angler. The task of taking a photo is then accomplished and the memory of the most terrific Fraser river sport-fish is preserved forever on paper.

I've done the "don't do's" that I previously mentioned, in the past and regret it, knowing much more now than I did then. But I learn from each experience and each fish that we handle. That's what it's all about; learning. And that starts with passing on knowledge and experience to others who may not get the opportunity to do what fishing guides do on a regular basis.

There are enough professional guides out there to serve the purpose of setting an example of proper fish handling techniques to those who don't get to handle fish as regularly as guides or other die-hard sturgeon fanatics. Professionals see large fish regularly, and know how to handle these fish. I encourage all the guides and other sturgeon anglers to start setting an example and sending the right message. Remember, it's about the fish first. If we don't, we will create the mentality that it's OK to utilize rough fish handling practices, and noosing is one of those rough practices. We can nip it in the bud right now, and start giving the sturgeon the respect and fair handling that it rightfully deserves.