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Castlegar News

Protecting the sturgeon by raising awareness

Geoff Mueller, News Reporter

Castlegar - It's an upstream battle for Columbia River white sturgeon as biologists team with students to raise awareness about the fish's plight and curb its potential demise. Of the thousands of fish releases every year, about 35 per cent survive the first six months, said Gary Birch, BC Hydro's environment and social issues manager. And although the fish are growing fast, three to nine fold in length and weight their first year, only a handful of fish live past three years. This is where the Upper Columbia White Sturgeon Recovery Initiative, a coalition of Canadian and American stakeholders to save the imperiled species, comes in.

More than raising awareness, the initiative has a research component aimed at determining what's needed to make natural sturgeon reproduction a reality. Reasons for the sturgeon's decline are debatable, Birch said. But many biologists feel survival in the first six months is directly related to predation. Predators on the river include sculpins, suckers, northern pike minnow and possibly walleye. As Columbia River water volumes have dropped and cleared with damming, predator numbers have subsequently increased. "It's clear, which makes it a great trout river," Birch explained. "But on the other side of the coin, that means a predator can find food a lot easier in the water column."

On top of increased predators, the loss of the Columbia River salmon has also hurt sturgeon stocks. A productive marine habitat with healthy salmon runs provides a nutrient rich environment, Birch said. Sturgeon here tend to spawn more frequently and grow larger. But despite impediments, sturgeon are spawning below Trail at the mouth of the Pend d'Oreille River. And with the help of future generations of budding conservationists, Birch and others feel there is hope.

More than 300 students from the West Kootenays were in Castlegar last Wednesday [May 4, 2005] to release 6,000 juvenile white sturgeon into the Columbia at the Hugh Keenleyside Dam. "We're pretty big into raising the awareness for the kids," Birch said. "This has been going on formally for three years now ... catering to Grades K-7."

The day was also an opportunity for older students to mentor elementary school students during the release. More than 40 students from Stanley Humphries Secondary School's biology 11 class handled everything from traffic control to providing information on the sturgeon and its history. Participating schools at the release were from Castlegar, Trail, Robson, Blewett, Warfield, Harrop and Kaslo. Prior to the release, the year-old sturgeon were raised at the Kootenay Sturgeon Hatchery near Cranbrook.

A total of 12,000 sturgeon were raised there for release on the Columbia River in Castlegar and Trail. Released fish wear an implanted Passive Integrated Transponder Tag, about the size of a grain of rice. The PIT allows biologists to track the sturgeon's progress throughout its life. Students are provided with PIT numbers and can find out information about their fish by logging onto www.uppercolumbiasturgeon.org.