

## Oolichan crash blamed for sturgeon decline

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A worrisome drop in the growth rate of white sturgeon may be contributing to their declining numbers in the Fraser River, said Fraser River Sturgeon Conservation Society director Craig Orr.

The sturgeon population in the Lower Fraser — the last population of wild white sturgeon in the world — has dipped about 17 per cent, according to estimates by the conservation society.

“We’re still trying to find out why that is and one of the big concerns is the reduction in growth rate,” said Orr. Whereas in previous years the growth rate has been six or seven centimetres a year, now they’re only seeing a three-centimetre increase.

Food supply problems are thought to be the main factor since oolichan populations have crashed in the Fraser system and all over the West Coast, Orr said.

“We saw the worst returns of oolichans this year, and that’s one of the primary food sources for the sturgeon,” he told The Progress.

The sturgeon population count is sitting at about 47,000, according to recent numbers.

“It’s a very precise estimate because of the monitoring that goes on from Hope to the mouth of the river,” Orr said.

The conservation society provides leadership by running conservation programs and stewardship projects through its volunteer-driven monitoring and assessment program.

The B.C. government recently chipped in \$65,000 to the Fraser River Sturgeon Conservation Society to support its efforts.

“The Fraser white sturgeon is an iconic fish for B.C.,” said local MLA and Environment Minister Barry Penner said. “Our government is committed to supporting the society as it delivers important projects to assist the white sturgeon.”

Although the population in the Lower Fraser has been considered stable in recent years, “the health of the population is not what we would like it to be,” Penner added. “It’s certainly vulnerable to development pressures and more research needs to be done on monitoring to ensure the population is recovering as we believe it should be.”

Orr said the funding will come in handy for those involved in the crucial monitoring efforts, and a portion of it will go toward offsetting the hard costs of maintaining the volunteer-based monitoring and assessment program.

The group keeps a lid on costs with the help of a dedicated cadre of about 100 volunteers which include sport fishermen and fishing guides, but there are still ongoing costs associated with boat fuel, as well as coded transponder tags and scanners.

“It’s very expensive to be out on the water, involved in the monitoring of the population,” Orr said. “But because we have so many eyes on the water, we have been able to count and detect a reduction in the growth rate.”

The provincial funding allows the society to focus on maintaining and protecting the survival of these magnificent fish, said Rick Hansen, chair of the Fraser River Sturgeon Conservation Society.

“We look forward to continuing to work with our partners at all levels of government and community, and the critical involvement of First Nations, recreational and commercial fisheries, along with other stewards of the resource toward this goal for the benefit of all British Columbians,” he said.

Catch-and-release fishing for sturgeon on the Fraser River is permitted only downstream from the Williams Lake River and anglers are not permitted to retain sturgeon. The sturgeon populations in the middle and lower Fraser River are both economically and culturally important and these stocks support a world-renowned recreational fishery worth millions of dollars annually.

White sturgeon, a species at risk in B.C., can live to be more than 100 years old and can grow to six metres in length.