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Front Page **NEW**



Sturgeon by the bucket



CAPTION: Dan Schneider/Daily Mining Gazette

Michigan Technological University Associate Professor of Biology Nancy Auer loads fingerling sturgeon into a container for transport to the Ontonagon River. Tech and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources teamed up in an effort to reestablish the river's sturgeon population.

By DAN SCHNEIDER, DMG Writer

ONTONAGON — Fingerling sturgeon were dumped by the bucket-full into the clay-turbid water of the Ontonagon River Wednesday.

It was familiar water for those young sturgeon, who had been raised from eggs in tanks full of Ontonagon River water.

"It is important to raise them using ambient river water so they will imprint to the river where we want them to return," Michigan Department of Natural Resources Fisheries Biologist Ed Baker said.

The sturgeon spent the first summer of their lives in long blue tanks situated on the floor of a large shed behind the old Gitche-Gumee Oil Company building. It's right on the bank of the river not far upstream from where it flows into Lake Superior.

"This is the first time we've done what we call streamside rearing," Michigan Technological University Associate Professor of Biological Sciences Nancy Auer said.

Tech and the DNR teamed up to raise young sturgeon for planting in the Ontonagon in an effort to reestablish a population in the river.

The Ontonagon River was once teeming with sturgeon. Baker said Native

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Americans used to catch enough of them during the stream spawning run to feed themselves for the rest of the year.

That lasted until around 1900 or so.

"That's the time when sturgeon populations all over the Great Lakes were being over-harvested," Baker said. "That and habitat modifications" decimated their numbers.

A recent fish survey showed the status of the population in modern times.

"We couldn't catch a sturgeon," he said. "Because we could find no evidence that there was sturgeon in the Ontonagon River, we decided to reintroduce it and see if we could create a self-sustaining population."

Tech biology graduate student Tim Wilson was in charge of the day-to-day raising of the fish, which hatched from eggs back in May. The little sturgeon ate an expensive diet of brine shrimp and blood worms.

"We had growth rates pretty close to what we wanted," Wilson said.

By Wednesday, the largest sturgeon had grown to nearly eight inches in length.

In Lake Superior, according to a poster on the wall of the rearing shed, male sturgeon can grow up to five feet in length and females can grow nearly six feet long. Fully grown sturgeon weigh between 45 and 100 pounds and the largest one ever caught in Superior weighed 310 pounds and was 90 inches long.

Sturgeon can live to be between 100 and 150 years old. They don't reach sexual maturity for at least 15 years for males and 20 years for females.

"These fish, we won't see them back in the river for another 15 to 20 years, probably," Baker said.

Over all that time, they don't forget where they came from. Baker said the sturgeon dumped from buckets Wednesday will return to the Ontonagon to spawn once they are old enough.

The baby sturgeon became a popular local attraction.

"We had people in here every day, we gave tours starting in early July," Wilson said. "We had 20 or 30 people a day."

Upper Peninsula Candle & Gift Shop, which donated the use of the rearing shed, would send tourists back to check it out and there were posters up around town.

About 800 sturgeon were dropped into the Ontonagon River yesterday — 750 at the marina and the rest farther upstream.

Auer and Baker's grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration will allow them to repeat the process next year. They hope to secure additional grants to continue the project beyond that.

"Our intention is to continue raising fish here and stocking them in the Ontonagon River for another 15 years at least," Baker said.

By then, they may be able to see the newest sturgeon in Lake Superior swimming back upstream.

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