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The Lake Sturgeon Have Arrived! Sturgeon Reproduction Documented at Fighting Island Reef!

Lake sturgeon have spawned four times on the reef constructed last year at the head of Fighting Island in the Detroit River! This is the first time in 30 years that spawning by lake sturgeon, a threatened species in both Michigan and Ontario, has been confirmed in the Canadian waters of the Detroit River. The new spawning reef, constructed at Fighting Island in October, 2008, was celebrated as the first Canada-U.S. funded fish habitat restoration project in the Great Lakes. The strong partnership between our nations and the dedication of everyone involved in protecting our shared natural resources made this project a reality. The fact that lake sturgeon, an indicator of ecosystem health, are utilizing the reef, provides scientific evidence that this restoration project was a success and further validates the binational pollution prevention and control efforts implemented through the water quality agreements crafted in the early 1970s (e.g., the U.S.-Canada Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement).

“We are indeed so proud to be part of this international success story of recovery of lake sturgeon in our shared Great Lakes waters,” notes Canadian Member of Parliament Jeff Watson. “These results provide concrete evidence of the benefits of using sound science and unique public-private partnerships to improve our Detroit River ecosystem.”

“It is so heartening to see the amazing success of this sturgeon habitat restoration for the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge,” notes Congressman John D. Dingell. “No one thought this degree of success was possible only 30 years ago. It truly validates the decades of international cooperation on pollution control and conservation efforts in the River and throughout the Refuge. I want to give my special thanks to all the Canadian partners who made this possible and I look forward to continuing this important work with them in the future.”

The lake sturgeon population in the Detroit River is estimated to be about 1% of its former abundance. Over the past century, fish populations in the Detroit River have been greatly reduced by channelization, loss of coastal wetlands, filling/armoring of shorelines, water pollution, and dredging of the limestone bedrock that served as spawning habitat for lake sturgeon and other native fish species. Scientists determined, based on three previous reef projects undertaken in both Canadian and U.S. waters, that they could build new spawning habitat using various types of materials, such as broken limestone rock, to enhance reproduction of lake sturgeon and other fish. The finding of fertilized lake sturgeon eggs at Fighting Island indicates that this restoration strategy is yielding very positive ecosystem results, and that this small, remnant population of native lake sturgeon may one day be restored to a higher level of abundance in the Detroit River.

Walleye and lake whitefish have also spawned on the reef, demonstrating that the constructed spawning habitat is enhancing populations of these high-value fish as well!

Other exciting news at the Fighting Island reef was the discovery of several Northern madtom, a fish that is endangered in Michigan and Ontario and never before confirmed in the mid-reaches of the Detroit River. Northern madtom were also discovered on the spawning reef constructed at Belle Isle in 2004, indicating that this type of habitat restoration is of value for sustaining threatened and endangered native fish populations. It is critical that scientists continue to monitor the reef for at least 2 years to document use of the spawning habitat by other valuable native fish.

“Rehabilitating habitat for fish species that are native to Ontario is important to us,” said Donna Cansfield, Ontario’s Minister of Natural Resources. “We are delighted the work by partners on both sides of the border is already showing signs of success.”

The construction of the lake sturgeon spawning reef at Fighting Island exemplifies the spirit of binational collaboration, partnership and stewardship of our shared resources. The success of this fish habitat restoration strategy will strengthen and improve the fishery in the Detroit River, the Huron-Erie Corridor, and ultimately the entire Great Lakes!

Partners in this project include: BASF Corporation, DTE Energy, Detroit River Canadian Cleanup, Environment Canada, Essex Region Conservation Authority, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, International Wildlife Refuge Alliance, Landmark Engineers Inc., Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Michigan Sea Grant, Michigan Wildlife Conservancy, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Ontario Great Lakes Renewal Foundation, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey, and Wildlife Habitat Council.

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Lake sturgeon fry hatched from eggs collected on the fish spawning reef constructed at the head of Fighting Island in the Detroit River. Photo by Jeff Allen, U.S. Geological Survey.



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service researchers Jim Boase and Jim McFee holding a lake sturgeon captured at the site of the spawning reef at Fighting Island. Photo by Dr. Bruce Manny, U.S. Geological Survey.