

Sturgeon History

GEOGRAPHICAL TIME

Rightly called a pre-historic species, white sturgeon ancestors lived during the time of the dinosaurs, **170-245 million years ago!** Physically, not much has changed. Their large, flat cartilaginous body covered in sharp bony plates are features that developed a time long ago.

During the last ice age 50,000-10,000 years ago British Columbia was covered in ice a kilometre deep. When the ice receded it created new waterways across North America. Dakelh Elders tell the story of when the river flowed backwards - when the Stuart River flowed north instead of south into the Nechako River as it does today. These kinds of ancient water connections and pathways allowed fish species to move great distances between continents and over mountains. The white sturgeon likely made their way to the Nechako River from the **Upper Columbia River over 10,000 years ago.**

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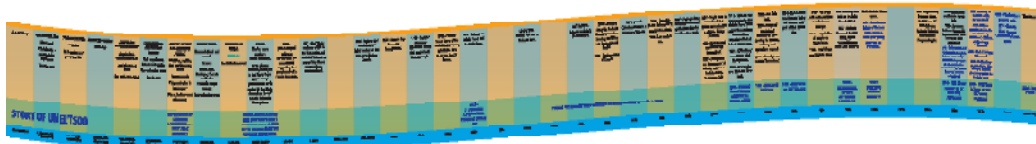
Globally, sturgeon are found circum-polar in the **northern hemisphere**. White sturgeon (*Acipenser transmontanus*) live on the west coast of North America, and the Nechako white sturgeon - a unique group within the genetically distinct Fraser River population - spawn within the Nechako watershed. The Nechako watershed is 52,000 ha in size.

100 years ago the population was likely in the thousands. A large influx of people came here with the completion of the railway in 1914. With more people rapid expansion of land use and development through urbanization, agriculture, forestry, and large industry.



**When did your family arrive
in the Nechako Valley?**

[CLICK ON THE TIME LINE TO SEE IT FULL-SIZE](#)



**UNEL'TSOO MEAN:
"GRANDMOTHER TO ALL"
IN DAKELH**

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UNEL'TSOO'S LIFE

1920s: Unel'tsoo, the oldest sturgeon that has been caught by the NWSRI, hatched when the Nechako River flowed naturally.

1940s: Sturgeon were caught and sold for food in stores in Vanderhoof and Prince George. People also fished for sturgeon all the way until the 1970s. Unel'tsoo eluded the anglers.

1952: Kenney Dam was built on the Nechako River. It changed the hydrology* of the river. Unel'tsoo survived the flow changes in the river.

*study of the movement of water

1960s: Unel'tsoo finally reached maturity, however it is likely that very few of Unel'tsoo's eggs and larvae did not survive after 1967, when researchers realized that young fish were not surviving.

1999: Researchers confirmed that the Nechako white sturgeon population was in a critical state of decline. The Nechako White Sturgeon Recovery Initiative was formed to find out why.

2000s: Although no one is allowed to catch sturgeon, sturgeon get caught as by-catch in First Nation salmon gill-nets. The Boat Kit Program supports fisher families to release sturgeon safely from their nets.

2014: The Nechako White Sturgeon Conservation Centre was built to maintain genetic diversity and to restore a naturally reproducing population in the Nechako River. Unel'tsoo, at nearly 100 years old, was caught and her eggs were collected to contribute to the next generation of sturgeon.