

Recovery Plan for Nechako White Sturgeon

The recovery plan for Nechako White sturgeon was completed in March 2004. The plan was developed by way of a co-operative effort between provincial and federal agencies, First Nations and other stakeholders. It represents several years of hard work and many years of sturgeon research and it will form the basis for improving the outlook for endangered white sturgeon in the Nechako and Stuart watersheds. The goal for the recovery initiative and the benchmark for recovery is a naturally-reproducing, self-sustaining population of white sturgeon in the Nechako system. With continued hard work and co-operation between government agencies, First Nations, public and private stakeholders, recovery of these amazing fish can become a reality.

Recovery Goals, Objectives and the Adaptive Management Approach

Although, the recovery plan has been printed and bound between two covers, the planning process for recovery is far from complete. As the recovery team and action planning group move forward into the future with new research and outreach programs, the activities for recovery are likely to change and be refined. The recovery plan is therefore a living document subject to continual improvement as new information is gathered. This document is a collection of the best available science, local and traditional knowledge for white sturgeon in the Nechako watershed which was used to develop recovery actions based on four main strategies:

- 1) Limit further declines of adult white sturgeon.
- 2) Develop a conservation fish culture program to restore the population.
- 3) Re-establish natural recruitment (spawning and rearing to adult hood).
- 4) Ongoing adaptation of the recovery program.

Strategy four (ongoing adaptation) is the link that will ensure the ultimate success of the recovery program. As with many endangered species, the white sturgeon has been difficult and costly to study and there are still many gaps and uncertainties about what is known of these ancient fish. Gaps and uncertainty can make it difficult to implement recovery actions. However an adaptive management approach partially solves this problem in that it allows recovery teams to take aggressive action, monitor and learn from their work and ultimately improve their programs.

Species at Risk Act (SARA)

While the recovery plan was being written it was anticipated that the Federal species at risk act (SARA) would come into force and that the status of white sturgeon would likely be downgraded from “of special concern” to “endangered” by the Committee On the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC). An attempt was made to ensure that the plan was compliant with the SARA legislation and that its contents fulfilled the spirit of the Act. After completion, the Nechako plan was submitted to the Biodiversity Branch of the BC Ministry of Water Land and Air Protection. After further review, it will be incorporated into a larger recovery plan for all white sturgeon populations in

Canada. The Nechako plan will become one chapter of the larger document, along with the recovery plans for the Columbia and Kootenay and Lower Fraser river white sturgeon populations. Once the larger plan is complete and after a final determination has been made by the federal minister, about the legal listing of white sturgeon under the species at risk act, the overall recovery strategy will be submitted to the Fisheries and Oceans Canada as part of the recovery process.

Given the critical stock status of the Nechako population of white sturgeon, it is important that recovery work continues in the short term. Therefore, as the federal species listing process moves forward the Nechako Recovery Team will continue to work towards implementing priority recovery activities based on the four main strategies outlined in the Nechako recovery plan. Subject to funding, several research projects and programs are planned for 2005/2006. Some of the proposed projects include, continuation of education and outreach activities by the Action Planning Group, analysis of changes in river geomorphology (stream bed changes) at the Vanderhoof spawning area, monitoring and evaluation of spawning success in the Vanderhoof area, evaluation of juvenile abundance and recruitment, monitoring of adult movements and continued work on the development of a conservation aquaculture facility.

For more information on the March 2004 version of the recovery plan, please contact the BC Ministry of Water Land and Air Protection at 565-6135. An electronic copy of the plan can also be downloaded from the Nechako White Sturgeon Recovery Initiative Website at www.nechakowhitestrugeon.org.

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