

EVERY STURGEON COUNTS - EMERGENCY BOAT KIT PROGRAM



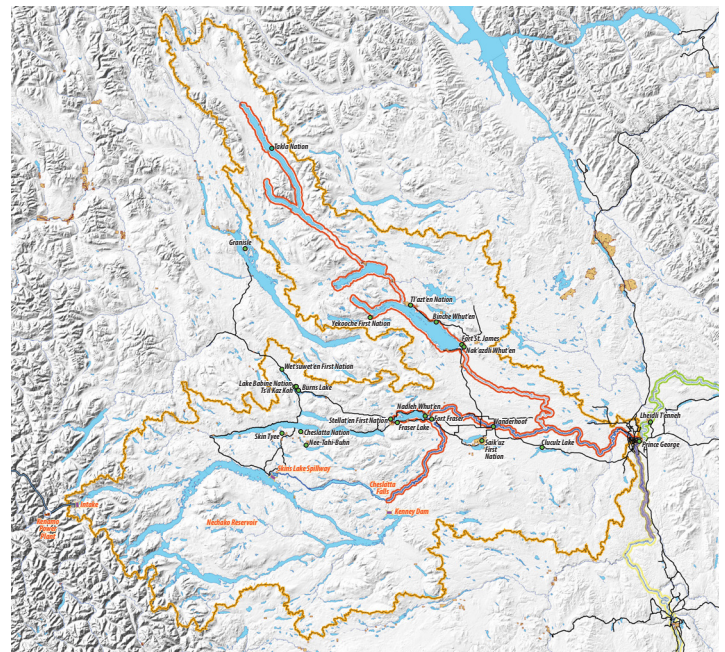
2011-2025 Summary

March, 2026

Photo: Sturgeon caught as by-catch in the Stellako River in 2025. Courtesy Darien Williams.

First Nation Communities

First Nation communities are approached each year to participate in this program. Figure 1 shows the location of the First Nation communities and the distribution of Nechako white sturgeon. Participation by First Nation communities differs from year to year, however the First Nation communities that have participated most often in the BKP since 2011 include Nadleh Whut'en, Stelat'en First Nation, Saik'uz First Nation, Nak'azdli Whut'en, Tl'az'ten First Nation, Takla Nation, and Lheidli T'enneh.



BACKGROUND

The Emergency Sturgeon Live Release Boat Kit Program (BKP) was piloted in 2011 because the Nechako White Sturgeon Recovery Initiative (NWSRI) and Carrier Sekani Tribal Council (CSTC) had become aware that an unknown number of sturgeon were being caught accidentally as by-catch in association with First Nation Food, Social and Ceremonial (FSC) fisheries and that fisher families didn't necessarily know how to release a sturgeon safely from their gill nets.

The BKP addresses one of the main objectives of the Recovery Plan for Nechako White Sturgeon to: "Prevent extirpation of white sturgeon in each of the four identified populations by preventing net loss of reproductive potential" (DFO 2014), by reducing the number of sturgeon harmed or accidentally killed during the fisheries. As a result, adult and juvenile sturgeon are kept in the population to maintain genetic diversity for future adult breeding.

Management and Funding

The NWSRI applies for funding to support the BKP and oversees the management of the program. Funding supports the hiring of community monitors to carry out the work of by-catch monitoring with Fisher Families, and funding supports the purchase of supplies and equipment.

Funding and in-kind support for this program since 2011 totals over \$200,000, and has come primarily from the Department of Fisheries and Ocean through the Habitat Stewardship Program (HSP), CSTC, and the NWSRI. Other contributors over the years include Freshwater Fisheries Society of BC (FFSBC), Canfor, Mt. Milligan and Integris Credit Union.

The Fisheries

The BKP focuses primarily on the salmon fishery, which occurs during the summer and early fall (July-September). Lake and river gill netting is primarily used in this fishery.

STURGEON BY-CATCH

From 2011-2025, a total of 114 sturgeon were reported to the BKP. Of those, **103 (88.8%) sturgeon were released live**, and 13 (11.2%) died (Figure 1). We acknowledge that more sturgeon by-catch may have occurred during this time, however the data presented here is from reports received by the NWSRI. Also, between 2011 and 2025, the FSC Fishery did not occur (or was limited) in 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2024. Thus the numbers presented are from 11 years of fishing data over a 15 year span.

The majority of sturgeon caught in the FSC Fishery have been in Stuart Lake (Figure 2) by Tł'azt'en (40) and Nak'azdli (39). Lheidli T'enneh has reported 16 sturgeon, Saik'uz 13, Takla 4, and Stellat'en 2. A Fisheries Officer and CSTC member reported 1 sturgeon each.

Length data was recorded for 65 (56%) of the sturgeon reported since 2011 (Figure 3). The largest sturgeon caught was >3.2 m in length (Stuart Lake, 2014), and the smallest was roughly 0.30 m long (Stuart Lake, 2016). Five of the sturgeon that died were <1.5 m in length (juvenile or sub-adult). Of the 30, 1.5 m and longer (likely spawning age) sturgeon, two died in gill nets, and the remaining 28 were released successfully.

Method of capture for the 13 sturgeon to have died was reported to be 8 in gill nets, one in a fyke net, and the remaining 4 did not have a method of capture recorded.

Of the 29 reports on sturgeon health of the sturgeon that survived, 24 stated that sturgeon looked good/ healthy, swam away easily, or had escaped. Five reports stated that the sturgeon were lethargic or slow to swim away, and one was reported as injured.

There are 38 reports of either no damage or only minor damage to nets, two stating moderate damage, four with major damage, and one net was destroyed.

PIT tag readers and radio receivers were most often not present in the boats at the time of the by-catch. Since 2011, only four sturgeon have had a PIT tag number recorded and five sturgeon were observed to have radio-transmitter antennae/tags.

Since 2011, 89% of reported sturgeon by-catch have been released live indicating that the Emergency Boat Kit Program has been successful in its goal of reducing harm to endangered Nechako White Sturgeon.

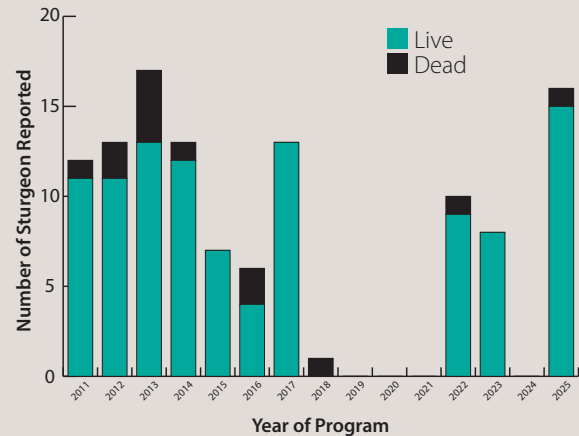


Figure 1: Number of live (103) and dead (13 by-catch encounters by year. Years with zero sturgeon reported were years with no or limited fishing.

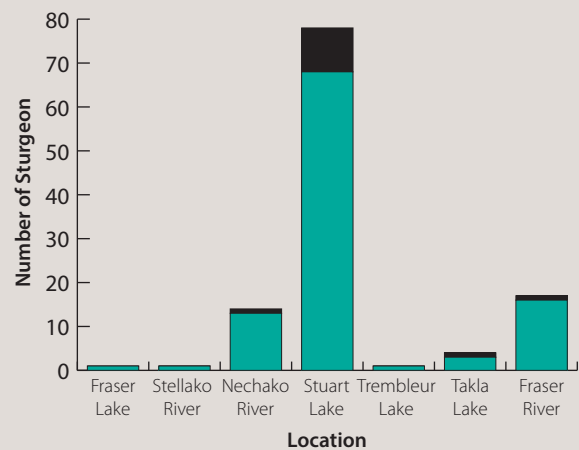


Figure 2: Number of live and dead encounters by location.

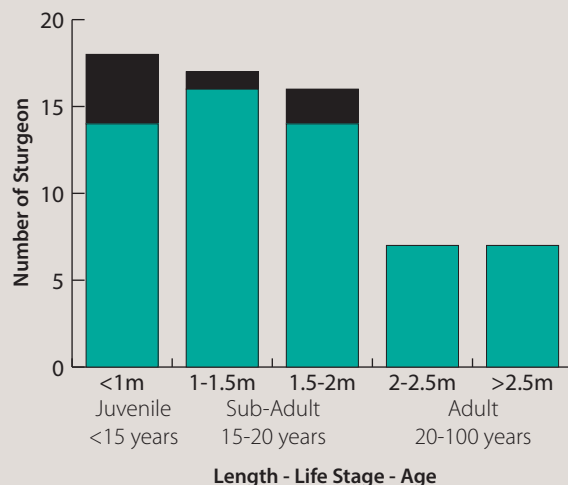


Figure 3: Length distribution of sturgeon by-catch that reported and estimated or measured length (65, 56%).

LEARN MORE

Visit the NWSRI Boat Kit Program page to download the form and get resources.



HIGHLIGHT ON 2025

In 2025, 16 sturgeon were reported as by-catch. Fifteen were released live (94%), but one that was caught in Stuart Lake was found dead.

Eleven of the 14 were caught in Stuart Lake, by fishers from Nak'azdli (4) and Tl'azt'en (7). One report came from Takla Lake fishers. Stella'ten reported one sturgeon that was caught in the Stellako River (photo on page 1). This sturgeon looks to be less than a metre in length (juvenile). Saik'uz fishers caught one in the Nechako River, just upstream from the Stoney Creek confluence (photo below). Two young sturgeon (0.6 m and 0.75 m in length) were caught near the Stone Creek confluence in the Upper Fraser River (photos to the right). No encounters were reported from Nadleh Whut'en.




Above: Sturgeon caught as by-catch upstream of the Stoney Creek confluence in the Nechako River. Photo courtesy Caleb Nome.

Below: Sturgeon caught as by-catch near Stone Creek confluence in the Fraser River. Size estimated as 0.6 m. Photo courtesy Dominic Frederick.

Bottom: Sturgeon caught as by-catch near Stone Creek confluence in the Fraser River. Size estimated as 0.75 m. Photo courtesy Dominic Frederick.




The Magnificent Barry Booth
0A18224A39



Nickname: The Magnificent Barry Booth

| | |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| Release Info | Capture 1 |
| Date: Jun 7, 2024 | Date: Sep 1, 2025 |
| Fork Length: 83.3 | Fork Length: |
| Weight: 4.125 | Weight: |

Fork Length
83.3m



One of the sturgeon caught in Stuart Lake by Nak'azdli had a PIT tag—0A18224A39—which the crew detected using the PIT reader they had on-board their boat. The sturgeon was a hatchery-raised fish from the Nechako White Sturgeon Conservation Centre. It was released in 2024 at 0.83 m (brood year 2022) by graduate students and research managers from the University of Northern British Columbia, during the Juvenile Sturgeon Release Event. They named the sturgeon 'The Magnificent Barry Booth'. Although no body measurements were taken when it was caught as by-catch, there is still incredible value in knowing that this fish

had survived its first year since release into the wild, and that it had travelled from the bridge in Vanderhoof to the lower end of Stuart Lake over the course of one year. Participation in the Boat Kit Program not only reduces harm to sturgeon, it also provides value data towards the overall recovery program for Nechako White Sturgeon.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 2026

Improve Communication: Establish regular meetings and a communication plan to increase awareness of the program. Share publications, such as the **Spring 2026 NWSRI Newsletter** on a regular basis with all Nations.

Make reporting more accessible: Improve the reporting process and equipment availability (eg. PIT reader) in a way that makes sense for Fisher Families and community monitors.

Incorporate cultural components: Add events such as net mending workshops to the program.