

OPINION

# Nechako sturgeon forgotten in battle over Northern Gateway

Province appears to have abandoned fight to save the endangered fish

**STEPHEN HUME**  
VANCOUVER SUN



Nothing exemplifies the apparent confusion of our reigning provincial government regarding the Northern Gateway pipeline project more than the paralytic seizures its own environmental policies induce.

Take the case of the endangered white sturgeon in the tributaries, lakes and main stem of the Nechako River watershed, which enters the Fraser at Prince George, about 800 kilometres north of Vancouver.

Back in 2008, when Barry Penner was environment minister, he championed a \$1.5-million grant to support conservation efforts for the much diminished Nechako white sturgeon population.

A comprehensive recovery plan for the endangered Nechako stocks — a genetically distinct sub-species of the Fraser River population — has been in the works for seven years. It was to be ready by 2009. But it still hasn't been implemented, Canadian Press reported last month.

The white sturgeon, the largest freshwater species in the province, is one of nature's wonders. It can live more than a century and reach enormous sizes.

A 500-kilogram specimen caught and released by British sports angler Michael Snell on the lower Fraser last summer generated newspaper headlines around the world. Another, landed from the Fraser about a century ago, topped 816 kilograms in weight and six metres in length.

But they've been severely abused throughout their range in Canada and the U.S.

In the 1890s, the American white sturgeon population collapsed after being commercially harvested for a few years in one of history's more disgusting greed fests. British Columbians were little better. We, too, indulged in a 35-year orgy of overfishing starting in 1880.

Then dams on the upper Columbia River ravaged sturgeon habitat in the U.S. and B.C.

The last hope for North America's largest fish was the Fraser, where the fishery was closed in 1994 and the river, although polluted and modified, remains relatively wild and free flowing.

"The Nechako white sturgeon population is the most endangered sturgeon population in B.C., and they need our help," Penner said in 2008.

He had an unassailable point. The Nechako had been subjected to massive changes from a dam providing power to an aluminum smelter at Kitimat. Government fish biologists estimated fewer than 400 adults survived of the Nechako's historic population of 8,000.

Now, sensitive sturgeon habitat could be threatened again. The proposed pipeline would cross sturgeon rivers carrying more than half a million barrels of gooey, toxic diluted bitumen from Alberta's oilsands to a tanker terminal to be built at Kitimat.

One provincial government news release in 2008 noted that most of the surviving fish in the Nechako are now already more than 40 years old, the age at which females reach sexual maturity and begin to spawn. However, it warned that while white

sturgeon spawn only every five to ten years, the natural death rate for such a population is about eight per cent per year.

Since Penner and the government's enthusiastic endorsement of recovery strategies, the white sturgeon population is now estimated at a scant 335. The simple arithmetic of decline is sufficiently ominous that alarm bells should be ringing.

So where's the province when it comes to arguing the case for the beleaguered Nechako sturgeon at the public hearings into the environmental impacts of the proposed Northern Gateway pipeline, which entered their final phase this week in Prince George?

Nowhere, argues the NDP's feisty young environment critic Rob Fleming.

While government was only too happy to take credit for sturgeon protection, issuing media releases by the sheaf, posing for dozens of photo ops and shovelling out tax dollars for the worthy cause, when it's actually come time to stand up for the imperilled species, it's vanished from the scene.

"Having spent all this money and done all this work, why have the Liberals failed to present this evidence to the joint review panel? By not presenting the evidence they help the pipeline project," Fleming says.

He has a good point. Political theatre is not leadership. Promises are useless if they don't translate into action. And the endangered sturgeon population now requires a serious advocate in our government, which has a moral and ethical duty to protect the fish on our behalf.

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IN BRIEF

BURNABY

Worker killed retaining wall

One man is dead at a hospital after a retaining wall collapsed as they worked on a trench in North Burnaby, B.C., Thursday. The man was in a residential area for a retaining wall when a retaining wall collapsed, according to a spokeswoman for the city.

Mike Hager, Vancouver Sun

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