Kids Release Juvenile Endangered Nechako White Sturgeon into the Nechako River

By June Wood

Photo Left - Young Sturgeon prior to release Photo Right - Future naturalists gingerly getting ready to release her sturgeon

Determination, apprehension and awe, were some of the expressions written across the faces of the more than 600 very excited elementary school students from School District 91 that converged on Riverside Park in Vanderhoof in May. The children had come to help release, into the Nechako River, the second half of the first batch of Nechako White Sturgeon that have been incubated and reared in the new Nechako White Sturgeon Conservation Centre (hatchery). All together, approximately 1400 juvenile sturgeon were released and the survival rate is expected to be high, given the size of the year-old fish. Releasing the young sturgeon was going to be no easy task for these children, since the river was running at flood level. An ingenious thought led to a water slide of sorts being devised to keep the kids safe and to help the fish reach the river safely. Each child plopped a squirming, slippery fish onto the chute and watched as it splashed into the river and swam away — home at last. The young sturgeon were tagged with micro-chips so that they can be tracked and each was christened with a name, like "Nemo" or "Nechako" by the kids. This release was one small step in helping the Nechako White Sturgeon avoid extinction, but did the kids gain anything from this unique experience? Their faces tell the story.

After the release of the fish, students had the opportunity to move through several educational stations that allowed a hands-on opportunity to see the types of food that sturgeon feed on. They also saw demonstrations of land stewardship decisions in the region that negatively affect the survival of all aquatic species.

Cory Williamson, manager of the Nechako White Sturgeon Conservation Centre, said the project couldn't have come together without the support of the community and getting children to take part in the release was a deliberate decision. Cory was emphatic that the whole recovery process is inter-generational and that introducing another generation of "this iconic species" to the river is important. It takes sturgeon 30 to 40 years to fully mature so that they can reproduce. With so few mature fish left in the Nechako, very few naturally-spawned eggs hatching and few larvae surviving, a hatchery became an essential component of bringing these fish back from the very brink of extinction. The ultimate goal of the Nechako White Sturgeon Recovery Initiative is a self-sustaining population of Nechako White Sturgeon.

The White Sturgeon has a slender, long body, head, and mouth. This fish has no scales; instead, it has large bony scutes that serve as a form of armor. Its 11–14 dorsal scutes are all anterior to the dorsal fin, and 38–48 lateral scutes and 9–12 ventral scutes are on each side. The dorsal color of a white sturgeon is gray, pale olive, or gray-brown. The fins are a dusky, opaque gray. The underside is a clean white. It has four barbels, used for sensing food, near its large, toothless mouth. White Sturgeon can live to be over 100 years old. The rate of growth is dependent on water temperature. Female Nechako White Sturgeon do not reach reproductive age until they are between 30 and 40 years old, while males mature at about 25 years. Females spawn every three to five years and males skip a year. Nechako White Sturgeon are smaller than the white sturgeon found in the Fraser River. The largest female found in the Nechako was about 10 feet long and weighed about 340 pounds – some sturgeon have been recorded at 1,800 pounds. Sturgeons are classified as a bony fish, but actually are more cartilaginous than bony, their internal bone structure being more like a shark's. Sturgeon have changed very little since they first appeared over 175 million years ago, thus have the appearance of a very ancient fish.