

CORCORAN EDUCATION GRANT REPORT A LIFE-SIZE STURGEON EDUCATIONAL DISPLAY FOR FREE INTERAGENCY LOAN



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Sturgeon are the keystone species of native, freshwater fishes. Once abundant throughout New York and the Great Lakes drainage, sturgeon have been reduced in numbers or extirpated from many watersheds. Most species of sturgeon are now listed as Threatened or Endangered throughout much of their historical range, and have been listed as species of primary restoration concern by the USGS Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, The Great Lakes Fisheries Commission, and most states surrounding the Great Lakes basin. Sturgeon were once abundant in many parts of New York, including the Great Lakes tributaries, St. Lawrence River, Hudson River, and others. They were an important part of Native American culture, and were once so abundant that commercial fishermen complained of all the large sturgeon tearing up their nets. However, the prized caviar of the sturgeon soon turned them into a highly sought after species. They were netted and caught in large numbers, with little regard to overharvest. At the same time, many streams were dammed to provide power to fuel the Industrial Revolution, inadvertently blocking access to many sturgeon spawning streams. Also, sturgeon are a long-lived species (>100 years) so it takes females 15–20 years to reach spawning age. Many were getting caught before they were even able to spawn. The combination of these factors, along with pollution, led to the collapse of nearly all sturgeon populations in New York and many other areas. Human actions led to their decline, and thus we bear the responsibility to restore them.

The New York Chapter of Sturgeon For Tomorrow (see links below) was recently formed to promote the

re-establishment of sturgeon throughout New York to levels such that all species of sturgeon found in New York are able to be removed from the Threatened or Endangered Species lists, and ultimately produce self-sustaining populations capable of supporting sport fisheries. Sturgeon For Tomorrow groups were originally started in some Midwest states, such as Michigan (<http://www.sturgeonfortomorrow.org/>) and Wisconsin (<http://www.sturgeonfortomorrow.net/Chapters.html>). About two years ago, a chapter was organized here in New York. It is still a fledgling group with practically no funding. From my fisheries job with Cornell University, I knew lots of folks who did sturgeon research, and had many fishermen reporting sturgeon catches to us, so it seemed natural to make a connection and capture everyone's enthusiasm to restore sturgeon in New York.

Public education and support play an integral role in encouraging state and federal management agencies to commit ever-shrinking resources towards re-establishment of sturgeon. We applied for and were very fortunate to receive an educational grant from the North American Native Fishes

Association through their Gerald C. Corcoran Education Grant Program, to purchase a life-size, realistic sturgeon replica to jump-start our public educational displays. This amazingly realistic sturgeon mount was specially constructed for us by American Fish Taxidermy in TN (<http://www.americanfishtaxidermy.com/>). The sturgeon mount is the centerpiece of our educational displays, and truly captures the awe-inspiring magnitude of a real-life, swimming fish that can surpass seven



feet in length and weigh over 230 lbs in freshwater lakes and rivers. It is truly a remarkable, eye-catching piece that would not have been possible without the Corcoran Education Grant. In addition to the sturgeon mount, we have rounded out the display with several sturgeon posters, a scientific poster on sturgeon research, informational brochures and signs, videos, sturgeon baseball cards, sturgeon coloring sheets and stickers for the kids, and even live baby sturgeon on display.

An added benefit is that the model was purchased with the intent of being available for short-term loan to environmental groups, angler associations, universities, researchers, fish hatcheries, state and federal agencies, public and private schools, local zoos, and other pertinent groups. By making it available for loan, we save them from having to spend resources on separate displays, something that would be impossible for most of them to do individually. By loaning out the sturgeon replica, we can reach many thousands more people than if our group alone tried to promote sturgeon. The replica mount is housed at the Cornell University Biological Field Station in Syracuse, and loans are coordinated by the author, who is employed at that location as a Fisheries Research Support Specialist.

DISPLAY USAGE

Since receiving the sturgeon model in the fall of 2012, we have done 15 educational displays. An overview of these is given in the table below, which also gives an idea of what types of agencies and groups have borrowed the display. Two of the largest events were the Syracuse and Rochester Sportsman's Shows, which are 3-day events that attract thousands of people. Other notable events include a display at the annual sturgeon stocking event; several elementary and college classroom displays; a display at the hatchery during spring spawning; and two fish and wildlife festivals. We've attempted to estimate attendance at each of these events, and believe that so far we have reached somewhere close to 17,500 people, a return on investment of approximately \$0.06/person. Eight of the 15 events so far have been loans of the model to borrowing agencies, and we are elated that folks have been able to take advantage of this great resource for their fish and wildlife related events! We have actually had to decline four requests for usage because the display was already reserved for that weekend or time slot.

The sturgeon mount, which has been fondly dubbed "Stella the Sturgeon," is an absolute magnet for the



(Photo by Thomas E. Brooking)

public at these public displays, and Stella attracts people from far off with sometimes humorous reactions. Some people excitedly run up to the booth and can't wait to relate to you that they or their fishing buddies recently caught a huge sturgeon. Others are in awe at the sheer size of the fish, and some are even frightened that such a huge creature could be swimming around in the lake they swim in! Many are fascinated and enlightened to learn about such prehistoric creatures and their fascinating life history. Particularly rewarding are the children who come up, wide-eyed, dragging mom or dad to look at the huge fish that they can't wait to catch someday! I believe this truly exemplifies the heart and soul of the Gerald C. Corcoran Education Grant Program.

Stella's work is far from done, however. As of this writing, we have seven more events scheduled between July and September of 2013. We are also trying to make arrangements for Stella to be on display for the New York State Fair in Syracuse at the end of August with a potential attendance of >1 million people over 12 days.

SUMMARY

Sturgeon are truly the "Bald Eagle of fish," a remarkable and awe-inspiring fish, the likely source of many



Stella. (Scott Schlueter, NANFA rep for central NY, third from left.) (Photo by Thomas E. Brooking)

legends and mythical beasts. They are an important part of Native American culture and European history. Sturgeon have the potential to provide a significant trophy fishery, and would be the catch of a lifetime for many anglers. An important facet of angling lore is the perpetual hope to catch a Moby Dick, the freshwater version of Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea." Even today, as sturgeon populations are being restored, we see that excitement in anglers' faces as they relate their catches to us. This species survived unchanged for millions of years, but was decimated by humans in less than one sturgeon lifespan. It is only with public education and support that our under-funded environmental resource agencies can devote the needed funds and personnel to reverse these trends, and the generous donation from the Gerald C. Corcoran Education Grant Program has substantially advanced our sturgeon education program in NY. The future is bright for sturgeon in New York and many other Great Lakes areas, where restoration programs have seen encouraging success in recent times. NY Sturgeon For Tomorrow is very

grateful for the help provided by the North American Native Fishes Association and the Corcoran Education Grant Program, and we encourage others to take advantage of this wonderful opportunity for education funding!

Acknowledgements

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Table. Summary of sturgeon educational displays.

Loan Date	Return Date	Affiliation	Attendance	Event Description
10/30/2012	10/30/2012	Cornell University	20	Group from Cazenovia College
11/6/2012	11/9/2012	NYSDEC Region 6	30	Stocking sturgeon at Salmon River
11/14/2012	11/14/2012	NYSDEC Region 6	40	Salmon River Central school
11/14/2012	11/30/2012	New York Power Authority	180	NYPA Visitors Center
11/30/2012	11/31/12	NYSDEC Region 6	40	Massena Elementary School
1/11/2013	1/13/2013	NY Sturgeon For Tomorrow	2000	OCC NY Sportsman's Show
1/25/2013	1/27/2013	NY Sturgeon For Tomorrow	8000	NY Fairgrounds Sportsman's Expo
3/1/2013	3/3/2013	NY Sturgeon For Tomorrow	5000	Rochester Sportsmen's Expo
4/3/2013	4/16/2013	Oneida Fish Hatchery	1200	walleye spawning run
4/6/2013	4/6/2013	Fat Nancy's Tackle Shop	declined	Spring Fishing Extravaganza
4/4/2013	4/7/2013	United Taxidermists of NY	declined	convention at Carrier Circle
4/1/2013	4/13/2013	Boy Scout group	declined	Saratoga County Trout Stocking
4/20/2013	4/20/2013	NYSDEC Region 6	300	Earth Day Event, Watertown State Office Bldg.
4/27/2013	4/27/2013	USGS	150	Tunison Lab Fishing Festival
4/27/2013	4/27/2013	SUNY Cobleskill	declined	Fish and Wildlife Festival
4/29/2013	4/29/2013	Cornell University	300	Oneida Lake Assoc. Annual Meeting
6/6/2013	6/6/2013	Cornell University	200	Bridgeport Elem. School Community Celebration
6/15/2013	6/15/2013	FWS Region 9	300	Dunkirk Fish and Wildlife Festival
6/25/2013	6/25/2013	Cornell University	50	Cornell Biological Field Station Open House
7/3/2013	7/3/2013	Cornell University	no data	Oswego County Fair
7/9/2013	7/9/2013	Cornell University	no data	Verona Beach Nature Festival
7/23/2013	7/23/2013	Cornell University	no data	Cornell Education Initiative Teacher Training Day
8/6/2013	8/18/2013	FWS Region 9	no data	Erie County Fair
8/22/2013	9/2/2013	NY Sturgeon For Tomorrow	no data	NY State Fair
9/7/2013	9/7/2013	FWS Region 9	no data	Buffalo 5k Run Fish and Wildlife Festival
9/7/2013	9/7/2013	Onondaga County	no data	Onondaga County Open House
9/20/2013	9/22/2013	NYS Conservation Council	no data	NYS Conservation Council fall convention
unknown	unknown	Cayuga Nature Center	no data	Nature Center display; not sure what dates
unknown	unknown	Sterling Nature Center	no data	Nature Center display; flexible dates