

About the Winnipeg River Lake Sturgeon Conservation Closure

Lake Sturgeon, an evolutionary ancient fish, were historically found in large lakes and many rivers within the Hudson Bay, Great Lakes, Mississippi and St. Lawrence drainage basins. Their long life, large size, slow growth, and late onset of sexual maturity (at 15-25 years of age), combined with an intermittent reproductive cycle, make them vulnerable to many human influences, including overharvest, pollution and loss of habitat.

Lake Sturgeon populations in the Winnipeg River were severely reduced due to historic overharvest. To improve the situation, the commercial fishery was closed, but some lower levels of harvest were still allowed at first. However, Lake Sturgeon stocks did not recover. As a result, a Lake Sturgeon Conservation Closure was put in place in 1995 to allow the populations to recover. The closure prohibits the fishing for, and the possession of, Lake Sturgeon by all users.

Over the last 20 years, despite the prohibition under the conservation closure, catch and release angling for Lake Sturgeon in the Winnipeg River has increased in popularity. This is due, in part, to the conservation closure's success in increasing fish numbers. Until now, information about the prohibition of fishing for Lake Sturgeon in the conservation closure area was not included in the *Manitoba Anglers' Guide*. However, because of the increased popularity of the Lake Sturgeon fishery, anglers need to know about the law, as steps continue to modernize Lake Sturgeon management.

Where does the conservation closure apply?

The Lake Sturgeon Conservation Closure applies to the Winnipeg River, from the Manitoba–Ontario border to the Pine Falls Generating Station.

What has happened since 1995?

In the Nutimik/Numao Lake portion of the Winnipeg River, the population estimate has increased from ~8,000 in 1995, to ~21,000 in 2011 and to ~49,000 in 2016. While these numbers are encouraging, most of these fish are juveniles and are not expected to reach maturity for another eight to 15 years (Figure 1).

2016 Nutimik Lake Fork Length Frequency

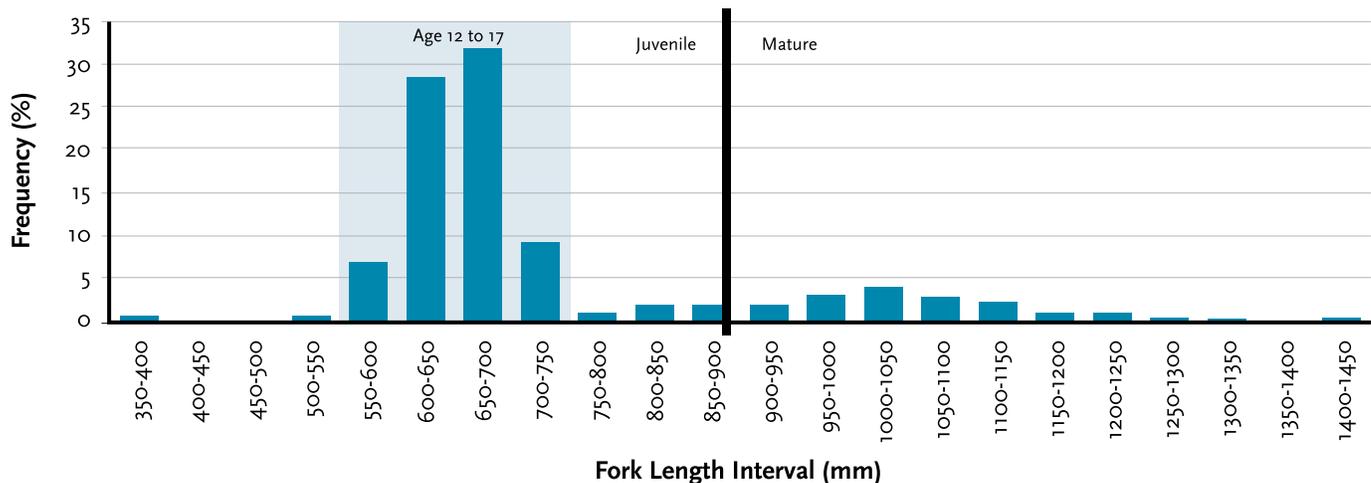


Figure 1 – Fork length frequency of Lake Sturgeon from the Nutimik Lake portion of the Winnipeg River in 2016 (N=304)



Between Pointe du Bois and Slave Falls and downstream of Lac du Bonnet, population projections are positive, but these populations are much smaller than that in the Nutimik/Namao reach of the river. Meanwhile, the population above Pointe du Bois has not shown signs of recovery. Fish in this reach can move upstream into Ontario, where no conservation closure is in effect.

What is being done now?

Manitoba Sustainable Development continues to assess Lake Sturgeon populations. While populations have grown despite incidental catch and release, more information is required to understand the impacts of the practice on Lake Sturgeon, including how the populations might respond to increased angling pressure. This information will be used to determine when the closure may be relaxed or lifted. A university study is also planned for 2018-2021 to assess the impact of catch and release angling on Lake Sturgeon. This study follows a preliminary study that suggested direct catch and release mortality on Lake Sturgeon on the Winnipeg River is low. But more data is needed for a solid conclusion.

Manitoba Sustainable Development staff will continue to evaluate the [Manitoba Lake Sturgeon Management Strategy](#), including reviewing management goals for Winnipeg River populations, in consultation with resource users.

The department will not be launching any new enforcement activities at this time. Conservation Officers will be on normal patrol this fishing season to ensure the laws respecting sturgeon are clear to the public. In the meantime, anglers are asked to be careful in handling and caring for incidental Lake Sturgeon catches.

What should I do if I happen to catch a Lake Sturgeon?

To minimize harm to the fish and to ensure the highest possible survival rate, use best handling techniques. Have tools ready for hook removal and release fish immediately. If safe to do so, remove the hook without taking the fish out the water. Proper handling will help the ongoing recovery of Lake Sturgeon.

If you catch a tagged Lake Sturgeon, please record the tag number and the date and location of capture. Then, report your information to the Eastern Regional Fisheries Biologist at 204-345-1426 or call toll free at 1-800-214-6497.

