

Sturgeon on loan



By **DANIEL MOFFATT**
Program Coordinator,
Northeast Michigan Great
Lakes Stewardship Initiative

BLACK RIVER – Lake Huron's largest and longest living native fish species was an extended-stay guest in three Northeast Michigan classrooms this year as part of the Department of Natural Resources' pilot program loaning lake sturgeon to schools for study.

Students from Cheboygan Middle School, Onaway High School and Ella White Elementary in Alpena welcomed their very own gilled classmates in October when the fish were only about four inches long.

Hosting the sturgeon proved to be quite the classroom learning opportunity for the caretaking students.

At the fifth grade level, students learned about fish biology by applying math and tracking growth rates, allowing students to understand adaptations – or body features – while helping sturgeon survive in their watery environment. In these ways, the sturgeon served as a simple yet effective opportunity to solidify those concepts for the students through hands-on experiences each and every day.

With sturgeon, each day brought tasks of feeding and tank maintenance and observing a fish that was growing more than one inch per month and

By raising this native fish, students are promoting Lake Huron biodiversity and raising awareness about native fish species among their community. Just this year, Ella White students worked with Michigan Sea Grant to create a new poster line of Lake Huron's indigenous fish, portraying these native species as cartoon superheroes.

offering funny behaviors every day. Sticking to a strict maintenance and feeding schedule, the students cared for their sturgeon's every need – food and water quality, shelter and space - by maintaining its classroom mini-habitat.

Frozen bloodworms were the diet of choice for the young lake sturgeon grew from four inches to 18 inches over a period of seven months. Not a bad start for a fish that may eventually reach 6-8 feet and 200-300 pounds or more in its lifetime.

Lake sturgeon are now listed as a threatened species in Michigan and either threatened or endangered by 19 of the 20 states within its original range in the U.S. Due largely to historic commercial overfishing, pollution and habitat loss, their rare status also offered a great opportunity for



An MSU student-researcher preps the sturgeon for tagging before Ella White Elementary students release their fish just below Kleber Dam.

Cheboygan County's Black River.

"Releasing the fish was by far the best part of the program," said Ann Douglas, science teacher at Cheboygan Middle School. "The students were

amazed while visiting the hatchery, seeing the different sizes and life stages of the sturgeon, and when we went to the spawning site on the river, researchers were tagging them and pulling out four-footers."

Each class released the fish under the direction of Dr. Kim Scribner, professor with Michigan State University Department of Fisheries and Wildlife. Scribner oversees the Black River Streamside Hatchery and Rearing Facility near the Kleber Dam, located northwest of Onaway.

Brenda Archambo, president of Sturgeon for Tomorrow, a catalyst to this program, offered her hand throughout and was present from first loan to last release.



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Onaway High School students are joined by teacher Scott Steensma and Brenda Archambo, president of Sturgeon for Tomorrow, as they release a classroom-raised Lake Sturgeon in the Black River.

In common, these three schools are active partners within the Northeast Michigan Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative network, learning from each other and partnering with their communities to develop and implement meaningful place-based stewardship education projects with their students. The initiative provides resources and funding, but also facilitates professional development and community partnership opportunities that help make a project

like this successful. Finding expertise and opportunity to work closely with partners like MDNR, Michigan State University and Sturgeon for Tomorrow was a great way for teachers to gain resources and expertise needed to pilot a project like Sturgeon on Loan.

By raising this native fish, students are promoting Lake Huron biodiversity and raising awareness about native fish species among their community. Just this year, Ella White

students worked with Michigan Sea Grant to create a new poster line of Lake Huron's indigenous fish, portraying these native species as cartoon superheroes. In addition to the classroom sturgeon, they also raised and released lake trout as part of their studies.

Lake sturgeon are not only amazingly cool looking and charismatic fish, they are prehistoric –



The lake sturgeon is a threatened species in Michigan but three schools in Northeast Michigan participated in an educational pilot program with the Michigan DNR.



swimming as far back as 136 million years ago, during the days of dinosaurs, and remain in our Great Lakes waterways today. Living to be as old as 100 years or more in age, it is likely that the adult parents of the young sturgeon witnessed many environmental changes caused by people over the past century.

Students from each school released their sturgeon wondering what the future might bring. They hope things may be a little brighter when the fish returns to the river to spawn many years down the line, thanks to the environmental stewardship commitment of these young students from Northeast Michigan today. 🌱



The Northeast Michigan Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative

The Northeast Michigan Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative is a regional partnership of schools and community partners working to promote place-based, community-based learning experiences. This network serves to engage youth as partners in protecting our Great Lakes and natural resources of Northeast Michigan through hands-on, feet-wet learning in (and with) the community.

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- **Educators and school improvement:** Through training and professional development for teachers, NEMI GLSI supports the use of best practices that maximize the effectiveness of PBE.
- **Strong school-community partnerships:** Schools and communities working together producing powerful partnerships that are beneficial to all.

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