

Black Lake Sturgeon Population/Harvest Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)



- 1. Why is there so much effort dedicated to the management of lake sturgeon?*
Lake sturgeon are a species native to Michigan. Populations throughout the state declined dramatically over the past 150 years. Lake sturgeon are now a state threatened species. The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) along with other organizations and agencies have been working together to restore this species and its associated fishery in Black Lake and the Inland Waterway.
- 2. Why is there a fishery in Black Lake for sturgeon?*
The lake sturgeon fishery is deeply rooted in the local culture, going back several decades. In 1997, the lake sturgeon population in Black Lake was determined to be well below historical levels, yet still at a level that could withstand a limited annual harvest. The DNR and the Black Lake Sturgeon for Tomorrow (SFT) chapter are striving to rehabilitate the sturgeon population in the entire Inland Waterway through protection, research, education and supplemental stocking. The DNR and SFT work together to administer this sturgeon fishery, which helps raise awareness and knowledge of the special management needs of the species.
- 3. Is hook and line fishing for sturgeon allowed in Black Lake?*
Yes, but only during the designated fishing season.
- 4. Why is an all-species fishing license needed for sturgeon?*
Anglers need this special license to fish for special fish in Michigan, including trout, salmon and lake sturgeon. These are species that require extra effort to rear and manage.
- 5. There was a sturgeon fishery in nearby Mullett and Burt lakes prior to 2000, why isn't there one currently?*
Fishing for sturgeon in Mullett and Burt lakes was prohibited near the end of the century due to concerns in the overall abundance of this fish in the Inland Waterway. Recent intensive netting efforts in these two lakes by DNR and Michigan State University (MSU) confirmed there are very few adults in these lakes, insufficient numbers to withstand a harvest season. These surveys did find a good number of juvenile sturgeon from recent stocking efforts, so the outlook for Mullett and Burt lakes is improving.
- 6. I have heard about a streamside sturgeon hatchery on the Black River. Where is it and what is the goal of this facility?*
Research has indicated that natural production of sturgeon in Black Lake is very limited, and insufficient to sustain or grow the population to target levels. The streamside hatchery was built by the owner of Tower-Kleber Limited Partnership in cooperation with DNR, MSU, and SFT. Each spring MSU and the DNR collect eggs and larval fish from the river and enhance survival by rearing juvenile sturgeon in the streamside hatchery. Fall fingerling sturgeon are then stocked back into Mullett, Burt, and Black lakes each year, supplementing those populations.
- 7. How does DNR determine the population estimate of Black Lake sturgeon?*
The DNR works cooperatively with MSU to tag adult (mature) sturgeon in the Upper Black River spawning run each spring. This dataset goes back to the year 2000. Thus, a

known number of adult fish have been tagged since this time. Each spring during the spawning run, a large portion of the adult sturgeon are captured in the river and the ratio of marked to unmarked fish are compared to the total number marked in previous years. This number determines the estimate of mature lake sturgeon for the Black Lake system. This number is currently multiplied by 1.2 percent to determine the total allocation of fish that can be harvested by tribal and state recreational anglers.

8. *Why is the harvest rate of adult lake sturgeon set currently at 1.2 percent?*
The State of Michigan and the five tribal governments listed in the 2007 Inland Consent Decree have agreed to this harvest rate of 1.2 percent. Harvest rates can be sustainably higher for a larger population, but the agencies have agreed to keep the rate low at this time while the Black Lake population rebuilds.
9. *Why is there no size limit on lake sturgeon that can be speared in Black Lake?*
For many years there was a 36 inch minimum size limit on lake sturgeon in Black Lake. DNR officials worked with SFT members and agreed to remove this size limit in recent years as a high size limit essentially selects for larger fish, often females. The minimum size limit was removed in an attempt to “spare” some large females from being harvested. Allowing smaller stocked fish to be harvested takes some burden off the larger, remnant females that are the key to rehabilitation efforts. Also, in a fishery where spearing predominates, it is often difficult to precisely determine the length of a sturgeon prior to harvesting. With no minimum size limit in place, anglers are able to harvest a sturgeon without worrying about size.
10. *There appear to be many juvenile sturgeon in Black Lake. Are they part of the annual spring population estimate?*
It is true that through supplemental stocking, the juvenile sturgeon population in Black Lake (as well as Mullett and Burt) appears in good shape. However, they do not become part of the potential population estimate until they become sexually mature and are caught in the spring spawning run.
11. *What is the difference between an “open fishery” for Black Lake sturgeon compared to a “lottery driven fishery”?*
The DNR managed a lottery system for nearly a decade at Black Lake. Thus, a limited number of names were drawn from an established pool of participants and those anglers participated in fishing on their established date. An open fishery means that any angler may fish for sturgeon on Black Lake during the provided season.
12. *Why did the DNR switch from a lottery driven fishery to an open fishery?*
The lottery draw system severely limited fishing effort and the number of anglers who could participated in the annual fishery. Due to the fishery’s popularity, the DNR decided to allow increased participation by implementing an unlimited entry system. Input from anglers indicates the open fishery is very much supported by the fishing community. The DNR has worked cooperatively with SFT to maintain this open fishery and has implemented other regulations to help manage overall harvest.
13. *An open fishery allowing multiple anglers on the ice for a limited number of fish seems risky, doesn’t it?*
Yes, it is a more risky management scenario when an unlimited number of anglers compete for a small number of fish available for harvest. However, the DNR and SFT have built in many safeguards or “buffers” to ensure the population of sturgeon in Black

Lake continues to rebuild while maintaining a popular fishery. One safeguard is keeping the harvest rate at a very low, conservative rate of 1.2 percent. Another safeguard is taking annual voluntary reductions in the state recreational harvest. The fishery will be managed so that overall harvest will be held to acceptable levels. If overharvest occurs in any one season, harvest in subsequent years will be adjusted.

14. *Are there any other safeguards to place on this popular “open fishery”?*

Yes, the DNR and SFT evaluate the fishing season each year and work cooperatively to better manage it for the benefits of the lake sturgeon population, the anglers and the agencies managing it. One major change made recently is to place more DNR personnel on the ice during the season itself. This has resulted in a quicker response time for when a fish is captured, and enables the DNR to close the season more quickly. Other communication tools have been implemented, such as canons and sirens, to notify anglers that the quota has been attained in a given day.

15. *I have been confused when trying to understand the difference between “allocation” and “targeted harvest level.” What do these mean?*

The annual allocation of harvest is based on the 1.2 percent annual harvest rate. This rate is multiplied by the preceding year’s adult sturgeon population estimate (see other questions). For example, if the estimate was 1,000 adult sturgeon, then the allocation of sturgeon is 12 (1.2 percent of 1000 fish). This number then is split evenly between the Tribes and the state recreational anglers: each **allocated** six fish. Because having an “open” fishery increases the potential to quickly harvest fish, the DNR takes its allocation and establishes voluntary reductions in this number to provide a buffer to overharvest. This final voluntary reduction is the **targeted harvest level**.

16. *What do the Tribes do with their half of the sturgeon harvest allocation?*

The tribal harvest is independent of the state harvest. The five tribal governments work together to establish their harvest seasons and rules on Black Lake, and to share their total allocation.

17. *How can I get involved with saving the lake sturgeon?*

There are three chapters of Sturgeon for Tomorrow in Michigan and you can learn more about their activities through their websites. These chapters are the Black Lake Chapter, the Kalamazoo Chapter and the St. Clair-Detroit River Chapter. Other questions specific to the Black Lake chapter can be directed to the Gaylord DNR Fisheries Division at 989-732-3541.