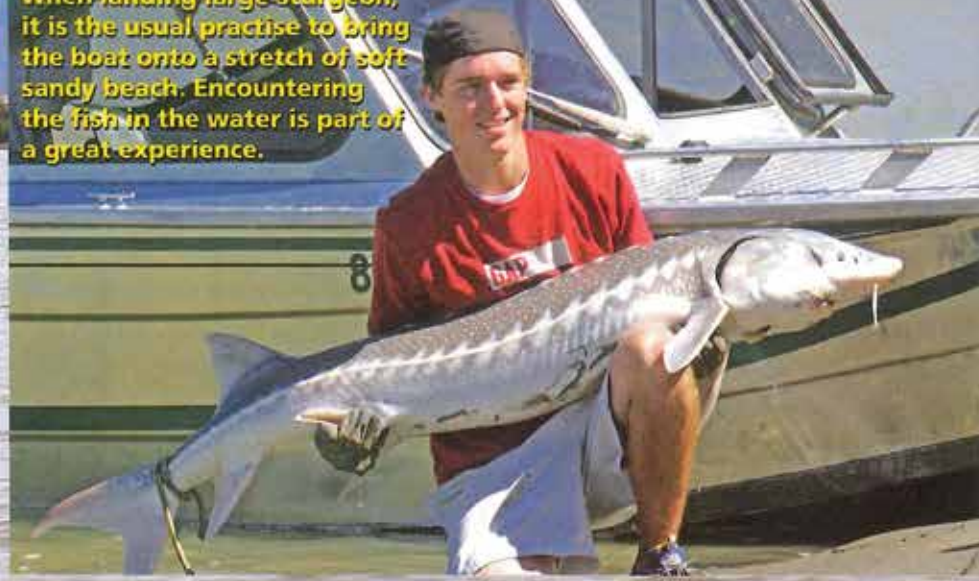
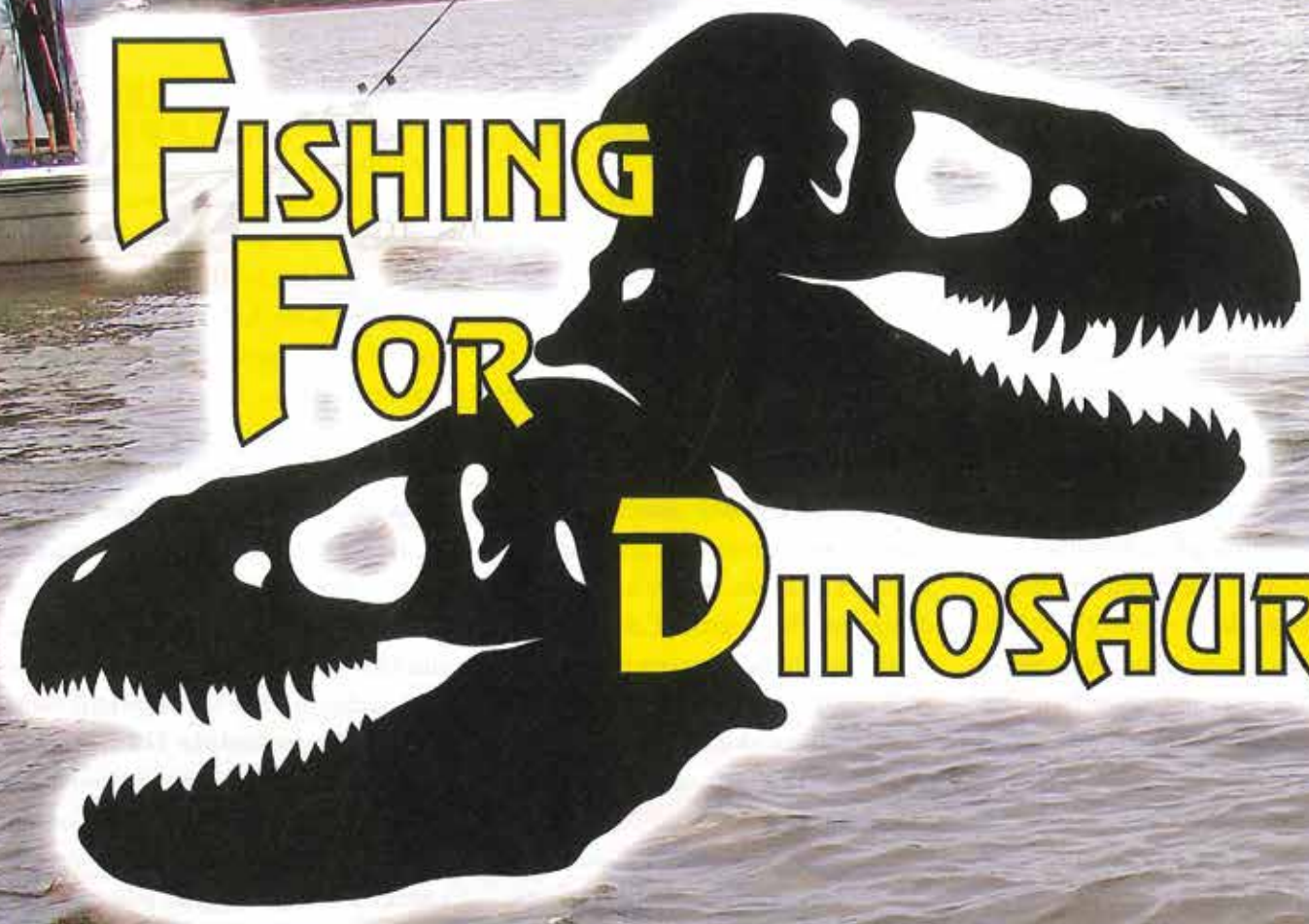


FISHING FOR DINOSAURS



**BY
RILEY LOVE**

Great sturgeon still swim in these waters. This 11 footer was last year's largest. She would certainly be well over 100 years old and weigh close to 400-pounds.

“Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in.” This thought from Henry David Thoreau’s musings on Walden Pond swirls in the cold morning air, over the Fraser River’s brown boiling water and up to Mount Chan, still purple in the early dawn’s light. The metaphor that connects the flow of the river to the passage of time is rooted deep in our psyche. Surely this must of occurred to Simon Fraser standing near this site in 1805 for he was a man in haste; one who sensed the magnetic pull of historical moment. He knew that the Lewis and Clark expedition was approaching from the south and he wished to be first to find a river route to the Pacific to claim for England. His name would be engraved in history by this action and the regional fur trade would become the dominion of the

North West company, his employer. The first nations aboriginals who occupied this land had welcomed Fraser with the cool hospitality of arrow fire. They had a different perspective on the course of time having no written heritage, only their story telling to pass along the precept of days gone by. For them time moved more slowly, the present felt expanded.

Thoreau’s profundity applies even more deeply in this early morning of expedition onto the British Columbia’s mightiest river. For this day we will come in touch with a history more antediluvian than the birth of this river itself or of the Costal Mountains rising about us. From at least the mid Cretaceous period, a creature has swam the oceans and rivers of the northern hemisphere. The age of primates is hardly noticeable on its timeline. They are the oldest and greatest of the fresh water

fishes, the venerable sturgeon.

The sturgeon’s earliest history was recently annotated by the discovery of a new fossil remain in the belly of a dinosaur. Mankind’s historic interface with the creature dates back to the first recordings of the Egyptian civilization. We have few records from such a distant past because of the tendency of lambskin and papyrus scrolls to rot away with humidity and time. Even wall paintings have not withstood the test of the passage of four millennium. However portraits of fishermen with sturgeon were carved in relief upon the walls of the Necropolis near the Sakkara pyramids, the oldest in Egypt. These date to 2,400 B.C.

Early Greek literature bears the sturgeon’s mark as its roe became popular as caviar. Alluded to in the writings of Aristotle, the root of that word means “cake of power” in ancient Persian. Others suggest

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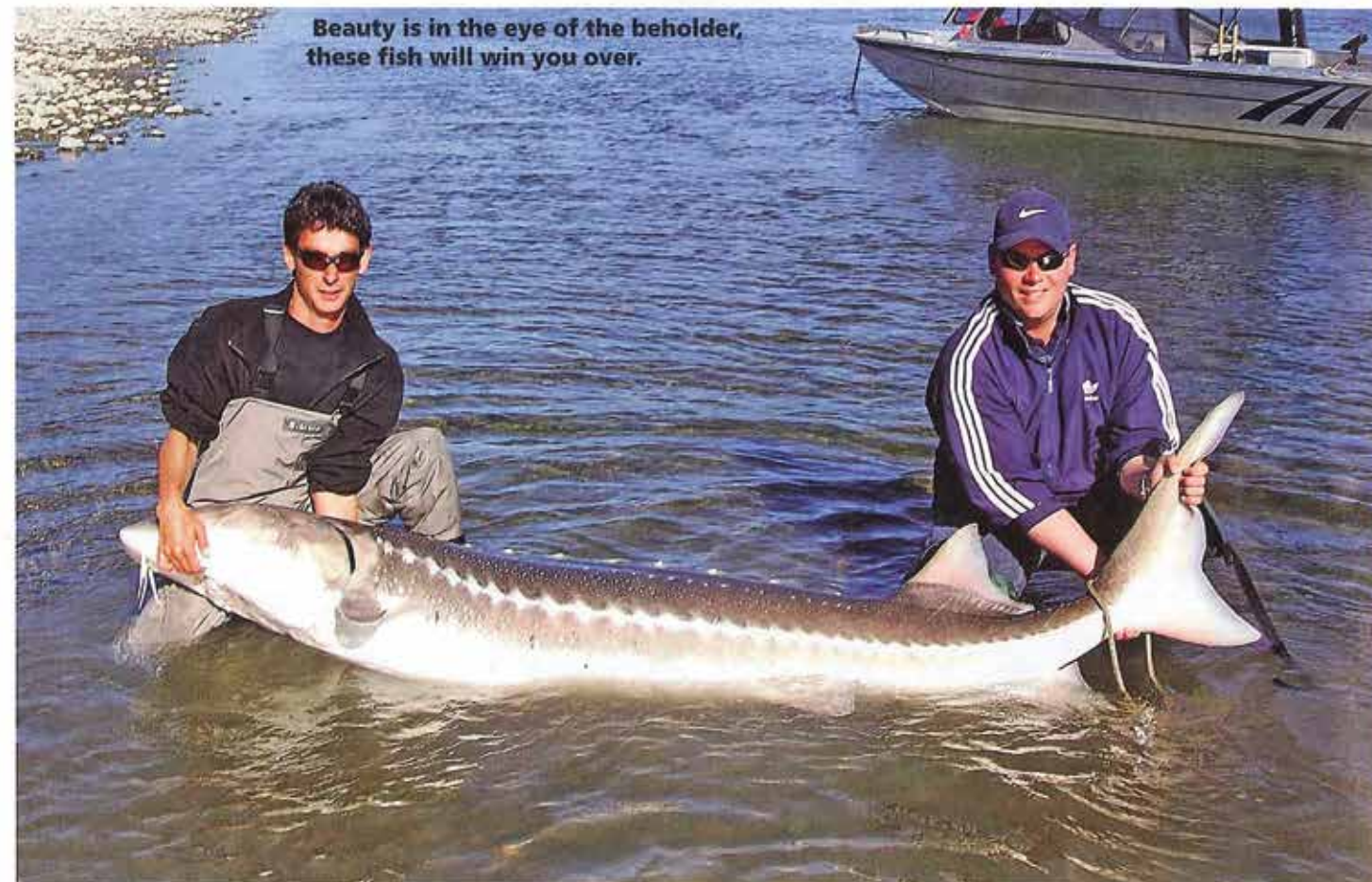
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the word originates from the word khavyar used by Genghis Khan’s grandson, Batu Khan.

Europeans held the sturgeon in high regard. During the 1320’s King Edward II made it a “royal fish,” which means that each one caught had to be offered to the monarch. This is attributed by at least one historian to Henry I some 150 years earlier. Technically this provision is still in force in England today.

Peter the Great of Russia appointed fifteen fishermen to keep his court stocked with sturgeon. He declared a similar “royal fish” edict in 1704 making “all fish catching undertake by the Great Tsar.” Chinese trade in the fish and its caviar dates in that literature to the 10th century.

In the new world the sturgeon

has not been so venerated. Some rivers of the eastern seaboard were teeming with large sturgeon. “No place affords more plenty of sturgeon,” wrote Captain John Smith of the Jamestown colony.

Early settlers took advantage of their abundance. They were used as minimally valued pig feed, fertilizer and cord wood. In the late 1800’s a half-ton white sturgeon was selling for twenty-five cents at the fish market in Oregon and caviar was served for free in New York bar rooms. At first the fishery seemed endless but, over a period of two decades it dwindled to around five percent of the original production of meat and caviar.

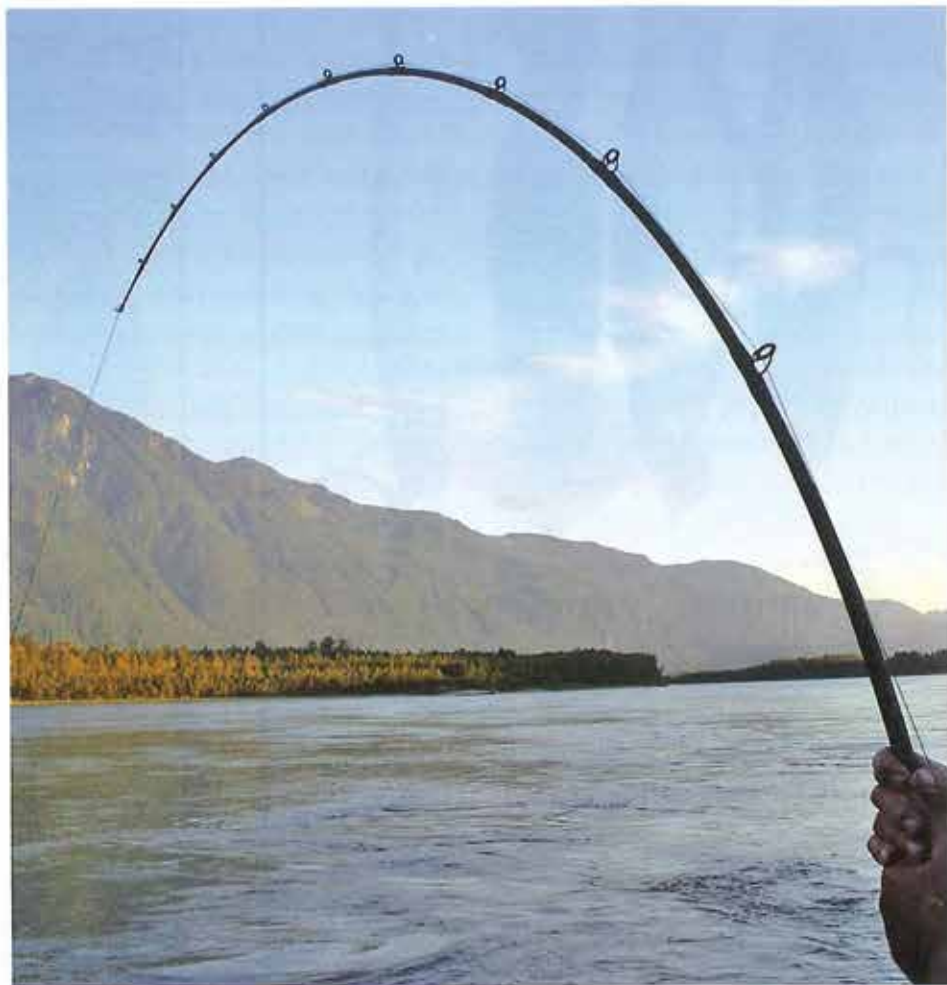
On the Fraser River, commercial fishing lead to a similar experience. In the early 1900’s large numbers of huge white sturgeon

were slaughtered and the fishery declined suddenly. The explanation lies in the time frame for reproduction of the animal. Although a fecund female may carry 15 percent of her body weight in roe, she doesn’t reach breeding maturity for 25 years, 15 years for a male. The mature female will only reproduce every four or five years under normal conditions and both sexes will demonstrate degeneration of their gonads if stressed. There are felt to be about 60,000 sturgeon now in the Fraser, with an overabundant population of juveniles mixed with a group of around 10 percent sexually mature adults. This reflects an ongoing recovery from the impact of commercial fishing. Harvest now is restricted to zero.

There are about 23 different

RIGHT: Home to migrating salmon and sturgeon, the mighty Fraser River rolls on to the sea. Time can pause a little while for the fisherman.

BELOW: Barbels and protractile mouths are evolutionary features that have led to the extraordinary success of these creatures.



sturgeon species in the world, all in the northern hemisphere and two species of its relative, the paddlefish. Opinion seems divided whether the largest is the beluga of Russia or the white sturgeon of the western Americas. There are many stories of giant sturgeon sighted as well as caught, but few formal verified measurements of the true Goliaths from the days before commercial fishing. The largest Russian sturgeon was reportedly 28 feet long and over 4,000 pounds. The 1893 World's

Fair in Chicago displayed a sturgeon from Astoria on the Columbia River which was said to weigh 2,000 pounds. The record claim for a white sturgeon on the Fraser River was in 1912 and was 20 feet long and weighed 1,800 pounds. The International Game Fish Association which performs the task of formal record keeping for all game fish lists the worlds record for white sturgeon as 468 pounds caught by Joey Pallotto III of Benicia, California in 1983. It would have been about 14 feet long. I was living in San Francisco at the time and remember this event in the news.

Although fishermen have been known to magnify the weight of their catch with the retelling of their stories, there have certainly been very large sturgeon encountered in the Pacific Northwest

over the last two centuries. This was prior to the era of commercial fishing when the largest of the fish were so prominently slain. Modern data suggests that sturgeon growth rates slow in response to environmental stresses and reduction in size of habitat. This offers some explanation as to why we don't currently encounter the giants of yore.

The species is very long lived, among the most of all fishes. Although no one knows for sure how long they may live, one 7.5-foot sturgeon which weighed 149 pounds was reliably aged at 71 years. The biggest one caught at the Fraser River Lodge last year was 11 feet long and was felt to be well over 100 years old.

Sturgeon are euryhaline which means freely capable of moving between fresh and saltwater envi-

ronments. The term anadromous applies to fish such as the sturgeon which migrates into freshwater rivers from the sea to spawn. The white sturgeon make this exodus into the Fraser twice per year.

And so we have come here on this cool summer morning, drinking in the coffee and the clear air and sensing the echoes of the past. The sun lightens the eastern sky as it has for the 200 million years of the sturgeons reign of earth, far longer than the history of this part of the North American continent when what is now British Columbia was itself an ancient sea.

The roar of the jet boats keep the mind framed in the modern moment of man and machine as we cross miles of brown swirling surface. We're heading for the deep flowing backwater holes where the big fish will linger. Almost all sub-



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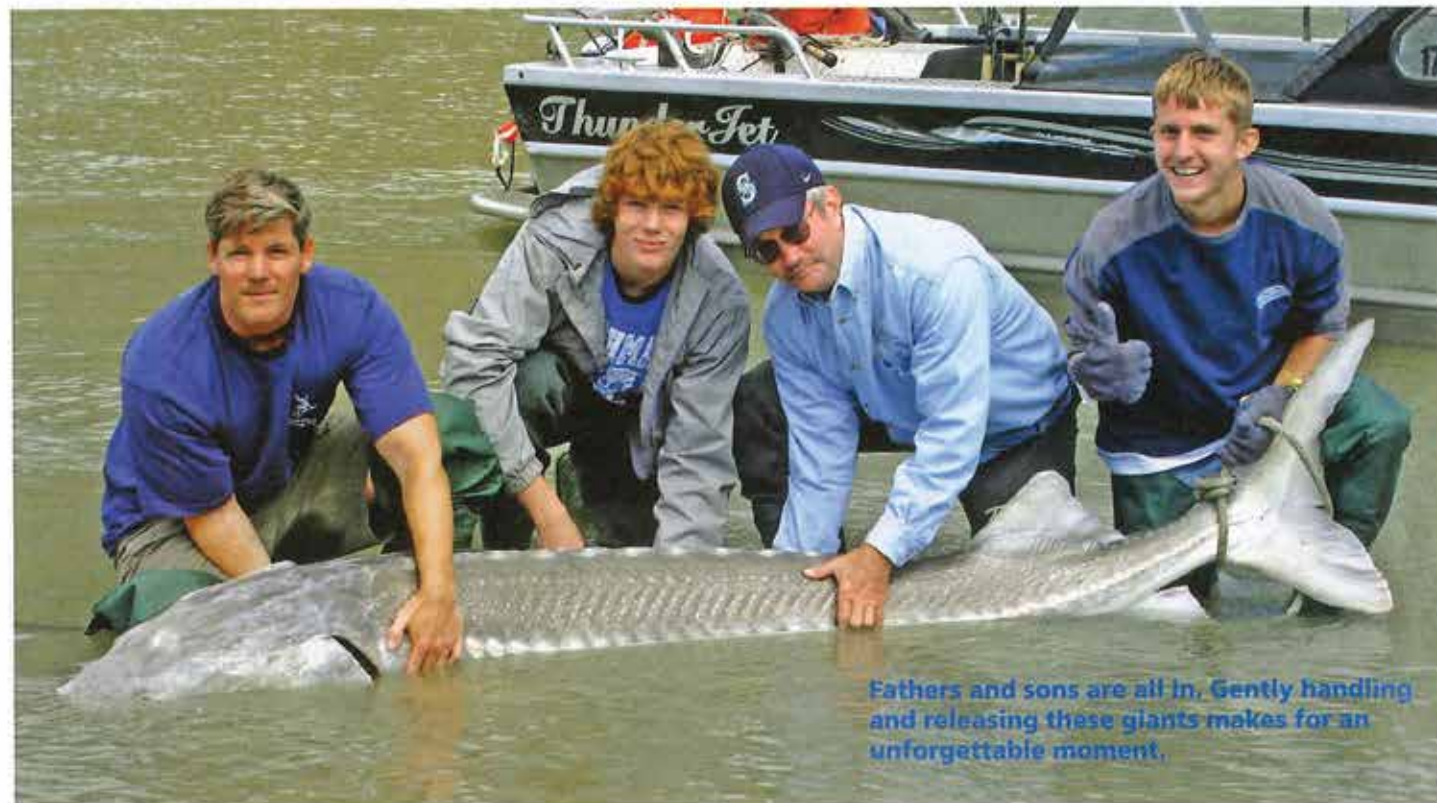
Hunter Love (right) with a sturgeon estimated at 95 pounds. This fish was swimming these waters about eight years before he was born.

species of sturgeon are predators and the white is no exception. We anchor up and start soaking baits. Depending on the month this could include salmon eggs or sperm, but now the main offering

is the local "squaw fish." These little morsels readily volunteer their services almost everywhere along the riverbank in exchange for a small baited hook.

Forty years of big game saltwater

sport fishing experience seldom leads one to a day of fishing for toothless bottom dwellers, but the rods on the back of the boat are of formidable heft and the reels are the size one is accustomed to for



Fathers and sons are all in. Gently handling and releasing these giants makes for an unforgettable moment.

big saltwater species. This gives a good feel to the outing. Then there is a gentle pull on one of the rods.

"Fish on!" The rod bends low and the reel screams aloud in a tone that says its bearings will be glowing red and turning to smoke if this keeps up. It's anchor up to give chase, you won't win a fight like this in a current without the freedom of mobility.

There is a special attribute in game fish which is manifest in these vivid moments of contact. It is a nobility of spirit that sets them apart. This is why we seek these moments and why the sky is bluer and the wind more freshly felt upon the face in these passages of time. Again and again the fish makes searing 100 yard runs, revealing a nature completely at odds with the image of a sluggish bottom dweller.

The surprises are far from over. A sturgeon the size of Yao Ming goes airborne behind the boat and then runs again. Jumping and tail walking, great displays of energy and spirit are encountered in the more modern game fish we adore. How provocative it is to find these attributes in the genetic forefather of the more contemporary species.

This sturgeon gives a fine accounting of himself but in the play's third act things are winding down and the strategy is to beach our friend along the riverbank for another sort of gentle contact. With jet boat's prow nudged into the dark sand it's out into the fish's environment to get more up close and personal. It proves a unique experience.

Sons and fathers alike are intrigued by the hands on experience for surely there is no creature that we have encountered quite like this. Evolved before the development of scales, the sturgeon's smooth hide which our hands stroke is punctuated by dermal

denticles called "scutes." These hearken back to a time when armored giants dominated the earth. There is a prominent rostrum or snout and suppleness of movement consistent with its cartilaginous skeleton. Beneath the head are barbels for sensing the environment and the most amazing mouth which is mounted on elastic jaws and can project far outward as a feeding tool. To say this fellow is extraordinary is a true understatement.

Yet there is more. Even the youngest among our group understands that this being is far older than the most senior of us here today. Cameras click. He is handled gently and with veneration and the moments spent in the association are deeply appreciated. With care he is directed back into his secret realm beneath the roiling brown surface. It is a morning well spent under the bluest of skies and the river flows on like the journey of time itself.

In his recent book *The Philosopher Fish: Sturgeon, Caviar and the Geography of Desire*, Richard Carey examines the idea that the sturgeon may be the single most valuable wildlife asset in the world. After the day's experience one understands why Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was inspired to transform the sturgeon into Nahma, "the king of fishes" in his epic poem *The Song of Hiawatha*.

Mankind developed into our current form about 250 thousand years ago. The sturgeon developed into his closer to 250 million. This species has more genes than we do. The grand stage of the future may contain a role for mankind, or perhaps not. Who can imagine where the river of time will carry the sturgeon over say, the next 100 million years or so. 🐟

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



RILEY LOVE is a physician and writer now residing in Kentucky. Some of his first steps brought him to the water's edge and he has been traveling the world to fish ever since. Beginning with the lakes and streams of the Midwest, he is part of a three generation tradition of discovering back country destinations for sport fishing on multiple continents. After fifty years of fishing travel his only goals are to go some place new and try something different again this year. He also has a home in Key Largo Florida where he regularly fishes and also scuba dives. He has published over two dozen articles on a variety of subjects but his chief interest is the fact and fiction of fishing. He is a member of the International Game Fish Association and The Billfish Foundation.