



This huge Atlantic sturgeon was captured around the turn of the last century in the Potomac River.  
(Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)

## **It's Time to Restore the Potomac River's Atlantic Sturgeon!**

**We, the undersigned Commissioners of the Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin, petition for restocking Atlantic Sturgeon into the Potomac River.**

**Dr. Hamid Karimi, Chair, Commissioner for the District of Columbia**  
**Robert van Laer Hartwell, Commissioner for Virginia**  
**Herbert M. Sachs, Commissioner for Maryland**  
**George W. Reiger, Federal Commissioner**

The Potomac River has 80+ pound blue catfish, striped bass nearly that size, and once held the world's record carp. The river is now famous for largemouth bass fishing and infamous for the introduced snakeheads. However, when we are talking Potomac River monarchs, true leviathans of the deep, we are talking about the magnificent Atlantic sturgeon. This fish can grow to more than 800 pounds, nearly 15 feet in length and live to 60 years old. It deserves the title King of the Potomac River Fishes.

Unfortunately, the last capture of an adult Potomac River Atlantic sturgeon occurred way back in 1970 and ongoing research and repopulation efforts have been put on hold by recent developments.

Sturgeon were once numerous and important commercial and recreational fish prized for both their meat and roe. They are ecologically important. As large bottom feeders, sturgeon help maintain bottom habitat, recycle nutrients and are important but lacking components of the Potomac and Chesapeake Bay ecosystems. They are sensitive to low dissolved oxygen and high temperatures, which contributed to their decline, but that makes them a good indicator species for water quality and measuring the success of bay and river restoration efforts. They take up to two decades to mature to spawning age and that makes it tough for their populations to recover.

From his diaries, George Washington "went a dragging for Sturgeon," referring to a type of fishing where a hook is dragged along the bottom to snag the fish, typically from a small skiff. Imagine George Washington, holding onto a line attached to a 200 lb sturgeon, being towed around the river experiencing a Potomac version of the whaler's "Nantucket sleigh ride." One can't help but wonder what he hollered (and would it have made Martha blush?).

Annual landings were reported in the hundreds of thousands of pounds. However, by the early 1900's, Atlantic sturgeon landings reflected only a remnant and dwindling population. The 1970 capture mentioned above was only preceded by one in 1948. Sadly, no young-of-year have been caught in the Potomac River after almost 60 years of trying.

Having survived natural onslaughts since the age of dinosaurs, the unkind assaults of mankind decimated this noble fish. The culprits, oft repeated for fishes, were overharvest, pollution, and loss of habitat. This year the Atlantic sturgeon officially went onto the Federal Endangered Species List, with many rivers and the Chesapeake Bay, including the Potomac River, designated as "distinct population segments."

There is some good news. Our rivers have largely recovered from pollution, the Potomac has excellent sturgeon habitat, and the Chesapeake Bay has had a harvest moratorium in place for decades.

The main problem is that the number of Atlantic sturgeon in the Potomac, or any part of the upper Chesapeake, is so small that expecting them to recover on their own, even with endangered species protection, is asking too much – there simply are not enough of them.

We need a sturgeon stocking program! There is much confidence that stocking efforts would help tremendously. The Maryland Department of Natural Resources, the University of Maryland, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the electric utility GenOn have been working for decades on sturgeon for the Potomac, collectively amassing hundreds of sturgeon in their facilities, some now up to 6 feet long. So why don't we stock them?

Because those efforts are on hold and may be terminated due to the endangered species designation. Most of the sturgeon came from non-Chesapeake river systems like the Hudson and concern about genetic mixing could restrict their use. If not used for stocking most would have to be destroyed. A few could be used for further research and education, but it is doubtful that any could go back to former systems after so many years in tanks and impoundments of Potomac and Chesapeake Bay water. Sadly, landfills might be their final stocking location.

If we can't stock them, the Potomac and the upper Chesapeake would be largely reliant upon any far-future surplus from a hopeful recovery of the small remnant population of Atlantic sturgeon recently discovered in the James River. That could take a very long time. "It could take centuries," said Steve Minkinen who heads the USFWS Maryland Fisheries Resource Office. An additional concern is that the James River sturgeon may be the offspring of only a few individuals - they may just be brothers, sister, aunts, uncles, or first cousins.

Trying to revive a population based upon limited genetic diversity is a bad idea. Increasing the gene pool is a more prudent course of action. A good example is the successful restoration of the Peregrine Falcon in the eastern United States which came about by using Peregrines imported from as far away as Europe.

We don't have to go to Europe in this case. We have captive Atlantic sturgeon from nearby U.S. rivers ready to stock. We could broaden the genetic pool and have Atlantic sturgeon back in the Potomac and many upper Bay rivers tomorrow.

A cooperative stocking program by Virginia, Maryland, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and GenOn should begin as soon as possible. Let Mother Nature continue to perform any necessary cull.

It will be a long-term project, much as the planting of walnut trees, begun so that future generations will fully enjoy the benefits.

However, if we stock the captive sturgeon at our disposal, having them back in the Potomac River is a benefit we could appreciate immediately.



This 170 pound, 7 foot long Atlantic sturgeon was the last known Potomac origin adult captured in the Potomac River, near Mason Neck, Fairfax County, Virginia on April 18, 1970, by brothers Joseph and John Harley. (Washington Post, Ken Feil).

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