

Backyard Briefs

A weekly column

by Judy Jessop, Nature Conservancy Volunteer

The Roanoke and the Cashie Rivers may provide one of the few healthy habitats that remain for an endangered fish called the short-nosed sturgeon.

If you have ever seen sturgeon you will long remember their appearance for they look like they came from the era of dinosaurs. They are brown to black on their backs with yellow gold sides and white on the belly. Unlike most fish they do not have scales, but instead possess large bony plates along their head, back and sides. They have shark-like tails and long snouts with four barbs around their toothless mouths. These adaptations serve them well for they are bottom feeders scurrying about like vacuum cleaners, living on invertebrates, like muscles and worms, as well as some vegetation.

Historically, short-nosed sturgeons were plentiful, inhabiting all the major rivers along the Atlantic Coast, from New Brunswick to Florida. Today however, studies indicate that there may be as few as 16 populations of these fish remaining in the rivers along this coast.

Adult sturgeons live at the mouths of rivers, in estuaries and in the ocean. When it is time to reproduce however, they take a long journey, up the river in which they were born, to spawn (or lay their eggs). Some have been recorded to travel more than 150 miles upstream. Dams blocking fish passage, dredging and river pollution are major causes for the decline of these fish. To complicate matters further, these fish take five to eight years to reach maturity before they can begin to reproduce and females only breed every three to five years.

These are not the only pressures however, for both Atlantic and short-nosed sturgeons have long been prized for their meat and caviar. As a result they have been exploited since colonist first came to North America; taken in large numbers until the mid 1900's when they were in danger of extinction. In 1973 short-nosed sturgeon received federal protection as an endangered species. Next week I will be telling you more about these unusual fish, where they have been found and what is being done to help them survive.