



Daniel Arluison, left, a M.Sc. candidate with UNB's biology department, holds a shortnose sturgeon and an Atlantic sturgeon is held by Jani Heiminien, a Ph.D. candidate with UNB's biology department. The photo was taken on the St. John River. Both fish were released after they were tagged with acoustic transmitters. PHOTO: SUBMITTED

Giant bottom-feeders in river are scary but harmless: experts

LAVERNE STEWART THE DAILY GLEANER

If you're on the St. John River and a giant creature swims by don't panic.

Tommi Linnansaar, a fish ecologist at the University of New Brunswick, says these are ancient fish that date back to the time of the dinosaurs.

They are sturgeon.

There are two species of these fish; the Atlantic sturgeon and the shortnose sturgeon.

"The Atlantic sturgeon can grow to sizes that would shock many people. It would scare you," he said.

A metre-and-a-half long with bony back plates, the Atlantic sturgeon is what many people would think of as the river monster, he said.

"It's the largest fish we have in the St. John River. It kind of looks like an armoured tank."

Its cousin, the shortnose sturgeon, is about 80 centimetres long, has armour-like plates on its back and is covered in a thick leathery skin that's olive-brown on the top, white on the bottom with a darker mottled chain

pattern running along the top of its head. While they look frightening, these are harmless fish, he said.

To Linnansaar, they're unique looking, even cute.

On a summer night in Fredericton when the river is still you may hear loud splashing sounds.

"Chances are it would be a sturgeon. For some reason they like to jump out of the water. They're a large fish so they make a large splash," he said.

Both species feed on worms, mussels and the like that live in the muddy river bottom. Having no teeth, they are unable to bite, unlike species such as pike or muskie which can cause serious damage to their prey.

The Atlantic sturgeon's life cycle depends on having access to the marine waters in the Bay of Fundy but it reproduces in fresh river water. The shortnose sturgeon prefers to spend the majority of its time in the river and will migrate along the river corridor as far up as the Mactaquac dam.

If it weren't for the dam, Linnansaar said, it's likely they would live further upriver.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that prior to the construction of the dam in 1967, sturgeon were found as far up river as Grand Falls, he said.

With the future of the Mactaquac dam under consideration, scientists at UNB want to know exactly where these fish spawn, Linnansaar said.

"Currently we don't know that. We have a masters student trying to find those very important spawning areas and describe the spawning conditions."

Today's sturgeon population is difficult to track. The study could take a long time because these fish can live for many decades.

"We don't have a very good handle on the numbers but shortnosed sturgeon are not considered to be at risk of being wiped out," he said.

There appears to be a better handle on how many Atlantic sturgeon there are in the river. Studies suggest the population is roughly 11,000 fish.

"Things are looking uncertain but it's not considered that either species are at the immediate brink of being wiped out," he said.