Symposium Proceedings
Kikenimatan wetan kitci nakitenimaik NÂME
STURGEON: Protection through Knowledge
First Peoples Pavilion, UQAT, Val-d'Or, February 23, 2011

Lake sturgeon is currently considered as a vulnerable species by the Québec government. At the national level, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) considers as "of special concern" the species' status in the area south of Hudson Bay and James Bay and estimates that the species is "threatened" in the Great Lakes and Upper St. Lawrence For many Aboriginal nations, lake sturgeon has a great cultural significance. In order to stimulate reflection on the best practices to protect lake sturgeon, the Kitcisakik Anicinapek community, in collaboration with the communities of Lac Simon and Long Point, organised a symposium that brought together nearly 100 people at the First Peoples Pavilion of the Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue (UQAT) on February23, 2011[1].

Under the theme *Kikenimatan wetan kitci nakitenimaik NÂME – Sturgeon: Protection through Knowledge*, the symposium was based on the premise that lake sturgeon is a little-known species and that sharing knowledge could help protecting the species. The symposium has allowed convening a broad diversity of participants from Québec and Ontario: members from many Aboriginal nations and communities, academic researchers, provincial and federal officials, industrial entrepreneurs and members of environmental organisations. More specifically, the symposium had the following objectives:

• Raise Aboriginal and non Aboriginal communities' awareness about the lake sturgeon's current situation and conservation issues;

• Underline the cultural significance of lake sturgeon for First Nations;

• Develop cooperation for a sustainable management of lake sturgeon populations;

• Share traditional and scientific knowledge;

• Explain each partner's roles and responsibilities in lake sturgeon protection;

• Explore and propose solutions for the species conservation.

Following the welcoming address by Adrienne Anichinapeo (Chief, Kitcisakik) and Jonathan Leclair (Kitcisakik Forest Committee), Louisa Papatie (Kitcisakik) recited a prayer to the Creator and asked Him to guide the symposium participants in their efforts to identify the best ways to protect *Nâme*.

[1] The symposium was made possible thanks to financial contributions from Environment Canada's Aboriginal Funds for Species at Risk, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, the Regional Board of Elected Officials of Abitibi-Témiscamingue (CRÉ), the Algonquin Anishnabeg Nation Tribal Council, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Wildlife, EACOM, Hydro-Québec and Mines Aurizon. The following organisations also collaborated in organising the symposium: Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue (UQAT), Canada Research Chair in Aboriginal Forestry, DIALOG Network, Val-d'Or Native Friendship Centre (VDNFC) and Aboriginal People Television Network (APTN).

The symposium opened with the viewing of a short film presenting "La légende de *Kinonjé*" (The legend of Kinonjé) as told in 1990 by late Salomon Papatie, then aged 70. This legend tells the story of *Kinonjé* (pike) and his son-in-law *Nâme* (sturgeon).

The first two speakers of the day were Ms. Monique Papatie (a retired teacher from Lac Simon) and Mr. Jimmy Hunter (involved in politics for more than 40 years, from Long Point), who both shared youth memories in relation to lake sturgeon. Ms. Papatie emphasised the importance of fishing sturgeon only for one's needs and not for selling caviar, which, in her view, is wasting (as the rest of the fish is often left unused). She also mentioned that the many forest cuts in the Ottawa River watershed contributed to changing the sturgeon's taste and reducing its nutritional value. Mr. Hunter reminded the audience that in the past, sturgeon was more abundant than it is today ("*At lake Simard, there were plenty of sturgeons, small and big, we could see their backs in the evening. Some were so big that they broke our nets*"). He also said with a mixture of irony and bitterness that there were no more sturgeons in "*sturgeon rapids*". Mr. Hunter concluded his presentation by emphasising the fact that "*We can blame many people for the sturgeon problem, even the catfish that eats the eggs, but we have this great responsibility to teach our youth how to protect sturgeon*".

Ms. Papatie and Mr. Hunter's presentations were followed by the viewing of an excerpt from the *Pachamama* program that presents an historical and culinary journey in different First Nations in Québec. In spring 2010, the film crew went to Kitcisakik to film the traditional way of cooking sturgeon. This program will be broadcasted on APTN (*Aboriginal Peoples Television Network*) next May 9 and 10, 2011.

The following presentation[2], on the lake sturgeon's role in Aboriginal communities, was given by Ms. Kimberley Tremblay, a biologist at the Anishinabek/Ontario Fisheries Resource Centre. Ms. Tremblay presented the results of a study conducted in collaboration with eight Aboriginal communities from Northern Ontario, which allowed documenting the sturgeon's spiritual, social, economic and ecological role. Lake sturgeon has always been very important in traditional aboriginal diet ("*smoked sturgeon is the best gift to make to friends*"), particularly in times of scarcity. In addition to eating the sturgeon's flesh, the oil drawn from it was used in traditional medicine and the gallbladder was used to make paint. The elders remember the large gatherings during which the people fished sturgeon. In the old days, sturgeon was not fished with a net, like it is today, but only with a snare or a spear. Increased commercial fishing at the end of the XIXth and beginning of the XXth century caused a collapse of sturgeon populations. Today, the elders who know the places where sturgeon can still be found refuse to share their knowledge, even with younger people, saying that they fear the last populations will be exterminated by their fault. Ms. Tremblay concluded her presentation by presenting the results of a spawning ground survey conducted at Smoothrock Lake in collaboration the Namaygoosisagagun First Nation.

The following speaker, Ms. Amandine Jean (Kitcisakik Forest Committee), presented a lake sturgeon population assessment project on the ancestral lands of the communities of Kitcisakik, Lac Simon and Long Point. This project was initiated as a response to a decrease in fishing success and the lack of respect for the Anicinape culture in relation to sturgeon. As an introduction to her presentation, Ms. Jean presented a short video produced by the Kitcisakik Recording Studio showing the work carried out in the first year (2009) of the sturgeon protection

[2] Most presentations are available at: http://www.kitcisakik.ca.

project. The project presented by Ms. Jean had three main objectives: (1) preserve and promote ancestral practices; (2) assess the status of sturgeon populations; and (3) propose adapted protection measures. Interviews were conducted with community members and fieldwork was carried out to validate the location of spawning grounds. The study allowed identifying possible solutions to two major issues. First, to reduce fishing pressure, it will be necessary to raise anglers' awareness, do some surveillance during the spawning season, fight against poaching, and establish a dialogue with Wildlife Protection Services. Band Councils will also need to adopt a code of practice. Indeed, although subsistence fishing is not a threat, certain community members give into the temptation to sell caviar on the black market. Secondly, in order to protect sensitive sectors, we need to improve our knowledge of the land (few spawning sites have been documented), collaborate with other resource users, limit access to spawning areas (by a better management of forest roads), create an aboriginal position of wildlife protection assistant, and identify new spawning grounds as sites of wildlife interest (SWI). In 2008, only 10 spawning grounds had been inventoried by MRNF for the whole Abitibi-Témiscamingue region. The project presented by Ms. Jean has allowed identifying 11 additional spawning grounds on a portion of Kitcisakik's territory.

The following presenter, Mr. Daniel Nadeau, biologist with MRNF and regional commercial fishing manager, drew up a general profile of the lake sturgeon populations of the Upper Ottawa River. Mr. Nadeau said that sturgeon is found everywhere in Abitibi-Témiscamingue, except in the south portion of Témiscamingue. Sturgeon starts reproducing at a late age (20 years old for males and 25 for females), does not reproduce every year and lays fewer eggs as compared with other species (for example: sturgeon = 7500 eggs / kg female, and walleye = 50,000 eggs / kg female). Habitat fragmentation by power dam construction is an important problem in the region. Furthermore, water level variations in the reservoirs may cause egg drying or washout. The commercial fishing peak has been reached more recently in Abitibi-Témiscamingue (1940-1960) than in Ontario (end of XIXth – beginning of XXth century). Mr. Nadeau said that a decimated population (such as sturgeon in the Upper Ottawa watershed) takes from two to four generations to rebuild, i.e. about 100 years for sturgeon. Mr. Nadeau also addressed the issue of poaching in spawning grounds for caviar trading, which is exacerbated by the fact that no external signs can allow differentiating males from females. Poachers must therefore kill the fish to identify its sex. Furthermore, only 15 % of mature females bear eggs.

The lake sturgeon protection measures provided for in Canada's Species at Risk Act (SARA) was then presented by Ms. Marthe Bérubé, biologist with Fisheries and Oceans Canada. According to Ms. Bérubé, SARA is intended to prevent extinction and support species rehabilitation. The current status of the Great Lakes and Upper St. Lawrence sturgeon populations, identified as UD8, is being assessed. Pursuant to its obligations under the Species at Risk Act (SARA), Fisheries and Oceans Canada must assess the possibility of registering this sturgeon population in Schedule 1 of the Act. In order to develop an informed recommendation, a rehabilitation program covering the whole territory must be prepared. In November 2010, a steering committee was set up for the whole Designatable Unit 8 (DU8) to develop this document. A representative from Kitcisakik sits on this committee.

The symposium went on with the viewing of a video titled "Rigodon de l'esturgeon" (Sturgeon Rigadoon), a song written by Charlie Penosway from Kitcisakik to accompany a sturgeon fishing activity. Afterwards, an excerpt from the Chic Choc 2 youth program (APTN, 2009) was

presented, in which the hosts Mélanie Napartuk and Christian Laveau discuss environmental protection with Rodérick Papatie, a young fisherman from Kitcisakik.

The two videos were followed by a joint presentation by Geneviève Tremblay, biologist with the Algonquin Anishnabeg Nation Tribal Council, and Linda Dwyer, forest engineer from Kitigan Zibi. Ms. Tremblay presented a progress report on the research on lake sturgeon conducted in several Aboriginal communities in Québec: Wendake (Huron-Wendat), Odanak (Abenaki), Kahnawake (Mohawk), Kitigan Zibi, Eagle Village, Kitcisakik and Pikogan (Anicinape). In all cases, the integration of traditional and scientific knowledge has allowed conducting population surveys, documenting knowledge and developing management and protection procedures. Ms. Tremblay made a more detailed presentation of a project carried out in Pikogan, where some 100 locations were obtained by telemetry on a portion of about 100 kilometres of the Harricana River, and more particularly on a section of about 30 kilometres at the mouth of Octave River. Ms. Dwyer then presented the research conducted in Kitigan Zibi. Over five years, more than 2500 locations by telemetry allowed demonstrating that sturgeon migrate annually, visit the same sites year after year and different individuals occupy different sites.

Marc Dunn and Lawrence Jimiken then presented the Niskamoon Corporation's grant program for fishery and environmental monitoring in the Cree territory. The program objectives are:

• to restore and strengthen fishing (traditional and commercial) through programs that meet the Cree communities' aspirations and needs;

• to support public health authorities in developing and delivering programs on risk management of human exposure to mercury contamination;

• to monitor sturgeon catch to ensure a sustainable harvesting rate.

According to Mr. Dunn, "*the key to sustainable use of resources is to continue using the resources*" in order to maintain a strong cultural connection to lake sturgeon.

Mr. Ted Moses, chairman of the Secretariat to the Cree Nation-Abitibi-Témiscamingue Economic Alliance and former Grand Chief of the Cree Nation presented the main results of a lake sturgeon stocking experiment in the EM1 reservoir (James Bay) by the Nemao firm on behalf of Niskamoon Corporation. In his introduction, Mr. Moses emphasised the fact that Hydro-Québec had denied the presence of sturgeon near the site of the future dam during the negotiation of the Nadoshtin Agreement. The project allowed (1) to catch a sufficient number of spawners (9 females and 27 males) in the Eastmain River to ensure the production of a sufficient amount of larvae; (2) the hatchery rearing of over 16,000 lake sturgeon larvae (3-4 cm) for stocking the Eastmain River to compensate for the catch of spawners; and (3), the rearing of 9000 sturgeons until they reached 9.5 cm long for stocking the Eastmain 1 reservoir (7000 individuals) and the Opinaka River (2000). The project allowed many Cree members to acquire experience and various skills both in the field and in the lab. Mr. Moses concluded his presentation by stating that "*when provided with appropriate resources and training, the Crees can obtain good results*".

The end of the afternoon was a plenary session with a panel made up of Charlie Papatie (Kitcisakik Forest Committee), Kimberley Tremblay (Anishinabek/Ontario Fisheries Resource Centre) and Daniel Nadeau (Québec Ministry of Natural Resources and Wildlife). The three

panelists said there were encouraged by the obvious mobilisation of the different actors, particularly the Aboriginal communities, regarding lake sturgeon management and protection. M. Papatie said that we need to reflect on this issue for the whole territory, and Ms. Tremblay added that the Ontario experience could be used in Québec since the problems are similar. A participant said that he was also happy to see an affirmed will to protect sturgeon, specifying however that the mere will is not sufficient and that we need to take action. Unfortunately, as he said, lake sturgeon does not have the same "high profile" as the walleye has in the eyes of MRNF. While Aboriginal communities say they are prepared to carry out broad scope survey projects, Mr. Nadeau was not able to confirm MRNF's collaboration to these projects for lack of human and financial resources.

Another participant mentioned that forest road bridges and culverts are too often located over spawning grounds and that this practice had to be changed. Someone else added that the dams built in the years 1940-1950 have not been subject to environmental impact assessments. He said, however, that it would not be too late for Hydro-Québec to conduct studies to document the impacts on spawning sites of water level fluctuations caused by opening and closing dams. Another person in the room mentioned that there should be a restricted period for forest operations near watercourses during the sturgeon spawning season. Ms. Tremblay mentioned that the same problems have been reported in Ontario. She added that the Aboriginal communities have the necessary knowledge to resolve the problems and governments must work in cooperation with the communities to sustainably protect and manage lake sturgeon. Mr. Papatie added that the communities are indeed able to identify the problems, but they lack the resources to resolve them. An Hydro-Québec representative in the audience mentioned that, for the time being, the government corporation's involvement in the sturgeon issue was limited to sitting on the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) and the *Comité des relations continues avec les communautés autochtones* (Committee on continuous relations with Aboriginal communities). For many people in attendance, it is a good start, but it is not sufficient. Someone mentioned that governments "*should put their money where their mouth is*" and used as an example the *Organisme de bassin versant du Témiscamingue* (Témiscamingue Watershed Committee) which benefits from an annual budget of $ 100,000 to manage a 35,000 km^2 area.

An Aboriginal community member said that "*it's not easy to report a poacher from our own community*". Employment and economic development opportunities are limited in the communities and it is understandable (but still reprehensible) that certain Aboriginal community members are tempted by poaching. A solution proposed by a participant was to involve Aboriginal people and train them to become land keepers and that they assist in monitoring sturgeon populations and raising the community members' awareness. This could also reduce potential conflicts with wildlife conservation officers. Ms. Tremblay mentioned that the Nipissing community has developed a fisheries management plan and hired a biologist and a technician to do the follow-up. Two individuals from the community have been trained and hired as conservation officers to enforce the rules of conduct enacted by the community. This type of community initiative could serve as an example elsewhere in Ontario and Québec.

An Aboriginal participant in the room mentioned that Aboriginal people in Québec and Ontario should "*start calling the shots or others will keep calling them for us*". In his opinion, the communities must be proactive and use networking to share knowledge, expertise and resources.

Of course, this does not prevent them from continuing to request more resources from federal and provincial governments.

To conclude the roundtable, Mr. Nadeau underlined the importance of "*combining traditional and scientific knowledge*". He said that, as a first step, MRNF was willing to work in collaboration with the Aboriginal communities and provide them with technical and scientific support. Mr. Papatie emphasised the fact that symposia like this one allowed for a transfer of knowledge and, as a result, certain people who may have committed reprehensible acts in the past for lack of necessary knowledge to make the right decisions would now be less inclined to re-offend. Ms. Tremblay wanted to conclude on a positive note by saying that "*the systems are still relatively healthy and there is still hope*".

To conclude the symposium, the chiefs of the communities of Kitcisakik, Lac Simon and Long Point signed a formal commitment to protect lake sturgeon (see appendix). This was a historic event, demonstrating the seriousness of the situation and the Aboriginal communities' clear will to work at preserving *Nâme*.

Thanks from *Nâme*