Above the Surface: Lifting Lake Sturgeon Conservation into Public View

By Dr. Anna George

Since 1998, the Tennessee Aquarium in Chattanooga, Tenn., has worked with its partners in the Southeast Lake Sturgeon Working Group to restore the species back to its native range in the Tennessee River. In that time, almost 200,000 captive-reared lake sturgeon have been reintroduced. However, monitoring fish in big rivers can be difficult. Recently, the Aquarium began implanting acoustic transmitters in some lake sturgeon and placed a network of stationary receivers in the river to log tagged fish. Thanks to support from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums’ (AZA) Conservation Grants Fund and the Disney Conservation Fund, the Aquarium was able to expand these monitoring and outreach efforts. There are now 57 tagged lake sturgeon in the river, and a new downstream receiver on the Aquarium’s River Gorge Explorer demonstrates the project on daily river cruises in downtown Chattanooga.

The Aquarium is using these tools to add to our knowledge of lake sturgeon distribution and movement. Currently, more fish are found upstream in the Tennessee River, closer to the release site in Knoxville, but downstream reservoirs have older and larger fish. Anglers in the region play a significant role as citizen scientists by helping monitor lake sturgeon throughout the 654-mile river. The Aquarium printed small cards about lake sturgeon to distribute with fishing license sales in Tennessee. These provide an image of a lake sturgeon, information about natural history and a link to a new website (http://icaughtone.org), created by partners at the University of Tennessee, to record sightings. There have been reports that some large fish gather in the tailwaters below dams each spring. It is hoped that Chickamauga Dam, just a few miles upstream from the Tennessee Aquarium, may eventually be a site for lake sturgeon spawning. However, as lake sturgeon are anywhere from 17 to 25 years old before reaching sexual maturity, it may be a little longer before the next generation of river giants arrives.

Dr. Anna George is the Director of the Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute.