



**SIERRA  
CLUB**

**IOWA CHAPTER**

## Pallid Sturgeon – Hanging in the Balance

At the time the dinosaurs roamed the planet, pallid sturgeon, or their close relatives, swam in the waters. After millions of years surviving on this planet, the pallid sturgeon could face extinction in our lifetime.

The pallid sturgeon are found in the Missouri River from Montana to Missouri; the Mississippi River south of Keokuk, Iowa; and sections of the Yellowstone, Arkansas, and Atchafalaya Rivers as well as the lower reaches of other large tributaries of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. In many of the tributaries of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, the pallid sturgeon is no longer living.



*Juvenile pallid sturgeon. Photo by U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service*

Since the mid 1960's the populations of pallid sturgeon have faced steep declines. In 1990 the pallid sturgeon was listed as an endangered species. To be placed on the endangered species list, a plant or animal is in danger of becoming extinct in all or a significant part of its range.

One of the main reasons for the decline in population numbers is that the rivers where the pallid sturgeon live have been channelized and dammed, which has changed the water flow, water temperatures, and the ability of the sturgeon to move up and down the rivers. Equally important is that the spawning areas have been destroyed and food sources have been reduced. The pallid sturgeon was also harvested, particularly for its caviar.



*Juvenile pallid sturgeon. Photo by U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service*

Pallid sturgeon have a flattened head in the shape of a spade, with a toothless mouth positioned under the head. Their skeletons are mostly made of cartilage instead of bone. They are able to use their fins in a crawling motion, which allows them to move on the bottoms of the rivers.

They are bottom dwelling and are adapted to living in muddy water. They grow slowly, however they are long-lived and can live over 60 years. They can grow up to 6 feet long and 80 pounds. Male pallid sturgeon

begin reproducing when they are five to nine years old, while the females begin reproducing when they are 7 to 15 years old. The females spawn every two to three years.

The Iowa Chapter supports the following policies so that the pallid sturgeon can continue to exist, to thrive, and to increase their numbers:

- Terminating barge traffic on the stretch of the Missouri River bordering Iowa. The barge traffic along Iowa's border has been significantly reduced from its historic levels.
- Restoring the natural course of the river and returning the natural flows of the Missouri River, including season variations, along Iowa's western border. This would alter the river to include sand bars, sand flats, and gravel bars. This would create slow-moving water loaded with organic material, which the pallid sturgeon relies on.
- Ensuring that water quality is improved so that harmful chemical pollutants are not present in the water.



*Adult pallid sturgeon. Photo by U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service*

It is now time to stop the barge traffic along Iowa's western border and to return the Missouri River to a more natural state.

## Sources

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