Review of : STATUS REVIEW OF ATLANTIC STURGEON

This report represents a major accomplishment in the consolidation of the most current information on the status of the Atlantic sturgeon populations and the various impediments to species recovery throughout its range. The authors are to be commended for their thoroughness and careful use of the best available data. In general, I found the report to be technically accurate in most sections; however, I am not equally familiar with the current status of each population reviewed.

With respect to the analytical methods used, I do have some concerns. With respect to recommendations regarding listing particular DPSs is based on extremely scant data – especially those dealing with mortality estimates of bycatch. Much of supporting analysis used in this portion of the document has extrapolated. I realize that the lack of data is not the focus – that the ESA mandates the use of the "best available data" but this can (and often does) lead to management policies that are simply not supported by the data. Still, I understand the need to error on the safe side with respect to protecting T&E species.

The most important part of this document are the implications it will have to the future recovery of Atlantic sturgeon populations. The creation of DPSs listed in the document is well grounded in science and I agree with the approaches used and the proposed groupings. I am deeply concerned however, with the management implications of elevating the ESA listing of 3 DPSs to "threatened status". The scientific rationale for this determination AND the interpretation of those data are somewhat suspect. For example, on page 117, that authors state, "the majority of the subpopulations show no signs of recover, and the current population unit sizes, suspected to be less that 300 spawners per year, are so low as to be considered unstable".

While I would not disagree that populations are much lower than they were historically, commercial fishing was unquestionably the primary cause of most population declines. The 1998 ASMFC moratorium has not been in effect long enough to really assess current population trends. Given the low intrinsic reproductive rate of Atlantic sturgeon, AND that we have had very few recent targeted studies to evaluate wild reproduction since the fisheries were closed I believe that the recommendation to list several populations as "threatened" is somewhat premature.

Having said that, however, the work represented in this document is important and impressive. The authors have thought obviously put an enormous amount of time and effort into this document and I'm certain it will be widely recognized as an important milestone in the conservation of Atlantic sturgeon population. I only urge the SRT to carefully consider the pros and cons of upgrading the ESA listings in their final revisions.

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