Native American Relationship With Sturgeon

***Caroline on camera statement:*** “Fish resources, such as sturgeon, have been used by Native American’s throughout history.”

***Her Question to viewer:*** “Makes you wonder… how have things have changed over the centuries, compared to today?”

**Voice Over – Caroline**

Archaeologists, the scientists who study past civilizations, believe that Native Americans inhabited Wisconsin shortly after the melting of the last continental glaciers about 13,000 years ago. Back then, mammoths, buffalo, giant beavers and other Ice Age creatures roamed across the landscape.

In many areas, these Native people left behind clues to their culture with stone artifacts, effigy mounds, and rock art in caves. From this evidence, scientists believe that the Native people lived off the land by hunting, fishing, farming and gathering natural foods. The largest of these American Indian populations in Wisconsin were the Menominee, who lived around the Fox River area.

Historically, the Menominee people farmed gardens of corn, beans and squash. They also relied on important aquatic food resources such as wild rice and fish. One of the more important fish species they harvested for food was the sturgeon. Because of their size, just one of the huge fish could feed a lot of people.

All creatures, including humans, get their food using something called an “optimum foraging strategy”. It simply means getting the most food with the least effort or risk. That usually means gathering whatever food source is most abundant and accessible at any given time and place.

For example, if Native people wanted to harvest acorns, they would search in oak forests during early fall when the acorns first drop from the trees. Waterfowl might be hunted during the heavy migrations of spring and fall. And fish such as the sturgeon would offer the greatest harvest opportunity during their spring spawning migration when they packed into the rivers.

One of the biggest concentrations of sturgeon in Wisconsin was in the Lake Winnebago system where the big fish would migrate up the Wolf River. They would swim upstream to spawn and concentrate below the rapids at Keshena Falls. There, the Menominee Indians would gather each spring to harvest the concentration of the giant fish. They would use spears to get the fish in the shallow water. After a long winter, that was a time for celebration of being able to feast on the abundant sturgeon while also welcoming all the plants and wildlife that would reappear in the spring.

But the traditional lifestyles of Native American people changed with the colonization and encroachment of European settlers. Besides displacing the Native tribes from their homelands and placing them on reservations, European diseases spread throughout the country and killed many Indians. Life on the reservation also presented more challenges as European settlers expanded their cities and towns across America.

One example was the construction of two dams on the Wolf River during the late 1800’s. Building these dams to supply electricity prevented fish such as sturgeon from swimming upstream to their traditional spawning grounds. Even though the Menominee Indians were given reservation lands that included their traditional sturgeon spawning site at Keshena Falls, the dams cut off their supply of sturgeon that they had depended upon for centuries.

So over 120 passed without the sturgeon being able to migrate upstream and return to their spawning site at Keshena Falls on the Menominee reservation. Though the dams couldn’t be removed, technology and cooperation between Native tribes and the government agencies finally began writing a new chapter in the story of the sturgeon and Menominee lands at Keshena Falls.

Using electro-fishing and modern science, they captured, transported and relocated many of the big sturgeon upstream near Keshena Falls. With miles of natural habitat, the transplanted sturgeon once again lived and successfully spawned in the Wolf River below the falls. And once again, the Menominee Indians had reason to celebrate the spring arrival of sturgeon at Keshena Falls. Part of the capture and relocation program is allowing harvesting of some of the fish to be used in their traditional sturgeon feast celebration. So in a way, it’s a blending of today’s fisheries science helping restore part of the long standing culture and history of the Menominee people.