



Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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Atlantic Sturgeon Technical Committee

Meeting Summary

Webinar
March 23, 2021

Technical Committee Members: Amanda Higgs (Chair, NY), Bill Post (SC), Brian Neilan (NJ), Chuck Stence (MD), Dave Secor (PRFC), Dewayne Fox (DE), Ellen Cosby (PRFC), Eric Hilton (VA), Eric Schneider (RI), Gail Wippelhauser (ME), Ian Park (DE), Kim McKown (NY), Luke Lyon (DC), Scott Smith (NC), Steve Minkkinen (USFWS), Tom Savoy (CT)

Staff: Emilie Franke (ASMFC), Katie Drew (ASMFC), Kristen Anstead (ASMFC)

Public: Adam Fox (UGA), Dave Cannistraro (MA fisherman), Fred Scharf (UNCW), Gayle Zydlewski (UMaine), Keith Dunton (Monmouth University), Marty Hamel (UGA), Rich Pendleton (NYDEC)

The Atlantic Sturgeon Technical Committee (TC) met via webinar on March 23, 2021, to discuss ageing of Atlantic sturgeon. The 2017 benchmark stock assessment for Atlantic sturgeon¹ included the following high-priority recommendation: *Collect DPS-specific age, growth, fecundity, and maturity information*. Some TC members and other sturgeon researchers along the coast have been collecting and/or processing Atlantic sturgeon age samples in recent years and have identified common challenges. The TC met to discuss these challenges and discuss the process for requesting an ASMFC ageing workshop for Atlantic sturgeon.

Dave Secor gave an overview presentation on ageing techniques using the primary fin spine and potential sources of error in the ageing process. In addition to the primary fin spines, TC members identified the secondary fin ray as another ageing structure. TC members noted NOAA Fisheries has recently been requiring use of the secondary fin ray as the ageing structure since there is some concern about sampling the primary fin spine, particularly from older fish. Some TC members noted challenges with using the secondary fin rays and the difficulty in getting reliable age estimates.

TC members and the public provided brief updates on recent Atlantic sturgeon ageing work in their state/organization as summarized in Table 1.

TC members discussed what the goals would be for a potential Atlantic sturgeon ageing workshop. TC members noted that developing a standardized ageing protocol for both fin spines and secondary fin rays would be useful since both structures are being used in current

¹ 2017 Atlantic Sturgeon Benchmark Stock Assessment and Peer Review Report
http://www.asmfc.org/uploads/file/59f8d5ebAtlSturgeonBenchmarkStockAssmt_PeerReviewReport_2017.pdf

research. Because Atlantic sturgeon is a protected species, researchers may not have a choice of which ageing structure they can use. There was discussion on comparing samples between rivers and regions (e.g., north and south along the coast). The TC also discussed potentially comparing the results from the different ageing structures, which would require paired samples for the workshop. **The TC agreed that they want to pursue an ageing workshop for sturgeon to address the ageing challenges identified by multiple states along the coast.**

Next steps for ageing: TC members from each state will nominate one person (either TC member or other researcher in that state) to represent their state as the workshop contact for Atlantic sturgeon ageing. ASMFC staff will coordinate with the contact list to discuss the potential ageing workshop in more detail and collect information on available ageing samples and data collection. The sturgeon ageing contacts will discuss the scope and format of the workshop (e.g., virtual or in-person).

Future TC discussions: TC members noted that vessel strikes, bycatch, and emerging offshore wind energy areas are important topics for the TC to discuss at future meetings.

Table 1. Updates on Atlantic sturgeon ageing and sample collection.

Maine	State is not doing ageing work for sturgeon. Researchers at University of Maine have samples and are doing some ageing for subadults; samples include both fin spines and fin rays.
Rhode Island	State is not doing ageing work for sturgeon.
Connecticut	State has collected samples for the last few years but sample size is limited because of protected species status; small sample size can be challenging; have ~250 samples for processing.
New York	State is sampling secondary fin rays under current permit and have issues with getting readable age results; expect lower sample size in the coming years; have Hudson River juvenile samples some subadult/adult samples from salvage fish in Long Island; have some paired samples available.
New Jersey	State is not doing ageing work for sturgeon; does have a few spine samples from salvage fish. Academic researchers may have samples available from past work.
Delaware	State has some sampling but relies on salvage fish for sample collection. Researchers at Delaware State University are not currently ageing but have whole fin samples from bycatch studies.

Maryland	State is not doing ageing work for sturgeon. Researchers at UMCES have old spine samples, primarily from Hudson River studies.
District of Columbia	DC is not doing ageing work for sturgeon; only encountered a few fish via acoustic tags.
Potomac River Fisheries Commission	Researchers at VCU have a permit for sturgeon research in the Potomac for 2021.
Virginia	Researchers from VCU have permit to collect spines from YOY and juveniles; planned work on juvenile growth rates in the James River.
North Carolina	State is not doing ageing work for sturgeon.
South Carolina	State has fin spine samples available and some limited secondary fin ray samples.
Georgia	Researchers at the University of Georgia are sampling secondary fin rays of juveniles; adult samples are available from past work.
USFWS	USFWS is not doing ageing work for sturgeon.