

On guard

Sometimes you have to get your hands dirty to stand up for our precious fish and wildlife

WHILE helping renovate a house recently, I looked on as my friend, a general contractor, rolled up his sleeves and proceeded to take out a portion of the foundation wall with a sledgehammer. The flying concrete and sweat, through the cloud of dust, was testament to his ferocity of purpose. At one point, I suggested he settle down a bit, but he just looked at me incredulously, his panting glare reminding me that if you want to get things done, you sometimes have to make some noise and kick up some dust.

This same friend frequents B.C.'s Squamish estuary in his canoe. Perhaps this is where he allows himself to settle down a bit. As a lifetime resident of Squamish, he knows the waters well, and he knows when something seems out of place. Coming across a large, dead fish that he can't readily identify is something out of place.

Most people would take note and carry on, but this particular fellow takes out concrete walls with sledgehammers, so he has something else in mind. Naturally, he bags the dead fish and sends it to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans for analysis. It's a good thing some people carry their ferocity of purpose over to environmental issues.

It turns out the fish is an *Acipenser transmontanus*, or white sturgeon. A bigger question, though, remains unanswered: was it a stray from another river system, such as the Fraser, or was it unique to the Squamish? Since there's no historical record of a white sturgeon population on the Squamish, the mystery persists. But if it turns out the river indeed harbours a significant population of the endangered fish, there could be implications for managing the estuary. My friend will no doubt make sure of that.

Consider the interesting timeline following his discovery of the dead sturgeon in 2004. The results of the DNA testing



seemed lost until they were finally passed on to him in the summer of 2006—just after he started appearing in the news, making noise over the need for a thorough cleanup of the estuary following an oil spill that summer. He was on the scene daily, watching and recording the cleanup effort, and I believe that an alert biologist saw an opportunity to help someone who cared enough to draw a line in the silt and sand.

In effect, my friend was saying there won't be a mess in my estuary, not on my watch. And with the discovery of a possible population of white sturgeon still fresh in his mind, he felt the need to advocate on behalf of the local marine

life. He would know if fish started turning up dead, and he wasn't afraid to get a bit messy to protect the waterway.

The oil spill was eventually cleaned up, but not necessarily to the satisfaction of the marine life. So to this day, at least one general contractor-canoeist continues to regularly monitor the situation. He looks for signs of oil, fish and bird carcasses, or anything else that suggests an assault on nature. I suspect he always has gum-

boots, rubber gloves and plastic bags close at hand. He's even gone so far as to seek out the best gear for catching sturgeon because someone from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans suggested that more recorded catches from the Squamish would provide very helpful data.

My friend's story got me to thinking about what's worth protecting in our natural world, and at what point people finally start to actually do something about it. While pondering this question, I discovered that the white sturgeon is the largest freshwater fish in North America; it can weigh more than 1,200 pounds, measure 18 feet in length and live for well over 100 years. Surely, this is a fish worthy of protection.

Thankfully, at least one hard-working Canadian with a day job is already answering the call. And I hope there will always be others ready to do exactly the same thing to help protect the fish and wildlife in their part of the country—roll up their sleeves, make some noise and kick up some dust.

Or simply paddle through an estuary to keep an eye on things. ♦

New Westminster, B.C., writer Gordon Morrison wrote about fishing photo memories in our Summer 2007 issue.

He was on the scene daily, watching the cleanup effort