A high-angle, top-down photograph of a person in a boat handling a large white sturgeon in a river. The person is wearing a tan jacket and a blue hat, and is leaning over the side of the boat, which is partially visible in the top right corner. The sturgeon is lying on its side in the water, with its long, pointed snout and rows of bony scutes visible. The water is dark and reflects the surrounding environment. In the bottom right corner, there are several large, smooth, rounded river stones. The overall scene is set in a natural, outdoor environment.

**RICK HANSEN**  
*and the*  
**FRASER RIVER'S**  
**WHITE STURGEON**

Sport, science and a lifetime of passion drive the preservation of British Columbia's iconic river dinosaurs

BY TIM MILNE



# Somewhere downstream of Chilliwack, Rick Hansen is energized and holding court.

The occasion is the Fraser River Sturgeon Conservation Society's (FRSCS) Sturgeon Challenge, and the crew aboard the Rick Hansen Foundation derby entry is hanging on the host's tall tales, technical talk and rhyme of the iconic white sturgeon.

Hansen's eyes light up when discussing the apex species of the Fraser River ecosystem. He grew up near this river and fished it as a child.

"My earliest memories have always been with my father and grandfather," says the 61-year-old who became a Canadian legend in the mid-'80s when he circled the world in his wheelchair on his Man In Motion World Tour. "It's been a big part of my life since an early age."

After a huge die-off of the species in 1993 to 1994, Hansen helped start the FRSCS in 1997 and remains its honorary chair. The sturgeon file is undoubtedly his baby.

"The best thing about sturgeon fishing is the actual fish themselves," Hansen says with a chuckle. "They have a face only a mother could love. But the more you get to know them the more beautiful they are."

The Fraser River white sturgeon is a genetically unique species and can reach monstrous size. Anglers from around the world try their hand at this catch-and-release fishery, just for a chance to hook a true river dinosaur. These prehistoric fish have survived two ice ages, can grow to six metres and weigh more than 600 kilograms. They are the largest and longest living freshwater species in North America, reaching ages up to 150 years. Quite a stat line.

On this cloudy October day the Hansen crew is on a sleek jet boat captained by Tony Nootebos, a longtime Hansen fishing aficionado, pro guide and owner of BC Sportfishing Group, an outfit that has made its home on the Fraser for almost 25 years. Hansen and Nootebos go back two decades and share a strong bond through the sturgeon fishery.

"He's a passionate fisherman that always puts his environmental surroundings first," says Nootebos. "His love and passion for sturgeon goes back to being a kid."

Also on board is Ben Hagkull, a wheelchair basketball athlete from Victoria who plays with Canada's U-23 team, his father Brad and longtime Hansen friend Ted Walkus, hereditary chief of the Wuikinuxv Nation in Rivers Inlet. Hansen works with Walkus, Duncanby Lodge owner Sid Keay and the Pacific Salmon Foundation in raising funds for the Percy Walkus Hatchery in Wuikinuxv, ensuring preservation of the prized Wannock River chinook.

Nootebos hooks a number of sturgeon in short order, with Ben and his father manning the rod and fighting battle-ready fish. The boat is full of belly laughs, chaotic fish fights and high fives. This is Hansen and Nootebos' environment and they truly enjoy sharing the experience.

"It was an awesome feeling catching my first sturgeon," the younger Hagkull says. "The cool part is that it hadn't been tagged yet. Rick explained that those are the most important sturgeon to catch as they can now gather more information about the population."

**BEFORE THERE WAS** a Rick Hansen Foundation, Order of Canada, Paralympics and Man in Motion World Tour, there was simply Rick Hansen—fisherman. A good BC kid born in Port Alberni with a love of fishing and all things outdoors, Hansen grew up in the sport. And in no small twist of irony, things took a dramatic turn after a day on the water at age 15.

"One day I was coming home from a fishing trip and got a ride in the back of a pickup," Hansen recalls. "It crashed, obviously broke my back and left me paralyzed. I thought my life was over because I didn't know what was possible."

Little did Hansen know at the time, he had reached his own crux moment. The amazing life journey he would begin was just on the horizon.

"Thanks to my family and getting back into fishing, I realized I could do things differently, accept some help, and re-engage in a lifestyle that was really a big part of my life," he says.

Nearly a decade after Man In Motion carried him through 34 countries and 40,000 kilometres, raising \$26 million for spinal cord research and awareness, Hansen turned his famous focus back to his beloved sturgeon.

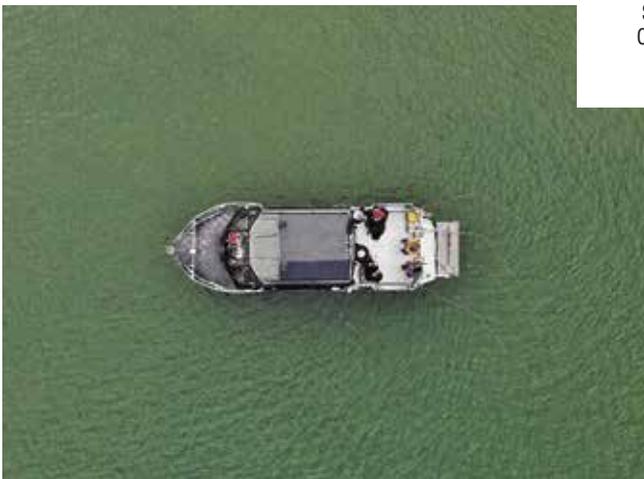
"I've been engaged and raised up and down the Fraser River and I've seen sturgeon. They speak to me in a powerful way," Hansen states. "I was really compelled to step up and form a sturgeon society and bring a group of passionate people from different sectors to get involved."

The FRSCS estimates 40,000 Fraser River white sturgeon reside in a 200-kilometre stretch of the Lower Fraser River from Hell's Gate to estuary. The population is far from historic levels, listed as endangered and in slight decline. The numbers, however, are strong enough to support a catch-and-release fishery critical in assessing stocks and obtaining scientific data.

"We started tagging 21 years ago and the majority of our data comes from the guide industry and a few recreational anglers," says John Rissling, ▶



Catching record sturgeon, both big and small, at the FRSCS Sturgeon Challenge.





conservation challenge director, long-time board member and a 19-year volunteer. “We educate members on the science of the tagging program, showing the importance of handling fish, how to scan tags and how to collect data.”

The program collects data from between 5,000 and 7,000 samples annually and allows the FRSCS to develop yearly models of population, distribution and mortality. All fish caught are scanned for coded pit tags, measured for length and girth and DNA samples are taken. If a fish hasn’t been tagged previously, a new glass-encased tag is inserted before the release.

“Without volunteer effort there’s no way we could have encountered 125,000 fish to date and put out 70,000 tags,” Hansen adds triumphantly. “We have a large number of tags over a large region and we understand the recapture rate. The scientific data acquired feeds a massive sturgeon database that can be analyzed every

year to provide a living model that’s updated, upgraded and even more sophisticated.”

Good science aside, ancient sturgeon have new-age environmental challenges. Changing river temperatures, salmon shortages, poaching and unsustainable fishing methods all play a role. But one can’t help feel that with stalwart citizen science, an enthusiastic angling community and leadership from the Man In Motion himself, sturgeon stand a fighting chance.

To survive ice ages and millions of years you need to be tough and resilient. White sturgeon sport those traits in spades.

**BACK ON SHORE** in Chilliwack, angling throngs from the day’s Sturgeon Challenge have congregated in a banquet hall for a dinner and awards gala. Hansen is the keynote speaker and, as usual, he inspires the crowd with energy and vision.

The Sturgeon Challenge raises over

\$100,000 and Team Rick Hansen Foundation wins a pair of awards—Most Fish for releasing 10 sturgeon and Smallest Fish for Ted Walkus’ 38-centimetre whopper.

“It’s fantastic when we see these juvenile fish coming in,” Hansen notes. “That means there’s been a successful spawn and they’ve survived. If they haven’t been tagged they become part of the database.”

Like many non-profit organizations, the FRSCS is cash-strapped and fuelled by a large and dedicated group of volunteers. There’s research, politics, lobbying and sturgeon stories to be told, but fundraising remains paramount. “The future is bright and we have an exciting plan to help sturgeon recover but we can’t do it alone. We need to build a team,” Hansen says with trademark enthusiasm.

As he sees it, that team includes every new angler who catches a sturgeon. And they tell that story. And that story spreads.

“Any time you bring someone new on the water and learn about sturgeon for the first time it’s a real thrill,” Hansen recalls. “It’s almost like revisiting your youth.”

Make no mistake about it, Rick Hansen is a busy man between his family and many commitments with his foundation and his slate of causes, he finds time to spread messages of inclusiveness, hope, conservation and passion. He’s a low-key big deal in all corners of British Columbia, from Rivers Inlet to the South Fraser and beyond.

“He has zero interest in using a resource without giving back,” Nootebos adds. “He loves to take people fishing and is the last to take a rod.”

Deep down, Hansen remains a fisherman. You see it in his eyes, his sharpened focus and his smile.

“When I go sturgeon fishing I get into a state. Everything disappears. I’m really knowing exactly what I need to connect with those fish. It’s a technique,” states Rick Hansen the angler.

“Fishing is one of the greatest pastimes. My whole life has been defined by my values, my mindset, the skills I’ve learned. And I’m so grateful for the privilege of fishing waters in British Columbia.” 🎣



A previously untagged seven-foot sturgeon on the Fraser River near Hope.