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People of the Sturgeon: Wisconsin's Love Affair with an Ancient Fish

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Wine and beer drinkers and the demand for high-grade caviar contributed largely to the near extinction of the sturgeon in the Great Lakes and the rivers and lakes of Wisconsin. By 1872, two German immigrants, Siemon and John Schact, were processing nearly 700,000 pounds of fish yearly. The Schacts processed sturgeon eggs to be used as caviar and isinglass made from the fish's swim bladder, which was used in manufacturing wine and beer.

The *People of the Sturgeon* is the story of the Lake Winnebago sturgeon, a giant fish that is well over a million years old and which has survived the onslaught of civilization in the Great Lakes area. It also the story of people: the Native Americans who relied on the sturgeon for centuries as a food source, the people who unwittingly destroyed the sturgeon fishery, and the people who have worked to save the sturgeon from extinction. In this book, the battle lines are clearly drawn: fish and game people viewed the sturgeon as belonging to all of the people of Wisconsin, while folks living on the shore of Lake Winnebago viewed the sturgeon as belonging to them exclusively.

The Menominee have been people of the sturgeon for thousands of years, and could rightly lay claim to a special relationship with the fish. What's more, they are good and knowledgeable conservationists. But, when the rivers flowing into the Menominee reservation were dammed, the spawning sturgeon were cut off from the Menominee. Today, the fish have returned to the Menominee due to state and federal efforts to plant sturgeon in area lakes.

Schmitt Kline, Bruch, and Binkowski successfully depict the intricate history of how environmental public policy is formulated and applied over time. For example, a governmental ban on sturgeon fishing did not stop people from taking sturgeon from Lake Winnebago or the Fox River. The pictures and stories of those people are a stark reminder that there is more to regulating human behavior than the written law.

After years of frustrated efforts to ban the harvest, the State of Wisconsin began to allow closely regulated spearing of sturgeon through the ice in 1931. That sport continues today and the flavor and spirit of that cold endeavor is well chronicled in this book. Also documented is the yearly early spring ritual known as "Fish Camp," wherein hundreds of volunteers stand guard over the spawning and vulnerable fish around the clock.

Richly illustrated with 210 black and white and color photographs and maps, *People of the Sturgeon* truly is an old love story between humans and this remarkable fish. Moreover, as research and conservation efforts improve the sturgeon's lot, it is a love story which is headed for a rosier future.

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