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## New hatchery for endangered white sturgeon opens on Nechako River

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*\$10-million facility will release as many as 12,000 fish each year*

A new hatchery to be built on the Nechako River is giving the endangered white sturgeon a chance at survival.

Construction will begin immediately on a conservation centre in Vanderhoof that will be owned and operated by the Freshwater Fisheries Society of B.C. It will cost approximately \$10-million to build and operate for the next decade.

The number of white sturgeon in the Nechako River has declined from 5,000 in the sixties to fewer than 300 today. Many people in the community blame the alarming drop on the construction of the Kenney dam, which was built on the river in the fifties.

"Where hydroelectric development has taken place around the world, sturgeon are impacted very significantly," Don Peterson, president of the Freshwater Fisheries Society of B.C., told The Globe and Mail on Thursday.

The fish have struggled to reproduce because of habitat changes, including extra silt in the river that is caused by the dam, Mr. Peterson said.

The genetically unique fish have been around since the time of the dinosaurs. They can grow to be six metres long and can weigh more than 600 kilograms. And they can live to be 100.

"They're iconic," Mr. Peterson said. "They're the largest freshwater fish in Canada, they're the top predator in the system and they're an indicator of environmental health."

John Rustad, the MLA for Nechako Lakes, said that if the community doesn't take action, it will not be able to save the species. "We need enough genetically unique adults to have breeding stock."

The new facility aims to release as many as 12,000 sturgeon into the river each year to help rebuild the population. The fish will be tagged to monitor their survival rate and behaviour.

A three-year pilot program has already been met with success, Mr. Rustad said. "We've already proved that this kind of project could be possible by releasing between 5,000 to 8,000 juvenile sturgeon a year using temporary facilities."

Similar programs on the Kootenay and Columbia rivers have also been successful, Mr. Peterson said.

However, he said the conservation centre is only a temporary solution. "We want to solve the habitat issue so the fish can return to a self-sustaining population, as they have been for thousands of years."