

Sauger

Sander canadensis

New York Status

Critically imperiled, species of greatest conservation need



Description

Sauger are elongate, cylindrical fish with large canine teeth and are similar in appearance to the closely related walleye. Unique characteristics include rows of distinct black spots on the spiny dorsal (back) fin, and three to four saddle-like dark blotches on light brown to olive colored sides. Sauger lack a dark spot at the bottom of the spiny dorsal (back) fin and a white blotch on the bottom of the caudal (tail) fin, which are characteristics of walleye. Sauger generally do not grow as large as walleye, averaging 10-18 inches and occasionally reaching 20 inches or more in length.

Life History

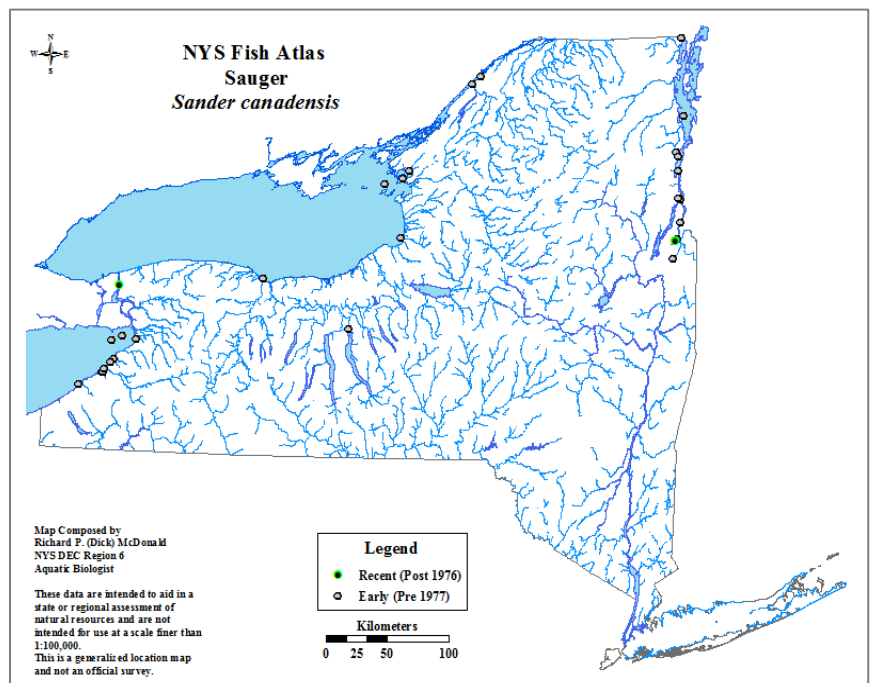
Sauger spawn in the spring when water temperatures reach the mid-40's to mid-50's. They typically spawn in slightly warmer water temperatures than walleye, but spawning may overlap and natural hybrids do sometimes occur. Sauger are highly selective of spawning sites and sometimes migrate long distances in late winter to find preferred locations. Spawning does occur along lake shorelines, but sauger typically prefer large turbid rivers with gravel/cobble substrates and moderate flow. Eggs are deposited into the gravel and hatch in 1 to 4 weeks, depending on water temperature. Young sauger grow rapidly and reach sexual maturity at 2 to 4 years old. The average lifespan is about 7 years, but is generally shorter in the southern part of their range and longer in the north. Adult sauger tend to feed on small fish and are most active during low light conditions (dawn and dusk).

Habitat

Sauger typically live in large turbid rivers and lakes. Adult sauger use off-channel habitats during spring and early summer periods of high flows, and generally return to main channel, deep, low velocity pool habitats with high turbidity during the summer and fall.

Distribution and Population Status

Sauger are widely distributed across central and eastern North America, but recently have been experiencing declines in the periphery of their range. In New York, sauger once existed in the Lake Erie, Lake Ontario, Oswego River, St Lawrence River and Lake Champlain watersheds. Of these, only the Lake Champlain population may still exist, but only one sauger has been documented there since the mid-



1990's (an adult female in 2010 from South Bay). The sauger populations nearest to New York are in the Ottawa River in Ontario, Lake Saint Pierre in Quebec, and the Allegheny River in Pennsylvania. The Allegheny River population is restricted from moving into the New York part of the watershed by the Kinzua Dam.

Management/Research

In 2013, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation implemented a Conservation Management Plan to restore sauger to their native watersheds. Initial restoration efforts are being directed towards the Allegheny River and Lake Champlain watersheds.

In the Allegheny watershed, a stocking program was initiated in 2014 to establish a self-sustaining population. Surveys have documented good growth and survival of stocked fish, which are encouraging signs for establishing the population. Fish will be stocked through 2018 and then a full evaluation will take place to determine the status of the population and guide future management.



A 20 inch female sauger collected from South Bay, Lake Champlain, 2010.

A stocking program is also being developed for Lake Champlain to restore the population there. Potential broodstock sources, methods and facilities for raising fish, and appropriate stocking details (numbers of fish needed, locations, etc.) are currently being assessed.

Fishing for sauger is prohibited in New York State during the restoration period, and efforts are being made to educate anglers on the importance of identifying and releasing sauger. Signs with this information have been distributed in angler access areas in the Allegheny watershed. Additional information on sauger and the restoration program in New York can be found at: <http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/92788.html>.



Chautauqua Hatchery fish culturist Brad Gruber stocking sauger fingerlings in the upper Allegheny Reservoir, 2016.



Region 9 fisheries technician Jim Zanett with a 14 inch sauger from the Allegheny reservoir, 2017.