

# STURGEON PAPER

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## THE OFFICIAL NARRATIVE

THE FOLLOWING TEXT IS DIRECTLY QUOTED FROM THE ORGEON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

He<sup>1</sup> is an Oregon icon – Herman<sup>2</sup>, the sturgeon, the state’s most famous fish.

Herman, at 10 ft. long and nearly 500 lbs., is not only one of Oregon’s most distinctive aquatic characters; some even consider him the unofficial state fish.<sup>3</sup>

And why not? Herman has a Facebook page, a line of Herman memorabilia, recently starred in a National Geographic documentary, made a music video with a famous rap musician, and for nearly 50 years was the undisputed star attraction at the Oregon State Fair.<sup>4</sup>

That was before getting his humongous body back and forth to the fair and keeping him healthy and safe while he was there became an issue. Just getting Herman onto a fish tanker was a big job. Hatchery workers had to corral him in his pond, lift him up on a wet blanket, carry him to the truck, and slide him in through the back gate of a fish tank mounted on the back of a truck. Upon arrival at the fairgrounds, someone had to climb into the tank to get Herman pointed at the back door so he could slide headfirst through the opening onto a wet blanket that was used once again like a sling to hoist him into the pond. Once in the pond, he laid around for 11 days and saw as many as 350,000 fair goers parade through the ODFW exhibit to gawk at him.

After many years of taking Herman to the fair, ODFW managers decided the ordeal was causing too much stress on him so the practice was stopped. No one responsible for his well-being regrets that decision. That was 1985. Yet 30 years later, people still remember Herman’s state fair days and continue to ask ODFW staff, “Where’s Herman?”

Steve Williams remembers that question well. Williams is the former number two man at ODFW’s fish division. He sometimes wore ODFW’s sturgeon costume at the state fair and fielded many a Herman-related question.

“Where’s Herman? ... There is no doubt in my mind that’s the most frequently asked question at the state fair,” said Williams.<sup>5</sup>

Not that there weren’t other important Herman-related questions, too, like, “Was Herman really kidnapped in the middle of the night from his viewing pond at Roaring River in 1983?” Yes he was. “Did thieves really mangle Herman so badly in a failed attempt to pull him out of his pond that workers spent months nursing him back to health so they could release him out in the Columbia?” Yes, that too is true. Sadly, even the story about the man who jumped into the pond with Herman and repeatedly stabbed him with a knife ... is true.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Herman and his friends have been assaulted on multiple occasions. In 1969, an unidentified assailant entered the sturgeon pool at Bonneville and stabbed five fish repeatedly. In 1980, a one of the sturgeon at Bonneville mysteriously disappeared and was believed stolen. In 1982, vandals took two sturgeons and inflicted a severe cut in another one’s back. In light of these attacks, hatchery workers responsible for taking care of Herman are guarded about any attempts to disturb him anymore.

Toward the end of Herman’s state fair days there was a concerted discussion in Salem at the time about building a permanent aquarium for him at the state fairgrounds. It would have been a grand facility. Features of the proposed \$500,000 aquarium included a 60,000-gallon tank, meandering stream, waterfalls, spawning ponds and a viewing window where visitors could get a close look at the big fish. However, that idea eventually fizzled.

In its place emerged another plan to build a first-class, fish-friendly sturgeon holding facility at Bonneville Hatchery next to the Columbia River near Cascade Locks. Oregon Wildlife, formerly known as the Oregon Wildlife Heritage Foundation, spearheaded a fund-raising campaign and raised more than \$350,000 toward the construction of what is now known as the Sturgeon Viewing and Interpretive Center, located at Bonneville Hatchery next to Bonneville Dam. The Sturgeon Center is one of Oregon’s top visitor attractions.

ODFW engineers designed the Sturgeon Center so it would preserve the historical architecture found at Bonneville Hatchery, mostly native stone and vegetation. Thanks to those efforts, Herman is now resting comfortably in the two-acre pond, feeding on fresh salmon, and doing swim-bys for tourists from all over the world who stop in by the tens of thousands to eagerly snap selfies with him to send to friends. It is one of the few places on the planet where people have the opportunity to gaze directly into the eyes of a fish that some believe predates man by millions of years, a modern day dinosaur.<sup>7</sup> The Sturgeon Center is situated under a forest canopy and has a

continuous flow of cool, fresh water.<sup>8</sup> A paved path partway around the pond provides easy access to a viewing platform where people can get a bird’s eye view of Herman and his companions – smaller sturgeon and some oversized trout. A covered kiosk just a few steps away has a large viewing window below the water’s surface that lets visitors get nose-to-nose with Herman. The site is accessible to the disabled and is open to the public year around free of charge.

So nowadays Herman is kicking back and enjoying the good life at Bonneville. He doesn’t have to hunt or scavenge for food in the bottom of the Columbia River anymore because hatchery technicians bring him a steady diet of fresh salmon. Eight smaller sturgeons – two 8-footers, a 7-footer, and four smaller sturgeons – also live in the pond and keep Herman company. Someday one of them may become the next Herman. That could be awhile, though, because even at age 77 the current Herman potentially has a couple more decades to reign as the state’s oldest and largest captive sturgeon. An older, smaller sturgeon viewing pond has approximately 21 sturgeons in it, in which all of them are less than four feet in length.

Some sturgeon live to be more than 100 years old<sup>9</sup> and grow to be twice as big as Herman, who is now approximately 11 feet long and weighs almost 500 pounds.

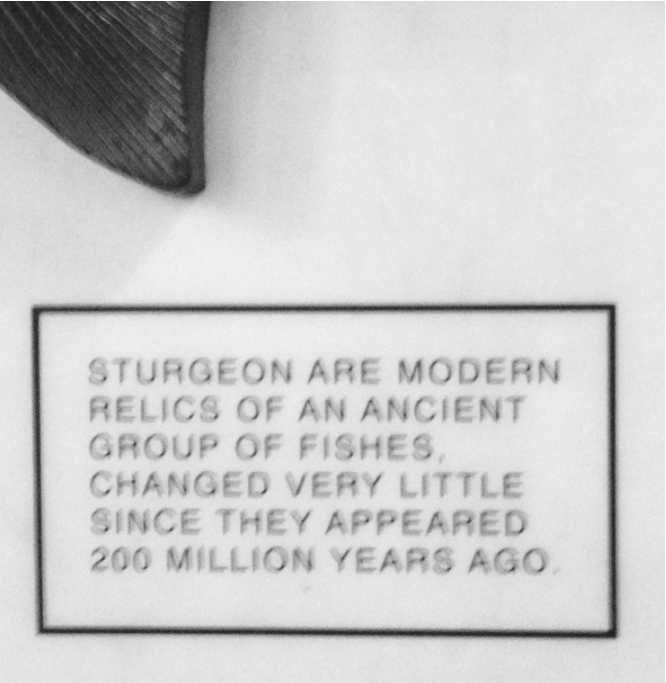
There are 23 species of sturgeon worldwide, seven of which that are found in North America with only two species (the white sturgeon, like Herman, and his green sturgeon cousin) found on the West Coast.

Herman comes from a long line of prehistoric bottom-feeders. So far this approach has proven an effective survival strategy for sturgeon, which evolved during the Jurassic Period of the Mesozoic Era (100-200 million years ago) when the dinosaurs were still walking the earth. Sturgeon have changed very little since then. They even look like part dinosaur. The prehistoric nature of the sturgeon recently captured the attention of rap music star Aesop Rock, who came to the Sturgeon Center at Bonneville to film a music video with Herman. So, yes, if you have heard Herman is a rock star – that, too, is true.

Though Herman is not coming back to the state fair, people who want to see him can easily do so. The Sturgeon Viewing and Interpretive Center at Bonneville is just 45 minutes east of Portland on highway I-84. It’s a great place to bring the family for a day’s outing.<sup>10</sup> There is abundant parking and admission is free. In addition to vising Herman and his sturgeon friends, visitors can take advantage of the hatchery’s other attractions such as the salmon rearing ponds, visitors’ centers and the spawning room, which is seasonal. Display ponds where people can feed rainbow trout are open year-around. The best time to view adult fall Chinook and Coho salmon is from August through November with spawning viewing in early September and late October.

The Bonneville Gift Shop is open year round and is owned and operated by Oregon Wildlife, a non-profit organization. Proceeds from the gift shop are used to benefit Oregon’s fish and wildlife. Neighboring Bonneville Dam has a visitor’s center and offers site tours for large groups.

Herman the Sturgeon, the mascot, will also be appearing at the 2015 Oregon State Fair on weekends and Labor Day.



Footnotes:

1. Herman is, in fact, a female white sturgeon.<sup>8</sup>

2. (the III) The current Herman is the third sturgeon to take the name of Herman. Much like the kindergarten hamster, the name and mantle of performing Herman is given to different fish over the years, as other sturgeon die (see below) or are stolen (see below).

3. The Official State Fish of Oregon is the Chinook Salmon.

4. Artists often struggle with the need for institutional recognition to validate their efforts, while simultaneously being opposed to many of their functions. Here we see the same thing: why a Facebook page makes anything valid is an important question, and one that should be asked in relationship to sturgeon. Creating social media presences for any non-internet using animal is always potentially problematic.

5. Where is Herman? She really only exists as a concept. As a slow-time testament to the strength, size, and potential of the Pacific-Northwest. Herman is not one fish, but all the fish, and her role has been a burden that makes her the target of scrutiny, violence, and even theft.

6. This story is shocking and true. It’s maybe worth pointing out that sturgeon occasionally do cause harm to humans, but this in no way can excuse or justify the intentional harming of these fish. Pat and Suzanne Crews first told me about the flying sturgeon problems they are having in Florida, where the fish, when triggered, actually jump out of the water and hit boaters.

7. What are our other modern-day walking dinosaurs? Misogyny? Colonialism? Globalism? Capital? Spectacle? Whose narrative is Herman (the construction) a part of, and what acts of vandalism, robbery, genocide, or colonial conquest is she complicit in? What can we learn from her about the banality of evil?

8. In any publication or conversation about the landscape and environment in America, it is important to acknowledge the First Nations, and the land that was stolen from them through the process of colonization and violent dislocation or destruction of natural resources. Specifically for this publication, the more than fourteen tribes that utilized the Columbia, including the Warm Springs, Yakama, Umatilla , and Nez Perce. All conversations about the land, and our use and effects on the environment, need to be framed within the history of North American colonialism.

9. What does time look like for a creature that is 100, or even 1,000 years old? Like our old growth forests, sturgeon have the abiltiy to capture the fascination of the public simply by living so much longer than humans. These fish bear witness to generations of human struggle, achievements, and failures.

10. I’ve been bringing artists to see the sturgeon for the past few years, always as a way to show them something weird. I don’t know if they were ever as struck by the strangeness as much as I was, but I felt it was important to try. I wanted to begin inviting people to have more intentional conversations about the sturgeon, and thus this publication was born. The sturgeon tanks serve as a point of departure for thinking about how we have shaped the world around us, and who we are in relationship to it.

Sturgeon Paper is a quarterly publication produced by Spencer Byrne-Seres for Sunday Painter Press.

Each issue reflects a conversation between Spencer and an invited guest while on a trip to see Herman. Sturgeon Paper focuses on land use, geography, and the environment, beginning with the Bonneville Dam Sturgeon Center as a point of departure.

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Excerpts from an interview with Roz Crews conducted at the Sturgeon Viewing Center.

SBS: People seem to really love Herman though, that’s part of why he’s so fascinating.

RC: Yeah, people’s love for Herman is a really interesting part of this place. I think it goes back to the idea of developing a sense of heritage in a place where you destroyed and stole other peoples’ heritage. You know what I mean?

SBS: Yeah.

RC: That lady next to the tank said to her children, “Isn’t it interesting that I saw Herman when I was a baby, and now you all are getting to see Herman?” But if you think back to 50 years ago Herman was only a young 45, and even then people were starting to forget the traumatic history of the place, and developing new narratives. I think Herman is like a cog in a new narrative developing system that is about erasing former trauma.

I think he’s just a pawn.

Excerpts from an interview with Roz Crews conducted at the Sturgeon Viewing Center.

SBS: The funny thing about the hatcheries is that they are here to “fix” the destruction of these fish populations that was brought about through Westward Expansion and conquest.

RC: Right.

SBS: And to grow something like 45 million fish a year? That’s just in Oregon hatcheries alone. This whole place seems to be about PR, the fact that these hatcheries are publicly visible and accessible, it’s an attempt to legitimize both the dams and the hatcheries, which are solutions to each other’s problems.

RC: Who do you think created Herman? Why? You say PR, public relations for whom?

SBS: I think the hatchery created Herman to make us feel better about the environment, and to reinforce the idea that the fish aren’t going to disappear entirely. But these hatcheries really make me think about just how much effect we have on the environment. I’m always fascinated by the fact that basically all of the forests we see have been logged at least once. 95% of all the forests in the NW have been logged. So that means that all of these trees have been planted and therefore affected by humans, and the same goes for the rivers. All of the fish in them are controlled through these industries and these concrete tanks where they just grow factory style: millions and millions of fish.

RC: I think you should become an activist.

SBS: Ugh, I wonder if that is what Sturgeon Paper might start for me...

RC: Spencer’s activism?

SBS: What does this place remind you of, what does it make you feel like?

RC: It feels like half zoo, half natural park, and half some weird tokenized form of nature that you’re talking about. This hatchery wants to make you think, “Oh don’t worry, you can still visit the animals. And we’re also repairing some of the damage we did with our dams, by raising fish and giving them back to the river.” I wonder what a Native person thinks of these hatcheries. The hatcheries become a kind of freaky theme park about a place that used to exist naturally. Even though it’s way more natural than Disney World, there’s less cement and plastic, it’s still sort of the same thing.

SBS: These fake waterfalls, strange pools, it’s all so odd... And then there’s Herman.

RC: Who we love...

SBS: The face and the name of the system.

RC: It’s really clear in the tank today.

SBS: It is, no rain.

