

Caviar on the
HUDSON

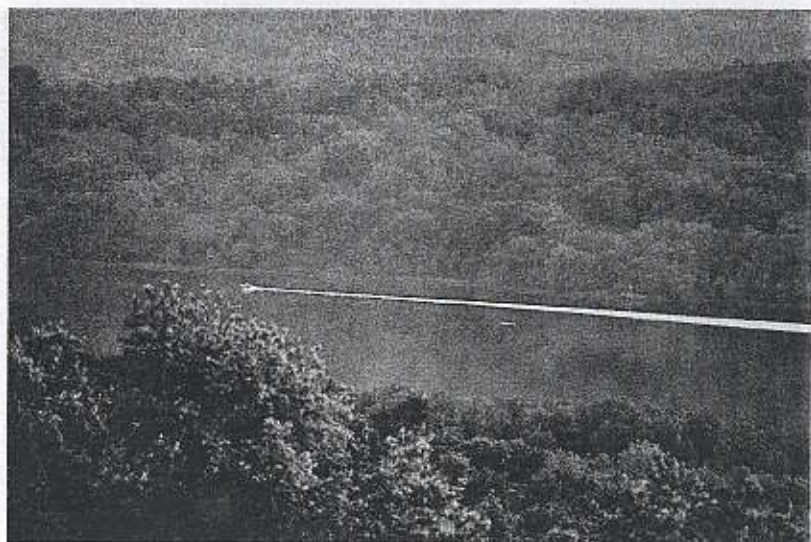
BY MARGUERITE HOLLOWAY

Fishing for Atlantic sturgeon is an old tradition on the East Coast. As the prehistoric fish made their way from the ocean into rivers to spawn each spring, the past century's fishermen would alight on the schools of mammoth fish, which could be as long as 12 feet and weigh 600 pounds. Some netted the sturgeon; others trawled for them with great grappling hooks. At first a source of cheap meat, sturgeon fishing became more lucrative as the caviar industry flourished. In the mid 1800s, 7 million pounds of sturgeon were being caught each year on the Atlantic seaboard. Caviar became as common as cocktail mix in bars along the Hudson River, and sturgeon steak was called Albany beef. By 1890, however, the catch had plummeted to 1 million pounds, and it dwindled steadily from there. Within 20 years the fishermen had outdone the ancient fish.

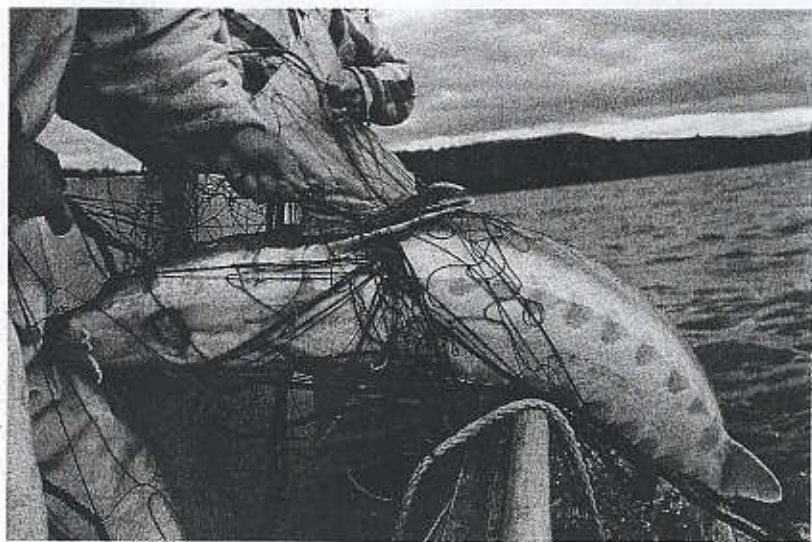
Now, after a century of relative quiescence, the fishery in the Hudson River has been revived. And after a hiatus of a generation or more, some fishermen have had to relearn their craft. Everett Nack, who has fished and trapped along the Hudson for more than 40 years, got the hang of netting the smaller shortnose sturgeon in the 1970s, when he was hired by a biologist to tag these elusive endangered fish. Several years ago Nack began trying his hand at bringing in the more daunting Atlantic sturgeon.

On a rainy day last May Nack and his crew drifted downriver, awaiting slack tide. The two 500-foot-long, eight-foot-deep

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICARDO AZOURY



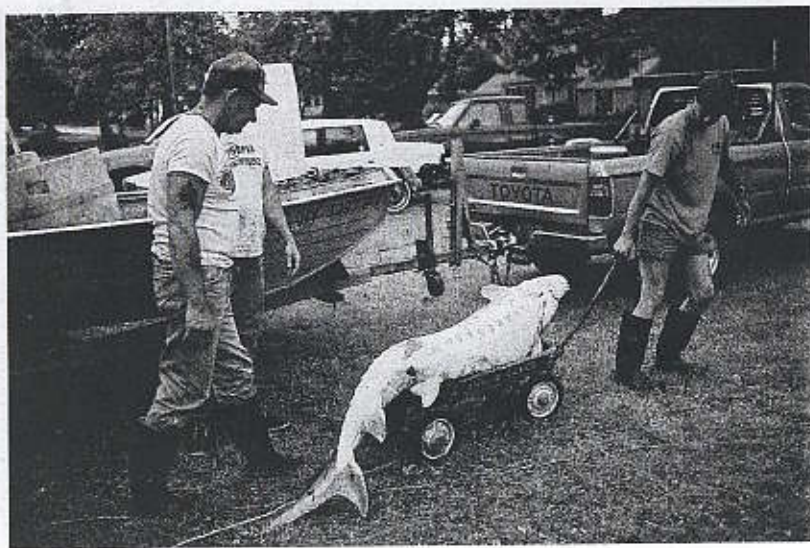
The Hudson River, near Hudson, New York, where Atlantic sturgeon spawn.



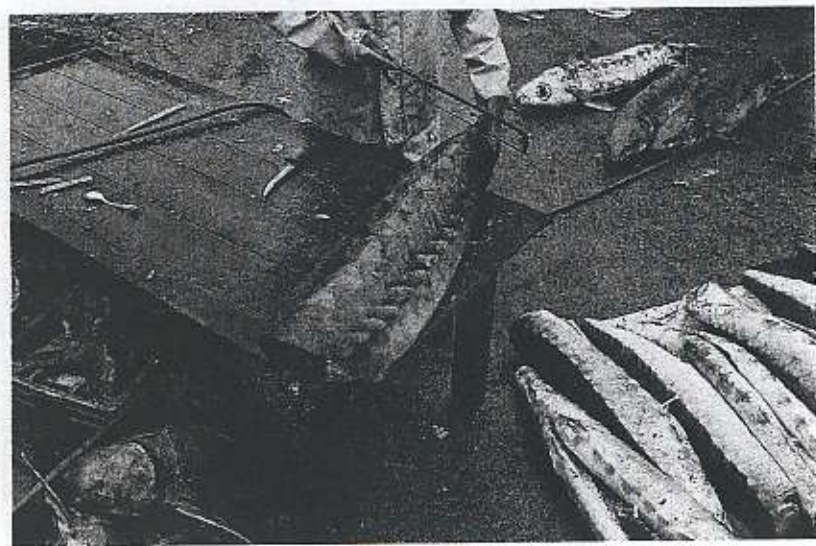
A netted sturgeon is hauled aboard Everett Nack's fishing boat.



A sturgeon is checked for possible transfer to a Fish and Wildlife hatchery.



The catch is brought—any way possible—to Nack's backyard for processing.



Male sturgeon are sold only for meat, which is firmer than that of females.



Everett Nack (left) and his son Steven work to remove the roe before it spoils.

anchor nets have to be set at dead calm for 20 minutes when the tide has stopped and is about to turn. That gray, unpromising afternoon Nack pulled in the second-largest fish he had ever caught. Weighing 280 pounds, the seven-and-a-half-foot female Atlantic sturgeon came quietly out of the cold Hudson carrying several thousand dollars' worth of caviar.

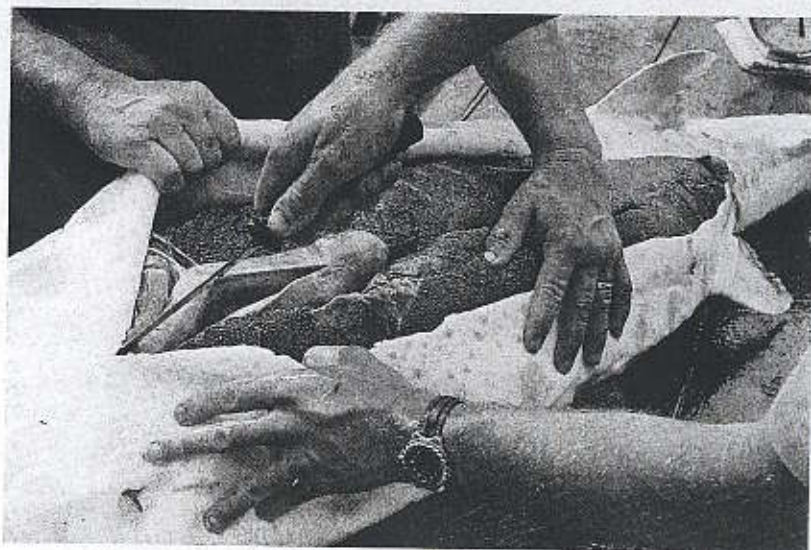
By the end of the season, Nack and his team had caught about 10 cows and 50 males and had processed about 120 pounds of roe. The eggs—strained and salted according to a technique Nack learned from a caviar dealer and sturgeon fisherman in Georgia—were sold for as much as \$100 a pound. Nack keeps the secrets of salting to himself. But he says, "You can spoil the whole batch if you're not careful. Each fish is very different, and it depends on how close to spawning they are. You can get them too salty. If you don't get them salty enough, they won't keep. If you handle them too much, the eggs will explode and turn to putty. It's almost like making wine. If you are lucky and real careful you get a real good batch."

A half-dozen other sturgeon fishermen also fish the northern reaches of the Hudson River. Some of them have turned to high-tech equipment, using electronic fish finders to scan the river bottom for deep pools where sturgeon may be hidden. It is not clear that precisely locating these pools has given these fishermen any advantage; the art of setting the net seems equally important. South along the Hudson, at Haverstraw Bay, only an hour north of New York City, a few traditional fishermen have been catching sturgeon

and processing small volumes of roe for the past 20 years.

The recent success of the river's fishermen suggests that the population of Atlantic sturgeon in the Hudson River may be the largest along the East Coast. Nevertheless, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) is being cautious. In 1993 the season, which was previously open, was limited to one month. The agency's concern was prompted in part by federal regulations seeking to protect East Coast sturgeon populations. Several states have closed their sturgeon fisheries altogether. In modern times, reports of Atlantic sturgeon landings have never risen above 200,000 pounds a year (unofficial landings may have been much higher). The Hudson's share of that take was documented at 40,000 pounds in 1991. Federal officials are concerned that the fish will be increasingly in demand with the Russian caviar industry foundering as pollution, poaching, and political upheaval threaten the Caspian Sea fishery.

The Hudson River fishermen, who lost a profitable striped bass fishery in 1976 to PCB contamination of the river by General Electric, believe the DEC is being overly careful. Their six-week shad fishery barely covers expenses, and they see the Atlantic sturgeon as the only well-paying option left. "Are we going to wipe the sturgeon out of the river?" asks Nack. "Well, you can only net for twenty minutes at dead slack tide every six hours. And we can't fish at night because it's pretty dangerous with the ships and tugboats. So under those circumstances, I can't really see how you can affect the sturgeon population." ❖



The mass of glistening eggs must be removed carefully so the eggs don't burst.



Transforming roe into "black gold" begins with gentle screening.



Hansen Caviar Company, in New Jersey, packages some of the Hudson harvest.

RICARDO AZOURY/SABA PRESS