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**For Immediate Release
June 01, 2016**

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CRIME STOPPERS AND GREAT LAKES FISHERY COMMISSION TAKE STEPS TO STOP ILLEGAL LAKE STURGEON TRADE

The Great Lakes Fishery Commission, the Ontario Association of Crime Stoppers and Crime Stoppers USA will be unveiling their co-venture on *Saturday, June 4th, 2016*.

The official announcement will be made simultaneously at the Blue Water Sturgeon Festival in Port Huron, Michigan and at the Annual Ontario Crime Stoppers Training Conference in Sudbury, Ontario. This initiative is aimed at educating and encouraging individuals to help put an end to this shocking crime. It is a fact that the trafficking of wildlife is comparable at a global scale with the illegal trade in guns, drugs, and people.

Lake sturgeon (*Acipenser fulvescens*) are often referred to as living fossils because they belong to a prehistoric family of fish that has survived for more than 60 million years. They can grow quite large (up to 185 kg/400 lbs) and are also one of the longest living fish in existence. One lake sturgeon was determined to be 154 years old!

The largest proportion of the global population lies in the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River basin areas where numerous management and recovery plans are in place among and between states and provinces sharing boundary waters. Commercial harvest of lake sturgeon is prohibited in all U.S. waters and strictly managed in Canadian waters with closed seasons, size limits and gear restrictions. Well-regulated sport fisheries occur throughout the northern part of their range in the U.S. and Canada.

Several species of sturgeon around the world, including lake sturgeon, have become a species at risk due to the destruction of their natural habitat and to intensive illegal trade, locally and internationally, of their meat, caviar and other products derived from the species. According to experts the number of sturgeon caught illegally is equal to or exceeds the number caught legally.

To protect lake sturgeon from extinction, many countries have joined the Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES), which has identified lake sturgeon as a species prone to extinction if illegal harvest, transport and trade is not controlled. To help control trade, lake sturgeon are considered a species at risk in Ontario and are listed as threatened or endangered in certain jurisdictions of the United States. These designations, and the regulations that come with them, are designed to protect lake sturgeon from over-fishing and the illegal commercialization of their highly prized caviar and meat.

"The illegal trade of wildlife is the fourth most lucrative criminal activity world-wide, only exceeded by the trade of narcotics, counterfeiting and human trafficking", says David Forster, President of the Ontario Association of Crime Stoppers and the elected Canadian Representative to Crime Stoppers International. "Crime Stopper programs throughout Ontario, Canada and the world are assisting law enforcement by engaging the community to anonymously report these illegal activities to Crime Stoppers."

"The Great Lakes Fishery Commission knows that sustainable fisheries are impossible without vigorous law enforcement," said Robert Hecky, chair of the Commission. "Nothing illustrates that connection better than the dire situation we find ourselves in with lake sturgeon. Today, we are at a crossroads and decisions that people make to break the chain of illegal activities will decide the fate of this species. I believe people, given the information, will do the right thing."

The Ontario Association of Crime Stoppers, Crime Stoppers USA and the Great Lakes Fishery Commission, encourage people to get involved and help prevent lake sturgeon poaching and illegal trade. You can help by:

1. Knowing where products are coming from and asking questions, such as being aware of where your caviar and meat came from to ensure it was legally captured and harvested.
2. Reporting illegal activity. If you suspect poaching or illegal selling of wildlife, call Crime Stoppers toll-free any time anonymously at 1-800-222-TIPS(8477) or call the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry tip line at 1-877-847-7667 or any local natural resources tip line in your area.
3. Spreading the word. Many people don't realize that in general taking animals from the wild and selling them is illegal.
4. Watching for suspicious activity in fishing areas, including lake sturgeon capture, killing, caviar harvesting and transporting.

Jill Wingfield, Communications Program Manager, Great Lakes Fishery Commission, and David Forster, President of the Ontario Association of Crime Stoppers and the elected Canadian Representative to Crime Stoppers International, will be presenting this co-venture at the respective locations to support the advertising campaign, which focuses on the illegal harvest and trade of lake sturgeon

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