



****NEWS RELEASE****

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Act now to protect northern fisheries, report urges Northern waterscapes globally unique

(Toronto, SEPTEMBER 20, 2007)--Ontario's immensely valuable northern freshwater fisheries could be at risk if resource development expands without careful planning and the implementation of conservation safeguards, says a new report released today by the Wildlife Conservation Society Canada (WCSC).

The report looks at what is known about freshwater fish species such as lake sturgeon, brook trout, walleye, and whitefish in the boreal region currently off limits to forestry in far northern Ontario. It finds that even basic information on the status of populations, long-term habitat trends and in many cases where species can be found is largely missing.

The report also warns that measures meant to mitigate the impacts of developments like road building, hydro dams or forestry on fish populations still lack a proven track record of success, providing few assurances that these globally significant aquatic systems will be adequately safeguarded in the face of the steady northward march of development.

"WCS Canada produced this report to help inform decision makers – whether they are government ministers, planners or community members – about what is at stake for northern fisheries, and for a region that we believe is an international ecological gem," says Dr. Justina Ray, executive director. "These are world-class fisheries that are important food sources, great recreational resources, and an economic engine for local communities across the north," she points out.

To put the importance of the northern boreal region in context, the report illustrates through new mapping that development and resource extraction in Ontario has left little ground untouched and undisturbed watersheds now occur almost exclusively in the area north of 51 degrees. "The fact that this region still contains major watersheds without a single dam and few roads makes this a world renowned destination for recreational fishing and other outdoor activities, as well as a critically important refuge for sensitive species like lake sturgeon," says scientist David Browne, the author of the report, who completed it as a joint post doc between

WCS Canada and McGill University.. Sturgeon are considered threatened throughout almost all of their worldwide range and populations have been declining in Southern Ontario.

Unlike in more developed regions in southern Ontario, fish communities of the northern part of the province remain largely unaltered by species introductions, stocking, overexploitation, or pollution. The report draws attention to a number of important potentially negative impacts to fish populations from forestry, hydroelectric power generation, mining, and accompanying road access -- the principal agents of change being faced by Ontario's northern boreal forests. The report culminates in a series of research and policy recommendations aimed at ensuring the outlook for northern Ontario freshwater ecosystems.

“Ontario really has a tremendous opportunity to proactively protect these freshwater ecosystems through careful evaluation of the consequences of past activities and the safeguarding of important areas following baseline inventory. And by doing that, we also help to protect fisheries and freshwater species present there, which means the north has a great deal to gain and little to lose by taking a forward-looking approach to conservation in the northern boreal,” says Dr. Ray.

The full report is available at www.wcscanada.org

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