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Vanishing sturgeon get federal protection

Federal officials Friday designated North American green sturgeon living in San Francisco Bay and the Sacramento River a threatened species, a move that offers the fish more protection under the Endangered Species Act.

The designation takes effect June 6.

The sturgeon is more of a sport fish than a food fish, said Jeff Miller of the Center for Biological Diversity in Oakland, one of the conservation groups that filed suit to force the listing of the fish.

Favoring coastal waters from Mexico to the Bering Sea, it is long-lived, spawns infrequently and is easy to catch, he said. Overfishing, dwindling water levels in its habitat and dams on the upper Sacramento and Feather Rivers have led to its decline.

The number of fish returning to spawn in the Sacramento River has dropped 95 percent in the past five years, and state biologists estimate that only 25 female fish will make the journey upriver to spawn this spring.

“This is a fish that’s survived for 200 million years essentially unchanged,” Miller said. “It was a very successful species until humans came along.”