



Missouri Chapter of the American Fisheries Society

2025 A. Stephen Weithman, Jr. Leadership Award

The Weithman Leadership Award was established to honor A. Stephen Weithman, Jr. for his outstanding long-term leadership in the Missouri Chapter and his dedication to Missouri's aquatic resources. This award recognizes individuals who demonstrate exceptional leadership qualities, not only in their scientific contributions but in their ability to mentor, inspire, and shape the future of aquatic conservation in Missouri.

This year's recipient, **Sarah Peper**, is a shining example of what this award represents. Over her remarkable 23-year career with the Missouri Department of Conservation, Sarah has left a lasting impact on fisheries science, habitat conservation, and, most importantly, the next generation of aquatic professionals. Her leadership in Lake Sturgeon recovery, dedication to outreach and education, and unwavering commitment to mentorship have shaped Missouri's fisheries programs and strengthened the future of aquatic conservation in our state.

As a co-lead of the Lake Sturgeon Recovery Program, Sarah has been instrumental in advancing conservation efforts for this iconic species. She and her colleague Travis Moore spearheaded the development of the Lake Sturgeon Volunteer Watch program on the Mississippi River, providing critical protection for spawning sturgeon. Their work has laid the foundation for expanding this program to other key waterways, such as the Gasconade and Osage rivers. Additionally, Sarah partnered with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to develop a water release plan designed to encourage Lake Sturgeon spawning—an effort that has played a vital role in the species' recovery. She has also been an integral part of long-term tracking studies on the Missouri and Mississippi rivers, contributing valuable data that informs management strategies for this imperiled fish.

Beyond species conservation, Sarah has made significant contributions to Missouri's aquatic resources through outreach, education, and advocacy. She has facilitated stream workshops focused on the challenges of gravel mining, led numerous landowner pond workshops to promote responsible stewardship, and played a key role in native Missouri River fish monitoring efforts. As a leader of several Resource Assessment and Monitoring (RAM) crews in the St. Louis region, Sarah has provided critical support for fisheries data collection and habitat assessments. Additionally, she has been involved in sampling efforts

on Missouri's wetland complexes, where her work has helped document a variety of species, further informing conservation and management efforts.

Sarah's expertise extends beyond game species—her ability to identify a wide range of non-game species has contributed valuable records to the upcoming Fishes of Missouri book. Her dedication to species documentation enhances our understanding of Missouri's aquatic biodiversity and underscores her commitment to scientific knowledge and conservation.

Perhaps Sarah's most lasting impact, however, is seen in the professionals she has mentored. Former employees consistently praise her guidance, crediting her with shaping their careers and helping them reach their full potential. She has a remarkable ability to recognize and nurture strengths in others, often inspiring individuals to stay committed to their work, their teams, and the larger mission of conservation. Where others may see limitations, Sarah sees potential—motivating and empowering young professionals to grow into leadership roles of their own. Her insight, patience, and dedication to mentorship have left an indelible mark on those she has worked with, strengthening the future of fisheries science and aquatic conservation in Missouri.

Beyond her scientific expertise, Sarah's ability to recognize and cultivate potential in others has created a lasting legacy – one that extends far beyond her own accomplishments. She has inspired young professionals, led critical conservation efforts, and played an essential role in shaping the future of Missouri's aquatic resources.

For her outstanding leadership, dedication to conservation, and commitment to fostering the next generation of fisheries professionals, we are honored to present the **2025 Weithman Leadership Award to Sarah Peper**. *Please join me in congratulating Sarah Peper on this well-deserved honor!*