

Watershed Wisdom –More Aliens and UFOs

Two weeks ago we talked a bit about “alien invaders” from foreign (to our watershed) ecosystems. Two days after that article appeared, one of BRCA’s Courtesy Boat Inspectors (CBI), Kerry Schlosser, made our first “Save” of the season. She removed a substantial fragment of Eurasian water milfoil, from a Massachusetts-registered boat that was getting ready to launch into Great Pond after being used the previous day in the Connecticut River in CT, which is heavily infested. Congratulations to Kerry for doing a thorough inspection and preventing a potential disaster. A study done a few years ago by Eiswerth et al. estimated the economic impact of a Eurasian water milfoil infestation on recreation **at 30 to 45 million dollars annually per watershed.**

Of Maine’s 6000+ lakes and ponds, 32 (unfortunately up by two from last year) are known to be infested with invasive plants, including Eurasian and variable leaf milfoil, curly-leaved pondweed, European naiad, and hydrilla. That this is a relatively small number, is a tribute to Maine’s strong “Milfoil Law” and the small army of paid and volunteer courtesy boat inspectors that man public boat launches in order to help boaters learn about the dangers of invasive plants and how to inspect their boat before launch and after recovery.

Maine’s “Milfoil Law” (LD1812) was enacted in 2001 and makes it illegal to transport any aquatic plant or plant fragment, invasive or not, on the outside of a vehicle, boat, trailer, or other equipment. It requires all motorized boats used in freshwater to display a lake and river protection sticker that costs \$10 for residents and \$20 for nonresidents. This sticker is now part of the regular registration for Maine residents and no longer a separate sticker. There are substantial fines for noncompliance with this law—up to \$250 for failure to display the sticker, \$500 for transporting any plant fragment (\$2500 for repeat offenders), and up to \$5000 for transporting an invasive plant. Funds raised from sticker sales are used for outreach and education programs and to help pay for courtesy boat inspection (CBI) programs.

The Belgrade Regional Conservation Alliance (BRCA) administers one of the largest CBI programs in the state on behalf of our local lake associations. Every summer, we work with the Lakes Environmental Association (LEA), the Maine Congress of Lake Associations (COLA) and DEP to train our team of paid and volunteer CBI’s that man (and woman) up all seven of the public boat launches in the Belgrade Lakes and at most of the sporting camps with private ramps. Last year these trained inspectors inspected over 10,000 boats between Memorial Day and Labor Day and prevented invasive plants from entering the Belgrades four times (and leaving Messalonskee at least 10 times). More importantly, they helped to educate over 10,000 boaters about the importance of inspecting their own boat whether there is an inspector there or not.

While plants are the most visible of the aquatic hitchhikers, there are numerous other Unwanted Floating Organisms (UFOs) that our inspectors are looking for and trying to keep out of our lakes. In addition to invasive fish such as northern pike and walleyes, other potential aquatic invaders include Quagga mussels, Zebra mussels, Chinese Mystery Snails, Rusty crayfish, and a particularly pernicious diatom called *Didymo*, more commonly called, “rock snot.” While Quagga and Zebra mussels, have not yet been found in Maine, they are common in the Great Lakes and are spreading out from there. Last year, Laurel Lake in western Massachusetts became infested. If your boat is

coming from these waters, it should be thoroughly washed and inspected (including the live well) before launching in Maine waters. Chinese mystery snails are present in Maine, including in the Messalonskee Stream near where it enters the Kennebec River. They are larger (about the size of a golf ball) than any native Maine snails and you should thoroughly inspect all surfaces of your boat if you are in these waters. If you detect mystery snails, please contact the Center for Invasive Aquatic Plants (CIAP) of the Maine Lake Volunteer Monitoring Program (VLMP) at mciap@mainevlmp.org to report your find. They are trying to document its spread in Maine. If you catch a walleye, please keep it, kill it, and call our local fisheries biologist, Bobby VanRiper at 547-5314.

Rusty crayfish are already established in the Belgrades in Great Pond. These crayfish, native to the Ohio River Valley, can be more aggressive than the native Maine crayfish and can displace them from their habitat. So far, this pest has not been that successful here, perhaps due to our aggressive smallmouth bass population, but it needs to be monitored. Both the University of Maine and the Maine VLMP are continuing to monitor the spread of Rusty crayfish in this area. It is thought that these invaders were brought in by an out of state fisherman who brought live bait with him. Fishermen should be aware that is illegal to bring live bait into Maine from out of state and it is illegal to release unused live bait into Maine waters whatever the source. Live bait should only be purchased from licensed Maine bait dealers who are only allowed to sell native, non-invasive species.

Rock snot is not yet present in Maine but it is present in Vermont in the upper Connecticut River. This organism forms dense mats on the bottom and looks like what you think based on its common name. It can be spread by anglers, especially those who wade in felt soled boots. Any time you move between waterbodies, to prevent inadvertent spread of UFOs, you should thoroughly wash and dry your equipment before fishing in new waters.

To learn more about any of these organisms, please stop in the BRCA office. We have brochures on some of them. Another good source is the CIAP web site at: <http://www.mainevolunteerlakemonitors.org/mciap/>

Enjoy the lakes, but beware of aliens and UFOs. **Don't pick up aquatic hitchhikers!**