



Eurasian watermilfoil found near the Schroon Lake Marina in Schroon Lake. *Photo by Nancie Battaglia*

By Janet Reynolds

Last year marked the first time in ten years that the number of lakes in the Adirondack Park where aquatic invasive species were found did not increase.

“This is very exciting. It means our prevention efforts are working,” said Erin Vennie-Vollrath of the Adirondack Park Invasive Plant Program, one of eight Partnerships for Regional Invasive Species Management in the state.

The Adirondack Watershed Institute (AWI) reports that lake stewards inspected 97,412 boats at boat launches throughout the Park last year and discovered 3,849 specimens of invasive species, including Eurasian milfoil, curly-leaf pondweed, zebra mussels, and spiny waterfleas. Nearly 2,800 boats were decontaminated (typically, hosed with hot water).

Yet Eric Holmlund, director of the institute’s watershed steward program, worries about the exotic plants and animals that perhaps didn’t get caught.

Holmlund said about 10 percent of boats carry organic material and about 3 percent carry invasive species. “These are the ones we catch and confirm,” he noted. “You can imagine there’s possibly that amount that escapes our own detection or [get through] when people are not on duty.”

Aquatic invasive species (AIS) are undesirable for myriad environmental reasons. They crowd out native species and can upset the ecosystem. The spiny waterflea, for example, feeds on zooplankton that small fish need to thrive, thus disturbing the food chain at its base. Eurasian watermilfoil, by far the most common aquatic invasive in the Adirondack Park, spreads quickly and stifles the growth of native plants. The weed alters fish habitat, clogs propellers, and makes swimming unpleasant.

Even a small number of exotic specimens entering waterways can wreak ecological havoc. “It is depressing and yet this [is] a success in the Adirondack Park,” Holmlund said. “We have the most robust program of any place in the state or New England. We’re way ahead of others in terms of inspectors and also in terms of

uninvaded waterways.”

There are about three thousand lakes and ponds in the Park. Last year, only 110 were surveyed for exotic species. Yet most of the region’s waterways are small and remote, places where motorboating is either banned or impractical. Hence, it’s thought that most lakes and ponds in the Park are free of invasives.

A watershed steward inspects a boat at Lake Flower boat launch in Saranac Lake.

Photo by Nancie Battaglia

That’s not the case with waterways outside the Blue Line. The AWI reports that in 2015 the Great Lakes contained 184 non-native and invasive species, the St. Lawrence River had eighty-seven, Lake Champlain (which is partly in the Park) had fifty, and the lower Hudson River had 122.

Motorboats and jet-skis that are operated in such infested waterways can pick up invasive species and transport them to the Adirondacks.

The Park’s defense against aquatic invasives is porous for two reasons: (i) not all boats get inspected before entering a waterway, and (ii) with the exception of boats launching on Lake George, the owners are not required to comply with requests to decontaminate their craft even if invasive species are found.

Last year, stewards staffed only sixty-seven of the ninety-five Department of Environmental Conservation public boat launches in the Park (from Memorial Day weekend through August 20), according to the 2017 AWI report. This does not include the dozens of private and town boat launches in the Park. Some of the DEC launches were staffed seven days a week, while others were staffed fewer days, depending on boat traffic. Stewards typically worked from 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.

The small number of decontamination stations—twenty—and the long distance between some launches and the nearest station can discourage voluntary compliance. A boat owner might have to drive a half-hour to have a boat cleaned, drained, and dried.

“That’s a problem,” Holmlund said. “Most people are quite cooperative, but five to ten percent aren’t.”

Holmlund and others see adding more inspection and decontamination stations as an important step in winning the battle against invasives. He also recommends increasing the hours of operation, especially on weekends, and focusing on “highly vulnerable, high-quality lakes and waterways that are not currently invaded.”

The need to monitor and prevent AIS from entering the Adirondack Park, as well as eliminate those that already exist, is important for more than environmental reasons. Tourism is big business in the Adirondack region, bringing in \$1.3 billion and supporting twenty-one thousand jobs, according to the governor’s office. Aquatic invasive species put that economy at risk.

That’s one reason some lake associations and municipalities began devoting time and resources to mitigating invasives years ago. When battling AIS, however, size matters. Large lakes typically have large—and often wealthy—associations capable of raising more money than can smaller associations and local towns.

Lake George had a boat-stewardship program in place for seven years under the Lake George Association before the Lake George Park Commission made boat inspections and decontaminations mandatory, according to David Wick, the commission’s executive director.

“There were gaps in the program,” Wick said, noting Asian clams and spiny waterfleas were found in the lake during the voluntary program. “That raised the alarm bell. We needed to take a stronger look.”

The commission undertook a two-year environmental-impact study to examine the gaps and how to best deal with them before finally deciding to require all boats to be cleaned, drained, and dried before entering the lake.

The commission operates seven inspection stations around Lake George. In 2015, the commission processed 27,852 boats, according to its annual report. Of those, 10,247 were inspected before entering the lake while 9,949 were inspected when exiting. The report notes that of those inspected, 16 percent needed to be decontaminated.

Upper Saranac Lake is another large lake (more than five thousand acres) that has been winning the battle against invasives. In 2004, the first year the Upper Saranac Foundation, a nonprofit that focuses on environmental threats, spent \$1.5 million paying thirty divers to hand-harvest eighteen tons of milfoil, primarily Eurasian milfoil and variable-leaf milfoil, according to Guy Middleton, the foundation’s lake manager. In 2017, three divers harvested a total of three hundred pounds.

“We are a model for many other lakes in the Adirondacks and throughout North America for being a successful story for harvesting invasive species,” said Middleton. “Having a board that in 2004 saw that if we didn’t get an upper hand on invasive species we would quickly be behind the curve was critical. Early detection and rapid response is very important when it comes to invasive species.”

Thanks to state grants, two watershed stewards are stationed at Upper Saranac’s two public boat launches seven days a week from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. from Memorial Day through Labor Day.

While smaller lake associations are also making progress, their ability to fight invasives is hampered by their lack of resources. “It’s a concern, especially with a lot of the lakes being half public and half private property,” Vennie-Vollrath says. “Lake associations have trouble raising money to do any management of it.”

Mike Durkee knows exactly what she means. He is a director of the Canada Lakes Conservation Association and co-chairman of its invasive-species committee. While the association has done a good job checking the spread of invasives in the Canada Lakes, Durkee says they are concerned about what is happening in neighboring lakes. “We have protected the Canada Lakes system,” he says. “Now we’re trying to extend to East and West Caroga lakes.”

East and West Caroga lakes have a serious milfoil infestation, according to Gene Centi, the supervisor of the town of Caroga’s Diver Assisted Suction Harvesting (DASH) program. Last year, eight divers worked four to five hours a day to remove a little over twenty tons of Eurasian milfoil. The cost was over \$30,000.

“Without question if this is ignored, milfoil will kill the lake,” said Centi. “I wish the state would recognize the fact that it’s great we have educational programs in place and are inspecting. The problem is the lakes that have the problem aren’t getting any help from the state. This has been a burden for the town.”

Gil Paddock is the owner of Deep River Campsites and president of Horseshoe Pond Deer River Flow Inc. It’s a small association with roughly seventy members. The landowners on Deer River Flow total seven.

New York State, he says, owns the lake bottom and 86 percent of the shoreline on Deer River Flow. “It’s gotten away from us,” he says, noting the organization has been able to raise only \$10,000 to \$11,000 a year for milfoil control. He estimates they need \$100,000 to make any progress.

“In my view it’s a state lake,” Paddock said. “The state owns right up to the high-water mark on my property. We do not have the funds. The state needs to pony up.”

Rather than run its own programs for mitigating AIS, the Department of Environmental Conservation provides funding to other agencies, towns, and lake associations to deal with aquatic invasives. Catherine McGlynn, who oversees the invasives program for DEC, says the department’s commitment to this problem continues to expand. In 2017 DEC awarded nearly \$2.1 million in grants to twenty-four aquatic projects statewide, according to its annual report. In 2018, McGlynn says DEC will fund fifty-eight stewards in thirty-three locations and fifteen boat-decontamination stations. That expansion will continue through 2022, she says, with each year more sites and steward funding being added. By 2022, DEC will fund forty-nine sites, eighty-two stewards, and twenty decontamination stations statewide.

Eric Siy, executive director of the nonprofit Fund for Lake George, says an additional step is needed to stop the spread of aquatic invasives: pre-emption. “How do we stop these species from reaching this region and ensuring that we fully protect our waterways as well as our woods?” he said. “The pristine waters are the defining issue of the Adirondack waterways without question. The fate of those waters will determine the fate of the region economically and ecologically.”

Pre-emption and prevention, he says, is a one-two punch for stopping invasives. “Prevention is your last line of defense. Pre-emption is offense,” he says. “We need to consider it as if we’re stopping terrorists because invasives are ecological terrorists. We need a TSA level of security here. We don’t have time to run a marathon. This is a sprint.”

“We can’t build programs around each lake in the Adirondacks,” he continued. “We have to create an infrastructure at the border and beyond the border. The towns can’t take this on themselves. It needs to be a coordinated comprehensive strategy. It may sound overreaching perhaps, but invasives know no boundaries. They’re a 24/7 threat. New York State can’t do it alone. It requires federal resources. If we need a wall anywhere, not a real one but for protection, it should be along the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River in particular. It would do wonders to reduce the risk.”

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