

Invasion of the (Water) Body Snatchers??!???

The COLA Call

by Ed Mutsch

This summer, Minnesota families who want to know if their favorite Minnesota lake is clean enough for swimming and eating fish caught in the lake have an easy way to find out. Go to: www.CheckMyLake.org.

Powered by Conservation Minnesota, the new website is a user-friendly way that Minnesotans can find out whether their favorite lakes are clean or polluted – or haven't been tested yet. The site relies on the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA)'s database but makes the information easy to access and comprehend. By going to the website users can either type in the name of a favorite lake or type in a county name and choose from among a list to find out whether lakes have been tested and what the results show. "Our 10,000 lakes help define Minnesota for all of us who live here and fishing and swimming in them are part of our way of life," said Paul Austin, Conservation Minnesota's executive director. "Information on the health and safety of our lakes empowers all of us. We want Minnesotans to enjoy these summertime sports based on the best data and advice." Many of the impaired lakes are polluted with excess mercury. Check My Lake refers users to the Minnesota Department of Health's fish eating guidelines for these lakes, which advise limited consumption of fish from many Minnesota lakes, especially for children and women of child-bearing age. Contacts: Paul Austin, Marty Broan (612.767.2444)

Minnesota lakes are under siege, threatened by a growing number of aquatic invasive species (AIS) being transplanted by humans, initially from regions where these species occur naturally to regions where they do not, and then from one water body to another on watercraft and trailers. These invaders go by a number of strange sounding names, e.g., curly leaf pondweed, Eurasian water milfoil, spiny water flea or zebra mussel, and once introduced into a "foreign" environment, they can dramatically alter the longstanding ecological balance by damaging, diminishing or destroying native fish and vegetation, and severely compromising recreational suitability; serious infestations can adversely impact lakeshore property values. The guiding maxim when dealing with AIS should be "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" as there is to this point no documented example of the eradication of an AIS once it has established itself in a new home. And the "pound of cure"----which speaks to control, not eradication----can be costly; the Portage Lake Association has spent over \$50,000 over the past 4 years to control its curly leaf pondweed infestation.

While Minnesota lakes in the southern half of the state are having significant AIS problems, the north central portion of the state has until recently been much less impacted, Hubbard county very little. However, the presence of Eurasian water milfoil in Leech Lake (a so-called trampoline lake), curly leaf pondweed in Portage, Upper Twin, and Blueberry lakes, and the more recent discovery of curly leaf pondweed in the 11th Crow Wing Lake (which puts the entire Crow Wing chain at risk) carry ominous portents, particularly given the rapidly accelerating growth in population and development in north central Minnesota. The geographic distribution of AIS correlates strongly with population and proximity to major highway routes. The accompanying Minnesota map illustrates the point for curly leaf pondweed, with each dot representing an infested lake. The AIS threat has prompted COLA to constitute a task force which, planning intently throughout the past winter, generated a series of action steps now being implemented to reduce the risk of the further spread of AIS to Hubbard County lakes.

Working with the DNR and Wildlife Forever, an extensive signage program has been implemented, with large signs [STOP AQUATIC HITCHHIKERS] having been placed on four billboards along major highways into the county, while the county highway department has helped with the placement of 11 smaller signs on county and township roads. It is anticipated that many county lake associations will be working with their townships to place additional township road signs.

A second effort involves the scheduling of two identical workshops on Friday and Saturday, June 15th & 16th, conducted by Minnesota DNR Ecological Services personnel, at which participants will learn to recognize the various AIS and how to effectively inspect watercraft and trailers for their presence. Lake association presidents have been informed of these workshops by letter and the general public through press releases in the local papers and radio spots on a local radio station. The workshops are free, but pre-registration is encouraged as attendance is limited to 50. Registration information for these workshops can be found elsewhere in this edition of the paper.

The AIS task force has held an initial meeting with Hubbard County resort owners and will be continuing to work with this group to provide them and their customers with tools to create AIS awareness and to guide watercraft and trailer inspections. The response has been highly positive, with many resort owners ordering "Stop Aquatic Hitchhiker" signs for use on resort property

Finally, the task force has an ongoing effort to produce materials that can be used to educate the general public on the risks of AIS. A Power Point presentation is being prepared for use wherever speakers are sought for discussions of the AIS issue, while various handouts will be distributed to resorts, bait shops, motels, the Chamber of Commerce, etc., any and all places that lake users regularly frequent.

All such efforts require time, money, and "elbow grease", i.e., volunteers. The AIS task force is a costly, unbudgeted effort, but the issue was deemed of sufficient urgency to justify a "leap of faith" that the program could be undertaken, financial commitments made, and the money subsequently raised. Gratifyingly, a DNR grant plus donations from lake associations and local businesses will cover most, but not yet all, of the first year expense; there will be additional expense as the program unfolds throughout the balance of this season and in future years. Additional donations are most welcome and can be directed to the COLA treasurer, John Weber, at Hubbard County COLA, P.O. Box 746, Park Rapids, MN 56470. Please specify that the donation is for the AIS program.

The Cola Call also goes out to those willing to commit some time to this worthwhile effort. More people would make additional initiatives possible while enabling greater progress on those currently underway. The ultimate objective????-----Preservation of our incredible quality of life in north central Minnesota

[Next: The Tragedy of the Commons Revisited]

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