

Invasive species 'Education Blitz' at Wollaston Lake boat launch



By Mike Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

At the tail end of National Invasive Species Action Week (May 15 to 22), the Wollaston Lake Home and Cottage Owners' Association's Milfoil Action Committee had an Education Blitz over the May 24th long weekend. This blitz raised awareness about Ontario's new Invasive Species Act regulations, and what that means for boaters using Wollaston Lake and surrounding bodies of water. Joanne Pozniak, a member of the WLHCA and the Milfoil action committee, and other volunteers from the committee were there Saturday and Sunday from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. to educate boaters using the lake and what the new invasive species regulations mean for them.

Eurasian Water Milfoil, the primary concern for Wollaston Lake, is native to North Africa, Europe and Asia and was accidentally brought over to North America at some point between the late 1800s and the 1940s. It has since spread to 45 U.S. states and at least three Canadian provinces, including Ontario. According to OntarioInvasivePlants.ca, it was first recorded from an herbarium specimen collected at Rondeau Provincial Park on Lake Erie in 1961, with subsequent specimens collected along the St. Lawrence seaway throughout the remainder of that decade. By the early 1970s it had become a nuisance in some areas of the province like the Kawartha Lakes.

Eurasian Water Milfoil is a submersed herb with finely divided leaves that inhabit water bodies. It is variable in appearance with long stems, and 12 to 21 leaflet pairs. Flowers are arranged on spikes above the water's surface which have a spiral of female flowers at its base and a spiral of male flowers at its apex. Eurasian Water Milfoil is found in lakes that vary in depth from over 100 metres to less than a metre. They overwinter in the sediment at the bottom of the lake and once warm temperatures arrive with spring, grow rapidly, outgrowing the native plant species and reaching the surface sooner. Its dense canopy also allows it to out compete native plant life in the same water body, and fragmentation of its vegetation by boats is usually the way it is spread around a lake or between lakes.

The Ontario Invasive Species Act was introduced in 2015, with 22 species being prohibited and another 11 species being restricted under the Act. Thirteen additional invasive species and watercraft and related equipment as carriers of aquatic invasive species were regulated into the Act as of Jan. 1, 2022. More information can be found at www.invasivespecies.ca/learn/ontario-isa/.

In addition to the additional invasive species, the amendments to the Act require certain restrictions in movement of watercraft between waterbodies to prevent accidental movement of invasive species like Eurasian Water Milfoil from one water body to the

next. For example, watercraft may only be transported if drain plugs or other devices to control drainage have been activated to get rid of any possible invasive species contaminants. A thorough cleaning by pressure spraying or by reasonable measures to clean possible invasive species off the boat is also required under the new regulations. Pozniak says the sprayers are quite a set-up, needing warm water of a certain temperature and an apparatus in place to collect all the potentially contaminated water and dispose of it properly.

“So, it's quite a large production. It's not just a matter of some sprayers. Chandos Lake has an Action Plan in place for a watercraft cleaning station, so we'll be able to learn from them and their experience with it. So that's going to be next year's project,” she says.

Drying out the craft in the sun and disinfecting the boat is also recommended to preclude the possibility of any invasive species from moving from one body of water to another. Failure to comply with these new regulations to clean and drain your boat give Conservation officers the discretion to charge anyone and issue a ticket in the amount \$100 to \$350 or issue a summons to court where they may be subject to an even higher fine.

Pozniak was at the Wollaston public boat launch at 11 a.m. on May 21 to speak with Bancroft This Week about the event and its goal of curbing the spread of Eurasian Water Milfoil, Zebra Mussels, Spiny Water Flea and other invasive species of concern to Wollaston Lake and surrounding bodies of water like Starry Stonewort and Water Soldier. The event also raised awareness about the provincial government's new Invasive Species Act regulations, recently on passed Jan. 1, 2022.

Pozniak has been with the WLHCA for three years and has been with the Milfoil Action Committee for two years. She said the year she joined the action committee, Milfoil had really been growing as a concern and the chair of the committee Luke Mellors (who is also the president of the WLHCA) asked her to join it, as the family outreach and small events at the beach she was interested in initially weren't possible because of COVID-19. She said she would if Fred McConnell, the Wollaston Lake steward, helped her out, as he was so knowledgeable about the lake and invasive species in general. McConnell subsequently did come on board to help her out.

“The first year went really great. We had about 10 participants and did a lot of fundraising. We raised about \$15,000. We got quite a few projects done last year. This year the project is mechanical harvesting, because the permit took a long time to do. But the main concern is the Eurasian Water Milfoil which has gotten pretty bad in some parts of the lake, from the big island to Bear Ridge Cottages. It's very shallow in that channel so the Milfoil has come up all the way and there's no avoiding it with the boats. So, we have to try the mechanical harvesting option,” she says.

While Pozniak says that there is some apprehension about doing the mechanical harvesting, it's their only option to prevent the future chopping up of the Milfoil in that channel.

“It's a natural place for boats to do their loop and the boats at Bear Ridge Cottages, some 30 of them, need to go through there. So, we're going to try that this year,” she says.

The Milfoil Action committee is still recruiting volunteers to help with the mechanical harvesting and to work with Wollaston Township to find an appropriate dry place to dispose of the collected Milfoil so it can't re-infect any nearby water sources. Pozniak says she has been in touch with the township about getting a dedicated garbage can at the boat launch, and will also be sending a letter co-signed by Karen Challinor, who owns the Red Eagle Family Campground (next to the Wollaston Boat Launch) to council about this, so any invasive species debris can be safely collected and disposed of. Getting rid of the collected Milfoil and taking it to a dry place away from any water sources will also be a top priority going forward.

Pozniak says that the Milfoil Action Committee will be continuing its efforts throughout the summer and that education about invasive species is one of their top priorities, including a more thorough presentation on invasive species like Eurasian Water Milfoil by the Invasive Species Awareness and Monitoring Program for Lakes Education Ontario. Launched in 2021 by the Federation of Ontario Cottagers' Associations and the Invasive Species Centre, IsampleON is a citizen science program that collects and analyzes water samples from selected waterbodies to monitor them for invasive species like Zebra Mussels, Spiny Water Flea, Milfoil and

others. The date and time of this IsampleON presentation is to be decided.

Pozniak says that for June, the Milfoil Action committee always does an educational activity with the local schools, and she says that this year she found a great learning booklet on the NDMNRF Invasive Species site that they'll be able to use.

And we're going to provide some good mesh nets for the kids so when they do go to the beach, they can not only scoop up some Milfoil but also have some fun with finding some minnows or anything like that. It will be double duty. So, we'll attach some information tags on them saying 'If you see that Milfoil, scoop it out of the lake.' So, lots of things. We're hopefully going to do a regatta this summer and get the kids out there and have some fun. Some information barbecues. As I mentioned, IsampleON will be here to do another information session about cleaning [watercraft] and all the new regulations [about invasive species], she says. It looks like a great summer ahead of us with a lot of fun and a little bit of work.