

Hydrilla discoverer earns service award

18-year-old intern spotted invasive plant in Cayuga Lake

By Matt Hayes

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ITHACA — Stories of most catches pulled from Cayuga Lake waters have a way of growing larger with each retelling. Not so for Jordan Stark, whose prize measuring just a little over an inch is not the biggest in size, but may be in terms of significance.

And it didn't even have fins.

For her discovery of the invasive plant hydrilla in the Cayuga Inlet this past summer, Stark received the Distinguished Civic Service Award from the Ithaca Power and Sail Squadron at a ceremony held Sunday in Ithaca.

A senior intern on the Cayuga Lake Floating Classroom, Stark, then 17 and in her third summer volunteering with the program, was skimming a plankton net for samples when she spotted an unusual sprig caught in the mesh.

"It had four or five leaves in the whorl instead of just three" Stark said. Three leaves would be the native plant elodea; extra leaves indicated something else entirely. She brought her find to Bill Foster, the program manager on the Floating Classroom, who sent the sample to a Cornell University lab, which confirmed it as hydrilla.

"It took an amazing ability to notice something in her surroundings of



Stark

such a subtle difference as elodea and hydrilla," said Dennis Montgomery, owner and captain of the boat Haendel, which serves as the floating classroom. "You really have to pay attention to see a difference in those two plants.

"It might have been there for a year or two," Montgomery said of hydrilla's introduction to the inlet. Had it not been for Stark, the

plant may have remained unnoticed. Now, he said, "we have a chance of eradicating it, perhaps."

The discovery led to a temporary ban on boating in Cayuga Inlet late this past summer, and the application of an herbicide and plans for further eradication efforts this spring.

The advance warning provided by Stark could potentially save millions of dollars.

"If it roots, it will kill all of the plants in the lake. It will take over," Montgomery warned, as it has in Southern states like Florida.

