

Invasive plant typically a 'tragedy' for waterways

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ITHACA — It was an unexpected find — an ordinary-looking water plant growing in a green clump in a small backwater to the Cayuga Inlet.

But staff members detected something unusual about the plant picked up two weeks ago at Cass Park by a student with the Cayuga Lake Floating Classroom. Though it closely resembles a native species — elodea — the plant has some subtle differences that marked it as the invasive Asian plant *Hydrilla verticillata*.

Commonly called hydrilla or water thyme, the plant is among the most aggressive invasive species in the United States, said aquatic plant expert and retired Cornell University biology professor Bob Johnson.

"It's the worst plant for invasiveness and degrading any ecosystem it's in," Johnson said. Eventually, hydrilla spreads until it fills waterways, ruining recreation opportunities and choking out other plants, creating a monoculture, Johnson said.

"This will make a lot of lakes and bodies of water, if unchecked, pretty much unusable for recreation purposes," he said. There is no evidence the plant has rooted in the lake itself yet, according to the New York Invasive Species Research Institute.

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 Johnson's work currently focuses on combating another invasive

aquatic plant, the Eurasian water-milfoil. But when he heard of the find in the Inlet, he organized a cursory survey of the area.

There are at least three mats of hydrilla, which Johnson said may be able to grow up to a foot per day, creating dense mats from bottom to surface in water up to 25 feet deep. There is a large patch of the plants near the northern end of the Ithaca Farmers' Market, as well as near the Cornell University boathouse, he said. Small fragments were found at several places in the Inlet.

Fragments of hydrilla, which are easily caught and transported by boats and boat trailers, can sprout roots and establish new populations, according to the New York Invasive Species Research Institute at Cornell. Fragments also float and are capable of dispersing via wind and water currents.

Hydrilla is thought to have been introduced when someone dumped an aquarium in a waterway in Florida in the 1950s. It has since spread throughout much of the eastern United States, from Florida to Maine, and into a number of western states. It is the first time it has been found in the Finger Lakes, though some small ponds in Orange County and on Long Island are being treated for infestations.

"Everyone was sort of expecting that it would get to the (Finger) Lakes eventually, but I don't think anyone expected that it would happen so quickly," Johnson said.

A meeting was held Friday among local and state environmental and municipal officials to get a handle on the extent of the infestation, and possibly to establish a lead agency. Johnson said he hopes the state Department of Environmental Conservation or state park officials will take the problem seriously and move quickly to prevent it from spreading.

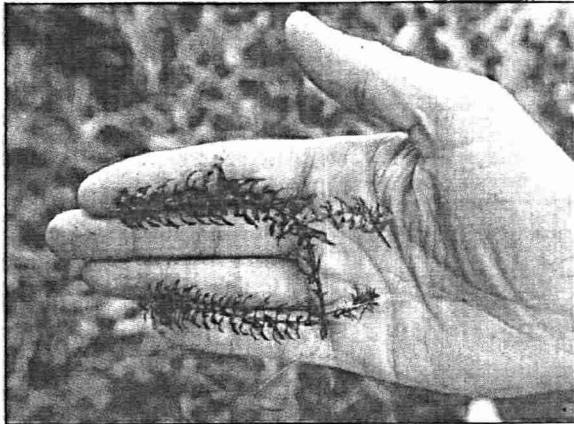
"It's really a tragedy, actually, in aquatics," Johnson said.

To prevent the spread of hydrilla or the introduction of other non-native species, recreational users of Cayuga Inlet are urged to employ clean boating practices. Remove any plants, mud or debris from boats or equipment that came in contact with water, drain any water from boats before leaving a launch area, and clean and dry anything that came in contact with water, including boats, trailers, gear, clothing, dogs, etc. Never release plants, fish, or bait into a water body unless they came out of that water body.

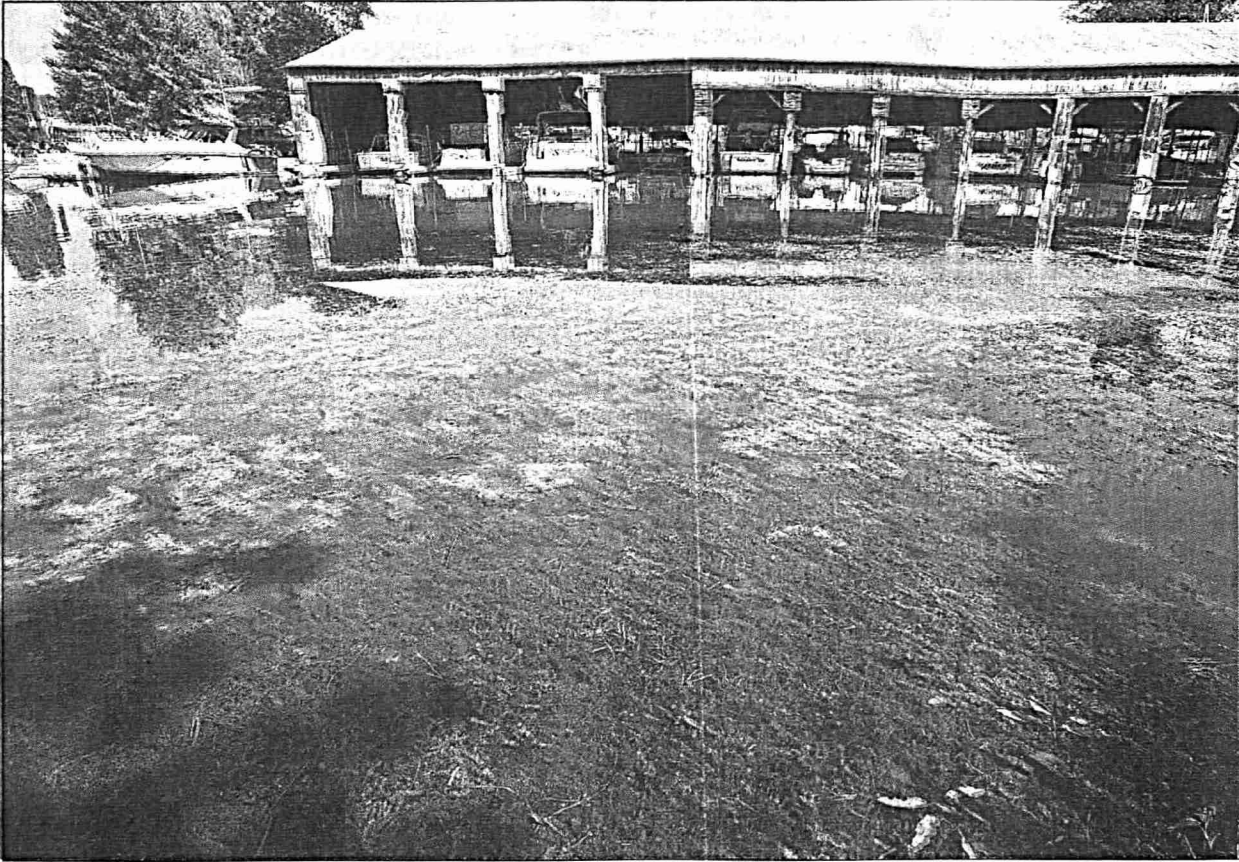




A duck swims in a thick clump of hydrilla in Cascadilla Creek where it meets the Cayuga Inlet at the Ithaca Farmers' Market. SIMON WHEELER / STAFF PHOTO



A section of hydrilla shows how roots form at the end of broken sections, bottom, allowing it to propagate quickly.



Hydrilla plants grow below the surface of Cascadilla Creek where it meets the Cayuga Inlet at the Ithaca Farmers' Market across from Johnson's Boatyard in Ithaca. SIMON WHEELER / STAFF PHOTOS