

STATE TURNS TO LOCAL VOLUNTEERS TO HELP PROTECT LAKES FROM INVASIVE SPECIES

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The state's Department of Energy and Environmental Protection has launched a new initiative that relies on local volunteers to help combat the spread of invasive plants and animal species in Connecticut's lakes.

The Invasive Investigators program trains volunteers to examine boats arriving at lakes for signs of invasive species. The volunteers also educate boaters in their communities about how to properly clean their vessels so they don't spread invasive species to other lakes.

The volunteers help fill a large void in DEEP staffing. The department employs about 20 seasonal boating assistants who are spread among 120 state boat launches. But hundreds of town-owned and private boat launches are outside the department's jurisdiction.

In helping prevent the spread of invasive species, the volunteers perform many of the same duties that paid staff members do but potentially have a much wider reach. They are free to offer their services at town-owned and private launches.

The DEEP is hoping the effort will mitigate the damage that invasive species cause to Connecticut's lakes. Although the program is meant to curb the spread of all invasive species, this year the DEEP placed special emphasis on the dangers posed by the zebra mussel, a tiny mollusk already found in four Connecticut lakes.

Zebra mussels cling to boat bottoms, the pipes of water treatment plants, hydroelectric assemblies and marina pilings. They destroy marine life by removing sources of food used by some fish and other organisms.

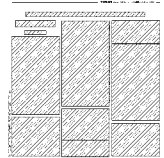
The zebra mussel, native to Eastern Europe, was first found in Connecticut in 1998 in Salisbury's Twin Lakes, according to Gwendolyn Flynn of the DEEP.

By November 2010, two lakes in western Connecticut, Lake Lillinonah and Lake Zoar, had become infested with the mollusks — just one of 19 invasive marine plants and animal species found in Connecticut.

Members of the Candlewood Lake community are trying to stop zebra mussels from spreading to their lake from nearby Zoar and Lillinonah. Candlewood already has other invasive species, including Eurasian milfoil, a prickly aquatic plant that repels swimmers.

"We don't have zebra mussels yet, but they're knocking at our door," said Larry Marsicano, president of the Connecticut Federation of Lakes and executive director of the Candlewood Lake Authority.

Zebra mussels can attach themselves to most living and non-living surfaces, including boats. Unwitting boaters traveling from lake to lake risk carrying the stowaways to new waters if they don't properly clean their boats.





HANDOUT

ZEBRA MUSSELS attached to a bottle.

Since April, the Invasive Investigators program has trained more than 70 volunteers during five sessions held in sites throughout the state.

The volunteers, generally boaters themselves, learn how to identify common invasive plants and animals and how to teach the proper boat-cleaning procedure — “clean, drain and dry” — to those who use their lakes.

The volunteers work shifts at boat launches in their communities to inspect arriving boats for invasive species, with the boat owners’ permission.

Although volunteers can inspect boats, they cannot prevent them — even those harboring invasive species — from entering the water. They can, however, report such boaters to the DEEP, which will then refer the matter to the department’s area environmental conservation officers for possible investigation, Flynn said.

In Connecticut, boaters are legally obligated to clean all plant matter — invasive or otherwise — off their boats after they leave any body of water. Boaters found

trying to enter a lake with any plant matter on their boats risk a \$95 state fine. State law doesn't similarly bar zebra mussels or other animal species, but such regulations are being considered, Flynn said.

Flynn said the department's hope is that any lake visitor made aware that his boat is carrying an invasive species will take the time to voluntarily remove it — even if that means rescheduling boating plans.

In late May, for example, a volunteer at Candlewood Lake found zebra mussels on a boat that, according to its owner, had been purchased near the Hudson River. The boat's owner left the lake, cleaned the boat and passed a follow-up inspection when he returned, Flynn said.

The volunteers are highly motivated because they work in their area communities. They have an intimate knowledge of their own lakes and the desire to protect them.

Phyllis Schaer of Sherman, chairwoman of the Candlewood Lake Authority's invasive species subcommittee, wakes up early on Saturdays to begin her rounds at Candlewood Lake. She typically offers to inspect the boats of about 11 newcomers a day, she said. She also takes the time to teach members of the lake community how to take care of their boats to prevent spreading invasive species.

Schaer said that many boaters do not take the problem seriously because they feel no impact from a single pest they fail to clean from their boat. But over the long term, if the invasive species settles in their local lake, it is expensive for the community to contain it.

"It's insidious because people think that if these things don't bite you, they're not dangerous. But they bite you in your economic pocketbook," Schaer said.

For more information about invasive species in Connecticut and how to prevent spreading them, visit www.ct.gov/dep/invasivespecies



RICK HARTFORD/THE HARTFORD COURANT

ZEBRA MUSSELS cling to milfoil from the Twin Lakes in Salisbury in 2001.



BRUCE FLETCHER

MILFOIL CATCHING a ride on a boat trailer. Infestations of milfoil can snarl up a lake, interfering with recreation.