Community, Natural Resource & Economic Development Impact Report

Clean Boats, Clean Waters: Working with boaters to protect Wisconsin lakes from aquatic invasive species

"I definitely believe that by working with 'Clean Boats, Clean Waters', I've been able to make a difference in the community."

—"Clean Boats, Clean Waters" volunteer watercraft inspector

Situation

More than 15,000 lakes dot the Wisconsin landscape, providing the state with prime economic, environmental and recreational resources. Citizens rely on lakes for clean drinking water, tourism, recreation and beautiful views of the natural world.

The health and beauty of many lakes are being impaired by the presence of aquatic invasive species. These non-native plants, animals and pathogens are introduced to Wisconsin in a variety of ways. They may be carried in the ballast water of ocean-going ships or accidentally introduced from horticultural plantings or aquariums. Because they grow faster, mature earlier, and have no natural predators here, aquatic invasive species, or AIS, can negatively impact the diversity and abundance of native species in lakes, as well as hinder recreational activities.

Unfortunately, now that they're here, AIS travel from lake to lake primarily with human help, hitching a ride on boats, fishing equipment, and trailers as people travel to lakes across the state. In this way, Eurasian water-milfoil, curly-leaf pondweed, zebra mussels and other AIS have made their way from Europe and Asia into some of Wisconsin's inland lakes.

Response

In an effort to protect water bodies and prevent the further spread of these aquatic hitchhikers, the University of Wisconsin-Extension Lakes program, the Wisconsin Lakes Partnership and citizen volunteers joined forces in 2004 to initiate "Clean Boats, Clean Waters," a statewide watercraft inspection program.

Volunteers have been an integral part of protecting Wisconsin's lakes for many years. With so many water bodies, and so few state resources, volunteer efforts to educate boaters about AIS and how to prevent their spread are more important than ever. Through "Clean Boats, Clean Waters" workshops, UW-Extension Lakes staff train citizens how to increase AIS awareness in their communities.

Adults and youth share information with boaters, anglers and the general public on AIS and the ways they travel from lake to lake. Volunteers also show boaters where invasives are most likely to hitch a ride and encourage boaters to check their boats and equipment for invasive species before they enter the water. As they speak with the boaters and anglers, inspectors collect and report valuable data on boater behaviors and awareness levels that are used to improve outreach efforts and support the watercraft inspection program.

In 2004, 23 "Clean Boats, Clean Waters" workshops were conducted across the state, covering the biology of AIS; offering tips on how to recruit and retain volunteers; providing practice in speaking to citizens at boat landings; and giving instructions on collecting data. Workshops have continued to be offered each year since, and, as of 2008, more than 100 workshops have been conducted in 59 counties with over 1,100 watercraft inspectors trained.

Outcomes

Thanks to the tremendous efforts of watercraft inspectors across the state, much valuable information has been collected. The year 2008 marked a high point in many of our data records. Some interesting and exciting trends were revealed in the information collected thus far.

- Citizens and staff spent 33,228 hours inspecting at the landings. More than 7,000 more hours were spent inspecting in 2008 than in 2007.
- 54,115 boats were inspected in 2008. This number is up from previous years and suggests an increase in inspection efficiency, and may be the result of a small increase in staff.
- In addition, dramatically more people were contacted at landings in 2008, as compared to previous years. Nearly 112,000 individuals received the inspectors' AIS prevention message.
- Boaters continue to be increasingly aware of the AIS laws that exist in the state; 91% of boaters and anglers were aware that it is illegal to launch a boat that has any plants attached.
- The data also indicate that boaters are not moving their boats among different lakes in a five-day time period as much as in the past. Frequent "lake hopping" can spread AIS from one lake to others if proper prevention steps are not taken. This trend suggests that boaters are aware of this behavior's negative impacts.
- Ninety-two percent of the boaters contacted indicated that they take one of the key AIS prevention steps—inspecting their boat and equipment and removing any plants they find.

Since the beginning of the "Clean Boats, Clean Waters" program in 2004, each year most boaters have reported that watercraft inspectors are their main source for information about AIS. This statistic, and all of the other data collected, indicate that watercraft inspectors are being successful in increasing awareness of how the spread of aquatic invasives can be prevented.

The passion that "Clean Boats, Clean Waters" volunteers demonstrate through face-to-face communications with boaters and the hours spent working the boat landings is inspiring to the individuals they contact. These volunteers are working to protect their local water bodies for future generations—and they know that what they are doing is making a difference.

For more information, contact:

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