

Commentary: All it takes is one boat

by Steve Gunther

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Insanity is doing the same thing, over and over again, but expecting different results. Some smart guy named Albert Einstein said that and it's a thought that comes to mind when considering our collective response to aquatic invasive species in our Minne-sota waterways.

In the past, the recreational quality of our metro area lakes has been highly impacted by the unintentional transfer of invasive species from one lake to another. Curly Leaf Pondweed and Eurasian Milfoil are just two examples. Within two to three years of appearing in one lake, they are observed in adjacent lakes.

These mats of weeds have clogged many a propeller and made many fine lakes un-navigable as they reproduced and multiplied. Public and private monies were spent to reduce their impact, either by treating them with chemicals (are these multi syllable com-pounds really safe?) or harvesting them with nautical threshers (where does all the stinky wet "hay" with entangled fish end up anyway?). A lakeshore home owner might typically spend \$200 to \$600 per year in an attempt to reduce them for a season in their immediate shoreline. Citizen-based Lake Associations might spend \$5,000 to \$15,000 to fight them in the common areas, trying to open up lanes so boats can move from one part of a lake to another. Parks departments do the same. Grants from the DNR and other public entities help defray the costs but real money is spent. Our collective money is spent. Your money is spent.

Now the latest invasive species threat in our lakes, zebra mussels, is at our doorstep. When you see a picture of one of these brown and gold striped mini morsels nestled in a finely manicured hand, you react the same way as you might when you see a baby rabbit. Cute! The problem is that they reproduce like rabbits and, once established, there is no environmentally safe control method to kill them. Because of this, the DNR does not try to eliminate zebra mussels if they become established in a waterway. The mis-sion becomes only one of containment.

"So what?" some people ask, "What's the big deal?" Unlike invasive weeds, which are a nuisance when they infect a lake, zebra mussels are a disaster. Medicine Lake resident Scott Burglechner has firsthand experience with zebra mussels. He can tell you what the big deal is. Following are his observations.

* "Zebra mussels reproduce like rabbits and are tough, clingy, and sharp, like razors.

* "My recollection is that zebra mussels were first detected in Cayuga Lake (in western New York State) in 1993 or 1994. The lake was fully infested with them by 1995. This is a lake that stretches 38 miles.

* "Here is what infestation looks like: clumps of tiny razor sharp shells attached

to any hard surface—rocks, docks, pipes, boats—and my perception is that the shallower the water, the greater the infestation. “

* “Within a year every boat in the lake had to be on a lift. They really clog intake lines on boats and irrigation systems.”

* “We had to start wearing shoes in the lake to prevent our feet from being cut.
“

* “I have seen people dive from docks, brush the bottom of the lake, and come up with deep cuts from the zebra mussels. “

* “I have observed that the water appears clearer than it used to, allowing weeds to grow thicker and removing food from the eco-system for young fish. “

* “I am scared about what these animals could do to our lake. It is much smaller and shallower than Cayuga Lake. I believe serious impacts to the natural and recreational uses of our lake are one boat away.”

These beasts are currently infesting many lakes in the metro area including Lake Minnetonka, Lake Nokomis and Prior Lake. Their spread from lake to lake most likely occurs when improperly cleaned boats enter clean waters after having been in infected waters.

The tiny mussels or their larvae are stowaways on the watercraft or trailer, in the water in the motor, bilge, bait bucket or livewell or in aquatic vegetation and transferred when the boat is launched into clean waters. While there are laws in place with moderate fines to protect against this kind of transfer, the level of boater knowledge and compliance to these laws is truly anyone’s guess. A conservation officer from the Morris area relayed in the Star Tribune that 25 percent of the boats he inspected were being transported illegally with their drain plugs in and the boats undrained.

With that kind of performance, your favorite lake may be one boat away from being added to the list of infected waters. And unlike invasive weeds, which are a nuisance when they infect a lake, zebra mussels are a disaster.

This is when Albert Einstein’s famous quote comes to mind. With a lot of money, we’ve used public service messages and random boat inspections in the past and have only slowed the transfer of previous invasive species. That approach is not good enough. We need a much higher level of attention and the resources to inspect every boat coming and going from the launches. We need each and every boater reminded of the rules and fined if they don’t comply. We need tools to clean and disinfect the boat and trailer at the launch station. But can we afford it?

Gov. Dayton just signed the Aquatic Invasive Species legislation to ramp up the battle but, while much improved, it doesn’t provide sufficient resources. With over 3,000 lakes with public accesses in the state, the costs would be huge to provide just inspection resources at every one of them. There are roughly 2,000

hours of launch access during the period that the water is warm enough for zebra mussel larvae to survive.

Providing an inspector at each launch (assume \$10/hour) would cost \$20,000. Total cost, \$60 million. Is this likely to be added to our state budget? Nope. Will boat fees be immediately raised statewide to pay for this kind of thing? Don't hold your breath. Are lake associations willing to foot part of the bill for their individual lake access? Absolutely, but most can't raise the kind of money needed.

So what's the solution? We must be creative and must combine our resources to protect our lakes. The leaders of the lake associations from Christmas Lake, Lotus Lake and Lake Minnewashta have formed the Lake Action Alliance (LAA). Our lake associations are willing to pool our money and volunteers. We are actively working with the Carver Parks authorities, The Minnehaha Creek and Riley Purgatory Bluff Creek Watershed Districts and the leadership of Chanhassen and Shorewood to pilot a program where:

- * The individual education of boaters and inspection of their boat and trailer is not performed at each individual launch on each lake but performed at a central inspection site on one lake.

- * Once certified as "clean" at the inspection site, the boater is free to launch at any of our three lakes.

- * A keypad controlled access gate at the remote launch site would prevent uncertified boats from launching, but the certified boater would be given a single use key code to enable their launch.

Is it inconvenient to boaters wishing to launch? Yes, but nowhere near as inconvenient as when their favorite lake is contaminated and permanently infested with zebra mussels. If the next boater after you is careless or uninformed, you may be one boat away from having their favorite lake being added to the list of infected waters.

So what do we need? We all have to sacrifice a little to make this happen. We need our city, county and state leaders to help us do the right thing, not just what is popular or politically safe. They must require that this pilot be launched immediately and that its guidelines be followed.

We need our Lake Association members to help with the funding for the pilot or volunteer if they can't. We need our watershed districts to help with the communication and funding, if they can. We need the DNR to help us staff, train and manage the re-sources. We need the sheriff's department to ticket the violators. We need the boaters to be understanding, cooperative and part of the solution. And we need all citizens to contact their local authorities with their support for the concept.

Let's get this method in place for this summer and we can find a more elegant solution for the future. But we just can't keep doing what we've done in the past

and expect different results. That's insanity.

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Preservation Association.*

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