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Costs of Combating Invasives in Lake George Now in the Millions

By Anthony F. Hall

Thursday, January 20, 2011 

Eurasian milfoil was discovered in Lake George in 1985; since then, approximately \$3.6 million dollars have been spent to control the spread of the invasive aquatic plant.

Add to that the value of the time spent administering programs and writing grants, as well the cost of educating the public about the dangers of spreading invasives, and \$3.6 million becomes a figure that easily exceeds \$7 million.

“We’ve been conducting a milfoil management program since 1995, when the state’s Department of Environmental Conservation turned the program over to us,” said Mike White, the executive director of the Lake George Park Commission. “We’ve employed methods like hand harvesting, suction harvesting and laying benthic barriers over the plants, but we’ve only had enough resources to contain milfoil, and not enough eradicate it.”

When an aquatic invasive like Eurasian milfoil has established itself, it must be combated continuously, said Larry Eichler, a research scientist with RPI’s Darrin Fresh Water Institute in Bolton Landing.

“It’s like weeding your garden,” Eichler said. “You can’t let up.”



Woman takes water samples to test for invasives. Photo by M. Vito

The Lake's Newest Challenge: Asian Clams

Shortly after Asian Clams were discovered in Lake George in August, a Lake George Asian Clam Rapid Response Task Force was organized to address the latest threat to the lake's water quality.

"Scientists from Lake Tahoe have urged us not to repeat the mistakes they made when they failed to act quickly when the invasive Asian clam was first discovered there in 2002," said Peter Bauer, executive director of The Fund for Lake George. "Since 2002, the Asian clam population has exploded, and groups are now spending over \$1.4 million in an effort to reduce the population, but with no hope of eradication."

The Asian clam was introduced to Lake George at least two years before it was discovered, perhaps in a fisherman's bait bucket, perhaps when someone emptied an aquarium into the lake, said Sandra Nierzwicki Bauer, the Darrin Fresh Water Institute's director.

"Our rapid response team's initial step was to determine the extent of the invasion," said Nierzwicki-Bauer. "If it was manageable in scope, we would evaluate strategies for eradication. If the invasion was broad, we'd have to start thinking about management strategies."

Either strategy will be expensive; neither would have been necessary had the invasive been prevented from entering Lake George in the first place.

Prevention

"One dollar spent on prevention is equal to \$100 spent on control," says Leslie Suprenant, the invasive species management coordinator for New York State's Department of Environmental Conservation.

Lake George, of course, does have at least a rudimentary prevention program in place.

Every summer, stewards inspect roughly 10% of the boats that are launched on Lake George for signs of invasives.

According to Dave Decker, the Lake George Watershed Coalition's director, New York State has invested \$127,000 in the program since 2002.

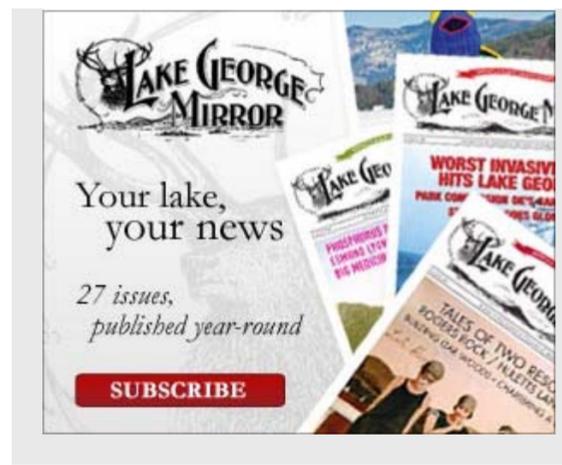
The Lake George Association has spent approximately \$50,000 of its own funds on the same program, said Walt Lender, the executive director of the LGA.

That's about \$175,000, total; less than what the Lake George Park Commission sometimes spends in one year managing milfoil.

Early Detection

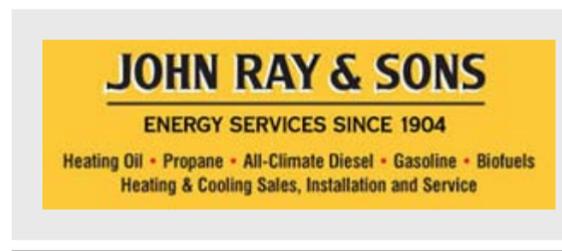
When prevention fails, detection and rapid response are key to any successful effort to combat invasives, says the LGA's Emily DeBolt.

When Zebra Mussels were found in Lake George in 1999, the Darrin Fresh Water launched a volunteer effort to remove the mollusks from the 1,500 square foot area in Lake George Village where divers had discovered them.



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The volunteers hand harvested 21,000 mussels, or more than 90% of the colony, from the site.

“Even with all the lakes nearby, and the multiple opportunities for introductions, Lake George has not become infested with Zebra mussels,” said Sandra Nierzwicki-Bauer. “One reason for that is the quick response in December, 1999.”

According to Nierzwicki-Bauer, the Darrin Fresh Water Institute has spent approximately \$800,000 battling Zebra mussels since 1999.

Within the same period of time, the Lake George Park Commission has spent at least twice as much money controlling milfoil, which was not discovered in time to be eradicated.

From 2006 to 2010 alone, for example, the Commission spent \$813,964 on managing milfoil.

Peter Bauer, the executive director of The Fund for Lake George, says that his organization has contributed \$752,000 of its funds to the Commission’s efforts since 1989.

“That figure includes the purchase of two boats for the Lake George Park Commission, several studies by the Darrin Fresh Water Institute, and two summers of removing milfoil from dense beds by divers retained by The Fund,” said Bauer.

Resources for Management

According to Mike White, the executive director of the Lake George Park Commission, the \$3.6 million spent on milfoil is money that could have been spent on other programs to protect Lake George’s legendary water quality.

“We’re sometimes criticized for not putting into place regulations to protect the lake that we’re authorized by the legislature to implement,” said White. “But once milfoil was discovered, everything got shoved off the agenda in favor of managing invasives. We’re not the organization envisioned in our enabling legislation

because invasive species emerged as the greatest threat to the Lake.”

According to its annual reports, the Commission devotes 20 to 30% of its yearly budget to managing invasive species.

For several years, those funds came from the fees the Lake George Park Commission collects in boat and dock fees.

Starting in 2006, Lake George’s representative in the New York State Senate, Betty Little, was able to use her influence to secure state funds to supplement the fees collected by the Commission.

The Lake George Watershed Coalition also won grants from the state’s Environmental Protection Fund to fight invasives, said David Decker.

“In a very real way, the state funds to manage invasives freed up the our resources to draft the stream corridor protection regulations,” said Mike White.

Since 2008, those state funds have been reduced, and according to Senator Little, there are no guarantees that they will continue to be appropriated.

Costs of Invasives to Ecosystem and Economy

“Why bother fighting invasive species?” asks Chuck Boylen, the Darrin Fresh Water Institute’s associate director. “They’re alien to the ecosystem, and they alter it; they monopolize a territory and crowd out the natives. More native species have been extirpated by invasives than by the destruction of habitat.”



Divers discuss invasives with Sandra Nierzwicki-Bauer of DWFI

For example, the native aquatic plants that help maintain the lake’s water quality are threatened by Eurasian milfoil, said Larry Eichler, who also noted that the lake’s native mollusks would be threatened if Zebra mussels ever established themselves here.

According to Sandra Nierzwicki-Bauer, Asian clams “have the potential to be as dangerous and problematic as Zebra mussels and Eurasian milfoil.”

Asian clams could drive out native clams. They also promote the growth of algae and help create a habitat where other invasives, such as Zebra mussels, can thrive.

But in addition to wreaking havoc on Lake George’s finely tuned, native ecosystem, invasives threaten Lake George’s resort economy.

“I’d submit that the costs of combating invasives pale in comparison to the economic costs of allowing them to overwhelm the lake,” said Mike White.

According to White, there is a direct correlation between a decline in water quality and a decline in property values. A recent study of Vermont lakes, for example, found that as a milfoil spreads, property values sink by one to sixteen percent. “These real estate values, and the revenues they generate in property taxes, drive our schools and local governments,” he said.

Lake George’s water quality, he adds, also supports the lake’s recreational economy, which generates \$22.5 million in local revenues every year.

“A water-based recreation study, which the Lake George Park Commission conducted in 2005, found that the water quality of Lake George was the leading factor in producing satisfaction among users,” said White. “If water quality declines, the number of boating trips will decline.”

Notes Lake George Park Commission member Dean Cook, “People don’t want to swim in milfoil and algae blooms. Invasives will kill the goose that lays the golden egg.”

“It’s Time to Get Serious about Prevention”

Cook, one of three members of the Lake George Park Commission’s newly-formed Invasive Species Prevention Sub-Committee, adds, “It’s time to get serious about prevention. Otherwise, we’re in the position of closing the barn door after the horses have escaped.”

“Prevention is the key,” says Mark King of the Nature Conservancy. “Without prevention, the cycle of

discovery and management of new invasives is endless.”



Tags: Asian Clams, Darren Fresh Water Institute, Eurasian Milfoil, Invasives, Lake George Association, Lake George Invasives, Lake George Watershed Coalition, The Fund for Lake George, Zebra Mussels

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