

Brazilian weed yanked from Waccabuc

By Greg Clary • Journal News columnist • July 10, 2009

It probably started with the innocent cleaning of an aquarium, maybe somewhere on Long Island.

The owner might have wanted to put in new water, change the tiny castle on the tank floor and wipe the glass so everybody could see the fish better.

So, he dumped the old water.

Maybe down the toilet, maybe down the storm drain, maybe in a nearby pond or lake.

What he didn't know was that he was pouring an aquatic pest into the water system that is now showing up in the Hudson Valley.

It's called Brazilian elodea and it's a popular aquarium plant that once freed from its glass confines hogs sunlight and grows as much as 2 feet a month in the wild.

With few natural enemies because it's not from around here, it grows like the weed it is - thick and widespread - with little abatement.

Except in northern Westchester, that is, where residents of a trio of lakes have raised \$80,000 to make sure the unwanted Brazilian guest doesn't make Lake Waccabuc its permanent home.

"This is a grassroots effort in more ways than one," said Jack Sinnott, the president of Three Lakes Council. "It's the first finding of this invasive plant in Westchester and just the third in the state outside of Long Island. We wanted to eradicate it while it was in a contained area."

State environmental officials consider invasives - plants and animals - to be enough of a problem that the state now has an office to combat the problem that some call an assault on biodiversity.

And the less diverse a habitat is, the less likely it is to thrive.

"If biological pollution were left alone, it's not clear what the timeframe would be for a new biological community to emerge," said Scott Kishbaugh an environmental engineer with the state. "Will it be healthier? Our experience with invasives is that it won't be. In places where Eurasian water millfoil - another invasive - has come in, they don't have the biodiversity they should have after 60 years."

Kishbaugh and other experts say that in states like Washington and Oregon, salmon runs have been blocked by Brazilian elodea - aptly named *Egeria densa* - to the point that communities have had to cut paths so the fish could continue to spawn.

The folks who live around Oscaleta, Rippowam and Waccabuc lakes didn't find it that thick, but when they conducted a plant survey last year by pulling greenery at 125 locations, they knew they had something that needed action.

Sinnott, Jan Andersen and other residents quickly organized, did their research, brought in experts like Kishbaugh and campaigned door to door to educate and mobilize their neighbors.

"It's one thing to be concerned, but taking action is a whole other step," Andersen said. "We hand pulled (the weed) last summer, but it was clear that there was too much here to do that."

So they tried unsuccessfully to get grants and ended up asking everyone to dig into their pockets to bring in professional



Divers for Universal Water Solutions in Rochester, N.Y. remove sacks filled with invasive Brazilian elodea and other aggressive foreign plants on Wednesday at WaccabucLake. (Ricky Flores/The Journal News)

help.

Cue Jerry Davis and his 10-year-old Rochester-based company Universal Water Solutions, a bunch of nomads who live in RVs most of the year and follow a growing market of choked lakes and frustrated homeowners.

Davis watched Wednesday as "The Octopus" - a custom-built pontoon boat - sat in the middle of a 2-acre Lake Waccabuc cove and fed air to his divers while they scoured the lake bottom for everything they could dislodge.

Using an underwater vacuum cleaner that sucks up the plant, its roots and the lake bottom around it, the divers work slowly a dozen feet below the surface looking for any type of flora.

Everything is pushed through straining bags that let the water go back into the lake and leave the tons of foliage to be floated to shore.

"We try to get it by the root," Jerry's brother Ira said. "This cove has a lot of other stuff, Eurasian millfoil, lily pads. "We even found an old outboard motor."

The company was featured in December on "Dirty Jobs," the Discovery Channel show highlighting work that isn't for overly tidy types.

It's easy to see why. The workers walk in muck, suck it up, wrestle their harvest to the shore and then unload it into trash bins or onto a site far enough away from water to ensure there's no migration back.

Since this water plant regenerates by fragmenting into tiny pieces that take root in new spots, the Davis brother said it's important to take up everything and make sure the entire bottom is empty of plants before moving on.

Kishbaugh said the invasive's advantage seems to be that it grows laterally and then up to the water's surface, while other aquatic plants tend to grow up and then spread out.

He said the Three Lakes Council's work was "a terrific example of citizen activism" that is necessary more and more to protect habitat.

Whatever its pattern, Sinnott said Brazilian waterweed isn't welcome now and won't be anytime soon.

"This is not a one-time shot," he said. "We can clean it all out, but we'll have to monitor it."

Additional Photos



Steve Kelly, a diver for Universal Water Solutions in Rochester is using a water vacuum to pull up invasive Brazilian Elodea and other aggressive foreign plants at Waccabuc Lake in Waccabac July 8, 2009. (Ricky Flores / The Journal News)



Dan Brewer, a diver for Universal Water Solutions in Rochester tows sacks filled with invasive Brazilian Elodea and other aggressive foreign plants at Waccabuc Lake in Waccabuc July 8, 2009. (Ricky Flores / The Journal News)



Divers for Universal Water Solutions in Rochester remove sacks filled with invasive Brazilian Elodea and other aggressive foreign plants at Waccabuc Lake in Waccabuc July 8, 2009. (Ricky Flores / The Journal News)



Dan Brewer, a diver for Universal Water Solutions in Rochester watches sacks getting filled with invasive Brazilian Elodea and other aggressive foreign plants at Waccabuc Lake in Waccabuc July 8, 2009. (Ricky Flores / The Journal News)



Divers for Universal Water Solutions in Rochester remove sacks filled with invasive Brazilian Elodea and other aggressive foreign plants at Waccabuc Lake in Waccabuc July 8, 2009. (Ricky Flores / The Journal News)



From left, Abraham Carter and Ira Davis divers for Universal Water Solutions in Rochester remove sacks filled with invasive Brazilian Elodea and other aggressive foreign plants at Waccabuc Lake in Waccabuc July 8, 2009. Davis along with his brother Jerome are owners of the company. (Ricky Flores / The Journal News)



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