

# New York DEC's Environmental Crime of Neglect



Summer has come to the Adirondacks, and with it the anticipated flotilla of recreational boaters and fishing fleet, accessing our waterways through a dense network of public and private boat launches. Joining this annual cavalcade, a horde of invading plants and marine animals: organisms with a proven record of destroying the lakes, ponds, and streams they infest. Lake associations and other private organizations across the park are once again gearing up for another season of defense against the introduction of these dangerous pests. It is an expensive battle waged by volunteers and hired lake stewards at the waters' edge, trying to inspect every boat and every trailer entering the water. And as part of this new summer ritual, appeals to Albany for effective support have gone largely unheeded.

There is a disturbing and seemingly irresolvable irony resting at the core of this environmental crisis. New York State's Department of Environmental Conservation, the state agency charged with stewardship of our waters, maintains and actively promotes the largest share of

the state's public boat launches—more than one hundred in the Adirondack Park alone. These launches not only serve to expand the constituency for environmental programs and outdoor activity to populations across the state, but have been heavily marketed by the state's division of travel and tourism as a key component to the tourism economy in rural and wilderness communities. These very launch sites have now become the principal conduit for spreading the weeds and pests that threaten to ruin the long-term health of our waters and economies.

Measured against the swarming and relentless onslaught of invasive species, the state's response seems slow, timid and sporadic. In 2003, years after the potential for ecological and economic devastation was recognized, the state assembled a task force of public agencies and private organizations to formulate a response. In an effort to catch up on battles already lost, moneys from New York's Environmental Protection Fund were made available for eradication of already established colonies of invasives. Last year that money disappeared, swept away by Albany's more urgent need to fill the hole in the general budget.

While the Invasive Species Task Force, now the Invasive Species Council, looks hopefully to the future where they will have authority to enforce prohibitions against spreading these organisms (and a dedicated funding source), their response to the

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crisis to date has been heavily weighted toward education of the boating public: kindly appeals to visiting boaters to take responsibility of lake stewardship into their own hands. At the unattended state launches, this campaign takes the form of laminated paper signs which are often lost in a cloud of sun-faded regulations and warnings, all too easily ignored. On the internet, where many potential boaters turn to plot vacation itineraries, the effort is even more hit-and-miss: While there is much information on invasive species at the DEC's labyrinthine web site, there is no centralized list nor maps of infested waterways; meanwhile, a search of ILOVENY.com (where vacationers are more likely to turn first) returns over 300 hits for "boat launch" and "boat ramp," zero hits for "invasive."

Ominously, the effort lacks any means for gauging its own effectiveness. There is no way to accurately assess how many visiting boaters inspect the hulls of their boats and the nooks and crannies of their trailers before sliding them into the water, or those who take the time to wash the same surfaces on their way out. More to the point, the state lacks the capacity to determine how many visiting boaters, distracted by kids, fishing gear, coolers, inflatable inner tubes, etc., impatient to get out on the water, simply ignore the official requests. Lacking any feedback, these efforts look less like an assertive, determined strategy to combat the scourge, and much more like a cry for help.

The unavoidable reality at the water's edge remains: the only way to prevent the introduction of invasive organisms into our water (and the very best way to promulgate public education of the threat) is to greet every boater at every launch, and walk them through a point-by-point inspection before they launch.

This is, of course, an ideal solution. The reality: it is prohibitively expensive to station a lake steward at every launch at every waterway for an entire summer. Even on Lake Placid, a lake with a large and wealthy shore owner population, the high cost of available stewardship programs allows for only part-time coverage at one of two boat launches. While the prospect for expanding stewardship coverage throughout the park and across the state (many waterways with no invested shore owner communities) seem impossible, it is not.

There is a cost-effective way to safeguard our waters (and by extension our local economies), but it will require leadership from Governor Paterson and better cooperation among state agencies. The solution, in two words: student volunteers.

Many public schools across the state require students to devote a minimum number of hours to community service before they can graduate from high school. This is a vast, untapped reservoir of man-and-woman-power that could potentially be channeled to protecting what is arguably the most essential long-term resource in the state. What's more, enlisting New York's youth in conservation of natural resources has a dignified pedigree in this state, where Governor Franklin Delano Roosevelt first created a civilian conservation corps, template for the legendary Depression-era federal program. Getting there is easy. A member agency of New York's Invasive Species Council is the State Board of Education. They, along with the DEC could learn a lot from a little history. And the entire state, and generations to follow us would surely benefit.

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