

The Weed Wackers

Southern Maine's lakes, ponds, and rivers are under siege. Invasive weeds, inadvertently imported on boats from out of state, are choking out native plants, starving fish of oxygen, and restricting boat access. The good news is that only a few water bodies have been destroyed by these aggressive plants. In many more places, the weeds are under control, but the need for upkeep is relentless, and the task falls almost entirely to volunteers. The editors of *Down East* are proud to award the 34th Down East Environmental Award to the more than 500 volunteers who have spent immeasurable hours checking boats at public launches, pulling and destroying weeds, and monitoring the quality of lakes so they'll be clean and healthy for future generations.

BY SARA ANNE DONNELLY

By late November, West Pond in Parsonsfield is usually frozen. You wouldn't know a war is being waged here unless you dove down under the ice and mucked around at the bottom, where the lake fish are half-asleep, suspended in waiting. There in the mud you'll find tiny, featherlike weeds, the nemeses of the 70 or so families who summer in the cabins dotting the shoreline. If those weeds win, crystal-clear West Pond turns into a green, gooey swamp.

One recent morning in Eliot, about an hour's drive south, Dennis Spinney – the dogged West Pond Association president known as Captain Spinney – accidentally knocked the modem off his kitchen table while looking for digital photos of the curly-leaf pondweed. Spinney grumbled an apology for not being “a computer whiz kid.” He picked the black box up off the floor, set it back on the table, and growled at it. “He’s a perfectionist,” his wife Linda said gently. “I think everybody in the family are perfectionists.”



Dennis Spinney dives for curly-leaf pondweed in West Pond.

Perfectionism can be a frustrating tendency when it comes to invasive weeds. Spinney, the retired former assistant fire chief of the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, is used to fighting forces of nature. But you know when you've beaten a fire. With invasive plants, the fire never really goes out. Spinney compares fighting curly-leaf to “shoveling against the current.” It's a particularly insidious invasive that can grow in a season from a palm-size baby (known as a turion) to a mature plant stretching 12 feet or more. Grown thick, as curly-leaf tends to do, the plant is a choking mass that most fish can't swim through and most native plants can't survive.

There are about two-dozen water bodies in Maine infested with invasive plants, mostly milfoil, and all of them in the southwestern part of the state. The plants are brought in on boats, anchor lines, and fishing gear that haven't been cleaned after touching tainted waters in New Hampshire and farther south. Because the plants haven't been found elsewhere in the state, the thinking is that the plant can't survive a drive beyond Maine's southwestern lakes and rivers.

In the summer of 2004, Department of Environmental Protection agents investigated a report of a small patch of turion floating on one side of West Pond. They took Captain Spinney out on the water, scooped a handful of web-like curly-leaf off the surface, and said, “That's what it looks like.” Curious, Spinney went out later with his smelt net, looking for the stuff. He found two other patches, one as long as a basketball court. He called DEP and said, “I hate to tell you this, but you got a lot more than you think you got.” It became an obsession – wake up in the morning, just about cry seeing the green stuff on the pond, and go out scooping it up with a smelt net.

Eventually, Spinney bought an old pontoon boat and outfitted it with an enormous water vacuum. These days, Spinney and his sons dive to the bottom of the pond every spring and summer to feed curly-leaf pondweed into a tube that sucks it up into troughs on the deck. There, other West Pond volunteers pack the weed into laundry bags that are emptied into a compost pile in the woods. The boat is called a DASH (for diver-assisted suction harvester) and it can suck up 10 or more laundry-bagfuls in one haul, depending on the weeds' maturity. The DASH operates about 12 weeks a year, and it's put a serious dent in the curly-leaf. The goal is to minimize the weed so much that a sighting is rare. It's unlikely that the plant will ever completely be eradicated from West Pond.

On average, the state contributes about \$1.1 million a year to invasive plant monitoring and mitigation. The

revenue comes from a Maine Lakes and Rivers Protection Fund sticker that freshwater motorboat owners are required to buy annually. About half of that money goes to prevention efforts like boat monitoring that are intended to catch the weed before it infests the water. For the tough work of mitigation once the plant has taken hold, the remainder of the fund is divided among the small volunteer associations that oversee the 25 affected water systems (a system includes linked water bodies, like a river flowing into a lake). Because state funding often isn't enough to harvest invasives for a whole season, neighborhood groups like the West Pond Association typically more than match their annual grants with their own money, in addition to investing their unpaid time. According to the Maine Volunteer Lake Monitoring Program, about 550 volunteers are active in invasives work.

The fight to preserve our waters is tough and ongoing, but there is good news. Maine's rate of infestation is relatively low – less than 1 percent of its waters – and there have been success stories, like the Songo River and Brandy Pond, where volunteers have all but eliminated the plant. Still, there are other places, like lakes Messalonskee and Arrowhead, with infestations so thick they will be very difficult to overcome. “It's just such a dynamic situation because you've got the constant threat of new plants being introduced,” says Peter Lowell, executive director of the Lakes Environmental Association. Weather, resources, and a lack of manpower are all challenges – finding young volunteers willing to take over is particularly tough.

“It's getting difficult now,” says Spinney, who is 64. “Probably for the same reason I got out of the fire service: Just burnt out. Tired of it. If I can get all those ducks in a row so that anybody

could take and do the grant paperwork and collect money from everybody around the pond and keep it going, that's what I'm hoping.”

Back in his kitchen, Spinney smiled to remember childhood summers on West Pond in the cabin his parents built. In those days, the pond was clear. You could dive down and see a whole living world under the surface, stretching on and on. He has a pet smallmouth bass, a fish he met while diving. The fish's name is Buddy, and Spinney feeds it right out of his hand. But as talk turned from Buddy to the likely source of the curly-leaf infestation, his smile faded.

“If they'd just drained the system on their boat before they launched it, which would've taken all of a few minutes . . .,” Spinney said. “It's aggravating to think that somebody brought that stupid thing in just because they were lazy.”

Sara Anne Donnelly is a contributing editor.

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