

Boat inspections remain top choice to slow AIS spread

Inspectors log 5,000 hours in Vilas, Oneida counties

BY GARY RIDDERBUSCH
NEWS-REVIEW EDITOR

It was another record-breaking season for watercraft inspections in 2010, as volunteers and others inspected boats and educated boaters and anglers on the importance of taking action to prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species (AIS).

The movement of recreational boats from one lake to another is still regarded as the primary source of spread of AIS through Wisconsin's inland water bodies, according to Ted Ritter, Vilas County invasive species coordinator.

"While boater hygiene is improving, there is still need to prompt changes in transient boater behavior," said Ritter.

During 2010 inspections, volunteers and paid inspectors, known as "water guards,"

found that 18% of boats had been in another water body in the previous five days.

Ritter said the "Clean Boats, Clean Waters" watercraft inspection program is the most effective means for accomplishing that behavior.

Statewide, 65,831 boats were inspected by volunteers and paid inspectors, 142,104 people were contacted about the Clean Boats, Clean Waters program and more than 38,800 hours were spent conducting watercraft inspections.

Vilas County has been a substantial contributor to the success of the program since its beginning, according to Ritter.

"That is as it should be,
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considering there are nearly 200 boating access points to Vilas County's 1,320-plus lakes," he said. "Those landings are used by locals and visitors alike."

During the summer of 2010, the busiest of those Vilas County landings were manned by volunteers who donated 2,941 hours of their time to talk to boaters after being trained in the principles of watercraft inspecting. Another 1,613 hours were provided by paid inspectors. In total, contact was made with 15,126 boaters.

In Oneida County, 10,594 boats were inspected and people made contact with 23,530 boaters. Oneida County volunteers and paid inspectors logged 5,747 hours educating boaters at landings, including 1,206 hours at landings on the Three Lakes Chain of Lakes.

While volunteers are key to the Clean Boats, Clean Waters program, Ritter said the volunteerism is difficult to sustain.

"Even the most ardent supporters of the local AIS initiative eventually burn out faster than new recruits can be found," he said. "New ways of manning boat landings must be found if the program is to hang around long enough to outlive its need."

Ritter said "creative partnering" has become the new

catch phrase for finding solutions to this challenge. At least two local organizations are coming up with new ideas to man the boat landings.

For example, the Big St. Germain Lake District enticed the local Lions Club to perform several hundred hours of watercraft inspections during 2010.

Meanwhile, the County Land & Water Conservation Department worked with the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh to develop a program whereby student interns were provided summer housing in Vilas County, mileage reimbursement, a modest hourly wage and academic credit for 400 hours each of watercraft inspection services. Ritter said that program will expand significantly in 2011.

"Other means of 'paying' people through sharing of resources to accomplish multiple goals are sure to be found to keep the Clean Boats, Clean Waters program going strong for at least a few years longer," said Ritter.

The goal of the Clean Boats, Clean Waters program is to share information about Wisconsin's AIS regulations, encourage people to drain all their water and clean plants off their boat and equipment to prevent the transport of AIS to other inland lakes.

Editor's Opinion

Volunteer boat inspectors are true conservationists

As aquatic invasive species (AIS) become an increasing threat to water quality, fisheries, recreation and property values across the lake country of Vilas and Oneida counties, we are fortunate that hundreds of true conservationists have stepped forward to protect our lakes.

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) reports that 11,640 were logged by volunteer boat inspectors during 2010 — 30% of the total hours statewide. Another 27,160 hours of inspections were conducted by paid personnel, which includes the 10 DNR Water Guards who enforce laws at boat landings across the state.

The really impressive part, from a conservation perspective, is that 75% of the volunteer hours were logged in these two counties. That's right, volunteers put in 8,688 hours watching boat landings in Vilas and Oneida, including 1,206 hours on the Three Lakes Chain.

Volunteers are certified through the Clean Boats Clean Waters program to inspect boats, collect data and share vital awareness information with boat owners. In the battle against AIS, they are warriors who've chosen to put themselves on the front lines.

Because of their dedication and hard work, we know vital information — like that 18% of the boats had been in another water body in the previous five days, and that 88% said they drained all water from their fish and livewell. Those statistics really illustrate the importance of having trained inspectors who can effectively approach people who are recreating.

The program meant the inspection of a record 65,831 boats across the state, 50% more than just two years ago. Some of those boats and trailers contained Eurasian water milfoil and other invasives, threatening new waters that are currently free of infestations. A total of 142,104 people were contacted about the Clean Boats Clean Water message.

The best news of all is that 95% of the boat owners surveyed said they inspected and removed plants from their boats, trailers and other equipment after their last trip to the lake. That means that years of inspection work continues to pay off in terms of public awareness.

Anglers, boaters and the public in general should be extremely supportive of the inspection program and especially the volunteers — common citizens who care about the state's resources. They are true conservationists, paying more than lip service to a noble cause.

Even that part of the inspection program that requires wages is more effective and less costly than after-the-fact management of an infestation — which drains financial resources year after year with no hope for eradication.

So the smart money is on prevention through inspections and public awareness. And Wisconsin could improve that a step further with a more aggressive containment program. That would mean more inspection efforts in waters known to contain invasives so that they don't leave on boats and trailers — equipment possibly destined for one of the 95% of waterways that are still free of invasives.

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