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Iowans join the fight against pesky invaders

Unwanted fish, plants can destroy Iowa's waters, unless action is taken.

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Boone, Ia. - Iowa outdoors enthusiasts stand on the front line of a battle against harmful fish and plant species invading state waters.

Anglers, recreational boaters, waterfowl hunters and scuba divers are helping control unwanted species that found their way into Iowa and may never be eradicated.

But they can be controlled.

"That's why we are trying to educate people about what they can do to help," said Kim Bogenschutz, who heads the Aquatic Nuisance Species Program from the Iowa Department of Natural Resources' Wildlife Research Station near Boone. Her program will receive about \$480,000 more this year from an increase in boat registrations.

She will have seven boat inspectors, instead of the three she had last year, plus two people to do summer surveys on invasive aquatic plants.

The department has brochures telling people how to stop the transport and spread of unwanted species that can adversely affect other species, recreation and safety.

The species can move from one body of water to another through the dumping of water in bait buckets, live wells and bilges, scuba gear and organisms attached to boats or hanging from boat trailers and motors, Bogenschutz said.

The seven inspectors will cover popular boating areas this summer such as the Iowa Great Lakes and Spirit Lake. They will look at boats before and after they go in the water and talk to boat operators about precautions against the invasive species, Bogenschutz said.

Boaters are asked to spray off their craft using high pressure or hot tap water after use, or allow the boat to dry for about 12 days.

Examples of invasive fish, plants and mussels include:

The big-head and silver carp: They reproduce quickly, crowding out other fish and eating their food supply in the form of plankton. Silver carp has become a danger to boaters and skiers, Bogenschutz said, because they grow quite large and can jump as high as 10 feet out of the water.

"They have landed in boats, broken noses and dislocated shoulders," she said. "On the Illinois River, a woman was knocked unconscious from her jet ski by a silver carp jumping in the air."

Pat Haefner of Oskaloosa, president of the Iowa Bowfishing Association, said: "Back in 1997, you could look all day and find it hard to get a big-head carp. Now, it only takes a few hours. On my best day below Ottumwa, I and one other guy put 75 fish in the boat in three hours. We stopped fishing because we just got wore out."

Eurasian watermilfoil and curly-leafed pond weed: The non-native aquatics grow thick, making boating, swimming and fishing tough. The plants also deplete oxygen levels for fish and crowd out other native plants.

Zebra mussels: They free-float in the water in the early stages of life and as they get more mature, attach to surfaces, including native mussels, suffocating them. They take over their food supplies. They attach to pipes and drain covers at hydroelectric plants and water treatment plants, which often leads to expensive removal work.

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These 202 big-head carp were shot by the four members of the Iowa Bowfishing Association in 2004 in the Des Moines River near Ottumwa. The anglers, from left: Brian Ball, Jeremy Leu, Larry Sims and Nevin Leu. The fish helped make up about 5,000 pounds of big-head carp taken from the river by club members in one day.

How to battle invasive species

Iowa Department of Natural Resources officials are asking people who do recreational activities in Iowa waters, as well as in other states, to take precautions to help prevent the spread of invasive species like big-head carp, silver carp, Eurasian watermilfoil, curly-leafed pond weed and zebra mussels.

AFFECTED AREAS: Eurasian watermilfoil and curly-leafed pond weed can be found around Iowa. Although they most likely cannot be eradicated completely, natural resources officials have had areas around boat docks, beaches and fishing jetties treated for the weeds to keep the areas clear.

Zebra mussels, which have inundated the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, have now been found in Clear Lake and Lake Delhi.

Big-head carp and silver carp have made it all the way up to the Red Rock Dam on the Des Moines River. They also can be found in the Chariton River, Mississippi River and Missouri River. This year, Iowa fisheries biologists found a fish kill in a wetland area off the Missouri River, called Louisville Bend. The 40-acre area had an estimated 6,000-8,000 dead fish, of which 50 to 60 percent were big-head and silver carp.

WHO CAN HELP: Anglers, boaters, scuba divers, personal

watercraft operators, sailors and waterfowl hunters.

WHAT THEY CAN DO: People who shore and fly-fish should remove aquatic plants, animals and mud from waders and hip boots and drain water from bait containers.

- Personal watercraft users should avoid running the engine through aquatic plants. When they are finished riding, they should run the engine for 5-10 seconds on the trailer to blow out excess water and vegetation from the internal drive, then turn off the engine.

- People who use sailboats should remove aquatic plants and animals from the hull, centerboard or bilge board wells, rudder post area and trailer.

- Boaters should inspect their boats after taking them out of the lake and remove any vegetation caught on the trailer or anything attached to the boat. Drain all water from the boat. In addition, they should rinse the boat and trailer with a high-pressure washer or hot tap water above 104 degrees before the boat is used somewhere else, or allow the boat to dry for up to 12 days.

- Anglers should throw away unwanted bait by putting them in the trash, rather than throwing them into the water.

- Waterfowl hunters should remove all plant and animal material and mud from their boats, motors, trailers, waders or hip boots, decoy lines and anchors, and cut cattails or other plants above the waterline when they are used for camouflage or blinds.