

STOP AQUATIC HITCHHIKERS!TM *Enters Conservation Lexicon*

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**STOP AQUATIC
HITCHHIKERS!TM**

"Only you can prevent forest fires." "Give a hoot, don't pollute." These mottos have been a part of America's vocabulary over the past 50 years. They effectively helped to define forest resource conservation and pollution prevention by bringing about behavior change, establishing social norms, and protecting our natural resources. Like these successful campaign mottos, *Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers!TM* recently joined America's lexicon.

Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers! is more than a motto for preventing the spread of aquatic invasive species (AIS) across the United States, however. Launched in 2002, it's also a national partnership connecting businesses, industries, media, agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and communities in a public education campaign to raise AIS awareness and empower boaters, anglers and others to take action to prevent the spread of AIS. AIS are nonnative plants, animals, and pathogens that cause environmental damage, economic loss, and harm to human health. You've probably heard of AIS like zebra mussels, hydrilla, and viral hemorrhagic septicemia (VHS). David Pimentel, Cornell University, estimates that AIS cost the United States billions of dollars in economic damage each year.

The *Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers!* campaign to protect lakes, rivers, reservoirs, and estuaries has already influenced boater and angler behavior. In 2005, Minnesota Sea Grant received support from NOAA/Sea Grant to extend and evaluate the implementation of the campaign along invasion corridors across Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa. In collaboration with the states' DNRs, University of Minnesota Extension, Wisconsin Sea Grant, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, Wildlife Forever, and many local organizations, several million people were exposed to the campaign's messages using strategic communications and outreach.

Results of a three-state survey led by Minnesota Sea Grant shows that not only are the campaign's AIS prevention messages reaching boaters and anglers, they are raising awareness and empowering people to take precautionary actions at water accesses. (Analysis of 2007 survey data is underway.)

Most survey respondents exposed to the *Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers!* messages said the campaign helped them to become more aware of AIS (86%). Importantly, 97% of the survey respondents said the messages WILL influence them to take action! In Minnesota, 99% of boaters surveyed said they plan to take actions after hearing why

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preventing the spread of AIS is important and how they can help. This is an increase from 2000 when over 90% said they took action, and 1994 when over 70% said they took action.

Especially in Minnesota, the *Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers!* messages seem to be working. Minnesota DNR inspectors report that the frequency of aquatic vegetation observed on watercraft (the main way zebra mussels spread) remains low – an indication that boaters are removing it. Furthermore, zebra mussels have been almost held at bay; they've been on Minnesota's eastern border for more than a decade. Eurasian watermilfoil spread has significantly slowed since 1993. Ruffe and round goby, two nonnative fish, invaded the Duluth-Superior Harbor but have not spread inland. Minnesota boaters and anglers appear to have gotten the message: *Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers!*

With about 40 million anglers and another 13 million boaters, America's recreational community needs to be aware of AIS and know what to do at water accesses to prevent the spread. Of all the groups that could spread AIS, boaters and anglers are understood the best. Knowing how to reach them and what motivates them to take action has been critical to the success of *Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers!* messages. Again, research shows that boater and anglers can be a part of the problem, but they are willing to be part of the solution.

Natural resource extension professionals are challenged to put information within their reach, or sometimes along their paths. You can help to extend the campaign to prevent the spread of aquatic hitchhikers. Partner with the *Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers!* campaign to educate people, distribute materials, emphasize the prevention message, and adopt standard guidelines (used in Minnesota since 1991; see side bar).

Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers! is now over 600 partners strong. It is making a difference to waters in the Upper Midwest – it can make a difference in your area. Clearly, success means making public education and communication priorities as part of comprehensive effort emphasizing: prevention, watercraft inspection, monitoring, and policy/enforcement. The demonstrated return in environmental, economic and public health is well worth the investment.

To join the public service campaign, visit: www.protectyourwaters.net. Joining is easy, free, and will allow you to tap into expertise and resources of the campaign. What are you waiting for? Once AIS are allowed to spread, eradication can be very costly. Reaction is a poor substitute for prevention. Give a hoot...only you can *Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers!*

Guidelines for Boaters and Anglers - What You Can Do

- ✓ ***Remove*** aquatic plants and animals before leaving any waterbody
- ✓ ***Drain*** water from bait bucket, live well, bilge and motor before leaving any waterbody
- ✓ ***Dispose*** of unwanted bait, fish parts, and worms in the trash
- ✓ ***Spray/wash*** boat, trailer, and equipment with high pressure hot water on your way home or at home
OR
- ✓ ***Dry*** everything for at least 5 days