

Stop aquatic hitchhikers - it makes dollars and sense

By Doug Jensen, University of Minnesota Sea Grant Program

People generally love lakes and rivers. They also tend to favor the exotic. So why doesn't a lake with exotic species generate waves of affection?

Harmful aquatic invasive species (AIS) can tarnish water quality, clog waterways and impact fishing. AIS are non-native plants, animals and pathogens that cause environmental damage, economic loss, and harm to human health. Because we want Minnesota's waters to remain untarnished by invaders, it's important to keep species like zebra mussels, spiny waterfleas, New Zealand mudsnails, Eurasian watermilfoil, purple loosestrife, and viral hemorrhagic septicemia (VHS) in the news and out of the water.

With each media story about AIS, it may seem as though the invaders are gaining on us. In reality, Minnesota is doing an exemplary job of stopping aquatic hitchhikers from spreading. Only a small percentage of the state's waters are infested. We need to remain proactive and vigilant to keep it that way.

AIS can spread when people empty aquaria into lakes or streams, allow aquatic plants and animals to escape from water gardens, or travel as "hitchhikers" on commercial plant shipments. They can also "hitchhike" with boaters, anglers, waterfowl hunters, or recreational divers who don't inspect, clean and drain their equipment. Our challenge is to block AIS from spreading along these pathways.

At the forefront

Many states point to Minnesota as a model in addressing AIS pathways.

In the early 1990s, Minnesota responded to the threats of AIS by emphasizing public education, watercraft inspection, monitoring, regulations and enforcement. Authorized by the Minnesota Legislature, the Minnesota DNR established a program to prevent introductions of new harmful AIS, control the spread of existing AIS, and reduce their impacts on our environment, society and economy. Today, successes of these efforts continue to rely on collaborations with many partners, including Minnesota Sea Grant, University of Minnesota Extension, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Minnesota Waters.

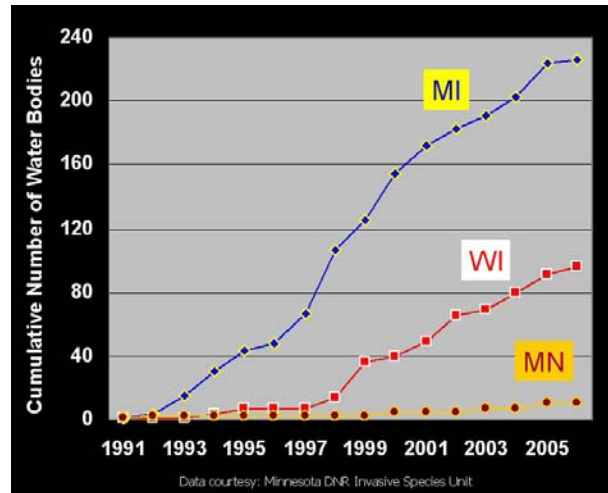
For nearly two decades, Minnesota has worked with recreational boaters and anglers, encouraging them to act in ways that will prevent aquatic "hitchhikers" from spreading by boats, motors, trailers and equipment. Minnesota Sea Grant partnered to assess the effectiveness of these efforts. Consequently, we understand how boaters and anglers get their information. We also have insights into their risks for spreading AIS, their attitudes, motivations, and behavior. We know boaters and anglers are willing to take action because they truly value our lakes and streams.



**STOP AQUATIC
HITCHHIKERS!™**

Surveys show that the percent of respondents who said they took action to prevent the spread of AIS in Minnesota increased from 70 percent in 1994 to over 90 percent in 2000. This increase eclipsed the rate of change reported in other states where less emphasis was placed on reaching boaters and anglers with AIS prevention messages.

In Michigan and Wisconsin, where educating boaters and anglers about AIS was less emphasized than in Minnesota, zebra mussels rapidly found their way into their inland lakes and rivers.



Cumulative number of water bodies infested with zebra mussels in three states.

In fairness, there are more water accesses from which zebra mussels could have spread in those two states than in Minnesota. Comparatively, Minnesota has invested more effort in public awareness and prevention regarding AIS. Minnesota Sea Grant believes that this investment has successfully prevented or slowed the spread of AIS across the state.

Dollars and sense

Minnesota has a \$9 billion tourism industry, which supports 230,000 related jobs, annually. Over 28.6 million people visit Minnesota each year of which about one-third purchase fishing licenses.

Of course, residents fish, too; about 19 percent of them. Retail sales related to fishing are valued at \$1.42 billion. With more than 828,000 registered watercraft, Minnesota ranks the fourth "boatiest" state in the nation. Lakes and rivers help define Minnesota; proactively working to keep AIS from spreading makes sense. To help, consider joining the Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers! campaign. Any organization can join and membership is free.

The Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers! campaign was designed to build on previous efforts to reach out to boaters and anglers. In 2006, campaign partners teamed with the Threats Campaign, led by Wildlife Forever, to extend prevention messages beyond Minnesota to the Upper Midwest. Based on exposure to the campaign, 99 percent of Minnesota boaters and anglers said it WILL influence them into taking precautionary action to prevent the spread.

In summer 2008, Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers! messages will be on TV, radio, billboards and in newspapers. Maybe you'll see them at rest areas, retail and other outlets, or on gas pumps. Maybe you'll see them on lawn banners at water accesses, at water festivals or fairs, in regulation booklets, or as windshield fliers and stickers.

To find out how you can extend the campaign in your community, visit www.protectyourwaters.net or email us at lakewaves@state.mn.us.