

The Three-way Solution to the Invasive Species Contagion



Back at the end of June, with the hope of warm, cloudless summer days stretching lazily out toward September, Gazette Opinion readers learned of a battle being waged on the shores of Adirondack lakes. For years private lake associations have defended their waters against an onslaught of invasive organisms rolling in on the trailers and in the bait wells of visiting motorboats. Defying all superstition, I presented Lake Placid as a case study of an uninfiltated lake, struggling to ward off a rising tide of aggressive, potentially ruinous plant and animal species.

Before that opinion piece even hit newsstands, the first fragments of an invasive watermilfoil were fished out of Lake Placid—evidence of a recently established colony that was starting to fragment and spread the length of the lake. The discovery instantaneously transformed Lake Placid from an iconic, unflawed natural gem into the latest high-profile victim of the twin threats of ecological contagion and government indifference. Apart from the immediate psychological shock of losing the lake's reputation for the purity of its

water, the infestation brought with it prospects of a costly remediation effort, and years of monitoring by specialized dive teams. The only upside anybody has yet offered is that it put into perspective what has turned out to be a pretty crummy summer weather-wise.

The ensuing weeks of milfoil removal operations on Lake Placid exposed many fractures in our defenses against the spread of invasive species among our lakes. In the honored tradition of summer sequels, here is a list of the weakest areas of our strategy and measures which must be pursued (and by whom) if we are to prevent the loss of the next lake and the next and the next.

Federal Response

Any sober consideration of possible solutions to the propagation of aquatic invasive species must include Washington for the simple reason that Congress these days seems bent on shoveling billions of stimulus dollars at a vast assortment of problems (some of these problems, like the lack of a four-lane limited-access divided highway across one hundred fifty miles of largely vacant farmland north of the Adirondack Park, were never really problems to begin with). Happily, in the case of invasive species prevention, there is a real role for our federal lawmakers. It goes like this: Through the Sport Fishing Restoration Act of 1950 the US Fish and Wildlife Service distributes among the states the proceeds of federal excise taxes on fishing tackle, waders, motorboat oil and whatnot for construction and maintenance of boat launches and for education and stewardship programs. Amendments to the act over the years have mandated that a minimum fifteen percent of all distributed money be spent on motorboat access projects, while a maximum fifteen percent may be spent on education. Of the nine million dollars that came back to New York last year, less than

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five percent went to education, and not a penny of that to lake stewardship. A simple amendment reversing the act's spending priorities would result in millions of dollars becoming available to New York State for lake steward boat inspection programs. To sponsor the amendment I nominate Congressman Scott Murphy, whose district includes not only the afflicted areas of Lake Placid, but the most likely source of Lake Placid's milfoil in neighboring Saranac Lake as well. To shepherd the amendment through the US Senate, I nominate Murphy's predecessor, Kirsten Gillibrand. Bonus: The natural recreational opportunities afforded by the clean-up of weed-choked waterways complements our Senator's efforts to make New York's kids thinner and healthier.

State Response

While the Adirondack Park Agency was springing to Lake Placid's aid with a streamlined permit application process (a promising development for future rapid-response removal operations), New York State's Department of Environmental Conservation was swimming rapidly in the opposite direction. As clean-up on Lake Placid proceeded, the DEC was circulating a proposal to increase the permit requirements for removing aquatic plants. Little surprise that the office promoting these new regulations is the Bureau of Fisheries, the same folks who cling tenaciously to the belief that the best way to educate exhausted, harassed, and/or impatient boaters, on the importance of removing weeds from your boat trailer, is with fine-print, detail-heavy literature posted somewhere in the general vicinity of boat launches. While seeking permits to contain the invasive outbreak on Lake Placid, I was given the strong impression by sympathetic staffers in other DEC divisions that Fisheries is the bureau where aquatic plant removal permits go to die.

This presents Governor Paterson, better-known for an altogether different kind of wild-life, with a true Nixon-in-China moment. By changing the name from "Bureau of Fisheries" to "Bureau of Fishing," transferring the whole operation—posters and all—to a more commercial corner of state government (Parks and Recreation? I[heart]NY?) and leaving the boat launches to a more ecologically-oriented division of the DEC, he could change the course of waterway protection across the state. While this simple reshuffling may not lift the Governor's dismal poll numbers enough to win an election—really, we mustn't kid ourselves—it will assure him a seat alongside the Roosevelts in the pantheon of New York's environmental visionaries. It will also earn him the gratitude of generations of New Yorkers yet unborn.

Local Response

Sadly, municipal governments, who are most at risk of severely degraded recreational opportunities, property tax values and—in the case of Lake Placid, their community drinking water supply—seem content to share the Bureau of Fisheries delusion that boater self-education efforts are all we need. Local officials must take steps to reduce our lakes' exposure to invasive species by consolidating local public boat launches and limiting motorboat access to hours when the launches are monitored by inspectors.

By and large, the attitude of elected officials at all levels of government amounts to a claim of support for the immediate economic interests of the citizenry they represent. Lost on them is the fact that the people who have most to lose in this battle for our lakes are the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of our villages, our region and our state. It is a fact which our public leaders must take to heart if we are to protect our waters from future contamination.