

Taken Hostage by Illegal Aliens!!!!

By Joann Wallenburn

It's safe to say that summer has arrived. Clear blue skies, gentle warm breezes, getting out on the water. That's what I really want to do.... And so do a lot of others. It's really part of why many of us are here. The valley population has swelled with the many friends, family, and tourists who have come to enjoy the gorgeous lakes and streams of the Clearwater, Swan, and Blackfoot Rivers. With so many people coming from so many different places, the chance of "Aquatic Hitchhikers", aka Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) tagging along is very high.

If you read nothing more of this article, please at least read this paragraph and take it to heart. Always assume that there is something in the water body you are leaving that would be harmful to the next water body you go to. Inspect, clean, and dry your boat and gear before entering another water body. These simple measures will help ensure our waters remain as beautiful and enjoyable as they are today.

Professionals have been aware of the threat of AIS for many years, but the topic has only recently been introduced to us - the general public. Many of you have probably heard of the zebra mussel or Eurasian Water Milfoil or have heard the "Inspect, Clean, Dry" message. I'm willing to bet that just a few years ago, you were as clueless as I was.

My introduction to AIS came in 2009. The 2009 Montana legislature allocated nearly \$500,000 to combat AIS over the next two years. As a result, a coalition of federal, state, tribal, and local government agencies, along with a variety of non-government organizations, and private citizens was formed to address the threat of AIS to the Flathead, and to help direct the spending of those funds. A couple of my colleagues at the University of Montana's Flathead Lake Biological Station are members of this coalition. I learned about zebra mussels from them and that's when I was taken hostage by these *illegal aliens*. I could see just how devastating an invasion of our beautiful lakes would be and immediately began efforts to protect them. These efforts would grow to consume a large part of my free time, but it is time well spent.

Although our waters do not flow into the Flathead drainage, our highway leads to the Flathead. It was easy to see that if we protect Clearwater waters, we reduce the

threat to Flathead waters. Consequently, the Flathead group provided large signs to be posted at many of the public boat launches in our area, as a start in the battle against AIS in the Seeley/Swan.

By spring of 2010, I had retired from the Biostation, moved to Seeley Lake full-time, and was able to join the Flathead group myself. In a workshop given by Eileen Ryce, AIS Coordinator with MT FWP, on the identification of AIS and boat inspection, I learned that there are more AIS than just zebra mussels. Although zebra mussels are scary and are probably the best-known AIS among the general public, there are other lesser known, scarier AIS than zebra mussels. The prevention is the same; what works for one, works for all the others. Everyone needs to make sure their equipment is AIS free before putting it in the water.

I met many lakeshore homeowners while working the US Census in 2010. MT FWP Region 1 (Kalispell) had generously supplied me with a variety of AIS literature, which I shared with these homeowners. Who has a more vested interest in the quality of the lake water than the people who live there? I felt certain they would help “Spread the word, not the weed”. The Big Sky Lake HOA allowed me to spread the word at their annual meeting.

At that meeting, several Big Sky Lake homeowners volunteered to monitor for the zebra mussels. MT FWP Region 1 had also provided artificial substrate traps (PVC pipe on a rope) to monitor for zebra mussels. By the end of the 2010 season, pipes had been deployed on six lakes in the valley and at several locations on the Blackfoot.

My husband and I volunteered with the Clearwater Resource Council (CRC) Adopt-A-Lake volunteer water quality monitoring program in 2010. We paddled our canoe to the center of Seeley Lake every other week for testing. On our way out and back, we traveled over some weed beds. I was initially alarmed to see what looked like Eurasian Water Milfoil. When I pulled a stalk, I was able to determine that it was a native milfoil – a good plant – and not the invasive. CRC has a couple dozen similar volunteers working on eight different lakes. It would be great to train their eyes as well.

In 2011, I petitioned the CRC Board of Directors to add an Aquatic Invasive Species Prevention program to the existing Adopt-A-Lake (AAL) program, and they agreed. This year, AAL volunteer training included an introduction to the issue of AIS and what to keep an eye out for, both in the water and at the boat

launches. Volunteers were provided with AIS literature to have at the ready should they encounter an opportunity to spread the word.

The CRC AIS Prevention Program plans for 2011 include giving AIS presentations to several lakeshore homeowners associations, inventory of signage and locating unsigned boat launches, enlisting additional mussel monitors, and co-hosting an AIS workshop at Holland Lake. Initial plans for this summer included mapping aquatic weeds on the five major lakes in the valley. Because CRC has an existing program in the region, MCWD is directing their funds for mapping here first. Once the native weeds have been identified, CRC will develop a public education program to teach identification of our local native aquatic weeds. Trained eyes are more likely to recognize when something, perhaps an invasive plant, is NOT normal.

To win the battle, everyone who uses our lakes and streams needs to be informed and “Inspect, Clean, Dry”.