



Photo by Brian Mann

Jason Smith is dressed for another day of battle against milfoil in Upper Saranac Lake.

Milfoil meets its match

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* NOT EAGLE LAKE ISSUE!

BY BRIAN MANN

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The radio crackles back with a voice that already sounds weary. "Pretty good. Everybody's a little chilly though."



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"I'm sure they are," LaDue says. He's a young man, with close-cropped hair and a sunburned face. There's no sign of the sun this morning. Surly clouds promise another day of rain. "It's not very nice out here. Are you guys finding anything?"

LaDue's team of 20 divers are already underwater, searching the muddy bottom for Eurasian watermilfoil. He's project manager for a three-year crusade to beat back the invasive weed. It's a grueling assignment. Imagine trying to pluck every single dandelion from a field that covers thousands of acres. Now imagine that the field lies under 15 feet of murky water.

Despite the fact that much of the shoreline is owned by New York state, the project on Upper Saranac Lake is funded entirely by private donors. The operation costs a thousand dollars an hour, LaDue says. The total price tag over its three-year cycle is expected to top \$1.5 million.

"The milfoil was getting ahead of us," says Curt Stiles, president of the Upper Saranac Lake Foundation, which has been raising money for the campaign. "We were losing ground and had to do something different."

Like a lot of shoreowners, Stiles accuses the state of failing to develop a strategy for stopping the invasive weed, which now infests 43 lakes in the Adirondack Park. A new infestation was discovered this summer on Putnam Pond in Essex County.

"I do think help is needed in Albany. There's still a broader awareness and a broader action that needs to be taken if we're going to preserve these lakes for the long



Photo courtesy of the Upper Saranac Lake Foundation

Dive leader Brendan Hayes has the enemy in his hands.

term," Stiles says.

"It's obscene that we haven't done something like this," agrees Lee Keet, who manages the watermilfoil program on Lake Colby, on the outskirts of Saranac Lake village. "It's obscene that we're not treating it like a contagion."

With little leadership from state officials, private groups are struggling to fill the void. Milfoil initiatives are under way in more than a dozen Adirondack lakes. Some programs, including Lincoln Pond in Essex County and Sixth and Seventh lakes in Hamilton County, are designed to keep the weed from overwhelming native plants. Other initiatives, including Brantingham Lake in the western Adirondacks and Rainbow Lake in the northern Adirondacks, are meant to prevent the plant's introduction.

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"Mostly we just see blackness down there," Smith says. "Once you start pulling the plants, the algae loosens and sediments kick up. It gets a little claustrophobic at times."

Like most of the crew, Smith is a true believer, committed to a mission he says could save Upper Saranac Lake. "From a water-clarity point of view, from an ecological point of view, from a recreation point of view this project covers all the bases, without a doubt," Smith says.

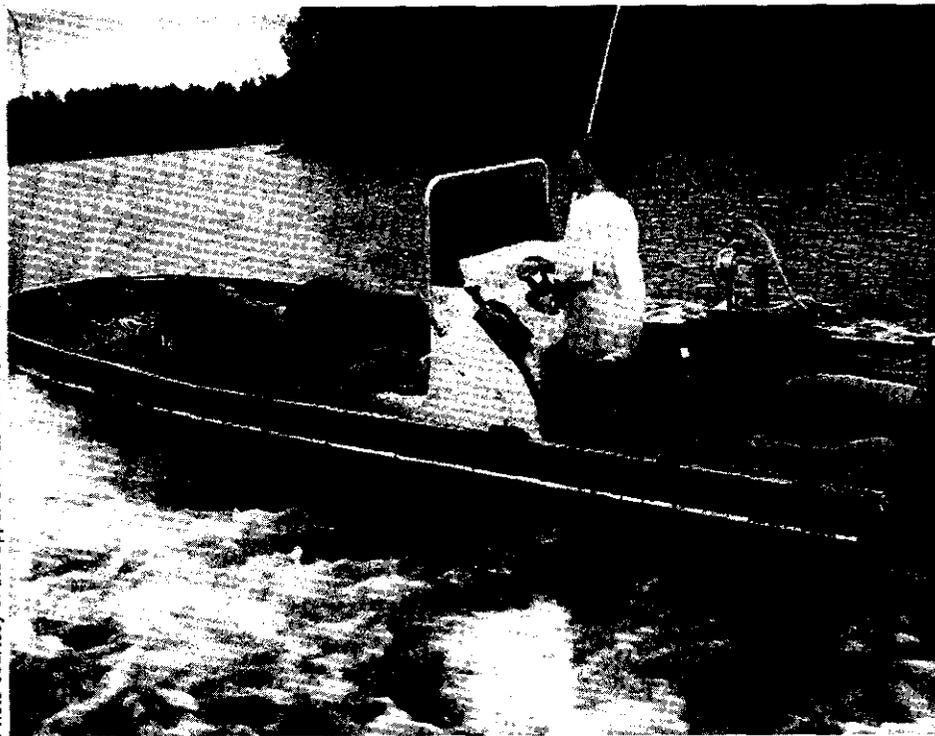
Willowy green fronds can still be seen bobbing just below the waves. Eurasian watermilfoil looks as delicate as lace, but it spreads rapidly, growing as much as a foot a day. Left alone, it can choke entire lakes, displacing native fish and plants, even triggering algae blooms. By the end of the summer, the divers on Upper Saranac will have removed 18 tons of the weed.

Many scientists and lakeshore residents see milfoil as a top menace to the Park's water quality. "Invasive plants are second only to habitat destruction as threats to biological diversity," says Charles Boylen, associate director of the Darrin Freshwater Institute, which monitors milfoil in Lake George.

Activists say it's unclear why the state hasn't developed a more forceful response. Speaking privately, some officials say the fight would be too expensive. Others are con-



Photo courtesy of the Upper Saranac Lake Foundation



CeCe Martin transports bags of milfoil to shore.

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vinced that the fight simply can't be won. Even proponents of milfoil control concede that eradicating the weed is all but impossible.

Politics have also slowed the response. Beginning in the late 1990s, the state spent millions of dollars developing a pilot program to test the herbicide Sonar against milfoil in Lake George. Sonar was seen by many lakeshore groups as a promising new weapon. But environmentalists fiercely opposed the application of the chemical inside the Park, and last year the APA rejected the Sonar experiment, reputedly on the orders of senior officials in the Pataki administration.

The state has since formed an invasive species task force, which is expected to recommend new policies in November 2005. But many of those on the front lines say that's not soon enough.

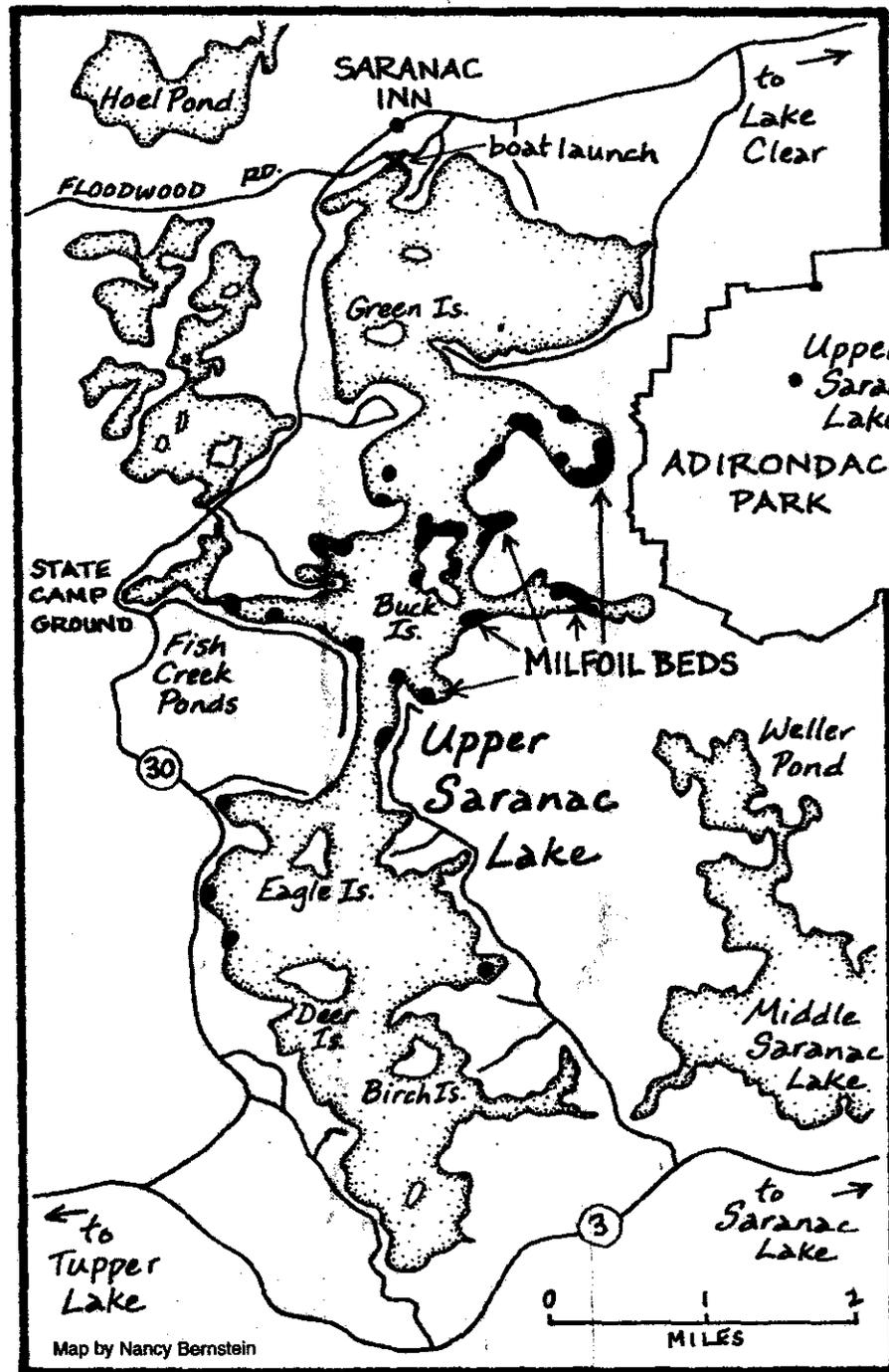
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Still, Crotty declined to outline new initiatives or offer new funding. She also refused to endorse a boat-cleaning program supported by many milfoil experts. "We have hundreds of boat launches," she said. "Do I think having a water pressure hose or a wash station at each boat launch is the



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Tensions boiled over this summer when state Environmental Conservation Commissioner Erin Crotty spoke at a water-quality conference at Paul Smith's College. A dozen lakeshore owners grilled Crotty on her response to milfoil, which they say is spread by motorboats using public launch sites.

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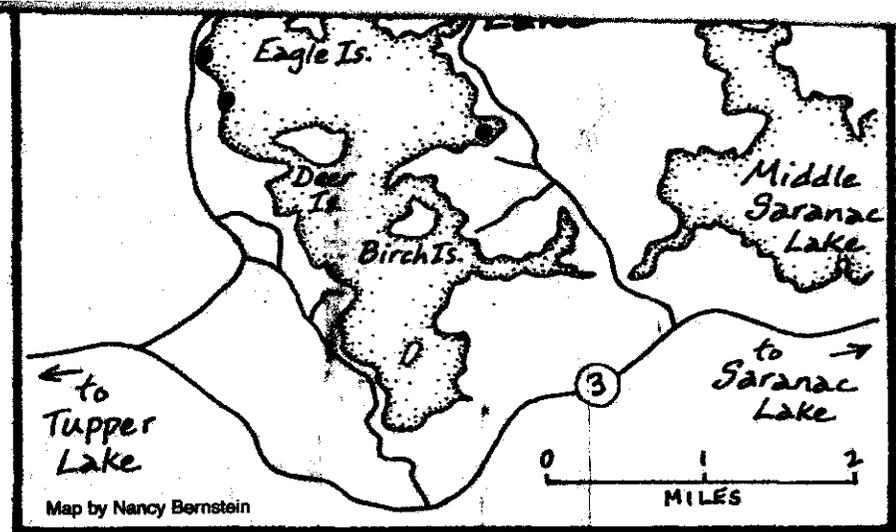
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That response outraged Lee Keet, who described Crotty as uninformed. "They should make it a finable offense to put an infected boat into a clean lake. We need to isolate [lakes with milfoil], just like we isolate SARS patients," Keet says.



Map by Nancy Bernstein

The map's dark spots indicate locations of dense beds of milfoil.

Most milfoil activists agree that prevention is the best strategy. Even with \$1.5 million in private funding, it's unclear how much the project on Upper Saranac Lake will accomplish. The hope is that this kind of full-court press can knock the weed back to a manageable level. "We expect to see fewer seedlings," says D. Dan Kelting, a biologist at Paul Smith's College who is monitoring the program. "What those numbers look like

at the end of each year is going to be real critical. Then we'll see if this is something that can be done realistically."

For those on the front line of this fight, the stakes couldn't be higher. "I know what's going to happen to this lake if something isn't done," says Tim LaDue. He looks worn out as he surveys the broad expanse of Upper Saranac. "I've been fighting this battle for so long, I really want to see a big win."

Help repel the invaders

Recognizing the threat exotic plants pose to Adirondack ecosystems, the state has teamed up with the Adirondack Nature Conservancy to inventory, monitor and control invasive plants inside the Blue Line. Besides Eurasian watermilfoil, the Adirondack Park Invasive Plant Program is focusing on the following seven species:

JAPANESE KNOTWEED: Fast-growing upright plant with greenish-white flowers. It often grows along roads and streams. Native to eastern Asia.

PURPLE LOOSESTRIFE: Tall, erect stalks with purple flowers. It is common in wet meadows, marshes and on the edges of rivers and ponds. Native to Eurasia.

COMMON REED: Wetland grass with feathery plumes of brownish-purple flowers. In the Adirondacks, it has been found along the Northway and in scattered small stands. Native to Asia.

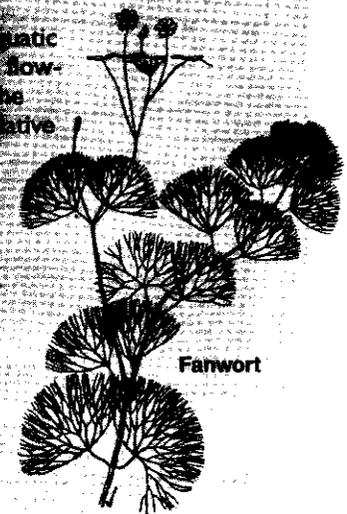
GARLIC MUSTARD: Prolific biennial herb with white flowers. It grows throughout the state in deciduous forests. Native to Europe.

WATER CHESTNUT: Floating aquatic plant with small white flowers. Grows in lakes, ponds and slow-moving rivers and streams. Native to Eurasia.

CURLYLEAF PONDWEED: Submerged aquatic plant with reddish-green, wavy-edged, toothed leaves. Found in several Adirondack lakes. Native to Europe.

FANWORT: Submerged aquatic plant with small whitish-pink flowers. Found in a few lakes in the southeastern Adirondacks. Native to southern United States. The Nature Conservancy is seeking volunteers to join the campaign against these invasive species. If you're interested, contact:

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For more information: www.adkinvasives.com.



Fanwort