

The Post-Star

Flying the flag against milfoil

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LAKE LUZERNE - Last year, residents from Lake Luzerne decided it was time to take matters into their own hands and turn vigilante - at least as far as Eurasian watermilfoil was concerned.

Not wanting the invasive, aquatic plant to become more of a problem than it already had over the last 10 years, Mike Schaffer and other seasonal and year-round inhabitants sprang into action.

They called themselves the Milfoil Pirates.

With the support of the town and the Lake Luzerne Association, the environmental buccaneers scraped together \$10,000 to lay specialized plastic mats - called benthic barriers - over milfoil beds in the lake.

After seeing how well the barriers worked to quash the invader and beat it back to a manageable level, the group is working hard to expand its efforts this summer.

"Milfoil grows in dense beds, and when I say dense, I mean dense," Schaffer said. "Where there's milfoil and where there isn't - it's like the difference between the sand on the beach and the grass on the lawn.

"And you'll see this distinct difference where the mats have been," he added. "The mats actually smother the plants and keep them from getting the sunlight and oxygen they need to grow."

It takes about 30 days, according to Schaffer, to effectively crush a stand of milfoil with these mats.

Encouraged by their initial success, the Pirates took their next big step. They changed their name to the Aquatic Conservation Task Force, and began seeking addition support for their project outside the Lake Luzerne area.

"When you're looking for grants, Milfoil Pirates doesn't work too well," ACT member Robert Sherman said, chuckling.

The more professional - but perhaps less spunky - name seems to have paid off.

"We got a state grant for \$10,000 with the help of (state senator) Elizabeth Little," Schaffer said happily.

The money has allowed ACT and its supporters to purchase 28 new barriers, each of which is 400 square feet in size.

This adds up to about 11,000 square feet of plastic, Schaffer said. Last year, we only put down 4,000 square feet.

But because they moved the barriers several times last year, ACT was able to squash milfoil beds over about 11,000 square feet of the 111-acre lake.

This year, ACT plans to move the barriers three times, Schaffer said. That will mean an additional 44,000 square feet of milfoil will be beaten down.

An acre, Sherman pointed out, is about 44,000 square feet.

While gaining control of milfoil's growth will take years using the barriers, the group and its supporters don't have many other options.

Methods that may be quicker, like chemical herbicides, aren't legally approved for use in the Adirondack Park, town Supervisor Gene Merlino said.

And ultimately, that's just fine with him. He has faith in the barriers, though he wishes everyone had decided to fight milfoil before it got such a hold on the lake.

"I believe this is going to work, but we should have done it sooner - like five or seven years ago when it first really became a problem," Merlino said, adding that milfoil removal is not just for the health of the native plants, but for the health of the municipality as well.

The community depends on a lake with recreational and aesthetic values undiminished by water-clogging vegetation, Schaffer said.

"The lake is the life-blood of this town."