

ZEBRA MUSSELS INVADE CONNEAUT LAKE

by Deborah Weisberg

While Conneaut Lake, Pennsylvania's largest natural lake, draws thousands of anglers and boaters each year, it's now hosting unwanted residents, too.

Zebra mussels, an exotic invader first spotted in the Great Lakes in the mid-1980s, have been found in the 925-acre glacial lake and its outflow in Crawford County, raising new environmental concerns.

"People have called me astounded that they are seeing zebra mussels everywhere in Conneaut Lake this year. Whereas last year, they saw just three," said Tim Wilson, Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC) fisheries biologist. "One of our seasonal employees was fishing the outflow and saw them everywhere, too."

"It shows you how quickly they can proliferate and why we put so much effort into public education."

All mussels continuously filter water, thus helping to keep it clean. But zebra mussels multiply rapidly and do their damage by sheer numbers. Since their arrival on Lake Erie 25 years ago, presumably in the ballast water of a European freighter, they have turned Erie crystal clear and wreaked havoc on the food chain.

"Because they eat microscopic animals known as zooplankton and plant-based phytoplankton, they can outcompete native mussels and fish fry for food," said Al Woomer, PFBC northwest regional fisheries manager.

"They extract food as they syphon water. Native mussels are the most important plankton eaters in a river or lake, and if they cannot get the food they need, they won't survive."

"Zebra mussels can also destroy native mussels by attaching to them," said Woomer. "Zebra mussels attach

to any hard surface or structure including the shells of other mussels. If enough of them encrust the entire native mussel, it won't be able to open, and it will eventually die."

"Once they establish and multiply, they are almost impossible to eliminate, particularly in a natural fishery," said Woomer. "If it got dire, you could drain a reservoir, at least theoretically. But, you can't drain a natural lake. And, chemicals aren't an option anywhere, because you would wind up harming other aquatic animals."

Zebra mussels are a new headache for the Conneaut Lake Aquatic Management Association (CLAMA), which already has its hands full trying to control vegetation in a way that satisfies all users of the lake. Anglers come for the trophy bass, northern pike and panfish while boaters are drawn to the lack of horsepower restrictions. CLAMA vice-chair Bryant Stuyvesant questions how a spiraling population of zebra mussels will complicate efforts to manage underwater plants.

"The lake looked clearer this year than I've ever seen it," said Stuyvesant, who fishes Conneaut Lake often. "Although extremely dry weather during the first half of the summer could be partly to blame," said Stuyvesant. He also thinks zebra mussels are having an impact on the lake's historical tea color.

"We saw them coating the docks when we pulled them up last fall," said Stuyvesant. "And, I see masses of them on my depth finder. They show up as a different color."

"The only practical approach to stopping the spread of any unwanted species, including zebra mussels, is to enlist the help of anglers and boaters by urging them to keep gear clean," said Woomer.

Zebra mussels attached to a native mussel



photo: Sean Rafferty, PA Sea Grant

Boaters should powerwash the hull of their boat and drain and dry bilge areas and live wells before using the boat in another waterway.

Areas of trapped water should be disinfected with a mixture of one part bleach to ten parts water. The same mixture will decontaminate anchors and anchor ropes, trailer frames, minnow buckets and other equipment.

Bleach should be kept away from electronics, because it can corrode them.

Zebra mussels can attach to the insides of boat motors causing blockages, low water flow and overheated engines. They can also clog intake systems.

Anglers should clean and dry waders and other tackle. Even fishing line should be dried or changed before it is used in a new fishery. Anglers who fish in waters infested with zebra mussels may want to reserve tackle just for those fisheries.

Although zebra mussels have been documented in the Susquehanna, Delaware and Allegheny river systems, there is special concern that they soon may surface in French Creek, one of the most ecologically diverse and pristine waterways of its size in Pennsylvania.

Edinboro Lake in Erie County has zebra mussels, and so does its outlet stream Conneauttee Creek, which is a tributary of French Creek. "If they get into French Creek, it will be a big problem, given the diversity of native mussels. There are many rare ones, and they would be vulnerable," said Woomer. ☐

photo: NOAA

Zebra Mussel



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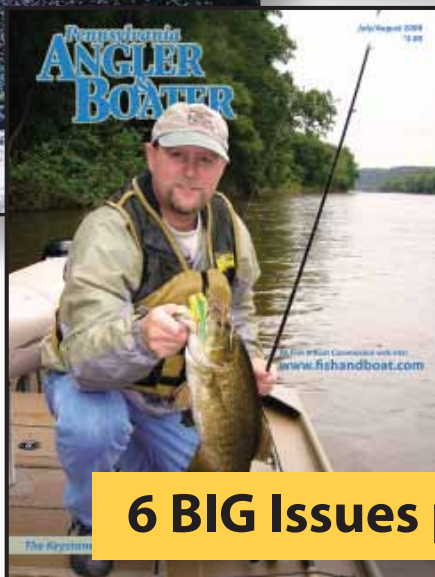
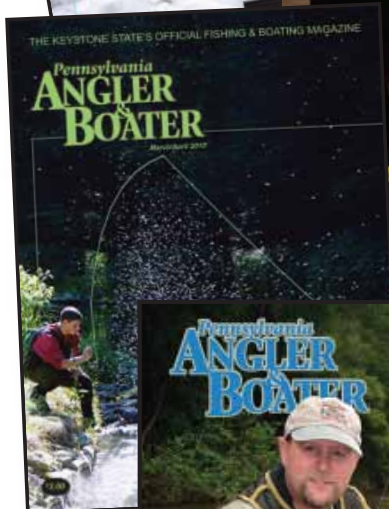
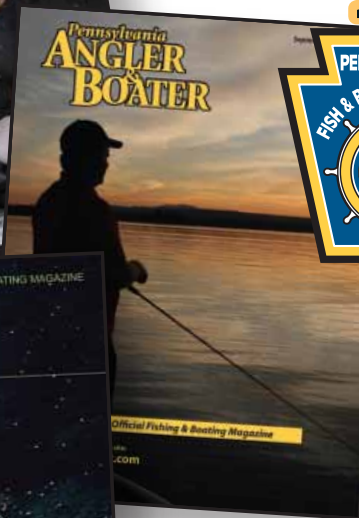
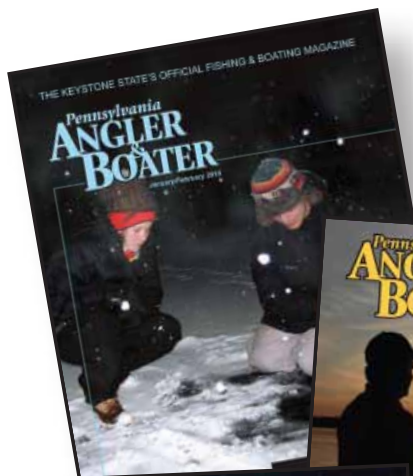
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