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Tompkins: Giant salvinia threatens area water bodies

By SHANNON TOMPKINS Copyright 2009 Houston Chronicle

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Here's a nightmare scenario for Texas freshwater anglers and other boaters:

Because of concerns about the apocalyptic damage to the lake's fishery resulting from introduction and spread of invasive plants or other alien aquatic life, a law is passed prohibiting launching any trailered boat onto Sam Rayburn Reservoir. Or maybe Lake Fork. Or pick your favorite lake.

Here's another only slightly less sobering prospect: On certain lakes, anglers are allowed to launch their boats only at specific ramps at specific times when decontamination crews are at the ramps. Before the boat can be launched, those government employees will inspect the boat and trailer for any attached fragments of invasive plants or aquatic life, then spray a solution of water and bleach on the boat and the trailer to kill any invasives that might have escaped the inspection.

When the boat is removed from the lake, the process is repeated.

Get caught violating the regulations, and face a heavy fine. And expect to pay much-increased boat ramp use fees, fishing license fees and boat

registration fees to fund the decontamination crews working the ramps.

Never happen, right?

It already has. Just not in Texas. Yet.

Precedent

This past year, California's Lake Casitas, one of the premier trophy largemouth bass fisheries in the nation, was shut down to any "outside" boats in an effort to prevent introduction and spread of invasive quagga mussels. Only boats permanently docked on the lake are allowed to use the lake.

On certain lakes in a handful of states, boats and boat trailers must undergo mandatory inspection and, in some cases, decontamination before they are allowed to launch. On some, that includes running a bleach solution through the outboard motor's cooling system to kill any invasives that may be hiding in the system.

Overkill?

Not when you consider what's at stake.

Sam Rayburn Reservoir's recreational fishery is not only a tremendous natural resource, it's a crucial economic engine. In the one-year period from November 2007 to October 2008, anglers visiting Rayburn pumped almost \$32 million in direct expenditures (gasoline, hotel rooms, bait, tackle, guide fees, etc.) into the lake-area economy, according to

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research conducted by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. TPWD estimates the total economic value of Rayburn's recreational fishery to the area at \$45 million.

And Rayburn's just one of more than 500 or so public lakes in the state, albeit a major player in Texas' incredibly vibrant and hugely important freshwater resource. Protecting all of those waters from spread of invasive aquatic species is a crucial and increasingly frustrating job. And it is being made more difficult by boaters who either through ignorance or apathy are the main agents for the spread of the problem.

And it is a problem. A big one.

The threat of invasive species damaging, even destroying, some of these fisheries is real. I know. I've seen it. Two of the best private fishing lakes I've ever known were killed — suffocated — by one of the worst of the lot: giant salvinia.

In the decade since giant salvinia was first documented in Texas — in a single pond near downtown Houston — it has spread across much of the eastern part of Texas. (Giant salvinia probably would have spread outside East Texas, but the floating plant with the ability to double its volume in days, cover the surface of a waterway and literally choke the life — denying sunlight and oxygen — from water seems to not like the more alkaline water in the western half of Texas.)

People spread salvinia, just like they spread

water hyacinth and hydrilla and other invasive aquatics. A tiny piece of salvinia hanging on a trailer rail, trapped between a trailer bunk and the boat or stuck on the outboard's lower unit, is released the next time the boater launches. That's all it takes.

With the mobility of boaters, it's easy for salvinia or any of the other destructive invasives to move from lake to lake.

Common problem

Giant salvinia has been documented on 13 public lakes in East Texas. Luckily, state aquatic resource managers were able to catch infestations early in five of those lakes and killed or removed the plants before they went nuclear — at least, they believe they got it all.

But some lakes are now permanently infested with the stuff. Salvinia is impossible to eradicate once it is established in anything larger than a farm pond. And it's prohibitively expensive to even attempt to control it. More than a quarter-million dollars have been spent on Steinhagen Reservoir just trying to keep the place from being overrun by salvinia.

Toledo Bend has an estimated 5,000 acres — almost 8 square miles — of the stuff. And it's showing up in parts of the lake in which it has not previously been seen. As summer and the peak growing season arrives, look for it to explode.

Poor Caddo Lake, arguably the most beautiful

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and ecologically diverse water in the state, may be doomed by invasives — giant salvinia, water hyacinth and hydrilla.

And now salvinia is in Rayburn. Not a lot of it, yet. But some. And TPWD keeps finding new infestations, invariably around boat ramps. Imagine that.

“It always shows up first around boat ramps,” said Howard Elder, the swamped-with-work aquatic vegetation control specialist for TPWD’s inland fisheries division office in Jasper.

So it was really no surprise to Elder when, this past week, he found a boat trailer draped with salvinia sitting in a parking area at a Rayburn ramp.

The salvinia had gotten on the trailer at the last place the owner used the boat — probably Toledo Bend. And he’d just infected the water around the boat ramp on a lake about to host a bass tournament that would draw more than 7,000 participants from across Texas and many other states.

Some of those boats would launch at the ramp. If one picked up a stray piece of salvinia and the owner didn’t check the rig before heading home, it would infect the next lake it visited.

There are signs at most boat ramps on East Texas lakes warning of the dangers of giant salvinia and other aquatic invasives, with photos of the plants and suggestions on how to avoid spreading the plants.

And Texas has a law, passed by the Legislature in 2005, requiring boaters to remove all harmful plants from their boat trailers and boats or face a criminal citation carrying a fine of as much as \$500. And that \$500 fine can be per plant.

Little enforcement

Understandably, perhaps, Texas game wardens have written few citations for violations of this law, even though they could get writers cramp if they cracked down hard at some ramps.

Many, perhaps most, boaters are ignorant of the law. And it might seem harsh to hammer someone for having a few water hyacinth plants, sprigs of hydrilla or even a couple of buds of giant salvinia on their trailer.

But maybe that’s what it’s going to take to get the point across.

If wardens started regularly issuing citations for violation of the law concerning harmful plants on trailers or boats — say, hitting people with multiple citations that have them facing hundreds, even thousands of dollars in fines — word would quickly spread that the state was taking this problem seriously, and so should all Texans.

Better, of course, would be for boaters to take it upon themselves to clean up their act.

“We all really need to develop some level of obligation to protect the resource,” Elder said.

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