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Volunteers yank weeds out of lake

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NETCONG -- Volunteers hand-pulled roughly 7 tons of water chestnuts out of Lake Musconetcong Saturday in a coordinated effort to combat the spread of the invasive plant, dubbed "Public Enemy No. 1."

The water chestnuts have produced thick mats of leaves that now stretch across about 30 acres of the lake's surface and can be seen from the shore, particularly in areas such as Arbolino cove, where the plant has been especially pervasive.

However, it's not the aesthetics that have residents worried.

The water chestnut depletes oxygen levels and raises the temperature in the water, thereby threatening wildlife, including the two endangered plants that grow in Lake Musconetcong. Saturday's volunteers also expressed concern about the speed at which the plant is spreading, noting that it could move into the state's waterways.

"The trend is very disturbing, the rapid influx of it," said Bob Hathaway, a member of the Lake Musconetcong Regional Planning Board, which organized the hand-harvesting effort. "There is no way we're going to keep up with this with mechanized harvesting."

The board's mechanical harvester has been bringing in 20- to 25-ton loads primarily consisting of water chestnuts, according to fellow member John Rogalo of Stanhope. However, the mechanical harvester can only access about 30 to 40 percent of the lake, as much of it is too shallow for the machine, Hathaway said. Other lakes have had success with hand-harvesting, he said, explaining that the kayaks and canoes can get into the more shallow portions of the lake. But it's no quick fix.

"It's going to be a longterm commitment," Hathaway said.

Park Superintendent Helen Maurella, also a member of the board, seems to agree. Maurella said 31 state park employees ventured out on the lake Friday -- prior to the Saturday volunteer effort -- and brought in 2 tons of water chestnuts.

"It was a scratch in the surface from what everyone is telling me," she said.

Unfortunately, the conditions at Lake Musconetcong are ideal for water chestnuts, Rogalo said. And though the water chestnut is an annual plant, its seed pods can remain dormant in the lake for up to 12 years.

Hathaway, who lives on the lake in the Netcong section, said he first began noticing water chestnuts last year. However, it wasn't until earlier this year that the blooms really became apparent, he said. He described the thick mats of water chestnuts seen on the lake today as "an incredible infestation," adding, "You could walk across it."

Saturday's volunteer hand-harvesting was the first of many, according to organizers. For more information, contact Helen Maurella at the Lake Hopatcong State Park at 973-398-7010, or visit www.lakemusconetcong.com.