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Many of our lakeside residents are discovering a new neighbor out in front of their property, weeds, Eurasian watermilfoil to be more specific. In 2001 Tri-County Skaneateles Lake Pure Water Association along with the Water Dept. of the City of Syracuse surveyed the milfoil population in Skaneateles Lake and located 39 patches of milfoil, mostly in the southern end. This survey was repeated in 2006 and much to our dismay the number of patches had increased nearly 3 fold to 111 patches, now scattered throughout the lake. Is this a problem? Should we be concerned? The answer is yes to both questions.

Most invasive species that are successful begin at low population levels and remain low until they establish a foothold in the new ecosystem. Then they go through a rapid growth phase during which the population explodes, increasing in size very rapidly. That appears to be the situation we are in now. Milfoil was first reported in 1975 in Skaneateles Lake and slowly became established throughout the lake. It appears that it is beginning the rapid growth phase.

Once milfoil becomes established it causes major problems with use of the lake. It forms large stands of thickly packed vegetation that reaches from the bottom to near the surface of the lake, sometimes as much as 25 feet tall. It is almost impossible to swim or boat through these stands. When they die back in the fall they produce large masses of material that shows up on the shore in the spring creating rotting masses of vegetation.

In unproductive lakes like Skaneateles it has a more subtle effect. Milfoil is rooted in the sediments of the lake and draws nutrients up from the sediments to the stems and leaves of the plant. When these structures die back or are injured or broken they release nutrients into the water, which can then be used by algae and other plants. In other words they serve as a nutrient pump, pumping nutrients up from the sediments into the overlying water. This leads to larger algal populations and murkier water.

They also act as a barrier to sediment transport. With large dense stands of milfoil ringing the lake in water 6-25 ft deep runoff entering the lake from tributaries carrying silt and nutrients is blocked from flowing into deeper water and becomes deposited in and around the stands of milfoil, which, over time leads to a substantial accumulation of silt and mud on the bottom of the lake near shore. Without milfoil this silt would tend to be carried into deeper water, eventually settling far off shore where it remains with little effect on the lake itself.

The Town of Skaneateles Aquatic Invasive Species Committee is addressing this problem by preventing any more milfoil from being introduced into the lake through education of boaters and other lake users. They are also monitoring the state of the milfoil population and developing a program to eradicate milfoil from the lake, which will be discussed in a future article.