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Lake Patrol staff ramped up at Okoboji

Officers to educate boaters about invasive species, safety

By Greg Drees, Journal correspondent

WAHPETON, Iowa -- Two priorities for Department of Natural Resources staff in the Iowa Great Lakes have always involved boater safety and water quality.

Those jobs, often daunting in the face of peak tourism and the escalating growth in Dickinson County, will be easier this summer as the DNR, and specifically the Lake Patrol division, beefs up manpower to make boating safer and to educate the public about curbing aquatic invasive species.

A bill increasing boat registration fees -- passed by the Iowa Legislature last year -- will infuse an estimated \$1 million annually into DNR coffers for water safety and aquatic invasive species prevention efforts throughout the state.

The Iowa Great Lakes Water Safety Council also raised \$32,000 for the effort locally, translating into a larger Lake Patrol staff for Gary Owen of the DNR. Owen, who has headed the division out of Gull Point State Park on West Lake Okoboji for 25 years, says the extra DNR presence on the water and at the boat ramps serves a dual purpose.

"We are fine-tuning a schedule that will place law enforcement officers at the major boat ramps during peak usage hours," Owen said. "They will educate boaters about the dangers of invasive species and talk to them about water safety issues as well."

Owens' seasonal staff will be increased this season from five to 11.

"We will have almost a 24-hour presence on the water this year," he says.

All officers will have law enforcement authority and could cite violators who encroach on the state's Aquatic Invasive Species Law that was passed last year, making it illegal to transport such non-native specimens. It is more likely, Owen notes, that potential violators would first be taught preventative action.

About those pests

Aquatic invasive species -- unwanted non-native plants, animals and organisms that can devastate water environments -- were the subjects of a recent presentation at Iowa Lakeside Lab by Kim Bogenschutz of the DNR. Bogenschutz directs the Aquatic Nuisance Species Program.

An invasive species can have a significant impact on natural resources and the economy. In

the Northwest Iowa lakes system residents cherish water quality and tourism generates about \$165 million a year.

Bogenschutz said invasive species like Eurasian watermilfoil, bighead and silver carp, purple loosestrife and zebra mussels, all of which have been found in Iowa waters, have had catastrophic results.

Eurasian watermilfoil, for instance, is an aquatic plant native to Asia and Europe that has infested more than two dozen Iowa water bodies. With prolific growth, it can quickly morph into dense surface mats that restrict recreational boating, fishing and swimming. Lakefront property values have been known to diminish where this pesky non-native has overtaken ecosystems.

The invasive species are unwittingly transferred to lakes and rivers and other water bodies most commonly on boats, trailers and motors. Prevention is the key. "Learn to identify aquatic nuisance species, wash your boats and trailers on a regular basis and don't release bait fish into the water," Bogenschutz said.

Silver and bighead carp, which have invaded both the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers and even the Big Sioux River regionally, are examples of nuisance fish species that can rapidly deteriorate a productive fishery.

Among the list of invasive invertebrates, Bogenschutz said the most widespread and recognizable are zebra mussels, which have invaded 23 states. Last year, two adult zebra mussels were discovered in Clear Lake in Cerro Gordo County.

In the lakes area, Petersen said the WSC and many of the lakes protective associations are planning volunteer efforts to help the DNR man the heavily trafficked boat ramps during the major warm weather holidays to conduct watercraft inspections and help educate boaters of the dangers of aquatic invasive species. Bogenschutz will assist in the efforts.