

Changing Attitudes Mark Progress In Beltrami County

“People—fishermen, pleasure boaters, personal watercraft riders, everyone—must take personal responsibility in stopping the spread of aquatic invasive species. It’s not up to the DNR, the county or the inspectors; people who use our lakes have to take it upon themselves.”

That’s the ultimate key to successfully keeping starry stonewort, zebra mussels, curlyleaf pondweed and other harmful non-native species from gaining a foothold in lakes across Minnesota, according to Bruce Anspach, AIS Lake Technician in Beltrami County’s Environmental Services Department.



James Crampton of Bemidji is one of 10 Beltrami County watercraft inspectors who will be assigned to work at public access ramp this year (2020).

Anspach has been working with AIS since 2008 and has been with the Beltrami AIS program since 2015, and in part, his duties entail being ever on the hunt for new AIS infestations, monitoring known populations as well as recruiting, training and strategically deploying launch-site boat inspectors on county waters. Beltrami County has just more than 1,200 lakes spread across its 3,000-plus square miles of real estate, which means he has his hands full most of the time.

“When I first started with the county, most people who used the public access ramps didn’t want to hear about invasive species,” he said. “For the most part, they were of the opinion that site inspectors were a waste of time, money and energy.”

Since then, however, things have changed for the better, he noted, saying that boaters he observes these days are not only more receptive to the message, they’re more willing to do what it takes to halt the progress of AIS.

“Attitudes and behaviors have improved a lot, especially in the last four years,” he said, noting a recent encounter with a trio of anglers at a public ramp as proof positive.



AIS Inspector at work. Photo courtesy of Bemidji Pioneer.

“I was working with a couple of inspectors at a launch ramp when three fisherman came off the water,” he explained. “They said that they’d spoken with inspectors many time in the past, so after asking a few mandatory questions, I let them proceed.”

Anspach watched the men examine their rig, including the boat’s underside and the trailer, for signs of clinging plant life. Then remove the transom plug and drain the boat’s bait- and livewells of lake water.

“They had collected their baitfish in a dip net and proceeded to transfer them into a container of water they’d brought along for that purpose,” he said. “That was perfect!”

When one of the men began refilling the wells from a separate water container, Anspach stepped over to inquire about this step.

“He explained that their plan was to fish another lake later that day so he was flushing out the boat’s plumbing system with water they’d left to heat up in the sun. Just awesome!” he said. “What was even more gratifying is that they said they’d learned the trick from one of our other inspectors on a different lake a few weeks before.



“That’s exactly the sort of thing that needs to happen,” he said, “boaters being proactive—bringing the water, tools and anything else they need along with them when they head to the lake.”

Anspach can’t put his finger on a particular reason boaters in his county are paying more attention to AIS, saying that messaging through PSAs on the state and county levels, as well as face-to-face conversations at access ramps, have certainly raised the level of awareness. But if he had to guess, he says that it’s that many boaters have seen for themselves how non-native species can affect a body of water—whether it’s Moose Lake (starry stonewort), Lake Minnetonka (Eurasian milfoil), or Cass and Mille Lacs (zebra mussels).

“First-hand experience on a lake where an invasive species has made you change the way you use the lake—how you fish, where you ski, swim or dive—is a powerful force that moves needle,” he says.

The Bemidji/Cass Muskies Inc. Chapter 46 is a case in point. When Anspach was invited to speak to the group of die hard muskie anglers a while back, he noted with interest how the members described how Cass Lake’s increasing water clarity (due to filtration by zebra mussels) had forced them to alter their fishing strategies.

“We had to be more aware of how clear the water is,” said Chris Thury, chapter president and Anspach’s next door neighbor, and consider more carefully things like lure colors and line visibility.

The outcome of this, however, is that chapter members have become more diligent in efforts to control the spread of AIS. “A few years ago,” said Thury, “I think the general opinion was that access site inspectors just caused an unnecessary delay at the ramp. Today our anglers see it as just part of the process to keep our lakes clean of invasive species.”

This information is produced and distributed by the Mississippi Headwaters Board in an effort to motivate everyone to protect our natural resources. A recreation based lifestyle is part of our MN Traditions and is only preserved when we protect our aquatic resources from invaders such as zebra mussels and Eurasian milfoil. To support Minnesota Traditions join us on social media here

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