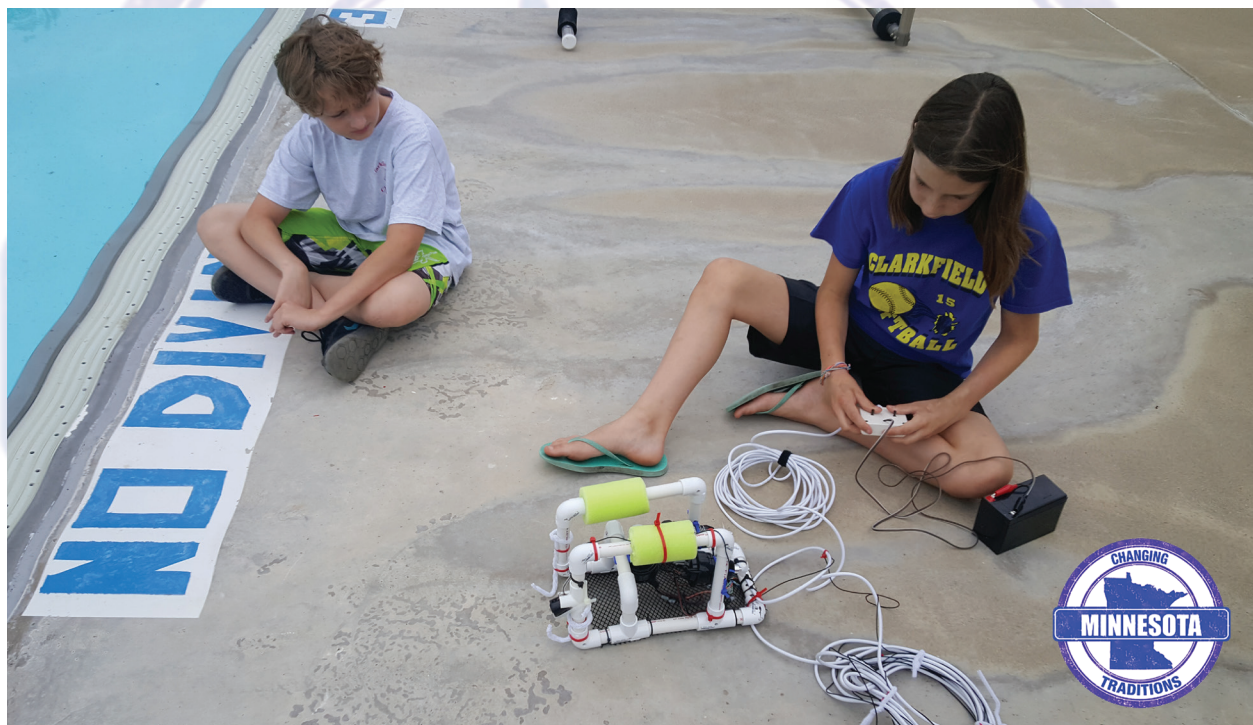


AIS Awareness Strategy: Tap Into the Younger Generation to Influence Parents

When Kurt Johnson, currently the Technical Advisor for Yellow Medicine County's Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), began to address the problem of aquatic invasive species in 2014, he had a couple of obstacles to overcome. He hoped the county's young people could help.

Being a county with very few lakes and where ring-necked pheasants and whitetails attract more of the spotlight than do walleyes and crappies, aquatic nuisances didn't register very high in residents' thinking. Plus, he had to battle a common misconception concerning how they're spread.



“We have 50 lakes in the county and just five of them are more than 100 acres,” he said. “It’s very unlike the lake-rich counties along the Upper Mississippi, but it’s still important that people understand AIS and the harm they cause.”

Johnson was the county's SWCD Technician at that time, and there like everywhere else, people tended to believe that humans weren't the culprits when it came to helping watermilfoil, zebra mussels and others find new homes. Invasives were primarily transported by waterbirds and animals, they said.

“Our state funding that year was \$39,000, so we had to be very efficient in what we did to turn that way of thinking around,” he explained.

The county purchased radio spots and pooled resources with neighboring counties for more expensive television time—both to get the AIS message out to adult residents.

“Then we started thinking about how kids can influence adult behavior,” he said, recalling his own experience. “I didn’t start really wearing a seatbelt until my kids who were in grade school at the time kept telling me to buckle up because they’d heard about it in class. It worked then and was different approach than what everyone else was doing.”

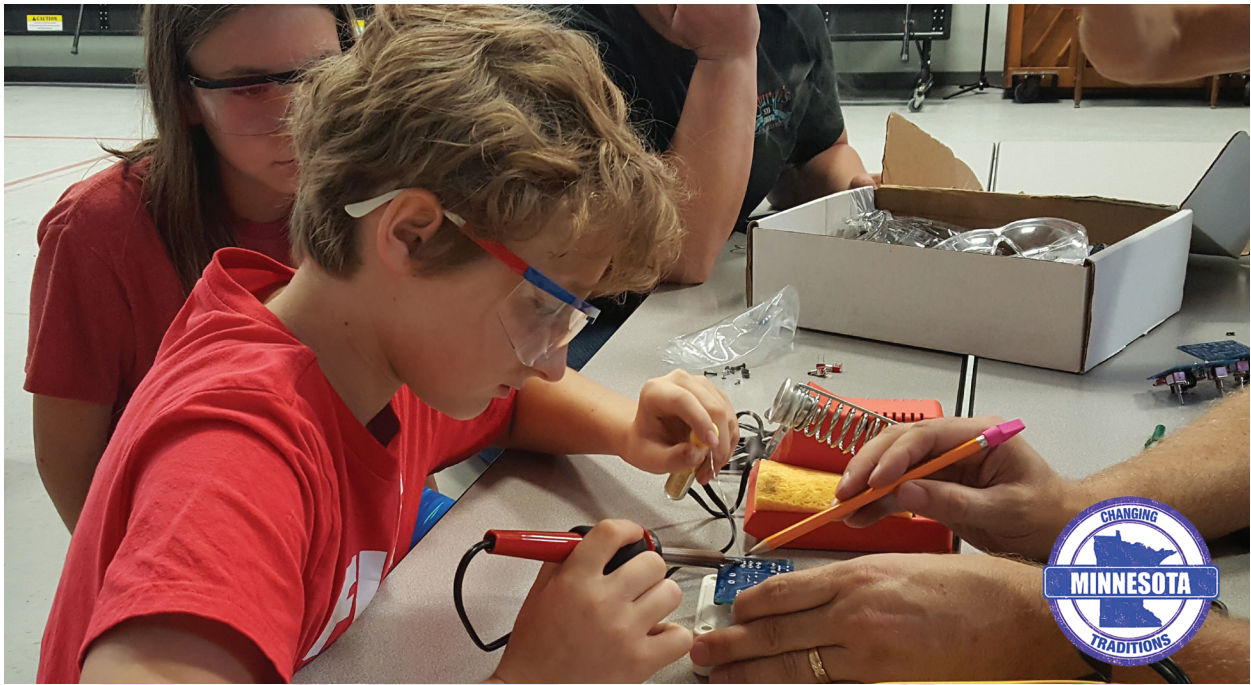
The SWCD joined the county’s Ag in the Classroom educational event, which annually brings hundreds of 4th grade students from the tri-county area to the Minnesota West Community & Tech college campus to learn about farming and agricultural business. It was a prime opportunity to add AIS education to the curriculum.

“We can talk to 300-400 kids in one day,” said Johnson, “and make it entertaining as well as educational by playing a quiz-type game with AIS messages.”

The program is going strong today and has engaged more than 2,000 young people since it started.

Another successful program, Aqua Robotics, was put on hold due to the pandemic but is now in the reboot stage. When started in 2018 it was headed up by Brooke Buisse, former SWCD Conservation Technician, and operated in partnership with the local 4-H organization.

School age children attended two sessions a month for three months during which they learned about invasives species in a classroom setting. The program was highlighted, however, by the participants building a remotely operated vehicle (ROV) equipped with an underwater camera. After constructing the ROV and testing it in a local pool, the class took it to local lakes to locate and identify native plant and animal species, as well as discover possible invasive species.



Young participants in Yellow Medicine County’s Aqua Robotics program learn to build a remotely operated vehicle equipped with an underwater camera. After pool-testing the ROV, the class heads to a local lake to search for aquatic plants and animals.

“This is a very popular program,” said Johnson, “and one that we’re very eager to bring back.”

Today, the SWCD also works with individual schools, providing teachers with information and educational materials they can use whenever it’s

appropriate. It also sponsors informational displays at local public events, such as the Western Fest PRCA Rodeo in Granite Falls which drew more than 4,700 spectators in 2022.

Yellow Medicine County currently has only two confirmed cases of AIS; zebra mussels in the Minnesota River above the dam in Granite Falls, and bighead carp found downstream from the dam.

“We don’t get an overwhelming number of visitors to our lakes from outside the county,” Johnson concluded, “but many residents either have a cabin farther north or travel there to enjoy the water. And though they have a much better understanding of how humans can introduce AIS to new lakes and streams, we’ll continue to reinforce the Clean, Drain, Dry message.”

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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