

Biologist: Otsego Lake is much cleaner now

- By Joe Mahoney Staff Writer
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COOPERSTOWN — For the past 40 years, Bill Harman has been a central figure in the annual Otsego Lake Cleanup Day.

The event became a summertime ritual in which volunteers, many of them connected to the Biological Field Station that he heads, would scour the shores of the lake for debris and litter carelessly discarded by those who used and abused the largest body of water in the Leatherstocking Region.

But in recent years, Harman acknowledged Thursday, he was pleased to see that the amount of debris being harvested had dwindled to the point that in last year's outing almost none could be found.

That meant, he said, that those who live along the lake have gotten the intended message — fouling the lake was good for no one, especially themselves.

“People used to throw their old hot water heaters, white goods, almost anything, into the lake,” he recalled. “Over time, we’ve seen that people’s level of environmental awareness has improved. There has been a whole change in attitude.”

While the new mindset was a victory, Harman didn't want a fine tradition to disappear.

So he decided that instead of holding a lake cleanup day this year, he would change the activity's mission as well as the title. And so on Sunday, the first Otsego Lake Invasive Species Awareness Day will be held.

The goal, though, is essentially the same: protecting the lake and keeping it a hospitable place for both human activity and the native species that thrive in and along it.

Harman said he expects to be joined on the lake by about 15 staffers and interns, and he's encouraging lake front residents to join in the effort.

"We're asking people to go out in canoes and kayaks and just paddle around, and if they see anything that looks suspicious, we'd like them to bring it to us," said Harman, the veteran professor of lake management for the State University College at Oneonta. He presides over a one-of-a-kind graduate studies program in lake management that attracts students from across the nation.

There are numerous varieties of aquatic nuisance species — from plants, to mollusks, to fish and crustaceans.

Harman can tell you off the top of his head which ones have taken up residence in Otsego Lake, which ones have been there but have been eradicated and which ones have still not found their way there, as well as which native species were once there but have vanished for one reason or another.

Water chestnuts have been found in Otsego Lake, although there has been some success in keeping them in check. Zebra mussels are not in the lake, and Harman is hoping those participating in Sunday's outing will keep an eye out of them.

One non-native species of fish that has caused problems for the lake's ecosystem is the alewife, first documented in Otsego Lake in the 1980s. While the lake trout fattened up on the alewife, they were getting out of control and eating more than their share of the

lake's zooplankton. That resulted in a bloom in algae and lake water that was cloudier and greenish.

Then the researchers at the Biological Field Station concluded that they could knock back the alewife by stocking the lake with walleye. Since the walleye stocking began in 2000, the alewife population has been sharply reduced and the lake water has been clearer, Harman said.

"It's really helped the situation nicely," Harman said, noting the National Science Foundation has taken note of Otsego Lake's success with the walleye stocking program.

The lake has some Eurasian milfoil but that species of aquatic plant is being contained by four types of insects that feed on it, Harman noted.

"We have been doing a nice job with early detection and rapid response," he said. "The targets now are the things we know that aren't here yet, but we still need to be aware of them."