Clean Boats Clean Waters inspectors protect Wisconsin water bodies

By: Marina Steiner

If you find yourself at a boat launch this summer, whether as an angler, recreational boater, or observing the area’s fine water resources, you may find someone wandering about in a blue shirt and clipboard in tow. Don’t be alarmed! That person could be me, Marina Steiner, the new Conservation Field Assistant for the Upper Sugar River Watershed Association (USRWA). I work with Matt Wallrath, USRWA Invasive Species Project Coordinator. Together we help run the Clean Boats, Clean Waters watercraft inspection program in southwest Wisconsin.

Clean Boats, Clean Waters is a Wisconsin-wide program for us to tackle the spread of aquatic invasive species. Invasive species are a certain kind of non-native plant, animal, or pathogen that rapidly take over a new location. This can alter the ecosystem because of being very fast growing, a lack of predators from the original far flung origins, or being unpalatable to our natives. Without these natural checks and balances, they are able to reproduce rapidly and choke out Wisconsin species. Think of pesky glossy buckthorn, garlic mustard, and wild parsnip; these are all common terrestrial invasive species. Lesser known but even more burdensome are aquatic invasive species like zebra mussel, curly leaf pondweed, Eurasian watermilfoil, Japanese knotweed and purple loosestrife. Viral hemorrhagic septicemia (VHS), a viral and deadly fish disease, can also be spread from one body of water to another and cause big die off. All of these and more are present on our near the Mississippi River, and we inspectors work to prevent their further spread.

Wisconsin has various laws in place to prevent the introduction and control the spread of aquatic invasive species and diseases within America’s Dairyland. Under the NR 40 Invasive Species Rule, it is illegal to possess, transport, transfer, or introduce certain invasive species in Wisconsin without a permit. Everyone from angler to lake recreation enthusiast (or both, like myself!) is responsible to comply with these regulations. As part of the Clean Boats, Clean Waters program, I survey landings and speak with boaters to inform and remind them of this law and the best practices and methods for compliance.

These practices include:

Inspect your boat, trailer and equipment.

Remove any attached aquatic plants or animals (before launching, after loading and before transporting on a public highway).

Drain all water from boats, motors and all equipment.

Never Move live fish away from a waterbody.

Dispose of unwanted bait in the trash.

Buy minnows from a Wisconsin bait dealer.

As an avid water sports enthusiast, myself, I enjoy sharing this message at landings because I want to help protect the waters that I grew up on. That way, we can all continue to enjoy protecting our lakes and rivers for generations to come so that we can all fish, boat, swim, and visually enjoy our shared resource.

Due to COVID-19, inspectors will not help with removal of any attached aquatic plants or animals or pass out informational brochures. That being said, the state is allowing this essential work to continue educating boaters on the proper practices to eliminate the spread of aquatic invasive species.

If you are concerned about the spread of aquatic invasive species in Wisconsin waters and along the Wisconsin side of the Mississippi River, you have the opportunity to be involved in the Clean Boats, Clean Waters program! As a watercraft inspector, you will be trained to organize and conduct a boater education program in your community. Adult and youth watercraft inspection teams educate boaters on how and where invasive species are most likely to hitch a ride into water bodies. Grants may be available to pay you for your time too! If you are interested in becoming an inspector or leading a team, reach out to Matt Wallrath at matt@uppersugar.org to learn more and help out with the 2020 season and beyond.

So next time that you are at a launch and see me or fellow inspectors at a launch, give us a wave and learn more about what you can do to protect the waters that you cherish.