PERSPECTIVE

Paul Smith's College Watershed Stewardship Program "Yes! In My Back Yard." (An exercise in YIMBY)

By ERIC HOLMLUND

Abstract

Paul Smith's College's Watershed Stewardship Program has posted employees at Adirondack boat launches since 2000 in an attempt to stop or delay the spread of invasive species, principally Eurasian watermilfoil. Public education, boat inspection and occasional boat cleaning comprise a day in the life of watershed stewards, who are typically Paul Smith's College environmental students. Stewards also monitor and control terrestrial invasive species and take part in a variety of service projects. A volunteer lake steward program was initiated in 2005 in Osgood Pond, modeled after the Watershed Stewardship Program's use of paid staff. The article closes with an anecdote regarding the observation and extraction of an invasive weed from a boat being launched into Lake Placid.

A young woman in a uniform and green ball cap waits with a clipboard at the Lake Placid State boat launch. The sky is achingly blue and the water is glimmering, peaceful and transparent. A man backs up a boat trailer and then gets out of his truck to unstrap his fishing boat. The uniformed woman walks up to the man and offers a smile and a greeting.

"Good morning! How are you today? OK? Glad to hear it! My name is Jecinda and I'm here today with the Watershed Stewardship Program of Paul Smith's College. Did you know that this lake is under attack? Yes, it is — not by *people*, but by *plants* ..."

So begins one of the approximately 3,000 formal interactions during summer months between Watershed Stewards and people launching watercraft at four public boat launches in the northern Adirondack Park. These interpretive encounters are the heart of the Watershed Stewardship Program (WSP), its reason for being, and its chief vehicle for impacting public awareness about what has developed into another war being waged on American soil: the desperate and sometimes hopeless fight against introduced, invasive plants and animals. Lake Placid is one of the remaining lakes that are so far free of invasive species such as Eurasian watermilfoil and zebra mussels. In 2004, more than 1,100 boats were counted by Watershed Stewards as having been launched at the state facility; we assume that the actual total is 20 to 30% higher, since Mondays and Tuesdays were left out of the study. What has residents, scientists, visitors, and by anthropomorphism, local weeds and trout, worried is that these 1,100 boats each could introduce invasive species into the vulnerable waters of Lake Placid, potentially degrading water quality and creating a tangled mat of weeds rising to the surface.

Steward Ashlee Petell chats with a new arrival at the public boat launch on Upper St. Regis Lake, delivering her message about the importance of checking boats and trailers for fragments of invasive plants.

Such is the state of affairs at Lake Placid. This situation is repeated at many lakes in the Adirondack Park as lake advocates try to keep the Pandora's Box of invasive species tightly closed, at least as far as the remaining "clean" lakes. Many other lakes, already infected, are faced with a different ethical dilemma: how to keep invasive species contained and limited to where they are. This situation is slightly harder to get people excited about: while the damage has been done, so to speak, on some lakes like Upper Saranac Lake and Lake

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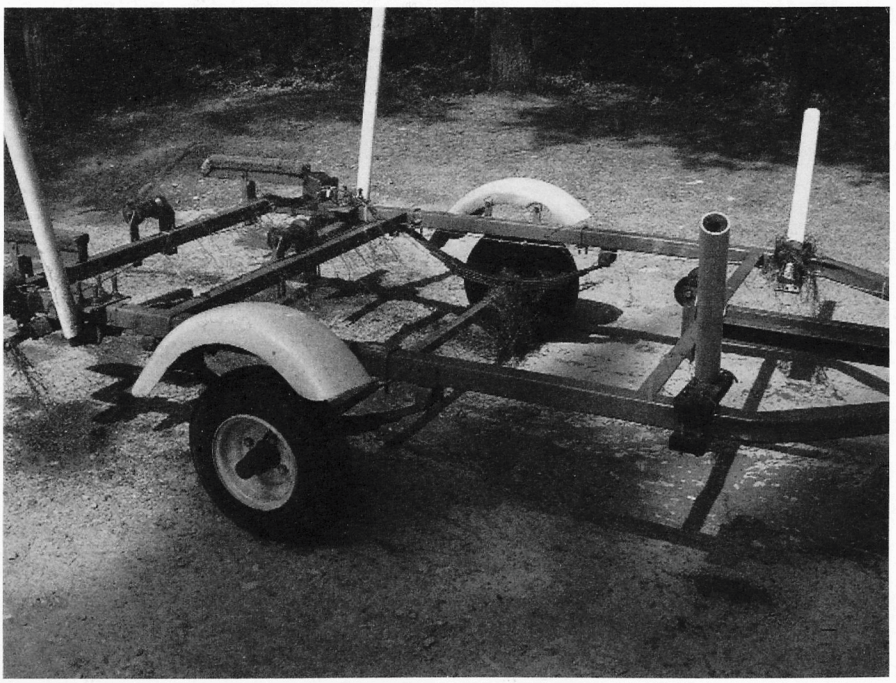
Flower which both struggle with rampant exotic weed growth, there is an obligation to keep boats from those lakes from carrying invasive species to other, uninfected lakes.

The Growth of a Good Idea

Since 2000, the Watershed Stewardship Program has tackled these ethical questions directly, with on-the-ground programming and research designed to enlist the general public in the effort, the struggle, to keep invasive species in check. The program was a brainstorm of Jim Gould, a professor and administrator at Paul Smith's College, in 1999. The idea was that there is a need for a tightly focused, local effort on behalf of the integrity of single lakes and their watersheds. Many programs have national, regional, or park-wide scopes. The Stewardship Program was to be different; it was to dig deep rather than spread wide, it was to gather information and resources that pertained to issues relevant to one lake, one place, one community. In a sense, the program represents the reverse of the oft-mentioned NIMBY principle — this isn't a program to which people say, "Not in my back yard"; we are welcome in areas near and dear to local residents.

With this philosophy, I was asked in 2000 to inaugurate a program addressing Upper St. Regis, Spitfire and Lower St. Regis lakes, along with St. Regis Mountain, all of which are located next to the Paul Smith's College campus. The first year was for pioneering — in a very real sense the first stewards designed the program with me as the summer went on. Stewards were posted at the Upper St. Regis boat launch and the summit of the mountain, but also had time to do vegetation inventories of several local wetlands using nested plots on transects, conduct weekly water chemistry checks at 11 stations through the three lakes, list birds, flowers and trees, engage in substantial trail maintenance efforts, measure exposed bedrock on the mountain summit, and create and publish a brochure series. The stewards loved the job — these six college students couldn't believe that they were getting paid to do the things they loved: look at plants, hike mountains, talk to people, take water samples, drive motorboats. The stewards' enthusiasm rubbed off: during the summer I was approached by the Upper Saranac Lake Association to expand the program to that lake.



If the stewards had not been there this trailer would probably have been lowered into Lake Kushaqua before the potentially dangerous plants were removed. Educating boaters is one of the most important functions of the Watershed Stewardship Program.

In 2001 we expanded to include Upper Saranac Lake, and stationed stewards at the Saranac Inn boat launch for the next four years. During that time, stewards offered educational outreach programs to camps and other entities on the lake, conducted a shoreline development study of the entire lake, which took a literal snapshot of shoreline development for the summer of 2002 as a benchmark, studied recreational use volume in Fish Creek, a stream flowing into the lake from a popular campground, and other special projects. The following year, the program expanded to Lake Placid, where it has been for four years. This year, 2005, saw the expansion yet again of the program to two new locations: Lake Kushaqua (Buck Pond State Campground), sponsored by the Rainbow Lake Association, and Second Pond (Saranac Islands State Campground), sponsored by the Lake Champlain Basin Program and the Lower Saranac Lake Association.

Associated with the Associations

When I reflect on the origin of this program, I am struck by the rich community that we tapped into and became part of. The primary boosters, both financially and philosophically, of the program were and remain property owners. This program is directed by Paul Smith's College but would not exist without the vision and dedication of the people who live on or around each of the lakes we serve. Members of the St. Regis Property Owners' Association, the Lake Placid Shore Owners' Association, the Upper Saranac Lake Association and the Rainbow Lake Association all have dedicated volunteer time and collective resources to the idea that a uniformed, educated person stationed at a boat launch can help address the national issue of invasive species propagation. The officers of these associations have assisted me in orienting the Watershed Stewards,

providing advice, printed resources, companionship and helpful news (gossip) to the Stewards, who are truly on the front lines of the effort to change public behavior around invasive species. Our program owes a tremendous debt to people like Susan Riggins and Linda Friedlander of the Lake Placid Association, Ed Hoe and Anne Weld of Upper St. Regis Lake, Curt Stiles from Upper Saranac Lake, Pat Willis from Rainbow Lake, and Charles Sporck and Penny Curran from Lower Saranac Lake.

The Watershed Stewards have also been trained and oriented by employees of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, the Adirondack Park Agency, the Adirondack Park Invasive Plant Program, the Adirondack Cooperative Loon Program and others. The stewards realize that they are part of a professional, committed community, and often share information as colleagues with Forest Rangers, Environmental Conservation Officers, unit management planners and environmental professionals.

It's Raining Invasive Species

"It figures," mutters Kate as she looks skyward at the heavy blanket of gray clouds. The rain falls at the soft, slow rate that all but confirms an all-day storm. Today is Kate's day to drive the Paul Smith's College boat around to a dozen sites along the shoreline of Upper St. Regis and Spitfire Lake in search of purple loosestrife. The WSP has worked with local residents, chiefly Lewis and Sheila Rosenberg of Spitfire Lake, since 2000 to map, track and "whack" stands of the lovely magenta flower, which so marvelously and rapidly spread and outcompetes native vegetation. Kate and I fill up the two six-gallon gas tanks for the small boat, hauling them through the rain-soaked pathway from the College's maintenance shed. We are soon met by two stewards hired by the Adirondack Park Invasive Plant Program, Leda and Joe, who then motor away with Kate to meet Steven Flint, the Park's icon of exotic weed control, at the Upper St. Regis Carry. This four-person rapid response team will spend a rainy day locating and pulling hundreds of purple loosestrife plants in an effort to keep the spread of the weed under control.

WSP Stewards, under the supervision of Steven Flint, have pulled literally thousands of the plants from local shorelines, and so have preserved the traditional color scheme of vivid greens, whites, yellows and pinks that we, and the rest of the ecosystem, have come to regard as natural. We can leave the acres of solid purple flowers for another time, another place. Sadly, such expansive vistas of purple loosestrife monocultures are becoming common along Adirondack highways and rivers, and can be seen in full glory in parts of Vermont and much of downstate New York. We're waging a war of attrition, and can't seem to stamp out the growth of purple loosestrife on the St. Regis Lakes, but we're keeping it isolated, and in a semblance of balance.

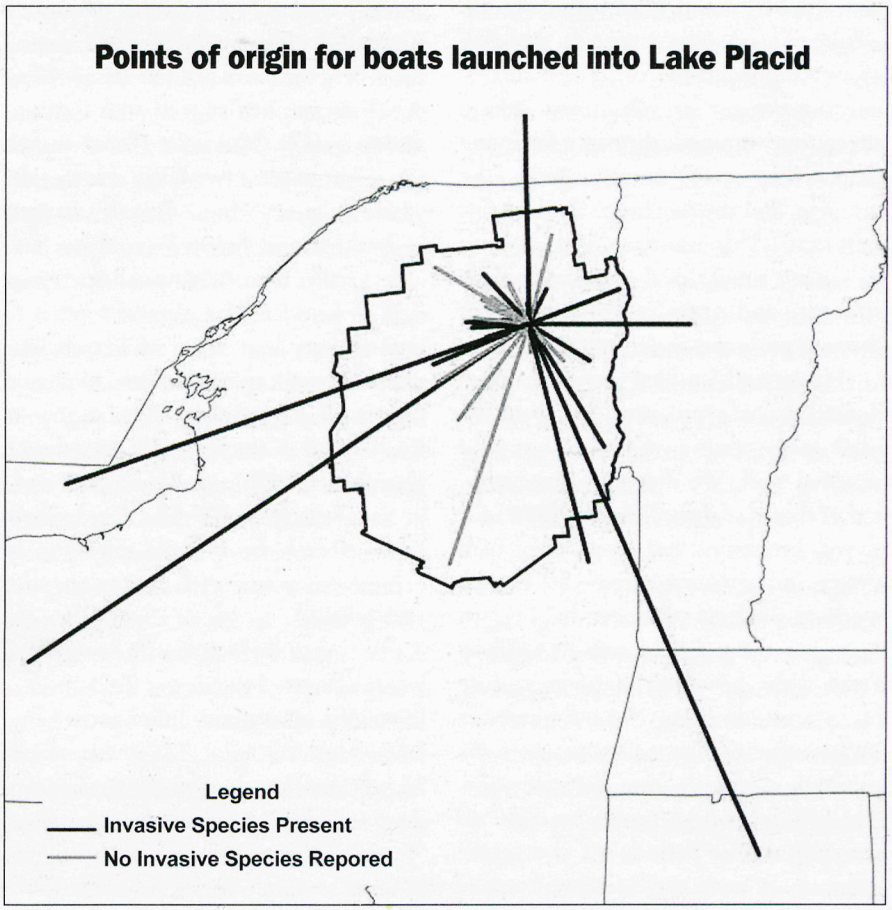
Later that day, I run into Kate as she returns, wet, muddy and cold, from a day of slogging through bogs, wrangling stubborn roots from the ground, dealing with a finicky motor, and bending over for far too long to clip seed heads. "How'd it go?" I ask. She pushes a wet strand of hair from her face and manages a smile. "Great. We got 'em. There were a lot fewer plants out there than last year. We took care of them before the seeds disperse in the wind."

I ask about how she dealt with the rain. "Soaked to the skin, but I didn't get cold 'til the end. But then I just wanted to get out of there and get warm." I can certainly sympathize.

Looking for Volunteers

Bob Hall, the current President of the Osgood Pond Association, rings me in my office. "We want to take you up on your offer. I think I've got about six people lined up. Let's try to get something together by Thursday."

"Sure, Bob. I'll plan something with Hilary. I think this could be the start of something big."



We're not talking about espionage or smuggling, here. In fact, quite the opposite — I suppose this is interdiction. For a couple of years we've been thinking about finding a way for small lake associations, those without significant financial resources, to get involved with the public education and lake stewardship effort. If one considers the Adirondack Park on a whole, it's easy to see that four, five or even ten lakes working to control invasive species and improve water quality can do only so much if they are surrounded by 2,000 lakes that have no such effort. It's apparently only a matter of time before the invasive plants and animals are transported in to each lake by unwitting members of the public.

Osgood Pond has been interested in what we do for years, but just couldn't afford us. Isn't there some other way? We came up with a solution: Volunteer Lake Stewards. Working together, Hilary Oles, coordinator of the Adirondack Park Invasive Plant Program at the Nature Conservancy, and I reviewed model programs in Maine and Wisconsin that train a cadre of local volunteers to do the work of my summer employees. There are certain advantages to volunteers: they're cheap, once trained, they stay for many years, they care deeply about the resource, and they're cheap. (Did I mention that?) This approach, if successful, will allow small, local organizations to structure and organize Volunteer Lake Steward programs at a minimal cost.

Hilary and I pulled together a condensed training program, based on the week-long training we give to our paid seasonal staff. We did it in two hours, rather than five days. We gave them uniforms, brochures and visual aids, data sheets and encouragement. So far, it's working. Six local volunteers have begun manning the public access to Osgood Pond with the objective of inspecting boats and educating the public about invasive species. The main obstacle to the program is coordinating the volunteers and getting enough people to cover all the critical time periods. As you might guess, there is no way to restrict public access to certain hours convenient to the Volunteer Lake Stewards; they have to be ready when the public is there!

We're optimistic that this summer's test of the Volunteer Lake Steward concept will allow us to offer the service to other lakes in 2006. Of course, lake associations will soon learn just why paid employees are so effective: they have to work their shifts!

My Own Story: Save!

As the Director of the Watershed Stewardship Program, I have to serve in a variety of ways as situations present themselves. On August 13, 2005, I needed to work a shift, not in the office, which is my familiar post, but at the state boat launch in Lake Placid, as one of my employees took a special day off. The rest of the Watershed Stewards were pleased to know that the "boss" was going to actually do a day's work "in the trenches." They were eager for me to see what the job was really like.

Well, let me tell you, interacting with a steady stream of folk intent on rapidly launching expensive watercraft during their precious and limited leisure time does present a challenge to one's communication skills. The Lake Placid launch can accommodate two boats side by side. There are many times when this statistic is doubled and feats of exquisite (and lucky) trailer maneuvering can open your eyes in wonder. The steward's job is to chat up every boat owner while eyeballing the boat, prop, rollers, wheels, hitch and license plate for visible weed fragments. Rush hour at the Lake Placid Launch resembles the Chinese New Year Parade in San Francisco. It's difficult to see all sides of each boat while engaging in earnest environmental discussion with each person.

At about 3:00 p.m., as I'm getting weary (I started the day at 7:00 a.m.), a large inboard-outboard ski boat is being backed into the launch. I spy what looks like a weed attached to the lower unit, deep in the shade under the boat. "Stop!" I say, rather excitedly, to the woman walking backward toward the water. She relays the message to a man behind the wheel of the tow vehicle. I stoop into the shade and pull a long stringy weed into the sunlight. I suddenly realize that this is the sinister object of my entire program: a strand of parched, but alive Eurasian watermilfoil. The boat was three feet from entering Lake Placid, which is, as I mentioned, beautifully clear of invasive weeds. I felt like a goalie in a long, boring soccer match. Up to this point, nothing ever seemed to actually happen in my end of the field. Finally, there was a shot on goal — I made a save!

As luck would have it, five minutes after I single-handedly saved Lake Placid (allow me my fantasy, please), Linda Friedlander, the Coordinator of the Lake Placid Shore Owners' Association — sponsor of our program — walked over to check on our progress. In my glory, I brandished my weedy trophy, which I had inserted into a soft drink bottle. We were in part heartened by this proof of the program's relevance, and in part worried by the close call. How many weeds like this made it through this summer, either during busy times when the Watershed Stewards were overwhelmed or on Mondays and Tuesdays, which are without our service? One can't help but feel humbled by the challenge of the task.

And so the Watershed Stewardship Program finishes its sixth year of service to four lakes directly, and to perhaps hundreds of lakes, indirectly. For the educational message our employees relate to users of our four lakes applies to any and all water bodies, near and far. We are finding that more and more people are aware of the threat of invasive species, and the role that boaters play in their transport and spread. But the majority of the public is still ignorant of the problem, and our Watershed Stewards strive from Memorial Day to Labor Day to spread information and change attitudes, which hopefully begins to change years of habits and behaviors. The rewards are few and fleeting, the obvious saves too infrequent, yet the cost of failure is too much for any of our lakes to bear.