On a mission to destroy

New campaign launched to prevent takeover by exotics

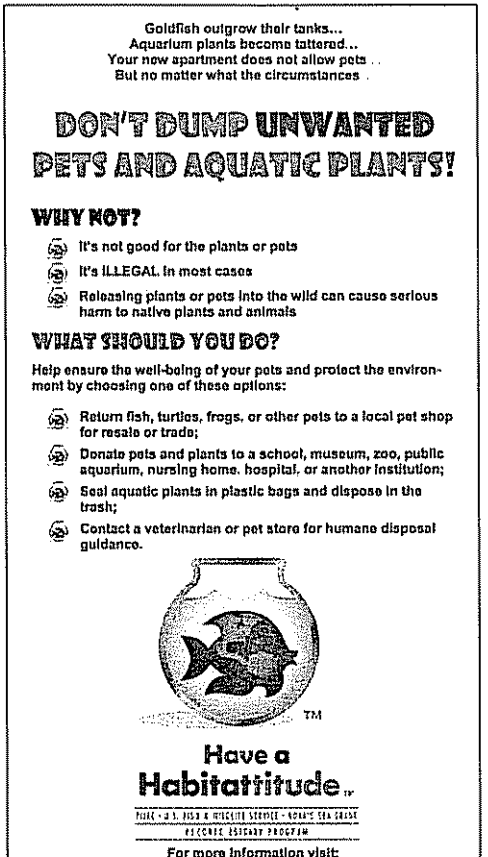
By Tom Burke

Alien plants and animals, nonnative species called "invasives" or "exotics" by scientists, threaten to destroy the native ecosystem of the North Fork as well as other ecosystems across the country. A new education campaign, "Habitattitude," exhorting people not to dump unwanted pets or plants into the environment, is being rolled out on the East End this week. Cosponsored by the local Peconic Estuary Program, pet and aquarium stores, and the nursery/landscape industry, the program uses education to help stop the spread of exotic species that destroy native plants, crowd out indigenous wildlife and cost the U.S. economy $130 billion annually in damages.

'There are alternative ... ways to dispose of these things.'
—Kathy Schwager, The Nature Conservancy

Some of the invaders, like the northern snakehead, make national headlines. (The snakehead, or "Frankenfish," is a native of China, eats everything in its path, can walk on its fins and survive for hours out of water. It was introduced in 2002 by a fish fancier who dumped a pair into a pond in Maryland.) Other invaders, such as the hydrilla plant, are less notorious but nonetheless cost taxpayers tens of millions as wildlife managers have labored to keep this killer weed at bay. (Hydrilla was introduced in Tampa and Miami as an aquarium plant in the 1950s.) Locally, the water plant ludwigia is beginning to take over parts of the Peconic River, after it was planted because it "looked nice." Phragmites, another "alien," is a slender, six-foot-plus, grassy weed. It has completely conquered thousands of acres of local marsh, killing critical black duck habitat. English house sparrows were introduced into Central Park in the mid 1800s and they bred so prolifically that house sparrows now account for 43% of all competitor species (species that take over nest boxes intended for native birds) in the New York area.

Controlling invasives once they take hold is difficult and expensive. Preventing their introduction is much easier, hence the emphasis on education. "People need to stop and think for a moment before they dispose of a fish that has outgrown its tank or a plant they no longer want," said Kathy Schwager, invasive species specialist for The Nature Conservancy in East Hampton. "There are alternative, humane ways to dispose of these things," she continued. Ms. Schwager also explained that the major source of aquatic invasives used to be aquariums. Today, however, water gardening and home ponds have become a significant new source of environmental trouble.

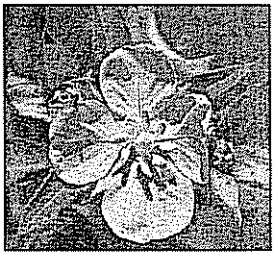


Graphic courtesy of Peconic Estuary Program

In addition to being destructive and dumb, dumping an exotic into the Suffolk County ecosystem is illegal and can cost up to $1,000 in fines. The county passed a law in December 2005 that makes it a crime to introduce, throw, dump, deposit or place invasive plants and animals "in any river, stream, lake, pond, wetland, or storm water drain."

Suggestions for disposing of unwanted fish or animals include: seeking advice at pet stores; donating them to a school, museum or public aquarium (call ahead); or asking a vet to suggest humane methods of disposal. Surplus or old water from a fish tank should be flushed down a toilet or buried in the ground; old back-yard pond water should never be poured down a storm drain or pumped into the street. Plants can be sealed in plastic bags and disposed of in the trash. Never dump live plants or pets anywhere outside.

A number of dangerous invasive plants are currently attacking the North Fork and greater East End ecosystem. All share a particularly noxious trait: They out-compete natural vegetation — they grow bigger, faster, stronger, and/or get by with less food. They take over an ecosystem, replacing the indigenous plants and displacing or starving the native birds, mammals and other critters that depended on now-gone natives for food and/or shelter.



The water primrose is among the 'invasive' species found locally.

According to Ms. Schwager and The Nature Conservancy, the invasive plants — Carolina fanwort, parrot feather and European frogbit — are making headway in their quest for dominance. Equally serious, and also a threat to human health, the giant hogweed is growing on Long Island. This plant contains a milky sap that blisters the skin and can lead to blindness if rubbed in the eyes. All these exotics (except the hogweed) were aquarium plants that made the leap (with human help) from the fish tank into our streams, lakes and rivers. The Peconic Estuary Program, The Nature Conservancy, and nursery/landscape professionals all recommend the use of native species around the house, rather than exotics such as bamboo, as another way to reduce the spread of invasives.

For more information, go to the Peconic Estuary Program's website at www.peconicestuary.org/, the Habitattitude website at www.habitattitude.net/, or The Nature Conservancy at www.nature.org/.