

Volunteers help control spread of invasive plant species

By Vera Chinese



Charles A. Guthrie scoured the shoreline of Peconic Lake from his canoe on Sunday in search of a species that could potentially take over the entire lake and, if left alone, possibly Peconic River.

After nearly 45 minutes of rowing to reach the western end of the lake, Mr. Guthrie, regional fisheries manager for the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, finally spotted the telltale yellow flower of the non-native invasive plant called *Ludwigia peploides*, commonly known as water primrose, and removed it from the water.

Thanks to the efforts of volunteers, infestation areas of the plant in this part of Peconic Lake, which borders Riverhead and Brookhaven towns, are now few and far between. That was not the case just two years ago, when sections of the lake could not be accessed via boat due to the dense floating mats created by the South American plant species.

The Peconic Estuary Program, in partnership with environmentalists from New York State and Suffolk County, held a large-scale cleanup this past weekend to remove the freshwater plant from local wetlands. More than 40 volunteers on Saturday, and about half of that number on Sunday, launched their canoes and kayaks and manually removed the invasive species from Peconic Lake, a body of water that feeds the Peconic River. The best way to effectively remove the hardy species is to pull it out by hand, which is done with little difficulty because of the plants' shallow roots.

Volunteers pulled an estimated two cubic yards of water primrose over the weekend. Last month, about 35 volunteers removed double that amount from the water, according to organizers. The plants were then loaded onto boats and later placed in a Dumpster located on property owned by the Peconic Lakes Estates Civic Organization. Volunteers have pulled nearly 40 cubic yards of water primrose in a single day during previous cleanups.

The estuary program has been hosting water primrose pulls since the summer of 2006, about three years after the species was first spotted in Peconic Lake. Laura Stephensen, the coordinator of the Peconic Estuary Program for the DEC's Bureau of Marine Resources, said the program has been such a success that large-scale pulls might not be required next year.

"There's been a huge improvement," said Ms. Stephensen of the progress made to clear water primrose from the estuary. "We've been able to keep it under control."

Kathy Schwager, an invasive species plant specialist with the Nature Conservancy, explained that, at one point, the Peconic Lake ecosystem was in danger of being overrun by water primrose. "There were places you could not access," she said. "We've cleared that area and it's not there anymore."

Ms. Schwager added that early intervention was the key in controlling the spread of the invasive species. "We caught it at the right time," she said.

When asked what could possibly happen if the water primrose invasion went untreated in the lake, Peconic Lake Estates Civic Organization President Ernie Fugina offered one possible scenario: "It would look like a meadow."

Environmentalists speculate that water primrose was introduced into Peconic Lake, also known as Forge Lake, in 2003. Ms. Stephensen explained that water primrose, which blocks sunlight from other aquatic plants and reduces oxygen levels in the water, is destructive to the natural ecosystem of the lake.

Ms. Stephensen said the estuary program organizes about four major pulls, like the one held last weekend, over two weekends each summer. The progress made during these pulls is enough to drastically reduce growth for the remainder of the summer, which is the season that usually provides the best conditions for the perennial plant to thrive.

Ms. Stephensen noted that, based on optimistic predictions, cleanup efforts have been so successful that there might not be a need for additional large-scale plant pulls next summer.

The plant species is especially dangerous because of its rapid reproduction rate; water primrose can double in mass in as little as two weeks in a slow moving body of water, like Peconic Lake. In addition to destroying the habitat of native species, water primrose also makes it nearly impossible for boats to pass through and for fisherman to access parts of the lake.

Although the exact cause of the water primrose invasion is unknown, Ms. Stephensen offered one likely alternative: "We think that people have used it ornamentally in yards or aquariums and someone may have emptied an aquarium into the Peconic River."

Water primrose has been found as far east as Grangebél Park in downtown Riverhead. To date, it has not entered the waters of Southampton Town, according to environmentalists. The only other place water primrose has been found on Long Island is in Brooklyn's Prospect Park.

The Suffolk County Department of Health Services, which oversees the Peconic Estuary Program, acquired a \$26,000 grant from the DEC and \$3,200 from the Corporate Wetlands Restoration Partnership to pay for the Dumpsters and other costs associated with the removal project up until 2009. After that time, the department will have to compile a comprehensive long-term management plan for Peconic Lake and the eradication of water primrose. Earlier this year, department officials secured permission to spend some of the grant money to finance the removal of water chestnuts, another non-native invasive species that has been discovered in Peconic Lake.