

Hydrilla surges back after decade-long dormancy at Smith Mountain Lake

PENHOOK — Don Pollock faces an invasion.

A fast-growing aquatic weed is choking the life out of his quiet cove and quickly making the waters around his home at Smith Mountain Lake unnavigable by boat.

“This has grown probably two feet in the last few weeks,” Pollock said of a patch of hydrilla surrounding the dock at his lakefront home.



Hydrilla, an invasive aquatic plant, is quickly making its return at Smith Mountain Lake after more than a decade. Lake resident Don Pollock picks a clump of the underwater weed from the cove he lives on in Penhook on Sept. 19.

Heather Rousseau, The Roanoke Times

Pollock and many other residents have noticed the invader’s return this year after it virtually disappeared from Smith Mountain Lake in 2013 following the introduction of sterile grass carp.

But as the carp reach the end of their lifespan with no ability to reproduce, fewer fish to feed on hydrilla means the pesky plant is surging once again.

Kristina Sage, executive director of TLAC, the Tri-County Lakes Administrative Commission — which oversees Smith Mountain Lake — confirmed a significant increase in hydrilla this year. The commission has received more than 60 hydrilla sightings this year, up from just a few reports all of last year.

“We are aware of the situation and are working through the proper steps to address it,” Sage said.



Hydrilla, an invasive aquatic plant, is quickly making its return at Smith Mountain Lake after more than a decade. The underwater weed is seen at a cove at the lake in Penhook on Sept. 19.

Heather Rousseau, The Roanoke Times

Hydrilla was first spotted at Smith Mountain Lake in 2007. The plant, which originated in Asia, has spread to bodies of water throughout the U.S. over the past few decades.

It likely took root in the country after being dumped from an aquarium into a Florida waterway sometime in the 1950s. The hearty weed has thrived in that time, costing some localities millions to control it.

Like in most water bodies, hydrilla likely arrived at Smith Mountain Lake by hitching a ride on a boat that was moved from a nearby lake infested by the plant. All it takes is a small fragment of the weed to start a new infestation in a different place.



Hydrilla, an invasive aquatic plant, is seen underwater in large patches at a cove in Penhook on Sept. 19.

Heather Rousseau, The Roanoke Times

Once hydrilla took hold at Smith Mountain Lake, it flourished. It spread from just a few reported patches in the first year to dozens in 2012. That's when TLAC spent \$150,000 to treat 189 acres of hydrilla with herbicide.

Those costly efforts only briefly slowed the weed's growth, as it reappeared the following year. Hydrilla can easily spread and regrow from fragments, roots or even tubers that grow from the ends of the underwater stems.

In 2013, TLAC got permission from Appalachian Power and the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources to stock the lake with 6,000 sterile grass carp to eat hydrilla into submission.

The stocking cost \$30,000 — a fifth the price of the herbicide — but it worked almost too well.

Carp started munching in March 2013, and hydrilla patches disappeared by September, according to reports at the time. But as the fish chewed through the invaders, they also ate much of the lake's native plants.

Twelve years later, most of those sterile carp have now died off, and hydrilla is thriving without the predator. In the last few months, Pollock has seen the patches of hydrilla around his and his neighbor's docks in the Little Bull Run area of the lake grow expeditiously.



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HEATHER ROUSSEAU, The Roanoke Times

There was no hydrilla in the cove earlier this year, Pollock said, but now huge patches make parts of the cove unnavigable. He has seen boats, kayaks and personal watercraft get stuck in the hydrilla. His grandchildren refuse to swim around his dock, surrounded by the slimy plant.

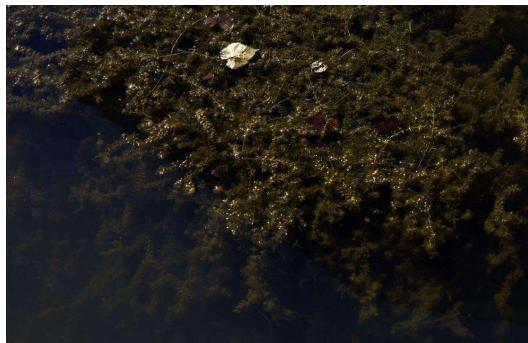
“I don’t want this around my dock,” Pollock said.

Hydrilla had been a problem in that section of the lake in the past. Pollock said his neighbors spent thousands on herbicide to control the weed until the grass carp came in 2013, a year before he moved in.

Pollock and his neighbors now look to TLAC to prevent hydrilla from taking over their community. He said they have had good conversations with the commission but want this issue taken care of sooner rather than later.

Sage said TLAC is already taking steps to address the issue. Appalachian Power is currently conducting a survey of the lake floor to mark hydrilla locations. That information will be taken to the DWR as part of a scheduled meeting this November.

“No one can introduce herbicide or sterile grass carp into the lake without a permit from DWR,” Sage said.



Hydrilla, an invasive aquatic plant, is seen in large patches at a cove in Penhook on Sept. 19.

She also said TLAC is looking closely at introducing sterile grass carp into the lake once again. The fish are cheaper and more effective than using herbicide.

Many people who fish on Smith Mountain Lake have spoken against the carp for eating more than just the hydrilla. Fishers often search for areas with underwater vegetation, as fish like to hide in the plants.

If the carp are introduced once again, Sage said there will likely be fewer. TLAC overestimated how many were needed in 2013, she said. The commission board at the time had even planned to add more carp than the original 6,000, but it scrapped plans after seeing how effective the fish were.

Fish biologists have reported that the carp prefer hydrilla as a food source and will only seek out other aquatic vegetation if no other hydrilla is available.

“We have to make sure we don’t wipe out all of the vegetation,” Sage said.

While TLAC is already taking steps to address the new hydrilla surge, Sage said it will likely be early next year before any remediation is in place. That would also work best for the possible stocking of new carp. A spring stocking helps minimize stress on the fish from extreme temperatures.

Pollock wants TLAC to consider herbicide for the large patches around his cove to keep it from growing any further this year. He also wants them to be more proactive in keeping an eye on the problem going forward to prevent it from further getting out of hand.

“My opinion is someone should take immediate action now to minimize the current hydrilla growth and long term corrective actions taken later,” he said.

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