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Lakeshore Stinks of Weeds

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By Debra J. Groom
Staff writer

Lots of people dream of owning property on Cayuga Lake.

But this year, for those who do own waterfront land on the east shore, it's been a stinky nightmare.

"We can't enjoy our beach," said Jeannen Pearson, who has lived on the lake with her husband, Robert, just south of Union Springs for about seven years. "We're getting more seaweed and leaves - anything that's out there will float in here. It smells like a sewer."

For the past two or three years, the amount of weeds has been increasing from just south of Union Springs heading north on the Cayuga County side of the lake. The weeds, and some smaller fish caught in the weeds, die, rot and expel an odor that can't be imagined.

"Come down any time and smell the stench," said resident Bill Hecht, who lives a bit north of Union Springs. "It smells like someone dumped a septic tank on my front lawn some days."

"It's disgusting," said Ronald Podolak, executive director of the Cayuga County Soil and Water Conservation District.

Podolak has had the district's weed harvester out on Cayuga Lake once already this summer and he expects to go back at the end of July.

He said the warm and sunny days, lower water levels, the disappearance of weevils that were supposed to eat the milfoil there and the appearance of zebra mussels in the lake (which make the lake water clearer so the sun penetrates deeper) have made the weeds more abundant this year.

"The weeds were driven by west winds into stinky piles on the beach and in the water, where they and the dead fish they entangled festered," said John Fox, who also has lakeside property a bit south of Union Springs.

"We and our neighbors have not only suffered from the stench, but also from itchy eyes, scratchy throats and breathing problems," he said.

Hecht said he has heard that the weeds are driving down real estate values. Jeff Trescot, an agent in Moravia who sells lakefront property in the Finger Lakes, said the weeds "are a definite negative eye appeal" and "it usually smells."

"And it's not so much that you'll get \$20,000 less (for a house) if there's weeds," Trescot said. "It's just that they won't buy the house at all."

Some residents have been hiring people to take away the offending mess.

Joseph Reding owns a machine he uses to scoop floating weeds from the water at his own residence and for the village of Cayuga. He doesn't cut weeds that are growing on the shore, only what has floated in, usually from the west side of the lake.

Bruce Natale, an environmental engineer with the Cayuga County Planning Department, said he wonders where the private haulers are taking the weeds once they are removed from the lake.

He also wondered if they are also removing muck/lake bottom sediments and if they are cleaning the equipment, bags and trailer between jobs to prevent diseases and invasive plants and animals from moving from lake to lake.

Podolak said the county Soil and Water Conservation District's weed harvester cuts in Cayuga, Owasco and Otter lakes and Lake Como. He said the weed problem in Cayuga Lake has been getting progressively worse for the past three or so years.

"We thought the weevils would take care of the milfoil, but for some reason unbeknownst to us, they died off or something," Podolak said.

But now, some residents along the lake are right back to that situation.

The Pearsons used to have a beautiful sandy beach at their property. Now, there is so much seaweed, algae, leaves, logs and other things that have washed up that a person can't even see the sand at the bottom of the shoreline.

The seaweed and leaves are about 1 foot deep, extending about 10 to 12 feet out into the lake from the Pearsons' shore area. Jeannen Pearson said, when the fish get in there and die, the smell is even worse.

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