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AGGRESSIVE INVASIVE PLANT HYDRILLA DISCOVERED IN CAYUGA INLET

Cayuga Lake and other regional water bodies at risk

Ithaca, NY – The highly invasive aquatic plant, *Hydrilla verticillata*, known commonly as 'hydrilla' or 'water thyme' was recently detected in the Cayuga Inlet by staff from the Floating Classroom. In a follow-up survey, Robert L. Johnson, a local plant expert with Cornell University and Racine-Johnson Aquatic Ecologists, located several areas of the Inlet with extensive populations of hydrilla. To date, hydrilla appears to be localized to the Cayuga Inlet, with no evidence that it has yet rooted in Cayuga Lake.

This is the first detection of hydrilla in upstate New York's waters, and the risk of it spreading to Cayuga Lake and other regional waterbodies is substantial. Fragments of the plant, which are easily caught and transported by boats and boat trailers, can sprout roots and establish new populations. Fragments also float and are capable of dispersing via wind and water currents.

State and local municipal officials along with biologists from Cornell University gathered Friday, August 19, to discuss the scope of the problem and rapid response options. Attendees included representatives from the City of Ithaca, the Cayuga Lake Watershed Network, the Finger Lakes Region of NYS Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation, the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, and NYS Canal Corporation. A follow-up meeting has been scheduled to develop management, spread prevention, and outreach plans. If left unchecked, hydrilla can clog waterways; interfere with boating, fishing, and swimming; and cost millions of dollars to control.

Recreational users of Cayuga Inlet are urged to employ clean boating practices to prevent the further spread of hydrilla and other aquatic invasive species. Remove any plants, mud or debris from boats or equipment that came in contact with water. Drain any water from boats before leaving a launch area. Clean and dry anything that came in contact with water including boats, trailers, gear, clothing, dogs, etc. Never release plants, fish, or bait into a water body unless they came out of that water body.

Native to Asia, hydrilla was first introduced to the US in the 1950s when the contents of an aquarium were dumped into a waterway in Florida. It has since spread throughout much of the eastern US (from Florida to Maine) and into a number of western states. It is found worldwide on every continent except Antarctica.

Hydrilla grows aggressively, up to an inch per day, and creates a thick mat of vegetation when it reaches the water's surface. Hydrilla quickly shades out other aquatic plants, displacing native species like pondweeds and wild celery. It does well in a wide variety of freshwater habitats including canals, springs, streams, ponds, lakes, rivers, and reservoirs. Hydrilla can survive a range of environmental conditions, including high and low nutrients, acidic to alkaline waters, and high to low light conditions. Hydrilla is a perennial plant that overwinters in northern climates by producing a storage structure, called a tuber, from roots and stems buried in the sediments. The tuber re-sprouts in the spring when conditions warm. In addition to floating fragments, the transport of tubers with sediments (e.g., dredging spoils) is another means by which hydrilla can spread to new water bodies.

Hydrilla has long slender stems that can grow underwater to lengths of up to 25 feet. Its identifying characteristics are four to eight small, pointed leaves are arranged in circular whorls along the length of the stem. The edges of the leaves are lined with sharp teeth. Hydrilla is often confused with native water weeds, particularly *Elodea canadensis* whose leaves typically occur in whorls of three and appear smooth-edged. It also resembles the invasive Brazillian waterweed (*Egeria densa*), which is found downstate in New York and has finely serrated leaves (3/4 - 1.5 inches) in whorls of 3 to 6.

Hydrilla can set seed, but primarily reproduces vegetatively via floating pieces that set roots, buds produced along the stems (called turions), or overwintering tubers.

Please visit http://nyis.info for up-to-date information about hydrilla and other invasive species.

IMAGES:
Hydrilla infestation, near Ithaca Farmers' Market on Aug. 10, 2011 (Image credit: Robert L. Johnson)

Whole hydrilla plants with tubers. (Image credit: Leslie J. Mehrhoff, University of Connecticut, Bugwood.org)

Close-up of hydrilla leaf whorls (Image credit: Robert Vidéki, Doronicum Kft., Bugwood.org)