

## **Enhancing the Role of Resorts and Fishing Guides in Preventing the Introduction and Spread of Aquatic Invasive Species**

Study conducted on behalf of Cass County, Minnesota by Patrick G. Welle, Ph.D.

The main purpose of this study is to invite resort owners to offer ideas on the best ways to insure that guests employ adequate measures with boats, trailers and other equipment to avoid AIS introductions. All 56 resorts operating on Leech Lake and the Boy River Chain of lakes, eleven lakes in all, participated in the study.

Responses indicate that resort owners/managers place a great deal of importance on preventing the spread of AIS. Various species were discussed and the greatest emphasis was placed on preventing zebra mussels with Eurasian milfoil being a close second.

There is widespread agreement that resort owners have adequate knowledge but substantial disagreement that customers know. **Over a third of owner/managers “Disagree” and two “Strongly Disagree” that customers know what precautions to take.** Results indicate that there is greater confidence that MN residents are getting the message and taking the precautions required by state law, but there is **much less confidence regarding non-residents.**

Another major component of the interview asked respondents to rate their satisfaction with various aspects of AIS educational efforts and policies. Only seven of the fifty-six respondents expressed dissatisfaction with overall efforts, with nine being neutral. This question served to begin the process of assessing AIS educational efforts and policies and prompted specific descriptions of satisfactory and unsatisfactory aspects. Ratings of State efforts were the least satisfactory of the four. Many of these leaders in the tourism industry were unaware of the roles served by Cass County so were neutral. A high level of satisfaction exists with the role fulfilled by lake associations, particularly regarding the educational materials. **The educational piece that was seen as most useful was the ½ sheet. This is an updated hand-out that has been revised since the MN DNR created it a few years ago.** The positive ratings given by these businesses corroborates the findings in the cost-effectiveness analysis that it is sensible that the county also designated this as its primary piece at public accesses in 2015.

The concluding portion of interview asked owners/managers to characterize patterns of boat usage among resort guests. One number that is of interest for understanding this situation is the **percent of resort guests that bring their own boats.** Over half of the resorts reported that between 60 and 80% of guests bring their own boats. The variations between these businesses is indicated by the range between 30 and 100%. It was further categorized into percentages of guests who bring boats from out of state. Responses indicate diversity of customer traits and activities across the 56 resorts: some have a **customer base which is predominantly Minnesotan and others attract more than half of their guests from elsewhere.** Nearly all resorts fell in the range of 10 to 50% of guests who bring boats from out of state. *Another major finding of this study is that this group of non-residents warrants special attention in terms of educational efforts, best practices at ramps and public policies to prevent the spread of AIS.*

Another pattern of boat use explored in this study is referred to as “lake hopping.” Resort clientele was categorized into those who only boat on the lake where the resort is

located, those who boat on 2-5 lakes and those who boat on more than 5 lakes. The evidence does not indicate a high volume of “lake hopping” but should not be dismissed because just a few risky launches could cause multiple introductions of AIS. A related **concern expressed by some resorts is their customers who are not overnight guests but who come to use their boat ramps.** Resorts that have more of this activity indicate a high degree of sensitivity among the resort staff where this occurs and exemplary vigilance to prevent AIS transport from use of their ramps.

A wealth of information is provided in owner/managers’ verbal explanations of their closed-ended responses. Major themes show a deep commitment to protect the lakes they cherish that are the basis of their livelihoods. Comments describe many ways in which this motivation translates into great care in monitoring and managing activities at their boat ramps. Most place the highest priority on education as the main way to prevent the spread of AIS.

### **Best Practices for Educating Resort Guests**

Making sense of the multitude of ideas about AIS and discerning where to set priorities requires recognition that the fundamental challenge in addressing the AIS threat is changing people’s behaviors and reforming old habits. This is an essential lens for viewing educational efforts and AIS policies and laws. Meeting such a challenge successfully is both daunting and complex. To be effective AIS prevention efforts must form an integrated system made up of components parts that are complex in and of themselves. Among the component parts of the system are: attitudes and values, perceptions about individual and group behavior, collaborative roles that must be fulfilled and integrated into effective partnerships, rules and norms that induce positive behaviors and discourage negative ones, balanced and judicious approaches targeted correctly across a diverse population, budgets and human resources that are limited and sufficient consensus to bring the various elements together before it is too late.

The ideas offered by resort owners and managers as well as fishing guides reflect an **understanding of the challenges in re-shaping behaviors in using our lakes for water-based recreation.** The comments highlighted above and reported in full in Appendices D and E emphasize the role of education. They reflect valuable insights as to what methods reach the customers - that they understand better than anyone - and how they can be partners in getting the message across. They also express realistic attitudes about what might work and the need for contingency plans when adjustments must be made. Optimism is greater for smaller lakes with fewer accesses and fewer people involved. **As a whole, these business people recognize that their futures will be influenced by the future quality of these lakes.** All of the people who participated in the interviews expressed some willingness to take action and pursue some measures to prevent the spread of AIS. A tough-minded skepticism is held by many juxtaposed with the willingness to try.

In addition to advancing understanding about launching activities at resorts, perhaps the biggest benefit of this study is defining the opportunity to succeed through community efforts. Against a backdrop where many see the spread of AIS as inevitable, the best chance at preventing that future will come from concerted efforts among all partners. In particular, having this profile of views among resort owners and managers

creates the foundation for building consensus as to what roles these businesses can play and how they can support each other. Prospects are bleak if people feel they are going it alone.

With that in mind, one idea for building on this study is to hold a discussion among resort owners and managers to take stock of what is reported here and to move forward. **Motivation levels will be maximized when there is a sense that sacrifices of time and effort and commitments of resources are mutually supported and mutually beneficial.** While there is competition among these businesses, they share common cause in protecting the quality of these lakes. Perhaps the effectiveness of ACCL can be attributed in large part to the sense of community among lake associations and the reinforcement that comes from “the Band-Wagon Effect.” Continuing the discussion among these tourism leaders is a next step in implementing best practices.

Ideas for best practices with guests are listed below. Some practices occur on location at the resort, others are resort contacts with guests between stays, and others are activities by partners that complement resort efforts.

Efforts at resorts:

- \* Lead by example with as much hands-on involvement as possible with guests launching and pulling boats
- \* Tailor attention toward those who need it most: first-time visitors, “lake hoppers” and non-residents
- \* Post standard issue DNR signage and/or customized instructions at boat ramp
- \* Charge “inspection fee” for non-guests who use resort boat ramp
- \* Place bucket in conspicuous and convenient place for dumping unused bait
- \* Reinforce pragmatic reasons for pulling plug and removing vegetation, to avoid fines: draw attention to plug by teaching memory tip of fastening it to steering wheel
- \* Distribute educational materials to guests in effective ways, especially the DNR ½ laminated sheet: in Welcome Book, at check-in counter, etc.
- \* Have decontamination equipment available to the degree feasible or refer risky cases to nearest station

Educate guests through contacts between stays:

- \* Include AIS materials in off-season newsletter - both printed and electronic – and other broadcast messages to guests as well as social media. Include ½ sheet or shorter blurb on AIS with letters that respond to inquiries and confirm reservations
- \* Create new, customized messages to fit resort clientele, such as printed and electronic messages on theme of “Pull plugs and remove vegetation.”
- \* Encourage stop at decontamination station in transit, especially for those coming from out-of-state and/or from infested waters.

Leverage educational efforts of partners:

- \* Support innovative efforts to educate visitors and locals about AIS that are developed by partners (ACCL, Chambers of Commerce, DNR) such as concise messages on theme of “Pull plugs and remove vegetation.” Resorts assist in distribution of materials to guests, such as fridge magnets, boat key chains or tables converting fish length to weight with AIS precautions described on reverse side
- \* Open dialogue with guests about AIS when possible throughout the year to find out which messages – media ads, online materials, billboards, etc. - they’ve been exposed to and how effective they are

## Other Ideas for Preventing the Introduction and Spread of AIS

In the spirit of progress and collaboration, many respondents offered ideas on how partners could help resorts in their efforts or suggested ways other entities could improve their roles in preventing the spread of AIS. Many of these ideas involve allocation of additional resources or formation of new AIS policies. The comments in Appendices D and E elaborate on those listed here.

- \* Offer free training to resort staff so they are qualified to conduct Level 1 or Level 2 inspections at resorts
- \* Involve the Chambers of Commerce and tourism boards more heavily in educating about AIS prevention, especially in response to inquiries by prospective visitors
- \* Educate residents and visitors who use private accesses at Planned Unit Developments (PUDs), and 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> - tier lakeshore developments. Suggested methods might include letters to property owners, blurbs in property tax statements, messages in Vacation Rentals by Owners (VRBO) contacts, assigning volunteers/inspectors to private accesses at busy times, etc.
- \* Increase efforts to educate non-residents by adding billboards on main highways that serve as border crossings and expanding ads in media that reaches border markets
- \* Increase monitoring of trailering on highways, especially near borders and conduct spots checks for compliance with AIS laws. Five respondents argued for the need for much stiffer fines as the only way to get the message across to some people
- \* The State of MN should use online contacts with boaters and anglers especially non-residents, as opportunities to expose them to AIS educational materials
- \* Increase monitoring and management of boat entry and exit that occurs during fishing tournaments, regattas, etc.
- \* Dedicate more funds to research on methods to eradicate AIS where they exist, control the spread once introduced or minimize ecological and human impacts
- \* Invest more resources in decontamination equipment and enact complementary policies that will result in more strategic uses of this equipment.
  - Extend the schedules and add more stations for more convenient use and make it free of charge.
  - Eight respondents argued for mandatory decontamination of watercraft and trailers upon leaving infested waters. Some described policies that would authorize inspectors to physically tie boats to trailers when exiting that would be removed once decontamination has occurred. Another suggestion was an electronic database that would enter boat license information for boats on infested waters that would be coupled with decontamination evidence once that occurred.
  - Establish cost-share opportunities for resorts or clusters of resorts that want decontamination equipment. Customers with evidence of decontamination elsewhere could present documentation upon arrival at the resort.
  - Set up decontamination stations at highway rest areas and other businesses such as car washes.