

DNR Fails to Prevent Spread of Invasive Species in Higgins Lake

Starry Stonewort was discovered by divers from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) in mid July 2018 during a scuba evaluation of DASH boat activities. The DASH boat (Diver Assisted Suction Harvester) is owned by the Higgins Lake Foundation and operates each summer on Higgins Lake to remove Eurasian Water Milfoil. The dive team from the MDEQ returned a few weeks later and did a survey at 33 sites on Higgins Lake checking for the presence of Starry Stonewort. The plant was identified at six locations in Higgins Lake. Three of the locations are the DNR launch site at the West Launch, the DNR launch site at the South State Park and the channel exiting the south park lagoon. The launch site locations were classified as dense by the MDEQ divers. According to the MDEQ divers, the launch site at the South State Park, while under the stewardship of the DNR, is now so dense with Starry Stonewort and Eurasian Water Milfoil that there are no longer any native plants present.

According to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources website, "Starry Stonewort is spread through the movement of water-related equipment. Fragments can get tangled in trailers, motors, anchors, fabric, footwear, fishing and hunting gear, and inside of a watercraft." Every watercraft that has been launched at the West Launch and South State Park launch sites this summer has been a potential distributor of invasive species into Higgins Lake. A small fragment of Starry Stonewort can start a new colony.

Understanding the situation that Higgins Lake is facing, the HLPOA asked the Department of Natural Resources Parks and Recreation Division (DNRPRD) on August 17, 2018 to close the West Launch and the launch site at the South State Park until the situation could be evaluated and a plan of action implemented. The request was denied. Unfortunately, boats continue to drag Starry Stonewort into Higgins Lake based on this denial.

It is clear that the DNR launch sites are the access points for invasive species into our lake as is evidenced by the high density of Starry Stonewort that was identified by the MDEQ divers. We suggest that the DNRPRD assume responsibility for the situation that they have created. The HLPOA recommends closing the launch sites until they are completely cleared of all invasive species, followed by the removal of Starry Stonewort from all other known locations in the lake. Given the continuing invasive species entry at the DNR launch sites, it should also be necessary to fund an annual invasive species assessment in Higgins Lake.

The State of Michigan website, updated December 2017 for the Status and Strategy for Starry Stonewort Management, states: "Prevention of new colony establishment is the most cost effective approach to Starry Stonewort management." The State of Michigan is refusing to protect Higgins Lake by continuing to allow the launching of boats at their known infested launch sites since the middle of July when Starry Stonewort was first discovered. All of us are stakeholders, and all who love and care for Higgins Lake deserve an answer as to why this is being allowed to happen.

The mission statement of the DNRPRD "is to acquire, protect and preserve the natural and cultural features of Michigan's unique resources and to provide access to land and water based public recreation and educational opportunities." Sadly, it is clear that unfettered access, and not preservation, is their primary concern.

HLPOA Board, October, 2018