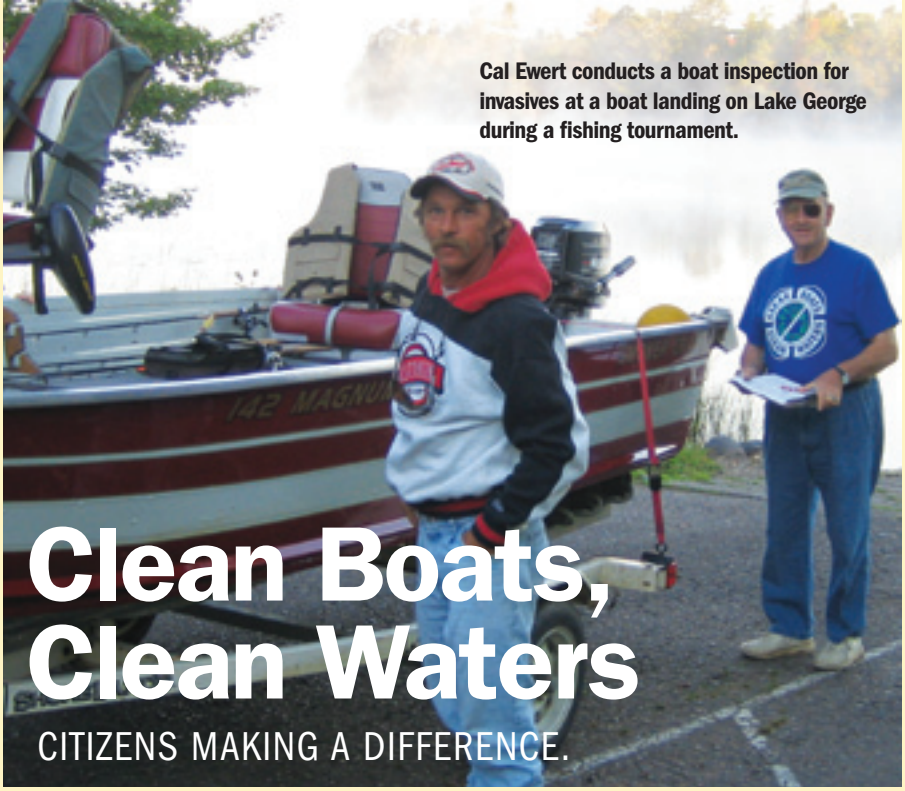


Cal Ewert conducts a boat inspection for invasives at a boat landing on Lake George during a fishing tournament.

BOB MCVETY

Clean Boats, Clean Waters

CITIZENS MAKING A DIFFERENCE.

Erin McFarlane

Drive by the Lake George boat landing in Oneida County most any weekend during the summer and you are likely to find folks in blue T-shirts talking with boaters about fishing spots, their weekend plans, and, most importantly, how to prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species (AIS).

These dedicated citizen volunteers are part of a statewide boat inspection program, known as Clean Boats, Clean Waters (CBCW). Through CBCW, citizens learn about aquatic invasive plants and animals and how easily they can be spread from lake to lake on boats and equipment. CBCW inspectors know what actions should be taken at the boat landing to prevent the spread of AIS, how to share prevention steps and AIS laws with boat landing visitors, and how to assist boaters in inspecting their watercraft.

When they first began conducting inspections in 2004, members of the Lake George Lake Association CBCW program were primarily motivated by a desire to protect their lake.

"We watched nearby lakes become infested with invasive species," recalls Doug Ceranske, the first president of the lake association and longtime CBCW volunteer.

Ceranske and his wife, Shirley, became residents on the shores of Lake George in 2003. Interested in getting to know their neighbors they organized a monthly breakfast for lake residents which led to their involvement in the lake association and CBCW.

The Ceranskes have been active in preserving and protecting their lake ever since. Doug has devoted many summer weekend hours to talking with boaters and anglers about cleaning plants off their boats, trailers and fishing equipment and the issues caused by aquatic invasive species.

He explains, "We try to get peak days and times, like Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays covered. But, we still feel the need to man the landings more effectively."

Ceranske and about 15 other residents have been CBCW volunteers at the Lake George boat landing for more than 11 years.

In addition to providing fundamental AIS outreach to boat landing users, CBCW watercraft inspectors record important data during inspections. While the Lake George Lake Association inspectors spent time at the landing, Shirley Ceranske volunteered her time to the CBCW program by entering the valuable data collected into a statewide database.

For nine years, she totaled the data collected by her lake group and entered it online, where Lake George's information was compiled along with results submitted by hundreds of other watercraft inspectors around the state. The Department of Natural Resources has summarized all the landing information to better understand boater knowledge of AIS, traveling patterns and which AIS prevention steps boaters are taking. The data from volunteers has helped guide AIS decision-making on a statewide level since the CBCW program began.

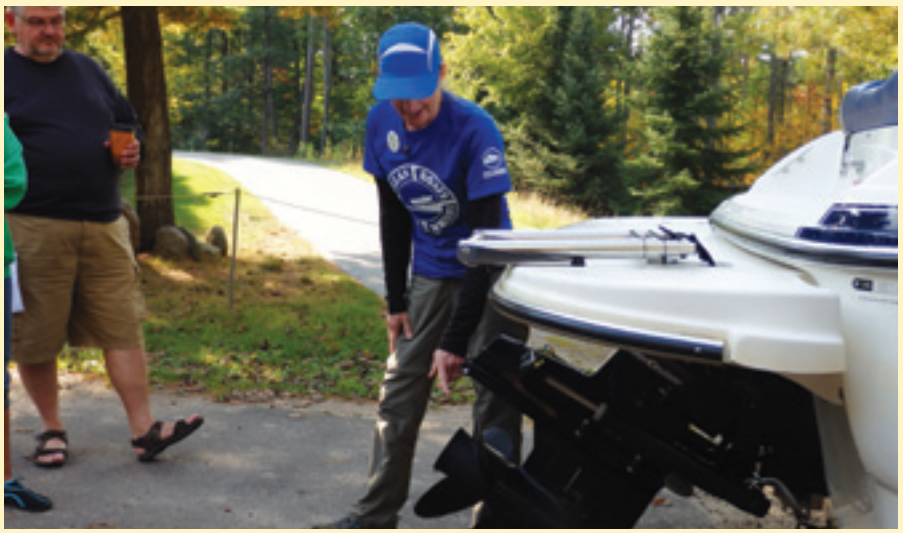
Wisconsin's watercraft inspection program would likely not exist in the form that it does today if it had not been for the vision of three students from Minocqua/Hazelhurst/Lake Tomahawk Elementary School.

Concerned by an invasive plant called Eurasian watermilfoil that was causing problems in their local lakes, Maree Stewart, Luke Voellinger and Janell Zajicek, along with their teacher, Lisa Ahlers, brainstormed a plan to educate boaters and lake residents about the plant and how to keep it from spreading from lake to lake. In 2002, their Milfoil Masters project garnered top prize in a national competition by the Christopher Columbus Fellowship Foundation, giving them $25,000 to see their project come to fruition.

>>> THE TROUBLE WITH AQUATIC INVASIVES

Aquatic invasive species can cause major issues in lakes, threatening the diversity and abundance of native plants and animals, negatively affecting ecosystems and hindering recreation. They can also pose a major threat to economic development, through reducing fisheries production, clogging industrial pipelines and decreasing property values.

Unfortunately, humans play a key role in spreading these aquatic invasives among inland lakes, thanks to the invasive's hardiness and ability to hitch a ride on boats, trailers and fishing equipment. Tiny plant fragments from Eurasian watermilfoil, an aquatic invasive plant, are easily transported in water or on boats, trailers and other equipment. Each small fragment of Eurasian watermilfoil can grow into an entirely new plant. Other aquatic invasives, such as zebra mussels or spiny water fleas, are microscopic and invisible to the naked eye in their early life stages. These AIS can also hitch a ride on boats and trailers, but are even more likely to be transported in water contained in boats, such as in livewells and coolers.



STEPHANIE BOISMENUE

Inspectors remind boaters on Squash Lake to check key points on their boats and equipment for plants and mud, including propellers, trailers and anchors.

UW - EXTENSION LAKES

Jennifer Filbert, DNR lakes and aquatic invasive species database specialist, trains citizens on how to enter and access data. To find out more about CBCW, go to uwsp.edu/cnr/uwexlakes/cbcw.

Working with the Department of Natural Resources and the University of Wisconsin Extension's (UWEX) Adopt-A-Lake Program at University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point, the students used the grant to further develop the program and create educational tools, such as boat landing stencils, Eurasian watermilfoil fact sheets, identification cards and aqua viewing scopes to help lake users check for signs of milfoil.

In 2003, around 150 education kits were distributed to boater education teams, comprised of lake organization members, students and other engaged citizens, in 25 Wisconsin counties. The newly re-titled Clean Boats, Clean Waters program was launched on opening fishing day in May 2003, with teams of adults and youth in place at more than 65 lakes to alert lake users about Eurasian watermilfoil and how to prevent its spread. Boat landing visitors were very receptive to the prevention message shared, and the success of the first summer allowed this grassroots project to flourish.

Once they are in a waterbody, costs of managing AIS populations can easily prove prohibitively high, with no guarantee of success. While Wisconsin's AIS goals have long included prevention, the CBCW program was the first cost-effective option to present itself.

The Wisconsin Lakes Partnership, comprised of the Department of Natural Resources, UWEX Lakes and Wisconsin Lakes, adopted the CBCW watercraft inspection program in 2004, developing new resource tool kits, manuals and publications to guide communities in developing their watercraft inspection teams.

UW-Extension and the Department of Natural Resources offered a series of training sessions to deliver these materials in lake rich parts of the state where AIS were most likely to take a foothold. That same year, the department and UW–Sea Grant also began devoting employees to the CBCW effort and hired watercraft inspectors to work in strategic areas during the boating season. The Department of Natural Resources also began recommending involvement in a CBCW effort for all projects seeking state AIS grant funding.

Since expanding the program in 2004, UW-Extension and other partners have trained more than 1,000 people from a wide variety of groups to conduct inspections. Clean Boats, Clean Waters inspectors include county board members, tribal community members, representatives from county park and forest programs, boat marina operators, scout troops, nonprofits and realtors.

Along with the increase in active inspectors has come increased staff to support them, by way of county and regional AIS coordinators, mostly funded through DNR grant funds, and other county staff who spend time training and assisting CBCW inspectors on top of their already crowded workloads. In 2013, the department introduced a new streamlined grant process for groups seeking funding for their CBCW programs, and it has been extremely popular.

Two lake-rich counties in northern Wisconsin — Oneida and Vilas — lead the state in number of CBCW inspections reported each year. Many groups active in the northern part of the state use watercraft inspection as a protective tool to keep their lakes free of AIS.

However, CBCW is just as effective, if not more so, at keeping AIS from spreading out of the lakes where they are already found.

One such example is the CBCW program on Lake Delavan in Walworth County. The Community Park boat landing in Delavan has had a CBCW program present for most of the past 10 years.

Mary Knipper, member of the Delavan Lake Improvement Association and Wisconsin Lakes president, began the effort in 2005 as a volunteer, and the Town of Delavan Community Park began hiring several inspectors a few years later. The Walworth County lake specialist also devotes significant hours during the summer to watercraft inspections.

"I can't imagine where we'd be without the CBCW program. Community Park boat landing receives 17,000-22,000 boats annually, as well as overflow traffic from Lake Geneva," Knipper says.

"While inspecting one morning, I talked with a group of anglers who said Delavan Lake was the fourth lake they'd visited that morning! That conversation was pivotal in helping me recognize the vulnerability of our lake to new AIS and its potential to spread AIS."

Clean Boats, Clean Waters inspectors range from dedicated volunteers to paid staff. The Lake George Lake Association, whose CBCW program has been completely volunteer-based since 2004, is planning to hire inspectors for the first time ever in 2016, thanks to funding from a DNR AIS grant and the Sokaogon Chippewa Community.

"This will allow our volunteers to work primarily on Thursday and Friday afternoons and have paid inspectors covering the weekends," explains Joan May, the Lake George Lake Association president. "Our volunteers will be able to enjoy some time with their families on weekends."

For waterbodies like Lake Delavan, where the presence of various AIS requires yearly management, the cost-effectiveness of paying for a CBCW program is clear.

Knipper asserts, "We spend about $175,000 annually on AIS management, including chemicals, harvesting and monitoring. The costs of paying inspectors to do CBCW are not even close to the cost of management for our Sanitary District."

At the commonly used rate of $12 per hour, the value of CBCW volunteer hours reported by citizens since 2004 totals nearly $1.5 million.

Almost all of the long-term watercraft inspectors are affiliated with a lake organization. Wisconsin is extremely fortunate to have a wealth of passionate citizens. The majority of watercraft inspections are conducted by citizens, either volunteering or receiving grant funding, and most lake monitoring data is collected by citizen volunteers. Other states, such as Minnesota, also have active watercraft inspections programs, but none of them rely primarily on citizen action. This raises the question: what motivates our CBCW inspectors to continue their efforts?

For the folks on Lake George, Squash Lake and Delavan Lake, the most common responses indicate that seeing their efforts make a difference for Wisconsin's legacy of lakes is a driving factor.

Doug Ceranske on Lake George explains, "It's been good. At the start of our program, people were ignorant about AIS. Now, people know what the problem is. It's neat to see. Overall, I think the educational effort is making an impact."

Maree Stewart, Janell Zajicek and Luke Voellinger initiated the aquatic invasive species education effort at boat landings.

UW-EXTENSION LAKES

May agrees and adds that being active in CBCW has opened up other opportunities for the Lake George Lake Association. "CBCW got us to go beyond just outreach at the boat landing. It was a good jumping off point and led to more eyes on the lake looking for AIS. Lately our goal has been to engage property owners in learning about and identifying vegetation in the lake."

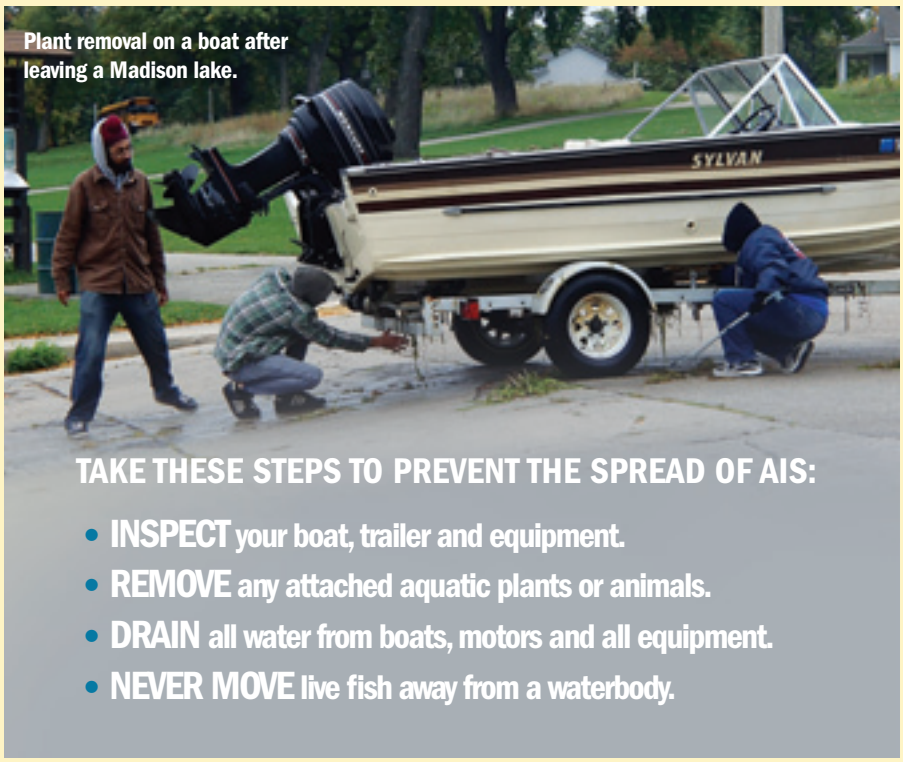
Not all lake groups are able to engage members the way Lake George has, but CBCW does offer them an opportunity to take action on a local level and have real conversations about the welfare of our lakes.

"One-on-one education isn't common anymore, and inspectors are the first line of science that boaters encounter," explains Knipper. "CBCW was born of and creates a grassroots effort of its users."

The local ownership and passion the citizen watercraft inspectors show is the key element that makes the CBCW program successful and unique in Wisconsin. Regardless of whether they are volunteering or grant-funded, it is the commitment and energy of the citizens that drives our watercraft inspection effort.

For Marj Mehring, a longtime CBCW volunteer on Squash Lake in Oneida County and likely for many of our citizens who do great things for our lakes, her motivation is simple. "I love the water. Keeping it clean is important and spreading that environmental message is important."

Erin McFarlane is the statewide CBCW Educator for UW-Extension Lakes.



Plant removal on a boat after leaving a Madison lake.

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