

# Lakes with zebra mussels are goners. Lock the trouble there.

It's time for us to stop (stop!) letting invasive species hitch a ride to our docks.  
By Jim Davidson

MAY 13, 2017 — 9:24PM



STAR TRIBUNE ILLUSTRATION (ISTOCK IMAGES)

TEXT SIZE

More than 60 years ago, my dad would wake me early on certain Saturday mornings, and we would drive north, beyond White Bear Lake, to fish. The lake my dad preferred was small, with one farm owning all the lakeshore. The rowboat cost \$1 to rent.

Arriving around 6 a.m., we would be on our way home by 8, having caught our limit of crappies with two cane poles.

I remember it vividly. I never thanked my dad enough for such beautiful and quiet experiences adrift in those Saturday sunrises.

Today, that lake is surrounded by suburban homes, each with boat docks and several motorized watercraft, and by hundreds of acres of green, fertilized lawns. The fish, for all practical purposes, are gone. The water is brown/green with algae. The homeowners need to harvest Eurasian water milfoil each year to keep the lake open for motor traffic (\$30,000 per year). With increased algae and warmer temps, swimming may soon be unsafe.

That change happened in my lifetime — during my watch as “trustee” for what our grandchildren will soon inherit. We, the older generation, do not own these lakes. We are only trustees of the creator’s natural wonders. Our children and grandchildren own them, and we are supposed to pass them along in as good or better a condition as we received them from our grandparents.

Obviously, we have failed on a grand scale.

New invasive species continue to arrive in Wisconsin and Minnesota — largely from the Great Lakes — on a weekly basis. Altogether, 180 invasive aquatic species are identified in the Great Lakes, according to the [National](#) Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration — allowed in by our government during our lifetimes.

For economic reasons, our elected officials encouraged international freighters to enter our fresh waters from the Atlantic via the St. Lawrence Seaway and sail all the way to Wisconsin and Minnesota. Did you know that Congress has allowed most all the ports of the world to send vessels right into Green Bay or Duluth with one or two stops? And we allowed them to empty their dangerous ballast tanks into American freshwater lakes — introducing a few hundred alien species from who-knows-where.

Over the past 30 years a nasty critter called the zebra mussel has hitchhiked and stowed away to cross lakes, rivers and streams — all the way to Wisconsin and Minnesota. Then they hitched rides at 60 miles per hour on highways, to reach hundreds of lakes, attached to boats and trailers — all the way to California.

Zebra mussels just arrived in our lake area of Washburn County, Wis., into Big McKenzie Lake.

You, your kids and grandkids have all played in the sand on a beach, right? But add zebra mussels to a lake — they cut your feet and can cause dangerous infections. Even your dog will stay off the beach. Nor will you ever tie up a boat along your dock — because its bottom will look

like barnacle-encrusted ships in the movies of Captain Jack Sparrow. So will your dock and boat lifts. Swimming will be in deep water only.

Your lake's water will become so short of zooplankton that fish will die off. Weeds will grow faster due to deeper-penetrating sunshine. Yet dangerous algae will float in onto your beach. Zebra mussels only eat the good algae.

The good news? There is none. Can't kill this critter without killing the whole lake. Zebra mussels will likely starve out most life in a lake over time — and then partially die off themselves, leaving tons of razor sharp shells along your so-called "beach."

Real estate values? One lake with 7 miles of beach suffered \$40 million in lost property value due to zebra mussels. Multiply that by 1,000 lakes and riverfronts. Then multiply that by 50 years — because no scientist expects this pest to leave anytime soon — or to stop spreading.

The "soft glove" strategies of state departments of natural resources have been a disaster. Approximately 1,000 lakes each in Minnesota and Wisconsin already harbor "aquatic invasive species," according to state [reports](#) — some 2,000 lakes already lost out of the 25,000 lakes in the two states. Both departments of natural resources have failed, claiming they lack authority to stop the spread by locking up infested lakes. State governments study the problem; publish findings, study it again — and rent billboards along the interstates pleading, "Be nice to our lakes." No fines. No laws with teeth.

Most important, no action has been suggested by any governmental agency to employ sequestration or containment to stop the transmission from infested lakes to clean lakes. If we as citizens come down with a serious "infectious disease," we get quarantined. Such preventive isolation is the accepted way to deal with dangerous, contagious diseases. A contagious disease is exactly what our lakes have contracted.

Let's call a disaster a disaster and stop denying the obvious. If you think, as does the DNR, that "increasing awareness of this problem" is the solution, show us the proof! Closing down vectors of migration is required.

The closing of all boat landings on lakes with known invasive species is a necessary first step. It can be followed with decontamination facilities and personnel at these boat landings — funded by forcing compliance and charging fees to enter and leave an infested lake (this approach is already active and operating on Shell Lake, Wis.).

Fishing by visitors can be safeguarded by the rental of fishing boats at boat landings and resorts — with boats that never leave that lake. In other words, turn back the clock to a time when rental was the only option citizens had when going "north."

None of this seriously affects the current lakeshore owners of an infected lake — they normally recreate on their own lake.

The main issue here is simple: If a boat sits in an infested lake; that boat, trailer, boat lift or dock should not move to any other lake without first being decontaminated. Period. No exceptions. And a very stiff fine should result if the law is broken. Such decontamination facilities should be run by local businesses, already servicing the boaters and fishermen of the many lake areas — not by government agencies. Such facilities should benefit the local economies.

Allow me to share a few statistics to shake you awake: Lake Mille Lacs sees 60,000 to 100,000 boats coming and going each year. Those boats are known to visit 171 other neighboring lakes during the season. Mille Lacs is estimated to contain 2 million pounds of walleyes — but 2 billion pounds of zebra mussels. That's some 2 trillion critters, and more than 800 mussels per square foot, according to the Minnesota [DNR](#).

Do you feel the size of this problem? Is it not time to stop this ruination?

We have 25,000 reasons to act. These glistening jewels of the north are a legacy we are destroying, one by one, slowly but surely. We must reverse this tragedy.

Our grandparents bequeathed us healthy lakes, rivers and forests. We need to remember their wise and conservative council: be more compassionate, less divisive, less focused on consumption, better stewards of our children's future and God's good Earth.

Here is what the Wisconsin DNR posts on its website as its mandate:

“To protect and enhance our natural resources:

“Our air, land and water;

“Our wildlife, fish and forests

“And the ecosystems that sustain all life.

“And in this partnership with the public

“Consider the future

“And generations to follow.”

This is not about “we” and “they.” This is about life itself.

*Jim Davidson divides his time between St. Paul and Washburn County, Wis.*

---