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County turns to volunteers for help battling invasive species

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OSWEGO — Dick and Naneen Drosse spent years watching from their home in Minetto as the water chestnut invaded the Oswego River. Each year the persistent invasive species returned and multiplied. Mechanical harvesting and chemical treatments helped combat the problem, but still left vast pockets of chestnuts.

About five years ago, Dick, Naneen and others began paddling along the west bank of the river and “pulling” water chestnuts out of the water. The straightforward approach worked.

“We could see a difference in the spots we had been handpicking,” Dick said.

The area along the west bank of Oswego River from Battle Island Golf Course to near Midway Drive-In was almost completely free of chestnuts last year, Dick said. Others have also had success in clearing small areas of chestnuts using the pulling method.

Now officials in the Oswego County Soil and Water Conservation District are working with volunteers from conservation organizations and other groups to coordinate several full-scale pull events this summer to halt the spread of the water chestnut.

Volunteers on the Oswego and Oneida rivers and the Salmon River Estuary pulled several acres of plants last summer. Nearly 30 members of the Oswego County River Guides Association spent a day pulling plants from the Salmon River Estuary last July. Also assisting in the project were New York Sea Grant, Selkirk Shores State Park, the Pine Grove Association and the Nature Conservancy.

This year, the lower Salmon River and select areas along the Oswego River will be targeted for hand pulling because the water chestnuts have not yet become established in those spots.

In the past a special machine that resembles a combination of a floating harvester and wood chipper was used to shear the plant and collect it from the water. When the machine became full, the collected chestnuts were transported to shore and hauled away for disposal. The procedure worked, but it was difficult to get the waste to shore and dispose of it. The water chestnuts also damaged parts of the machine over time. According to John DeHollander, district manager of Oswego County Soil and Water, it would require a small fleet of the aquatic harvesting machines and more money to effectively control the invasive species.

Then officials turned to topical chemical treatments to deal with larger areas, such as one 80-acre patch of chestnuts along the Oswego River. The Oswego County Legislature allocated money for the chemical treatment on the Oswego River last year, which was reimbursed through a state grant.

"Mixed results appeared during post-treatment," DeHollander said. "Further sampling last fall showed that some areas still had a high percentage of viable nuts for growth in the next season, while other areas are showing promise of reductions."

Each water chestnut plant can produce as many as 300 nuts per year. They also can remain dormant for years before reappearing.

A contractor has been hired for this summer to treat about 200 acres of the Oswego River from Minetto to Ox Creek, but even with the chemical treatments the chestnut problem will likely persist. Harvesting and chemicals still leave many chestnuts in shallow areas untouched, DeHollander said.

The plant, which occupies most of the waterways in Oswego County, can create large floating mats of vegetation restricting the penetration of sunlight, limiting the growth of native plants and disrupting the food web.

"It is difficult to slow the spread of water chestnut once it becomes established in a shallow water area," DeHollander said.

The plant has been established in some sections of Oswego River for decades, he said. It also has been found in the Salmon and Oneida rivers.

In addition to hurting fish and other wildlife, the plant can prevent fishermen and boaters from using parts of waterways that were once navigable.

Pulling chestnuts is the least expensive and most effective method of dealing with the plant in small areas. Volunteers are expected to pull several acres of chestnuts this summer, DeHollander said.

Water chestnuts plague virtually every major waterway in New York state, but several communities have been successful in eradicating or at least reducing the water chestnut population over the course of several years.

"The average person doesn't realize it isn't a one-, two- or three-year solution, Dick Drosse said. "It has to be long term."

Although the pulling efforts on the Salmon and Oswego rivers will be essential to maintaining the gains made long term, DeHollander said the events will be as much about creating awareness and educating the public of the issue because it is unlikely the plant would completely disappear soon.

"We may have to learn to live with it," he said.

For more information or to sign up for the pull at Port Ontario or the Oswego River, contact the Oswego County Soil and Water Conservation District at 592-9663.

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