

Myths About Aquatic Invasive Species

By Dick Osgood

Minnesota Waters' position paper and recommendations (*Aquatic Invasive Species in Minnesota – An Aquademic*, available on Minnesota Waters' website) framed the issues with aquatic invasive species (AIS) and made arguments for fixing a broken AIS management system in Minnesota.

Since this Spring, when our position paper and recommendations were made public, we have received much favorable feedback and support. However, one of our key target audiences – the state legislature – may have some mis-understandings or misgivings about the AIS Aquademic and the needed funding, policies, rules, statutes, etc. to confront this aquademic and protect and manage our lakes and rivers.

Myths About AIS

1. **The spread of AIS is slowing and is lower than surrounding states.** This is not true. AIS infestations are increasing in Minnesota, in many cases, exponentially. An oft-presented chart shows zebra mussel infestations in inland waters of Minnesota, Michigan and Wisconsin. Minnesota's line depicting the number of new water bodies by year is the lowest, meaning there are fewer infested water bodies compared to the other states. However, this is not a fair comparison, as both Michigan and Wisconsin have substantial frontage on Lake Michigan where there is substantial inland boating activity from Lake Michigan. On comparison, Minnesota was technically infested with zebra mussel at the same time; however, Minnesota's infestation was in St. Louis Bay (the Duluth-Superior Harbor), from which there is no significant inland boating.
2. **Managing invisibility is the key to minimizing the spread and establishment of AIS.** Invisibility is an ecological concept, whereby a less invisible environment is less inviting to an introduced species. However, this is not an effective prevention measure because there are no operational models to guide managers regarding how to make a waterbody less invisible. Some of the practices that have been offered to minimize the invisibility of AIS include lakescaping, lakeshore restoration, preservation and protection of native aquatic plants, minimization of stormwater pollution, especially nutrients and sediments. These practices are worthy and Minnesota Waters encourages and supports them all. Unfortunately, we do not know how much of these activities are needed to make a difference regarding retarding AIS – indeed most of these practices are not likely to make any measurable difference with respect to AIS invisibility. Lacking quantitative or operational models, we cannot answer the 'how much' questions. Minnesota Waters is concerned if state policy relies too heavily on this solution, as it may lead to false expectations as well as complacency in contemplating other important and direct prevention and management measures.
3. **Some AIS are good for lakes and rivers.** There have been claims of short-term or small-scale beneficial effects, like increased water clarity from zebra mussels or better bass fishing with milfoil, but they are dwarfed by the long-term and broader-scale ecological damage caused by invasive species. The germ of the argument is that most introduced species (land and water) are not or do not become harmful. Further, some introduced species may even be beneficial (for example, pheasant). While this is true, it is irresponsible to then project that all introduced species would not be harmful, or at least so few that it is not worth much trouble to prevent their spread. In fact, the

Minnesota Invasive Species Advisory Council has identified two dozen AIS plants and animals that represent a “severe threat” to Minnesota’s waters.

4. **Education and awareness is high in Minnesota and that is enough.** Education and awareness among Minnesota’s recreational boaters is indeed high, but that is clearly not stopping the spread of invasive species to more lakes and rivers. Minnesota rightfully boasts of high levels of boater awareness and this is an important element of a comprehensive AIS management system. However, this element needs to be complemented with other, more active, direct and aggressive elements as well. Minnesota Waters has found that AIS infestations are increasing exponentially – so, it is obvious we need a more comprehensive program.
5. **Constitutional amendment monies can be used to pay for AIS management.** Unfortunately, the current guidelines for these monies (both clean water and habitat funds) do not include AIS management. We have heard the counter that the amendment goes for 25 years, so the guidelines could be changed to provide for AIS management. Yes they could. But, with an increasing problem that usually lacks a remedy, we do not have much time to wait. Also, there is a great deal of competition for these monies, so it is uncertain where AIS might fit in. The current state funding for AIS is about \$4 million. Minnesota Waters has recommended funding at least triple that amount.

These myths and the counter arguments are addressed in Minnesota Waters complete AIS position paper.

AIS represent a serious challenge and protecting our waters from AIS as well as managing AIS already in our waters. Minnesota Waters believes Minnesota must be as aggressive with protection and management programs as AIS are in infesting and fouling our lakes and rivers. We have recommended that state leaders initiate a dialog to consider changes that may run counter to our ‘boating culture,’ but which ought to be on the table if we are to be serious about stemming AIS. Issues such as fees, mandatory inspections, quarantines or restrictions, while tough medicine, ought to be weighed against the permanent impacts of AIS are and will continue to cause to our lakes and rivers.

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