

Aquatic Hitchhikers: Mobile Invaders

Julia Solomon

For many people, the word “hitchhiker” conjures up an image of a disreputable character—aggressive, a nuisance, maybe even a threat. In the case of “aquatic hitchhikers,” or aquatic invasive species, these impressions are all justified. Like their human namesakes, aquatic hitchhikers rely on unsuspecting travelers to move them from place to place. Once they get to their destinations they can wreak havoc on natural systems.

Natural resource professionals have coined the term “aquatic hitchhikers” to describe aquatic invasive species because it accurately depicts one of the main ways that aquatic invasive species move around the landscape – by “hitching a ride” with boaters, anglers, and other water users as they move from one water body to another. In many cases, boaters are unaware that they are transporting these stowaways and can unintentionally introduce them into new waters.

How They Move Around

One of the biggest culprits in the transport of aquatic hitchhikers is the ballast water of large ocean-going ships. These ships, which visit ports across the world, take on ballast water to balance their loads. When they arrive in new ports, they often discharge the ballast water – and any hitchhiking organisms that may have come along for the ride. This is a dangerously efficient way for species to jump across long distances, often colonizing whole new continents. Many of the species introduced into the Great Lakes are suspected to have arrived through ballast discharge.

Aquatic hitchhiking also occurs on a much more local scale. Anglers who launch their boats in a nearby lake for a day of fishing may bring much more than their catch home with them. Here are two



“Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers!” is a national campaign that encourages boaters to take action to prevent the spread of aquatic invaders.

of the main places that hitchhikers can hide out in boating equipment:

Trailers

If the lake has aquatic invasive plants such as Eurasian watermilfoil, curlyleaf pondweed, or hydrilla, these plants can get caught on the boat and trailer as they are pulled out of the water. This can be dramatic – in very weedy lakes trailers often come out of the water dragging a green carpet behind them. But it doesn’t take much. Many of these invasive plant species are able to reproduce vegetatively, so even small fragments can start a new population. An additional twist to the story is that recent observations in Wisconsin have shown that the plants attached to boats and trailers often bring their own hitchhikers along for the ride. Zebra mussels are commonly

found attached to these plants and may be transported along with them – two problematic invaders for the price of one!

Water

Anywhere that water collects on a boat – livewells, bilges, motors, even bait buckets – can serve as a reservoir for aquatic hitchhikers. Water has long been known to be a potential source of introduction for zebra and quagga mussels, which are microscopic in their early lifestages, and it can also be a major culprit in the spread of fish disease. This has become a more urgent concern recently with the spread of viral hemorrhagic septicemia (VHS) throughout the Great Lakes region. Several affected states have enacted rules requiring boaters to drain water from their boats and motors before leaving launch sites.

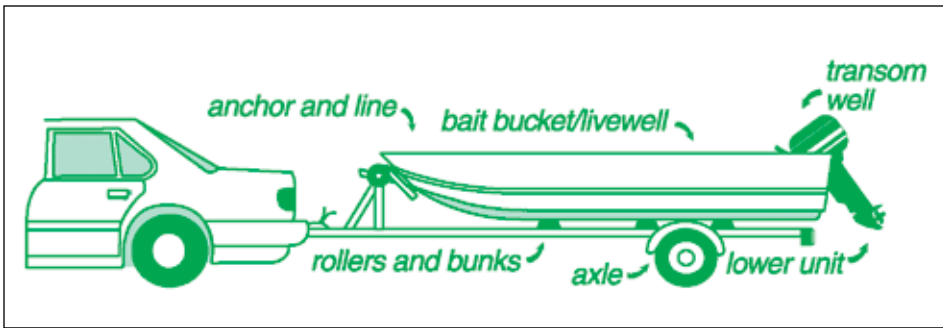
What Boaters Can Do

The good news in this story is that by taking a few simple steps, boaters can effectively remove aquatic invaders from their equipment, preventing these troublesome species from hitching a ride.

Each time boaters and other water users leave a landing, they should:

- **inspect** boat, trailer, and equipment and **remove** visible aquatic plants, animals, and mud;
- **drain** water from boat, motor, bilge, live wells, and bait containers;
- **dispose** of leftover bait in the trash, not in the water or on land;
- **rinse** boat and recreational equipment with hot water *or* **dry** for at least five days.

By taking these steps – which can be completed in a matter of minutes



When cleaning a boat and trailer, it is important to inspect all of the places where aquatic hitchhikers are likely to get caught.

– boaters can do their part to block one of the primary pathways for the spread of aquatic invasive species. Even though the prevention steps may feel cumbersome or unfamiliar at first, they can quickly become a routine part of boating. Natural resource managers hope that within a few years these steps will be so commonplace for boaters that they become habits, in the same way that behaviors such as seat belt use and recycling have become second-nature for so many Americans.

Spreading the Word

Boaters can't take prevention steps if they don't know about them, and they are not likely to take them if they are not aware of the problems that aquatic invasive species cause. That is where the *Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers!* campaign comes in. *Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers!* is a national effort sponsored by the National Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Coast Guard. The goal of the campaign is to inform boaters about the dangers of aquatic invasive species and encourage them to take action. *Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers!* works with partners all across the country and uses tools such as billboards, radio ads, and stickers to get the message out.

In addition to this national campaign, numerous state and local efforts are also educating boaters about aquatic hitchhikers and how to prevent their spread. Many states have developed watercraft inspection programs that train staff or volunteers to monitor boat landings, talking with boaters about aquatic invaders and teaching them how to clean their equipment. Surveys have consistently shown that this personal interaction is one of the most important

ways for people to learn about aquatic invasive species.

All of these outreach efforts are aimed at giving boaters the tools to prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species. Ultimately, however, the choice is up to individual boaters. Knowingly or

not, they are responsible for moving many unwanted species around from water to water, and only by taking appropriate prevention steps can they leave these unwelcome hitchhikers behind.

Julia Solomon is the statewide aquatic invasive species education specialist for the University of Wisconsin Extension and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. She coordinates the statewide outreach campaign for aquatic invasive species prevention and works with staff and volunteers around the state to educate the public about this issue. You can reach Julia at: Julia.Solomon@Wisconsin.gov. 



Inspecting and cleaning boats and trailers before leaving the landing is the most important step that boaters can take to prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species.

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