Chautauqua Lake & Watershed Management Alliance
201 West 3rd Street, Suite 115
Jamestown, NY 14701
716-661-8900

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Contact: Jay Young
(716) 661-8918

WATER CHESTNUT, INVASIVE SPECIES ARE PRIORITY OF ALLIANCE PROGRAMS

The Chadakoin River is one of Chautauqua County's most valuable environmental, economic, and recreational resources. It is home to a diverse ecosystem of many different plants and animals, and provides residents, businesses, and visitors with unique opportunities for fishing, biking, birding, kayaking, walking, and more. In order to ensure that these opportunities are available now and in the future, improving the health and usability of the Chadakoin River, and Chautauqua Lake at large, is a priority for all stakeholders.

Water chestnut and other invasive plant species that have the potential to negatively impact local waterbodies are the focus of several collaborative programs in 2022. Efforts centered on the prevention, early-detection, monitoring, and removal of these problem species are underway by the Chautauqua Lake and Watershed Management Alliance and several of its Member organizations via the Alliance's fourth annual Consolidated Local Funding Program. This important work is a continuation of previous programs aimed at keeping the lake and watershed free from emerging nuisance species of aquatic plants.

The Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy's (CWC) Aquatic Invasive Species Early Detection Volunteer Taskforce took to the water for the first time this summer on June 22. Alliance staff joined Twan Leenders, CWC's Ecological Restoration Manager, for a kayak survey focused on finding and removing water chestnut from the lower basin of Chautauqua Lake and the Chadakoin. This invasive species is identified by its small triangular leaves that form patches of rosettes on the surface of the water. Water chestnut plants flower in July, and reproduce via sharp nutlets which can cling to animals and spread easily through currents. Each seed can be viable for up to 12 years and produce approximately 10 to 15 plants, which in turn can produce up to 20 seeds each. This plant's reproductive advantages, potential for rapid spread, and tendency to impair the ecosystem and recreation all make it a top priority for targeted removal.

Before the taskforce even entered the water, a water chestnut plant was spotted near the kayak launch in Celoron. This indicates that the plant may be spreading from locations where it has been found and removed in the past, or that other populations exist that thus far have escaped detection. Rapid response programs targeting this species stretch back to at least 2012, with more than 200 plants being removed from the Chadakoin in 2021. After three hours of surveying with three kayaks, the first taskforce paddle of the year removed over 120 water chestnut plants and recorded their locations on www.imapinvasives.org. This platform is used by six states including New York and Pennsylvania to track observations of invasive species in near real time. Professionals and the public alike can get involved by reporting any invasive plants you might encounter in the lake or watershed.

Early detection and rapid response removal work in tandem to address imminent threats posed to the lake by new invasive species. The Audubon Community Nature Center (ACNC) has been leading an invasive species rapid response removal program on the lake since 2020, regularly working in the Chadakoin River to complement the early detection programs currently led by CWC and in the past led by the Roger Tory Peterson Institute. "Audubon Community Nature Center has been performing extensive water chestnut removal at their own facility located on Riverside Road since 2015," said Audubon Executive Director Leigh Rovegno. "Since then, we have seen a severe reduction in the number of plants, however, they continue to pose a significant ecological threat. We have been thrilled to partner with members of the Alliance, CWC, the Western New York Partnership for Regional Invasive Species Management, and other participating organizations to ensure that water chestnut does not continue to spread throughout the watershed."

Following the first taskforce event of the year and the significant amount of water chestnut removed, partners quickly coordinated to plan future surveys and response needs. ACNC's rapid response removal team returned to the Chadakoin River within days to remove approximately 200 additional water chestnut plants and search other nearby areas. "By definition, non-native invasive species negatively impact the native flora and fauna that has long inhabited the area that they only just arrived in. By catching these harmful newcomers before they become established, we can minimize their impact and help protect the health and sustainability of our ecologically sensitive wetlands, rivers and lakes," said Twan Leenders of CWC. "Chautauqua Lake and the Chadakoin River support several at-risk species, ranging from bald eagles and osprey to spiny softshell turtles and rare aquatic plants. Sadly, all of those wonderful assets and the thriving ecosystem that supports them, are constantly under attack from new environmental threats, like invasive species. It is in everyone's best interest to keep a watchful eye on these potential intruders, while you're out there enjoying the beauty of the lake. Observing and reporting environmental concerns is arguably one of the best things anyone can do for Chautauqua Lake and the Chadakoin River."

CWC hosted its second on-water citizen science survey on Friday, July 8 at the Celoron boat launch and will continue to hold events throughout the summer. For more information on participating in those programs you can visit chautauquawatershed.org or contact Leenders at Twan@chautauquawatershed.org. In addition to water chestnut, surveys are also expected to target the invasive alga starry stonewort as well as the invasive plant species brittle naiad. Other CWC programs also target invasive plant species found on land, such as the hemlock woolly adelgid and tree of heaven, the latter has been found at locations in the City of Jamestown and can cause a number of ecological problems.

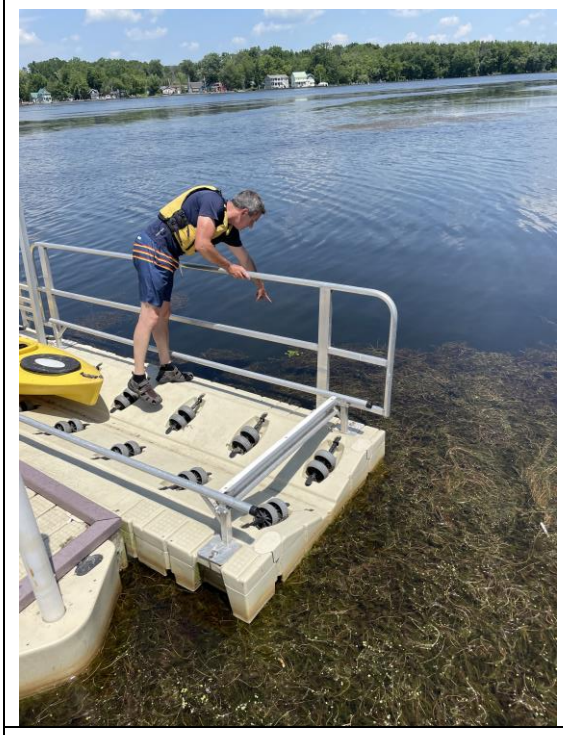
Working in parallel with these removal programs is another Alliance Member project aimed at preventing invasive species from entering or escaping the lake. The Chautauqua Lake Association's Watercraft Steward Program provides local prevention efforts by stationing stewards at public launches on the lake and elsewhere in Chautauqua County. Stewards meet with boaters entering the lake, check for any signs of invasive species, discuss prevention protocols, and catalogue important information. Watercraft stewards often make a point of telling boaters to clean, drain, and dry watercraft, as this is one of the best ways to prevent aquatic invasive species from spreading.

Prevention and early-detection programs both target species that are not yet widespread and well established. This relatively small-scale work requires fewer resources than more costly management programs that have to be undertaken once invasive species gain a foothold in a new environment and become much more difficult or even impossible to eradicate. Early detection and targeted removal are only feasible at the early stages of an infestation. As an infestation spreads and increases, so do the costs of corresponding management programs. “When you consider the cost to manage curly-leaf pondweed and Eurasian milfoil in Chautauqua Lake, it makes a lot to sense to invest in early detection and rapid response,” Chautauqua County Watershed Coordinator Dave McCoy said. “The lake would have been much easier to maintain if these species had not become established.”

In addition to these locally led efforts, State and regional groups also perform important work on and around the lake including the Western New York Partnership for Regional Invasive Species Management and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.

“The Chadakoin River serves as Chautauqua Lake's outlet and is a vital area for people, plants, and animals. In order to make sure it continues to develop in the right direction, it is a priority to tackle problems like water chestnut when they are more manageable,” said Alliance Executive Director Randall Perry. “A big thank you to our local charitable foundations and the Alliance Members involved in this collaborative invasive species work, which will benefit the lake and river in the long-term.” These local programs have been made possible thanks to generous funding through the Alliance provided by The Lenna Foundation, the Ralph C. Sheldon Foundation, and the Chautauqua Region Community Foundation. For more information please contact Alliance Communications Coordinator Jay Young at jyoung@chautauquaalliance.org.

	Alliance Project Manager Taylor West holds up a water chestnut plant pulled from the Chadakoin River.

	CWC Ecological Restoration Manager Twan Leenders points out a water chestnut plant spotted at the kayak launch in Celoron.
	Several water chestnut plants are seen growing amongst water lilies in the Chadakoin River.