

**Le Droit, July 19, 2018**

The following is compiled from an article that appears in Le Droit

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## **Invasion of the zombie plant**

*The Outaouais would be the second region of Quebec most struck by Eurasian Watermilfoil, also known as the "zombie" plant. This aquatic plant causes the early aging of lakes and streams.*

At least 27 bodies of water would be contaminated in the Outaouais, according to a document from the Union of Quebec Municipalities (UMQ). The "zombie" plant has attacked the municipality of Val-des-Monts, including finding refuge in lac Grand, lac Saint-Pierre, lac Dame, lac Brassard, lac McArthur and lac Lucerne/ l'Écluse.

The number of affected lakes could, however, be much higher than what has been recorded so far. According to the UMQ, more than 180 lakes and rivers in the province are victims of contamination with Eurasian watermilfoil.

The highly invasive and prodigious Eurasian Watermilfoil grows and spreads rapidly, choking out native water plant species and lowering oxygen levels so that certain species of fish are driven away. Within a relatively short period, the weed beds create tangled, oxygen starved mats that are inhospitable to marine life and that impede use by boats and swimmers. When the thick weed beds die each fall, the dead refuse drifts to the lake bottom causing premature aging of the lake.

"We are asking the government, in the first place, to do a thorough analysis and inventory all the contaminated water bodies," says

UMQ vice-president of the local municipalities caucus, Joe Deslauriers.

This rapid spread of milfoil in the lakes of Val-des-Monts is of concern to the riparian owners of the area.

"I'm worried because it's growing really fast and it's very difficult to get rid of it," said Rosaline Frith, a waterfront owner for decades on Grand Lake. You can not do much except tear them out, but you really have to uproot them. "

A former federal public servant, Ms. Frith points out that the majority of plants are on the edge of streams.

"The deeper the water is, the more there are," she said, pointing at the end of her dock. Now, we have to go south to swim because it's really unpleasant to swim in there."

For the moment, it is the residents who must mobilize to face this aquatic plant.

"We are producing a brochure that we are going to send to the other members of the Grand Lake Association to remind them to be careful where they are boating on the water and maybe even encourage them to uproot certain plants," explains the waterfront owner of Val-des-Monts.

Rosaline Frith and other members of the association also want to install buoys to delineate the seagrass beds where there are more milfoil to indicate to people where not to move with their boats.

"The problem is that we have to buy the buoys and also install them," she laments. It's a lot of work."

According to the new president of the Val-des-Monts Federation of Lakes, Dan Brazeau, buoys of the same kind have already been installed in Lake Saint-Pierre.

Proper identification is extremely important because a native species of water plant looks very similar to the invasive type, and it takes an educated eye to delineate between the two. Many Quebec municipalities have embarked on a vigorous, costly and labour-intensive program of identifying, mapping and cordoning off Eurasian milfoil weed blooms along entire lakeshores. They are working with the Federation of Lakes to secure funding from municipalities and the province to affect mitigation and eradication of the so-called zombie weed. So far, funding is not forthcoming.

Cordoning off weed bed sections is one way to mitigate the spread of Eurasian milfoil. By preventing boats from entering those sections, the chances of propellers chopping up and spreading the weed are reduced. There are other effective methods of mitigating its spread as well. They include washing down boats entering the lake from outside the area and prohibiting large speedboats — especially wake boats—from operating on lakes.

Wake boats are designed to create large waves that cause shoreline erosion, spread milfoil fragments, and disrupt water habitat for nesting waterbirds such as loons. The municipality of Val-des-Monts took the unprecedented and highly controversial step in May, 2016 of limiting public boat launch use at McGregor Lake and Lac-Sent-Pierre to resident boaters and preventing wake boats and personal watercraft (seados) from entering the lake. Outsiders must pay up to \$110 per day to launch their approved boats (fees are dictated by horsepower). Still, prohibited boats manage to launch from private properties, and there is nothing that can be done to stop them once they are on the lake.

Because Canadian waterways fall under federal jurisdiction, the province and municipalities cannot control boats once they are on the water. While police can monitor boat safety and alcohol consumption, they cannot force a prohibited craft off of a body of water. Several jurisdiction in Quebec, including the Val-des-Monts

mayor and municipal council, are petitioning the province and federal government to grant municipalities the authority to control watercraft on bodies of water.

In the coming weeks, until mid-August, teams of Federation experts will visit the various lakes of the municipality to further analyze aquatic plants and proceed with the implementation of Beacons and signs to indicate a presence of Eurasian Watermilfoil.

The depreciation of land values is another detrimental effect of the "zombie" plant that directly affects the riparian owners. In some Quebec municipalities, the value of a property with milfoil on its property can be reduced by as much as \$100,000 in the real estate market.

"Some homeowners with this problem are putting their homes up for sale and are not even able to sell at the price of municipal assessment," says Deslauriers. A property valued at \$250,000 and about \$300,000 in the market will be sold for between \$175,000 and \$200,000."

"Property values are going to go down because people are going to wonder if they can swim and boat on the water without it spreading," says Frith.

At present, no solution has been found to stop the problem of the "zombie" plant.

"The only solutions we know are solutions to prevent the spread, but studies are currently taking place to find a solution to eradicate the problem," says the expert and consultant for the Federation of lakes Val-des-Monts, Stephanie Milot.

Studies by aquatic biologists associated with the Lac Saint-Pierre Lake Association and Federation of Lakes have determined that there are at least two methods to rid the lake of weeds. The least expensive is to smother the weed beds by covering them with

biodegradable burlap (jute) and weighing the corners down with biodegradable sandbags. The more expensive —but most effective —method is to hire certified divers to pull out each plant by the root.

### **Not new**

This is not the first time that the "zombie" plant is wreaking havoc in the rivers of the region. Lac Beauchamp is among the victims of the zombie plant. Last June, the City decided to invest \$1 million to prevent the lake from entering the terminal phase. In April 2017, the city council paid \$955,000 for the same purpose of saving Beauchamp Lake and in 2015, the executive committee awarded \$26,000 to a specialized firm to establish an environmental management plan for the lake.