

Officials guard against mussels

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PITTSFIELD — Zebra mussels have been found in lakes and rivers in Northwestern Connecticut, Eastern New York and Vermont, but the barnacle-like shellfish haven't been discovered in any Berkshire County bodies of water — yet.

And in an effort to keep it that way, state officials have embarked on a new education program designed to help people quickly identify zebra mussels and prevent them from spreading.

State officials consider the possibility of zebra mussels infesting Berkshire County waters as "a very serious threat," said Jim McGrath, Pittsfield's harbormaster. "They consider this area ripe for infestation."

The Department of Conservation and Recreation recently distributed three "zebra mussel identification kits" to Berkshire County lake associations. Each kit contains \$4,000 worth of equipment that includes high-powered microscopes, global positioning devices, and a tow net for collecting water samples to be tested.

The kits will be used on Onota and Pontoosuc lakes in Pittsfield, Richmond Pond, Laurel Lake in Lee, Stockbridge Bowl, and other area bodies of water that participate in the Lakes and Ponds Association of Western Massachusetts, according to Lew Cuyler, a member of the Lake Onota Preservation Association.

One kit will be used to test Onota and Pontoosuc lakes, while a second kit will be used in South County, McGrath said. The third kit will be used by a "roving lake steward," who will test different bodies of water.

Onota Lake was tested when the kits were given out, and no zebra mussels were found. Pontoosuc Lake will be tested during the week of June 16, said Lanesborough harbormaster Lee J. Hauge, who is also president of the Friends of Pontoosuc Lake.

Zebra mussels are native to western Russia, but they have spread rapidly through lakes and rivers in the eastern United States since they were first discovered in the Great Lakes 20 years ago. Locally, zebra mussels have been found in both Candlewood Lake and the Twin Lakes in northwestern

Connecticut, the Hudson River, and in Lake Champlain. The Twin Lakes are in Canaan, Conn. just over the state line from Sheffield.

Zebra mussels can clog pipes, cause boat engines to overheat, and eat the microscopic food supply in lakes and rivers that supplies the native fish population. They increase water clarity, but are also believed to be a health hazard because what they filter from the water can increase human and wildlife exposure to such pollutants as PCBs. When zebra mussels coat beaches, their sharp edges can cut swimmers' feet.

The DCR will also provide signage at local boat ramps warning of the zebra mussel threat, and offer additional information at kiosks located near bodies of water. A "ramp monitor" also will also be stationed at Onota Lake, McGrath said.

The DCR is helping lake associations identify zebra mussels so that if they are found in Berkshire County, they can be kept from spreading to other county waterways.

"The real reason is to keep them from spreading," Cuyler said. "That's why they're telling us to go out once a month and test the lakes."