

CONFERENCE TO FOCUS ON VEXING MUSSELS, OTHER CHALLENGES

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St. Mary Lake and Wild Goose Island on the eastern side of Glacier National Park on Monday, June 25. (Casey Kreider/Daily Inter Lake)

Dan Handlin moved to Little Bitterroot Lake in 2007 with a firsthand understanding of the devastating impact of aquatic invasive species.

He had observed in Minnesota the effects of Eurasian watermilfoil, a submersed aquatic plant first discovered in that state in 1987 in Lake Minnetonka.

Handlin, now 68, and his wife, Nancy Krause, lived a short walk from Lake Minnetonka and kept a boat at a dock on the lake.

He said they boated frequently and often had to adjust their outing to the watermilfoil.

Handlin described this adjustment while gazing across an iced-over Little Bitterroot Lake from his lakeside home.

“When I came here I had the perspective of putting your boat in the water [at Lake Minnetonka] and having to wait for them to ‘mow’ the lake,” he said.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources reports that Eurasian watermilfoil “can limit recreational activities on water bodies by forming mats on the water surface, and alter aquatic ecosystems by displacing native plants.”

Handlin said if you tried to boat through the mats of watermilfoil the plants would clog the propeller.

Lake Minnetonka also has been invaded by zebra mussels.

In the Flathead Valley and vicinity, a region abundant in lakes, a chief focus has been preventing the introduction of especially destructive zebra and quagga mussels.

Handlin and the Little Bitterroot Lake Association have spearheaded a grassroots prevention effort at the lake near Marion. The focus has been turning “passive boaters” at the lake into “active boaters” who can keep eyes peeled for people whose trailer-borne watercraft could pose a threat to Little Bitterroot Lake.

Handlin, a native of Lincoln, Illinois, served 27 years as a pilot in the Air Force and worked as a commercial pilot for Delta and Northwest.

The military veteran said when he and Nancy moved to Little Bitterroot Lake the lake seemed essentially defenseless in the battle against invasive species, including Eurasian watermilfoil and mussels.

He said he shared this observation during a meeting of the Little Bitterroot Lake Association.

“They outsmarted me and put me on the board,” Handlin said, smiling.

He and others organized a symposium in June 2018 at the Marion Fire Hall and invited speakers well-versed in aquatic invasive species to help inform the people who might become “active boaters.”

“We knocked on all the doors we could to get people to the symposium,” Handlin said.

During the summer of 2018, volunteer watchdogs at boat launches adopted the active boater approach, which is: “Meet them, greet them and turn them into active boaters.”

He said only one boater was a jerk when approached.

Handlin said special attention is paid if a vehicle towing a watercraft displays a license plate from another region or state.

Volunteers who suspect a watercraft might have been in waters infested with invasive mussels or other invasive species are encouraged to inspect the craft and strongly suggest that its owner not put it in the water if there is any sign of potential infestation. If the owner refuses to comply, the volunteers are instructed to alert the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Handlin will be among a host of speakers next week during the inaugural Montana Lakes Conference, scheduled to run Wednesday through Friday, March 13-15, at The Lodge at Whitefish Lake.

Handlin’s presentation is titled “Changing our world one lake at a time: The Little Bitterroot Lake Story.”

The Whitefish Lake Institute has organized the conference to provide a forum focused on “improving the health of Montana’s lakes through science and monitoring advances, watershed restoration practices, policy innovation and collaborative stakeholder involvement.”

Topics will include aquatic invasive species, climate change, pollution from septic systems and much more.

A presentation by Clint Muhlfield, Ph.D, a research aquatic ecologist with the United States Geological Society, is titled “Trout in hot water? Climate vulnerability of native salmonids in the Northern Rockies.”

Mark Lorang, Ph.D, chief science officer for Freshwater Map, will present “The not so flat Flathead Lake.”

Little Bitterroot Lake is the headwaters for the Little Bitterroot River. The lake’s maximum depth is about 260 feet and it has a surface area of about 4.6 square miles. The lake’s outlet is controlled by an earthen dam built in 1918.

The Little Bitterroot Lake Association organized in 1988 with the stated purpose of “preserving the high recreational value of Little Bitterroot Lake, maintaining its aesthetic integrity and to educate the public and others as to the value of Little Bitterroot Lake as a recreational resource.”

Handlin said recruiting “active boaters” is a key approach to protecting Little Bitterroot Lake from invasive species.

“The association can’t defend the lake. The government can’t defend the lake,” he said.

He noted the Swan Lakers have a volunteer program to inspect boats for the potential presence of aquatic invasive species before the watercraft enter Swan Lake.

Handlin said Mike Koopal, executive director of the Whitefish Lake Institute, has been an invaluable source of information as the Little Bitterroot Lake Association has gotten better prepared to try to defend the lake from invasive species.

The Whitefish Lake Institute, a nonprofit based in Whitefish, is funded by memberships, research and education grants and through partnerships with resource agencies and other organizations.

For example, the institute partners with the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks for a citizen science program and partners with the city of Whitefish to jointly manage an aquatic invasive species program.

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