



FACED WITH AN INSIDIOUS PLANT THAT CAN RUIN A pristine lake on one hand, and a toxic pesticide that harms aquatic invertebrates on the other, Mercedes Gallagher dove in. Or rather, she coordinated a group of volunteer scuba divers, canoers, and kayakers to dive in to a complicated problem and work towards a less harmful, effective solution.

Eurasian milfoil is a fast growing aquatic perennial that crowds out native plants and forms dense mats that make swimming and boating nearly impossible. Once it gains a foothold in a lake or pond, it is very difficult to eradicate thanks to its tendency to break into fragments, each of which can generate into a new plant.

Milfoil was first discovered in Center Pond in Becket in the mid-1990's, and the Lake Association decided to treat it with the pesticide diquat. When the permit to treat the lake came before the Becket Conservation Commission for the necessary permits, Mercedes was a new commissioner who was deeply disturbed by the ideas of both a lake she treasures no longer being pristine for swimming and of adding a toxic substance with many risks to the ecosystem of the lake.

Though the permit was granted and diquat applied, the milfoil rebounded and was growing back within two years. This time, with the help of a scuba diving friend, Mercedes put an alternative proposal before the conservation commission – try hand-pulling the milfoil using a coordinated team of divers and boaters first, and chemically



treat whatever is left. The commission agreed, and the Center Pond Weed Project was officially born.

Now in its eighth season of hand-pulling milfoil and another invasive plant, curly-leaf pondweed, the Center Pond Weed Project is being rewarded with some impressive results from their efforts. The first diquat treatment was applied to 62 acres in 2000. Since the divers have been hand-pulling, the area treated dropped to 8.5 acres in 2004, and to 1.5 acres in 2008.

Though no one, especially Mercedes, would claim that it has been an easy road. From early spring to autumn, she coordinates up to 100 volunteers – divers as well as boaters

who serve as 'skimmers,' collecting any plant fragments that are released by the hand-pulling. After spending several hours on and in the lake, volunteers come together to enjoy lunch at the beach provided by the Center Pond Weed Project. The Project pays a small group of professional divers – all former volunteers that became very skilled at hand-pulling – while training and providing lunch and air refills for many volunteer divers throughout the summer. Certified scuba divers gain valuable experience in both diving and milfoil removal, and are increasingly applying those skills to other lakes and ponds throughout western Massachusetts.

"It's definitely a long term project", says Mercedes, "but in future years it should take less time and energy, and we're making progress on our goal of reducing and hopefully eliminating the need for chemical treatments. The lake has always been important to me, and now I'm out in the canoe a lot, or in the water pulling milfoil in the shallow areas, so I don't miss going to the beach. I get the same relaxation and experience of nature, plus I get the satisfaction of seeing these invasive weeds disappear."

If you'd like to help out diving or skimming (with your boat or theirs), contact Mercedes Gallagher at 413.623.2169 or centerpondweedproject@yahoo.com.

OPPOSITE, TOP: Hand-pulling requires a coordinated team of boaters and divers to catch all the milfoil fragments, which can regenerate into new plants. © CENTER POND WEED PROJECT

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: Scuba divers have been effective at hand-pulling milfoil in Becket's Center Pond. © CENTER POND WEED PROJECT

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Saturday, September 12 | 9AM – 3PM | Ashfield Town Hall

The Highlands' Least Wanted Field Days: The Bad B's – Barberry, Buckthorn, and Bittersweet

Sunday, September 20 | 1PM | Goshen

Understanding Ch 61's Right of First Refusal

Wednesday, September 23 | 7PM

Chesterfield Senior Center | *FREE. Please pre-register.*

Moose in Our Midst:

A Resercher's Report From the Field

Tuesday, October 6 | 7PM – 9PM | Peru Town Hall

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Wednesday, October 21 | 7PM – 9PM | Otis Town Hall

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Family Land Conversations:

Effective Communication Strategies for Estate Planning and Inheritance Decisions

Saturday, November 14 | 9AM – 3PM | Northampton
\$20

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