



Why Every Lake Needs a VIP

A rainbow of brightly hued canoes and kayaks appear beached on the grass as a collection of a dozen or so paddlers apply sunscreen, locate water bottles and don PFDs. We're at the Fish and Wildlife Access Area at the mouth of Memphremagog's South Bay in Newport, and fortunately, the rain that threatened all morning finally broke to hot, humid sunshine. "Do you have any more view scopes?" one paddler asks. "Sure," I say, and retrieve another scope from the back of the truck. We're about ready to push off. One by one, we carry our boats to the ramp and climb in, digging paddles into the mud to try to make

forward progress in the shallows. Eventually, we cluster our canoes and kayaks about 30 feet from shore and this is when the fun really begins.

Everyone here is training to be a VIP; yes, a Very Important Person, but more specifically, a Vermont Invasive Patroller. This dedicated group of volunteers surveys their favorite water body for aquatic invasive species, like Eurasian watermilfoil and water chestnut, twice each summer and reports their findings to the Vermont DEC. With over 800 lakes and ponds scattered across the state, VIPs play a critical role in detecting invasives before they become well-established, before eradication and even control can simply be too difficult and costly.

Aquatic invasive species have several common characteristics. They reproduce abundantly (for example, aquatic invasive plants can often propagate from just a leaf or piece of stem) and lack natural predators and other control mechanisms. And if we're not careful, they also tend to be adept hitch-hikers, hitching rides on boats, fishing gear, and other recreational equipment as we travel from one lake to another. Once established, they can form dense monocultures, outcompeting native species, and throwing the ecosystem off balance. They can also be hard on our pocket-books. For example, zebra mussels can attach to and clog intake pipes, and water chestnut can grow so dense it makes boating all but impossible, which can hurt tourism.

Spread prevention and early detection are vital to reducing the risk aquatic invasive species pose to our environment and our economy, which is where VIPs come in. To be a VIP, you need to attend a VIP workshop, which spans approximately four hours, split between classroom time and "field" time on the water. VIPs learn how to distinguish common aquatic invasive species from native ones, how invasives are introduced and established, and survey techniques.

This afternoon, this group of VIPs-in-training is practicing their aquatic plant identification skills by surveying the mouth of South Bay. Leaning over the sides of our boats, peering through the plexiglass-bottomed view scopes is like looking through a window into an unknown and mysterious underwater world. Although this afternoon, we'll all come to know it a little bit better and armed with this new knowledge, we can help protect the lakes and ponds we love so dearly.

For more information on the Vermont Invasive Patrollers or how to become a VIP, contact Bethany Sargent of the Lakes and Ponds Management and Protection Section at Bethany.Sargent@state.vt.us or (802) 490-6129.