

The Hamilton Spectator

Day: Monday Date: 5/10/2010

Section: Local Page: A3 Edition: MET

Dateline:

Asian carp threat to our Great Lakes

Jon Wells The Hamilton Spectator

Hamilton's most recent aquatic visitor who didn't belong -- a gator spotted in a Confederation Park pond - was a lively conversation piece last week.

But the very real threat posed by aquatic invasive species -- most notably the hated Asian carp -- pose an immediate environmental danger to the Great Lakes, greater than global warming.

That was one message at a workshop hosted by the Bay Area Restoration Council Saturday at Royal Hamilton Yacht Club.

"We are on the cusp of a new invasion, we ignore the problem at our peril," said Lindsay Chadderton, a biology professor from Notre Dame University, one of those who spoke to a group of about 40.

Speaker Hugh MacIsaac, director of the Canadian Aquatic Invasive Species Network in Windsor.

"Climate change may become the issue of our time, but biological invasion is a far more important issue right now," said MacIsaac.

Foreign aquatic species reproducing in the Great Lakes have always been an issue, but never more so now than with Asian carp, which have voracious appetites, can weigh 40 kilograms and will upset the ecological balance of the lakes if they make a home there.

The entry point for the carp is Lake Michigan.

What it could mean for Hamilton is Lake Ontario's sensitive fish eco-system is thrown for another loop, one it may not be able to recover from, and in turn will damage the campaign to rehabilitate Hamilton Harbour and Cootes Paradise.

The Asian carp invasion problem has roots in human behaviour. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, two species of Asian carp -- the bighead and silver -- were imported by U.S. catfish farmers in the 1970s to remove algae from their ponds. Flooding in the early 1990s allowed the carp to make their way to waterways in the Mississippi River basin. That basin connects to Lake Michigan, primarily through a canal lock system near Chicago.

Illinois authorities have been slaughtering Asian carp by dumping poison in key points in the canal to stop them from entering the big lake. There is also an electric fence barrier to deter them as well. But Asian carp DNA has been found at points beyond that fence.

Michigan's Attorney General has called for closing off five river entrances to the lake altogether, including locks that would have an impact on shipping.

That measure has not yet found political traction. U.S. President Barack Obama, whose home state is Illinois, has in the past pledged a zero tolerance policy toward foreign species invasions in the Great Lakes.

The political drive to attack the issue likely comes to a head in the coming months, as a new Great Lakes Water Quality agreement is negotiated between Canada and the U.S. Public input will be received this month and next.

For more information, go to the Great Lakes United website at glu.org.

jwells@thespec.com

905-526-3515