Weeding woes

Considering options for invasive species removal

BY REBECCA LEXA

As someone who has volunteered a significant amount of time to habitat restoration efforts at Willapa National Wildlife Refuge and elsewhere, restoration activities are near and dear to my heart.

Some of my current efforts are being given to Loomis Lake. At 2 miles long, it is the largest freshwater lake on the Long Beach Peninsula. While the lake's west side is a mix of houses and fragments of forest, the east bank is almost entirely wooded. A large portion of this area is owned by Columbia Land Trust.

With its share of kayaks and fish-seekers, the lake can be popular with visitors on warm summer days. It's a marvelous place for bird-watching, with nesting wood ducks and ospreys in the summer and trumpeter swans in the winter. Great blue herons can be seen year-round, as can the additional native biodiversity in and around the lake.

I volunteer with the Loomis Lake Restoration Group, a band of citizens dedicated to protecting the lake from invasive plants. These species, which have formed massive clusters, threaten the survival of the lake's landscape. Brazilian elodea and Eurasian watermilfoil are the two most common and pernicious plants. These live within the water column rather than on the banks, and because Loomis Lake is quite shallow, they can now be found across the entire lake, with clusters largest at the southern end.

Not only is this overgrowth difficult to navigate with most boats, but as the plants die and decay, they add to the silt on the bottom of the lake. This speeds up the rate at which the lake fills in, and threatens to transform the spot into a wetland or meadow.

Recent lake restoration meetings have drawn a few dozen residents on average, and the group has been assisted by various local representatives and organizations.

Historically, the best-known option for controlling elodea and watermilfoil has been the use of herbicide. Sprayed directly on invasive plants, it significantly knocks back growth but never kills off entirely. Within a few years, the lake is back to its clogged state.

This ongoing cycle means that restoration advocates are looking for other options. While previous doses of herbicide were acquired using grant funding, recent proposals have since been denied. Instead, advocates have reached into their own pockets to continue the efforts.

Rebecca Lexa

An invasive Brazilian elodea, left, and native Canadian elodea, right. Notice the significant size difference between the two species.

The Loomis Lake Restoration Group has discussed the possibility of introducing triploid Asian carp. However, they're expensive in quantities needed for a lake of this size, among other issues. Unfortunately, there aren't any herbivorous freshwater lake fish native to this area that are large enough for the job of cleaning up.

Mechanical removal has also been brought up, but is unrealistic simply due to the massive amount of plant overgrowth in the lake. Uprooting each plant individually would take an immense amount of time. Even if restoration advocates could afford to use some sort of machine to gather up as much of the elodea and watermilfoil as possible, both plants reproduce from even the smallest fragments.

The restoration group has also discussed planting more native species in place of spraying. I recently surveyed the water column of the lake to see what native species were still present. Along with three, possibly four native pondweeds, I found abundant amounts of the native Canadian elodea. Some were only found mixed in with the invasive species, but the Canadian elodea and Richardson's pondweed both had some patches that resisted invaders.

But being able to identify native species isn't the same as being able to cultivate and successfully reintroduce them. However, it's a start.

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M.J. Cody

The shallow, weedy Loomis Lake is a challenge to negotiate. Perch and large-mouth bass lurk below the surface.