

Okanagan at risk of invasion



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Public awareness is the first line of defence being raised by officials trying to shut out an invasive species that could irreparably damage Okanagan lakes and lifestyles.

Although they're only about the size of a person's thumbnail, zebra and quagga mussels multiply quickly and spread easily. Beginning in the 1980s, the aliens colonized the Great Lakes basin and caused damage the [Ontario government has estimated](#) at upwards of \$7.5 billion. The creatures have since [made their way west](#) across the U.S. all the way to California.

Heather Larratt, a marine biologist who's been hired by the Okanagan Basin Water Board to help draw up a local defence strategy, estimates

[the annual cost to taxpayers](#) in the first few years of an attack here could hit \$40 million.

She said the mussels create problems by attaching themselves to in-water equipment, harming other marine life and washing up on beaches where their sharp shells make walking difficult.

"If these guys get in, and we end up with people being unable to walk barefoot on a beach, people not being able to enjoy reasonable success when they go fishing, a drop in tourism... that will indirectly affect us all," Larratt said.

"It's a game-changer, for sure."

Intake for water supply systems are considered to be particularly vulnerable since the mussels, which feed by straining algae and nutrients out of water, can attach to the pipes and have dinner come to them.

"Given the chance, like everything else on this planet, they'll be lazy. If they're going to be able to enjoy a current flowing by, as long as it's not too strong, then they don't even have to exert the effort to feed," Larratt explained.

She deems the Okanagan to be at high risk for an invasion since the lake system's waters are high in calcium and the area is a steady draw for out-of-province boaters, with whom the mussels could hitch a ride by surviving in a vessel's bilge water or on its hull.

The pests [have made it into B.C. that way at least once](#) before. Quagga mussels were discovered on a visiting American boat in Shuswap Lake in July 2012, although the creatures were dead and aren't believed to have established themselves in the lake.

On the bright side, Larratt continued, it's easier to prepare for a threat than to deal with it once it's here.

"We're trying to stop an invader, not stop an invasion. We don't have it. And I think that's really key."

Leading the charge against the mussels is the OBWB, which is launching a campaign to remind boaters to [clean, drain and dry their boats](#) to get rid of tag-alongs before putting them in the water.

Osoyoos Mayor Stu Wells, who chairs the OBWB board, said his group is also reaching out to the provincial and federal governments for help.

He'd like to see the Canada Border Services Agency inspect all boats entering the country from the U.S., and have signage placed at interprovincial border crossing to promote the clean-drain-dry message.

Wells noted that state governments in Washington, Idaho and Oregon, which have yet to record a mussel infestation, tack on additional charges to boat permits to fund similar work there, plus staff roadside inspection stations, and he thinks the same model could be employed in B.C. Idaho's Invasive Species Council last year [inspected 42,348 boats and found 57 that were contaminated](#) with zebra or quagga mussels, according to that program's website.

"It's my belief that if we are proactive and with the amount of lead time we have on this, I really believe we could head this off and not let (a mussel invasion) get established in the province of British Columbia," Wells said.

Osoyoos will also play host to a community forum on Thursday from 7-9 p.m. at the Sonora Centre where people can learn about the threat and how they can help stop it. Wells hopes it will serve as a call to arms.

"The devastation (mussels) can cause is horrific... It would change our lifestyle completely," he said. "And anyone that has anything to do with water, including even drinking water, should be interested in keeping their eye on this."



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