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How Vernon RCMP volunteers are protecting us from a new threat: invasive mussels

By Charlotte Helston

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Vernon RCMP volunteers have added a new job to their list of duties: checking boats for invasive mussels.
Image Credit: Submitted/ Regan Borisenko

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VERNON - Crime prevention volunteers in Vernon are on the lookout for an intruder of a different sort: invasive mussels.

It's not necessarily work that you would normally find RCMP volunteers doing, but Vernon's Crime Prevention Coordinator Regan Borisenko says the threat of invasive quagga and zebra mussels is too great to stand by and do nothing.

"We are doing marine vessel safety checks anyways," Borisenko says of their summertime work at Vernon's Paddlewheel Park boat launch on Okanagan Lake. "Now, volunteers also look for invasive mussels on boats and trailers."

The mollusks have been spreading across the U.S. for years and in 2013 they were discovered in Lake Winnipeg, Manitoba. So far, the mussels haven't made their way into the Okanagan, but prevention is becoming more and more critical.

"Once you get them, you can't get rid of them," Borisenko says.



Image Credit: Brynne Morrice/ Mussel Threat

The threat is well illustrated by the experience in Montana. Despite setting up a perimeter defence to keep the mussels out, the state lost the battle and in October 2016 declared a natural resource emergency over the infestation.

British Columbia is building up its defences. The Okanagan Basin Water Board rolled out an educational campaign aptly named 'Don't Move a Mussel' and the provincial government announced a \$3-million investment earlier this year toward mussel inspection stations. There were eight such stations in operation in 2016, and only one of them was in the Okanagan.



"I believe that every boat launch should have people checking," Borisenko says. "Whether they're volunteers that are trained or whether they're paid for by the province or municipality, this is the least we can do to protect our waterways."

The RCMP volunteers — whose usual duties range from checking for speeding and distracted drivers to helping prevent thefts from vehicles — have all received specific training to check for the invasive mussels, which at their youngest age, are as small as a grain of sand.

"The volunteers check visually and tactually. Sometimes you just have to feel for them," Borisenko says.

The mussel inspections are fully endorsed by the Vernon/North Okanagan RCMP detachment, and boaters must comply with the check.

Under the Invasive Species Act, boats must be decontaminated and/or seized for up to 30 days if there is concern about an infestation. Failure to clean mussels off boats or equipment could lead to fines of up to \$100,000.

According to Borisenko, Vernon is the first city where RCMP volunteers started playing a role in mussel inspections. Since they began last year, he says West Kelowna has picked up on the idea but no other municipalities have to his knowledge.

"This is a duty that fit perfectly with what we were doing with boat safety checks," Borisenko says. "It's something we can do, why wouldn't we do this?"

Volunteers have checked a few hundred boats already this year, Borisenko says.

"People have been very cooperative. Ninety-nine per cent of the people are very understanding of what's happening," he says. "We haven't found any (mussels) yet fortunately."

It's a good thing they're checking. Since April, B.C.'s inspection stations intercepted 15 boats carrying invasive mussels, five of which were headed for the Okanagan.

Want to know more about Vernon's RCMP volunteers? [Click here](#).

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