



Kelowna News

'It's a big deal': B.C. conservation officers on alert after invasive mussels found in pet store aquarium

Carli Berry



FILE PHOTO
Image Credit: PEXELS

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The B.C. government has spent millions of dollars since 2015 to keep lakes free of invasive mussels by conducting boat inspections but now there is a new threat.

Zebra mussels could be in moss balls used in aquariums, and the invasive species could enter the province's waterways through the backdoor when the infected water is drained.

On March 6, the B.C. Conservation Officer Service confirmed the mussels were found in a moss ball in a Terrace pet store aquarium, spurring a search of pet stores over the weekend.

The search included Kelowna, where conservation officers were busy at checking pet stores in the hunt to find the mussels.

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"We hit up all the aquarium stores, any place that would sell those moss balls," Kelowna conservation officer Ken Owens said. "We put a lot of manpower and resources into that this weekend.

"It's a big deal... it's one of those things where we put all the effort checking boats coming into British Columbia at all our borders... and then all of a sudden we've got zebra mussels coming into kind of the backdoor."

The woman who saw the zebra mussels in Terrace was thankfully a biologist so she called the conservation officer service right away, he said.

The service is asking residents to check their aquarium moss balls for any potential zebra mussels and to call the RAPP line at 1-877-952-7277 to report any findings.

The contaminated moss balls - which are sold at pet and plant stores - have also been found in Washington State.





FILE PHOTO - Zebra mussels
Image Credit: 100thmeridiam.org

Conservation officer Staff Sgt. Josh Lockwood said no invasive mussels were found over the weekend after roughly 30 pet stores, plant distributors and plant shops were inspected in the Okanagan Valley.

Only two stores in Kelowna were found to sell the moss balls and they have since been removed from the stores' shelves, Lockwood said. Conservation officers are asking pet store owners to avoid selling the moss balls until more information is available on how to deal with them.

"They're imported from distributors and brokers from outside the country," he said.

Conservation officers are working with ministry invasive species colleagues, as well as in Canada and the U.S., to help prevent any potential spread of invasive zebra mussels. Lockwood said the provinces are dealing with the Government of Canada to have the moss balls inspected before they're distributed to stores nationwide.

"We have a big concern and we have a team in place that is currently dealing with the distributors trying to track down as much as these as possible," he said.

To dispose of the moss balls, the service requests that residents place the balls into a sealable plastic bag and freeze them for at least 24 hours, or place the moss ball in boiling water for at least one minute. Afterwards, the moss balls can be sealed in a plastic bag and disposed of in the trash.

"Please do not flush moss balls down the toilet or dispose of them in the compost. Never dump aquarium tank pets, plants or water into any residential water system or B.C. waterway," the service said. "Those zebra mussels can live up to 30 days outside of water... and we've got such rich fisheries and aquatic resources in British Columbia, it would just be grave (if) it hit our water system," Owens said.

To date, there has been no reported introduction of live zebra mussels into B.C. lakes or waterways, but other invasive species have caused serious damage, according to a press release from the Invasive Species Council of B.C.

Some of the most serious invasive species were originally sold as pets or plants for water gardens and aquariums. For example, goldfish released by pet owners have caused serious damage in B.C. lakes.

"We all have a role to play in understanding the effects of invasive species in our province, and we all need to do our part to prevent invasive species from spreading," said Gail Wallin, executive director of the council, in the press release.

"In both Washington and Terrace, the invasive mussels were found by informed individuals, so it shows how important it is to learn more about preventing invasive species," Wallin said. "Please talk to your friends and local aquarium stores to help find other high-risk moss balls and report them immediately."

The Okanagan Basin Water Board is calling for the province to take stronger measures to prevent the spread of invasive mussels.

According to the province's reporting, 16 watercraft entering B.C. this past inspection season carried adult invasive mussels.

"According to the (Okanagan and Similkameen Invasive Species Society) only 67% of out-of-province

According to the Okanagan and Similkameen Invasive Species Society, only 37.7% of out-of-province boaters they surveyed in the Okanagan last summer reported stopping at an inspection station. This survey included socially-distanced interactions with 361 watercraft at 11 boat launches," an OBWB news release issued March 4 reads.

A study for the OBWB found an invasive mussel infestation would cost the Okanagan at least \$42 million annually to manage.

For more information on invasive mussels, visit the [province's website here](#).

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