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INVASIVE FERN

A grass-roots effort to fight giant weed

Tired of waiting for state aid to fight a 'terrorist' plant, Caddo Lake residents took matters into their own hands

By THOMAS KOROSEC

UNCERTAIN — Out on Caddo Lake, among the mossy, primeval cypress trees that seem to float on the banks, Michael Turner maneuvered his swamp boat into a narrow slough and began hosing down the area with herbicide.

"It's like a terrorist," Turner said, describing the aquatic fern that has taken hold in Texas' only naturally formed lake. "It hides out, but if you don't hunt it down, it'll pop out and take over."

Early last year, giant salvinia, an invasive plant from Brazil that some biologists describe as the world's worst weed, arrived at Caddo, most likely by hitching a ride on a boat trailer or motor from another infested lake. The plant rafts into dense green mats that deplete oxygen and light, choking out native fish and vegetation below.

The salvinia colony began on the Louisiana side of the 26,800-acre lake, where state officials have had little money to attack the intruder. Once last year, Texas parks officials provided boats and chemicals to attack a 300-acre mat of the dull green, furry plant across the state line in Jeems Bayou.

This spring, though, as the menace began appearing on the Texas side of the lake, local residents concluded that neither Texas nor Louisiana had the resources to fight the weed.

"We developed a community response instead of doing what every other lake does, which is wait around for the state to do something," said Jack Canson, a retired screenwriter who works as an organizer for the Caddo Lake Institute, an ecologically oriented group funded by musician Don Henley, of the Eagles fame, who grew up in the area.

Phil Durocher, director of inland fisheries for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, said the state spends about \$500,000 a year to control noxious plants of all sorts in Texas lakes, with giant salvinia being only the latest problem. But it would take a budget four to six times that amount to completely do the job, he said.

Strategy develops

Seven Texas lakes are infested with giant salvinia, including Toledo Bend Reservoir, home to a 3,000-acre outbreak considered the largest in the United States.

Locally, the Greater Caddo Lake Association and Cypress Valley Navigation District, which maintains "boat roads" through the stump-filled lake, formed the backbone of a task force that began raising money and developing a weed-fighting strategy.

"By last February, it had begun blowing over to this side and we were going out and trying to catch the stuff with nets," Canson said. "When we saw how difficult that was, we figured we gotta build a fence."

At a cost of \$35,000 and with more than 1,000 donated man-hours, the group designed and built, with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' approval, a two-mile fence of orange nylon netting to keep the free-floating plant from infesting the dense cypress bogs on the Texas side.

"This is the more vulnerable side of the lake with more nooks and crannies for it to hide in," Canson said. They include some of the lake's best-known spots, such as Government Ditch and Mossy Break, where the waters grow dark in the shadow of giant cypress trees.

The warm, still shallows present ideal conditions for giant salvinia, biologists say. With no natural control to slow it down, the plant can double in size in four or five days.

The group's second line of defense is a fleet of three swamp boats, manned by local residents such as Turner working four-hour shifts for nominal pay, who patrol the fence or spray aquatic herbicides on the salvinia and another pest plant, water hyacinth, under which the giant salvinia tends to hide.

"We have a garden hose in our hands and we're fighting a raging forest fire," said Canson. "All we're doing is holding this thing back, waiting for the fire department to arrive."

Ken Shaw, a retired paper executive and chairman of the lake navigation district, said the state has committed \$120,000 to fight salvinia in Caddo in the coming year and his group has commitments for another \$90,000 from corporate and other government sources.

Still, Shaw said it will take at least \$600,000 next year to control the weed, known scientifically as *Salvinia molesta*, at both ends of the lake through aggressive spraying, beginning in April, when the water warms and the plant resumes reproducing after sitting semi-dormant over the winter.

"We know we can't do this by ourselves," Shaw said. "But we thought if we work hard enough we can buy time and maybe get enough attention that someone else will realize how serious this problem is for Caddo and all over this part of the state."

Two weeks ago, federal and state officials toured Caddo Lake and listened to the local groups' pitch for help.

"We don't care who operates them, but if we had two full-time boats, each capable of spraying 25 acres a day, we could beat this thing back," said Shaw, summarizing his request. "The next year there would be a lot less to do."

Dr. Earl Chilton, who runs the state parks department's aquatic plant program, said it is too early to say what type of control plan will emerge. But it is likely, he said, that one control will be to introduce a Brazilian bug — aptly named the giant salvinia weevil — that eats the plant. The weevil has helped control the plant in other states, he said, and it can be useful in cypress bogs too dense to reach by boat, such as Caddo's heavily infested Big Green Brake.

Dr. Randy Westbrook, an invasive species specialist with the U.S. Geological Survey who was at the lake last month, said he is impressed by the spunk of Caddo Lake's volunteers, but doubts a major push at the lake will be successful unless it coincides with a more aggressive regional approach.

"I don't think spending \$500,000 in Caddo is going to make a lot of difference," Westbrook said. "It will be back in that lake and every other lake in East Texas."

Popped up in Houston

Introduced into the U.S. as a contaminant in a shipment of water lilies or another legally imported plant, it was first discovered in Texas at a schoolyard lake in Houston in May 1998. Authorities have been fighting it since 2000 in Lake Conroe, where a recent survey found it covers 221 acres of the 21,000-acre lake.

In most Texas lakes, the cost of controlling salvinia and other weeds such as water hyacinth and hydrilla has been shared by the state and local authorities. At Toledo Bend this summer, for instance, the Sabine River Authority purchased \$100,000 of herbicides that were spread by a parks department crew using a helicopter, parks officials said.

Salvinia has been found in waterways in nine Southeastern states, from Texas to Virginia, and in California and Arizona, where it threatens to clog irrigation ditches. If gone unchecked, it can form "huge floating islands" 3 or 4 feet thick, so dense that trees begin growing on them, Westbrook said.

He said Texas and Louisiana must do a much better job of policing boaters who are unwittingly, or carelessly, spreading the problem from lake to lake. Under Texas law, transporting giant salvinia carries a \$500 fine, but state officials concede the law is not rigorously enforced.

"We've spent a lot of money educating the public," Durocher said. "We haven't been issuing a lot of citations, but an effort should be made to start doing so."

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