

ASK THE EXPERTS



Boaters at Dewey Lake (left) must power through mats of hydrilla. This invasive weed is already found in six Kentucky lakes, and can easily spread if not properly cleaned from boats and trailers.



KEVIN FREY PHOTOS

Q There's an old saying, "grass equals bass." Does this mean introducing hydrilla to a lake will improve bass fishing there?

A There are many misconceptions and misinformation surrounding hydrilla.

Hydrilla is an invasive species that lacks natural control factors. For that reason, it acts differently than native aquatic vegetation and proves that not all "grass" is the same. Hydrilla grows quickly, outcompetes other types of vegetation and can grow under poor conditions. As a result, hydrilla forms massive mats that cover acres and acres of the lake. Other types of vegetation do not form these kind of barriers.

The main issue with hydrilla is these mats. Many studies have shown that there

is an optimal density of aquatic vegetation – too much can damage fish populations. Hydrilla typically fits in the "too much" category. Other types of native aquatic vegetation usually maintain an optimal density, providing benefits to a fishery.

What about the assumption that "grass equals bass"? Studies from the southeast have shown that as hydrilla mats grow, largemouth bass anglers can see an increased catch rate of smaller largemouth bass but weights of these fish are lower than normal. Additionally, it takes anglers longer to catch a memorable bass (a bass over 20 inches) in lakes with hydrilla.

While hydrilla has been in three eastern Kentucky reservoirs for more than a decade, these lakes still struggle to produce high quality bass populations. The introduction of hydrilla does not equal better bass.

What does all this mean for fishing?

First, the dense mats cause a decrease in growth rates and condition factors of largemouth bass. So, you'll have smaller fish that don't weigh much for their size when compared to lakes without hydrilla; so it can hurt the overall population.

Second, the best fishing for a predator fish like a largemouth bass occurs along the edges and pockets of weed mats. Native vegetation forms diverse clusters of weeds with many pockets and edges.

Hydrilla grows into a monoculture mat that covers acres of the lake with no pockets and edges.

Finally, in lower fertility systems where fish growth rates are already a problem, hydrilla compounds the problem by making it more difficult for predators to get at prey hiding in the dense vegetation. This slows the growth rate of predators even more. So, in stunted lakes where anglers are not catching many big fish, the situation worsens.

The federal government lists hydrilla as a noxious weed, meaning it harms ecosystems. This is not a weed wanted in Kentucky waters. Little can be done for lakes except to try and keep access ramps open. However, anglers and boaters can help prevent its spread. For tips on how you can help, see the Nature Notebook section on page 20.

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