

One Perspective from a Summer Studying Fanwort

As submitted by Nick, TrentU masters student in Environmental Science

I am writing this article as a follow up from the small workshop on Fanwort I did with the lake association and as a way of exploring what I am studying with their support so that there is some additional transparency for the public record. I am new to studying fanwort, though you all have been interacting with it for, likely, 30 years. The intent of the project I was running this summer was to revisit 6 sites that were sampled 15 years ago, 3 which had fanwort and 3 which didn't (at the time). I was tasked with making some determination about whether fanwort was becoming a dominant / monoculture, or whether it somehow coexisted with the native plants, that are important parts of the ecosystem

All of those sites have Fanwort now, however, something interesting has occurred. From visiting the sites a few times over the summer, I have noticed, tentatively (as I have not processed my data yet), it seems that the sites that had fanwort 15 years ago now have less than the sites that had no fanwort 15 years ago. If that sounds confusing, I don't blame you, it wasn't what I was necessarily expecting either, or expecting to see so soon. In other words, the sites that had fanwort 15 years ago are now less dense than the newly affected areas.

However, this didn't necessarily surprise me. I remember speaking with a member of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, a state that has had fanwort for more than 100 years, who told me that they no longer regard it as a species of concern because it has not been observed to exclude other plants on a large scale in the long term.

I think one of the big things that is unspoken is that we often get the conversation about invasive species mixed up with our desire to remove plants from beside our docks for going swimming or boating. It's totally understandable to not want to feel plants when you go swimming, that is certainly the half the reason I wear a wetsuit when I am sampling plants in the water. I think that that the most important thing is not getting motivations mixed up as to why plants are being removed because that is good for no one. Because when we do, we can kill things that don't need to be killed because we think we should do it, or because they don't "belong".

Eradicating fanwort from the lake is not realistic and removing it from beside docks is not going to be the end of fanwort. However, the presence of fanwort is not necessarily the end of the ecosystem. This is not to say that fanwort doesn't cause or isn't a problem. Or that there aren't any problems to address, the lake is nowhere near as vibrant ecologically as it was 50 years ago, it used to be teeming with fish and bugs in a way that it isn't now, ask those who have been here that long. Nonetheless, I think, rather than asking what we don't want, asking "what do we want our lake to look like so it is healthy?" is a better place to start. Aquatic plants, bugs, fish, turtles and frogs all have a role to play in healthy waters.