

An Interview with Joe Starinchak

In the past couple of years there has been a growing awareness that aquatic invasive species represent a real threat to us all. However, for many years some people have known that the threat is real and huge. Perhaps no one knows better than Joe Starinchak. Since 2002 Joe has been the US Fish & Wildlife Service's national Outreach Coordinator for Aquatic Invasive Species. He has traveled the world learning firsthand about the global scope of the problem and has consistently been ahead of others in recognizing what the real issues are and how we can best address them. Recently, the *Clean Angling News* had an opportunity to learn from Joe and we want to share some of his thoughts and comments with you.

Q: You are the man behind the Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers campaign which is bringing together companies, agencies, organizations and individuals under a common banner. Tell us a little about this program; when did it start, how has it grown and how can individuals get involved in making it a success?

This program started about two years after I joined the Fish & Wildlife Service. Coming into the Service with a non-traditional background, I observed how the agency conducted its outreach and concluded that while the agency serves many vital roles, outreach is not one of its strengths. Employing folks with a journalism background to do outreach, the agency has and continues to focus on information dissemination. With my background, I have been exposed to on-the-ground educational programming, so I'm well versed in the educational research that shows information alone will not change behaviors. And given that behavior change is exactly what we need with this issue, I offered up a much different approach. So, I introduced strategic planning and social marketing and unveiled the program in 2002. Since then, the program grew slowly at first, but now its growth has been exponential, attracting roughly a hundred new partners a year.

Individuals can get involved in many ways. They can go to the campaign website (www.protectyourwaters.net), and take an online pledge, they can educate themselves about the aquatic invasive species issue or they can take a fun quiz about the issue. Also, if they belong to a fishing club, a lake homeowner's association, a business or government agency, they can formally join the campaign and use the branded materials to help educate others.

By becoming conservation advocates, individuals can help the government to improve its capacity to address this incredibly complex issue. While anglers, boater and people who recreate on the water may contribute to this issue, they are also some of the most passionate advocates we have for conservation. So, individuals can also engage their elected representatives and ensure that these people are addressing this issue. But most importantly, individuals, at a local level, can model the prevention behaviors of cleaning their equipment every time they leave the water and ensure their community has the infrastructure to help others adopt the prevention behaviors; that is, if they want to protect their favorite aquatic recreational spot.

Q: A lot of anglers feel like fishing is being focused on as the main or only problem in spreading ANS. What kinds of programs or efforts are you involved with that go beyond angling?

The reality that is becoming more apparent everyday is that we are living in a world that ecologically is coming apart at the seams, and everything we do is contributing to this deterioration. So, while anglers may feel like they are being unfairly targeted, that's not the case. I have created two other national cross-sector campaigns; another one that focuses on invasive species prevention and one that addresses a growing contaminants problem, pharmaceuticals in the environment.

The other invasive species campaign, is in conjunction with the pet and aquarium industry and it is called Habitattitude. Basically, this campaign targets pet owners, aquarium hobbyists and water gardeners and encourages them to adopt environmentally-friendly pet surrender behaviors. People have to give up pets for a variety of reasons, and we don't want them to release their pets in the environment. It's not good for the pet and not good for the environment. So, we provide alternatives such as returning the pet back to the retailer or donating it to a school. However, the choice they make has to be legal in their respective state.

The other campaign, SMAR_xT DisposalTM is in partnership with the American Pharmacists Association and the Pharmaceutical Research Manufacturers of America. This campaign targets all medication consumers and prompts them to use environmentally-friendly medication disposal behaviors when faced with the need to get rid of out-of-date, unwanted or expired medications. The longstanding consumer advice for disposal has been to flush your medications down the toilet. While this certainly gets rid of the medications, it doesn't deactivate. As a result, medications go through our wastewater treatment systems with their active ingredients still very potent and ultimately, they end up our natural waterways. This is causing harm to various aquatic organisms – we have found prozac in the tissues of freshwater mussels, our country's most endangered aquatic organism, and these mussels aren't happy. We also have seen instances of same-sex fish and sterile fish due to exposure to a combination of the active ingredients in medications and other chemicals found in our waterways. So, again, this campaign helps consumers make appropriate behavioral choices to protect aquatic organisms.

Q: Tremendous effort is going into the effort to teach anglers to properly clean their boats and trailers. However, there is a general sense that non-fishing boats and boaters are not getting the same message. How can we make sure that everyone who boats learns to protect our waters?

It all starts with education, and then these various lessons are constantly repeated through many different sources like boat retailers, marinas, tackle shops, fly shops, jet ski dealers, kayak dealers, etc... This can't be just the government saying do this..., don't do this.... Basically, anyone who sells recreational equipment, provides a service relating

to recreating on the water, or benefits financially from healthy aquatic resources can help to reinforce the cleaning and prevention behaviors that are necessary to stop the introduction and spread of invasive species. These behaviors need to become second nature, a key component for every recreational experience. Just like catch-n-release evolved to become an ethic for most anglers, cleaning your equipment needs to become an ethic for anyone who recreates on the water, regardless of whether they participate in a low impact sport like kayaking or something a little more involved like flying a floatplane.

Q: Across the country states are implementing new invasive species programs. While we all support increasing our efforts, many anglers find state and local regulations to be complex, confusing and increasingly expensive. Do you expect this patchwork approach to regulation to continue? Will the USFWS or another agency implement national standards that make it easier for the individual boater or angler to be compliant?

Well, this is an evolving arena. In the short term, I do expect the patchwork of regulations to continue. However, sometime in the future and I don't know when, I hope this changes. We have a unique governance system in this country that is shared by the federal and state governments. And while there's pressure for a regulatory agency like the EPA to develop these types of regulations; there's also a lot of resistance for this to happen as well. Some people want to say this is a States' Rights issue. In the past, boaters have never had to do this, so we have to wait and see what happens.

Q: The ANS problem is huge and complex. Many of the solutions identified are not the types of things that government typically does well. What do you see as the role of the government in solving this problem? If we cannot expect the government alone to solve the problem how do you see the private sector providing solutions?

First of all, I think differently than most bureaucrats and I think government needs to employ a variety of tools to try and solve this problem. A carrot and stick approach is needed. I think having laws on the books that prohibit the transport of invasive species is important, but I also think government needs to develop and use tools like Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers to foster voluntary conservation efforts by individuals.

As for the private sector, they bring a lot to the table. They can employ innovation to make their products more effective in preventing the transport of invasive species, much like Patagonia and Simms have done in switching from felt to sticky rubber soles for their wading boots. They can also use their sophisticated communication capabilities to push the cleaning and prevention behaviors. They can also bring innovation to their business models and try new things like having people rent waders locally, so they don't have to rely upon individuals to clean their equipment and can insure that local waders are only used locally. Additionally, they can offer merchandise discounts for those citizens/consumers who pledge to internalize the cleaning behaviors and offer discounts to help reinforce the behaviors. As you noted, this is an incredibly complex problem and in this country, we have always stood for individual rights and freedoms. So, given this, how can we foster these behaviors to address a tragedy of the

commons, particularly when commons or community values aren't nurtured in this country? In my opinion, it's by working closely with the private sector.

Q: You are very active on this issue on a global basis. Are there programs in other countries we can learn from and are there things we need to do better to enhance the global response?

Probably, the country I've been most impressed with that has the most comprehensive program is New Zealand. However, it is important to keep in mind that their population is significantly smaller than ours and this contributes a lot to the complexity.

However, where New Zealand has carved out their niche is the way they view the issue. They don't look at it through a resource management lens, they view invasive species as biosecurity risk. As a result, their screening processes are much more stringent than what we have here in the States and this biosecurity perspective creates direct linkages to their biggest industry other than tourism, agriculture. So, not wanting to impact their agriculture, they have much more intensive screening and risk management procedures than we do.

Q: You have been an advocate to the business community that combating invasives is key to developing a sustainable business model. Please tell us a little about this.

Well, yes I have and that's primarily through the influence of Patagonia, Yvon Chouinard and Bill Klyn. Most private sector efforts to move towards sustainability are focused on reducing energy consumption and producing less waste. And while this is a good step in the right direction, it's not nearly as comprehensive as we need businesses to become and it doesn't address the issue of biodiversity. Unfortunately, biodiversity is an academic term to describe the stuff of life and it is very hard to make this concept resonate with a culture that has a limited connection to the environment. Most people think biodiversity is an exotic butterfly in the tropics, but in reality, it is all the different fish and wildlife species, their interactions with each other and the environment. And businesses make considerable impacts on biodiversity; however, they don't factor in these true costs. As a result, the biodiversity crisis is worse than climate change. So, as an advocate, I'm trying to get businesses to factor biodiversity impacts into their business models and use fish and wildlife as the ultimate environmental litmus test for sustainability; along the lines of the "canary in the coalmine", because fish and wildlife feel impacts before we, as humans, even know they exist.

Q: You are just one person working on a national problem that is global in scope. Obviously, there is no possible way that one entity can accomplish things alone. Where do you think we most need new resources for this fight?

Here in the States, I think there are two areas that need the most resources. 1) We need to provide our State partners with funds to address this issue. The FWS can't anything without our State partners and thus, our response is only as strong as our

weakest link. So, that's one area. 2) We need to address the social side of this issue. You and I are doing this. By not cleaning our recreational equipment, by throwing our exotic pets into the environment, everyday citizens are responsible, either directly or indirectly. Consumers or citizens drive the ship in this country and if we reduce our consumption and become more conscious of our impacts and develop more responsibility, we can affect some change. But since we don't foster these qualities, this transformation won't happen by itself, which is why more money needs to be put towards helping citizens make voluntary changes. Ultimately, over time, these efforts will pay off and our culture's social norms and expectations for responsibility will change. And citizens will be expected to not only make responsible purchasing decisions, but also to responsibly use their products and responsibly dispose of them so that our individual impacts on the environment are minimized.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to tell our readers?

Become a leader, become responsible, look at yourself before you blame the government or the private sector. We're all part of the human system that lives in the most wasteful country in the world that is leading the way in destroying our environment.