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When Good Weeds Go Bad

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FROM DIRECTOR DANNY BOYLE

One of the basic parables of our time — and a staple of science fiction — is the tale of an alien organism that escapes into a new world and, because it has few natural enemies there, takes it over. We like the story best when it comes from outer space, preys on humans and is obviously the invention of a heated imagination. True invasives, the ones among us now, are more modest, and that helps explain their success — and their danger.

To spread, they rely on the incautious habits of humans. A case in point is Eurasian watermilfoil, which escaped from aquariums, where it was supposed to look like seaweed. It is now choking out native plant life in the lakes where it has taken root. The struggle is to contain this water weed and to keep it from spreading further, especially into some of the Adirondack lakes, which have been protected by their remoteness.

Watermilfoil grows in dense, fibrous stands that foul propellers and give swimmers nightmares. Most worrisome is the damage it does to native aquatic plant species, crowding them out and unbalancing the ecosystems they anchor and all the organisms that depend on them.

The State of New York has taken the threat of invasive species seriously and is working alongside other organizations, like the Adirondack Park Invasive Plant Program, to curtail the spread of watermilfoil. There are real obstacles, starting with the tenacity of watermilfoil, which can spread from even a few broken plant fragments. There is also the danger of ecological fatalism, the assumption that there is really no countering such an entrenched foe.

For now, there is no simple remedy, and this is true for many invasive species. What it takes is vigilance, a commitment to protecting the balance of native ecosystems, and a willingness to clean up a mess that is the result of our own negligence.

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