

## Invasive Weed Control Crew takes on the Exotics of Highlands County

By: Corine Burgess

The citizens of Highlands County are fortunate to live in an area that boasts 113 diverse and beautiful lakes. The simple beauty, recreational opportunities and natural diversity that these water bodies offer cannot be denied. As with any natural area in today's world, these lakes need to be managed and protected by mankind. It is truly unfortunate that many of our lakes are plagued with invasive, exotic plants, which can diminish the quality of the water and certainly the recreational opportunities they offer. But, fret not, the Invasive Weed Control Crew of Highlands County is on the job!

Invasive, exotic pests have long been a problem in our Sunshine state and we continue to battle them every day. These plants and animals degrade and diminish Florida's conservation lands and waterways. Many of these exotic plants pose a serious problem for citizens and visitors by affecting recreational use and even impeding flood control. In addition, when aquatic plants such as water hyacinth take over the entire lake, oxygen is depleted and fish may suffer. These unwelcome plants also take necessary space, oxygen, nutrients and sunlight away from native species. It is critical that these fast-growing exotic aliens be taken in hand.

That's where the crew from the Aquatic Weed Control comes in. A division of the Parks & Natural Resources Department, these brave souls travel to the infested areas and annihilate these out of control plants. They use various herbicides to do the job and often have to re-treat areas to manage the pesky plants. Without this service, these areas would be taken over in no time by these exotic invaders.

One of the many species of plants they treat is water hyacinth. This free-floating plant is native to South America. It was introduced to Florida in the 1880's. Currently, it infests a majority of water bodies in Florida. Water hyacinth grows very fast with populations doubling in just a couple of weeks. If left unmanaged, in no time at all, the lake will be completely covered with the plant and navigation becomes impossible.

Also on the list is hydrilla. This menace is a rooted, submerged plant which is native to Southeast Asia. It was introduced to Florida in the 1950's as an aquarium plant. Since that time, it has infested over 175 lakes in Florida and continues to be such a huge problem that eradication is no longer the goal, but simply managing it has become priority. The reason this plant is such a problem is its growth rate. It has the ability to fill lakes and rivers from the bottom to the top with a tangled mass of stems. Hydrilla is not picky and will grow in shallow, deep, shady, or sunny water. If not controlled, lakes would become a huge mass of this plant and navigation would be out of the question.

The list of noxious and problematic species goes on and on. These plants do not have any natural enemies here and they thrive in the warm climate. With no environmental controls such as disease, severe weather and pests, these aliens rapidly reproduce and continue to take over areas that were previously pristine with native vegetation. With the reduction of native plants, comes the reduction of native wildlife. These plants are literally changing the composition of our beautiful, unique state.

We are fortunate to have such a dedicated crew who tirelessly take on these green beasts. Carl Smith, Weed Control Supervisor, Chris Mayhew, Danny Copeland, Richard Haley and Wesley Williams fight the good fight every week, in hot or cold weather, and travel to places that most of us would not dare to venture into. If not for their efforts, who knows what our beautiful county would become.