

Sun Journal

Face Time: Roberta Hill

By **Mark Mogensen**, *Editor*

Sunday, April 26, 2009 05:00 am

Roberta Hill knows Maine lakes.

As the program director for the Center for Invasive Aquatic Plants, headquartered in Auburn, she also knows what can kill a lake -- Eurasian milfoil, for instance -- and what can save it -- lake monitoring volunteers.

The center is part of the Maine Lake Monitoring Program, the longest-standing citizen lake monitoring program in the nation and one of the largest. Roberta knows her lakes. She'd like you to know Maine's lakes too.

Name: Roberta Hill

Age: That depends. I am a firm believer that our real age and our chronological age are not always one in the same. I feel youthful, and my age has not really slowed me down, so I don't think about it much. (I was born in 1956 if that helps.)

Greatest love: I have way too many great loves to answer with any accuracy here. Maybe I should just say that my greatest love is love itself.

Greatest frustration: A closed mind.

Your earliest memory of thinking/acting green: From as early as I can remember my family took regular outings to the seashore (the one on the other side of the U.S.). I spent most of the day in the water, which, contrary to popular belief, can be just as cold as the sea we have here on the East Coast. I particularly loved to float on my back, out just beyond the breakers. I would just float there with the giant sea heaving below, the clouds in constant motion above, salt air in my lungs . . . until I could no longer sense where I left off and the environment began. Looking back, those early experiences planted the seeds of my ecological awareness: We are all part of something much bigger than ourselves; there are no hard and fast boundaries between living things and their environment; all life on earth is interconnected, fluid, constantly changing.

Is environmentalism in your blood or an acquired cause? I like to think it is in my blood, though I am quite sure neither of my parents would ever have characterized themselves as environmentalists. My parent taught me to respect myself and others. My environmentalism, if you want to call it that, is basically just a natural extension of that lesson.

Out of the many environmental concerns, how did you get attracted to the issue of invasive plants? As an aquatic



[thumbnails](#) | [gallery](#)

1
tweets

[Share This](#)

retweet

[Share This](#)

 [Facebook](#)

1
tweets

 [Delicious](#)

retweet

ecologist and educator, I had been studying and teaching about lakes and threats to lakes here in Maine for a number of years, when I attended a conference in Toronto focused on the topic of aquatic invaders, such as Eurasian water-milfoil and zebra mussels. I heard one account after another of the widespread, largely irreversible damage done by invasive species in much of the U.S. and Canada. It occurred to me (or rather hit me like a ton of bricks) that Maine had a rather small window of time in which to act if it was going to prevent that same kind of ecological and economic devastation here. I came home from that conference knowing that I wanted to be directly involved in that work.

What's the big deal about invasive plants? What's the worst that could happen? The impacts of invasive aquatic plants are very serious and well documented. They include habitat disruption, loss of native plant and animal communities, impaired fishing and degraded recreational experiences, reduced property values and other significant economic losses. Maine's inland waters are among the state's most significant natural resources. An estimated 640,000 Mainers recreate on Maine inland waters every year. Visitors to Maine lakes spend \$2.3 billion annually, generating and sustaining: \$3.5 billion total economic activity in Maine; \$1.8 billion in annual income for Maine residents and 50,000 jobs. Lakes and rivers are also vital drinking water sources in our state. Invasive aquatic species can severely impact all of the above uses.

Does your family share your zeal for these things or do they think you've gone overboard (no pun intended)? My husband and I met doing lake work; we became engaged at a lake conference; we got married on the shore of a small local pond; and we work together for the Maine Volunteer Lake Monitoring Program (Scott is the executive director). So yes, I suppose you could say that our shared zeal for these things is one of the ties that bind us. My children (now full grown) have plenty of zeal of their own. I admire the fact that they are following their hearts. I think they pretty much feel the same about me.

What, in your view, is the most important thing for people to know about invasive aquatic species? People are the primary means of spread. This means each one of us can play an important role in the prevention of spread. Anytime we put an object (a boat, a trailer, seaplane floats, anchor line, fishing gear, hip waders, duck decoys, etc.) into a body of water, that object is a potential vector for spreading an aquatic invader. The small investment of time and effort we put into checking, cleaning and drying our gear before and after using it in the water, will help keep Maine waters healthy and beautiful now and in the future. Maine has some of the most pristine lakes and ponds in the world. We all have a responsibility for helping to keep it that way.

Is there a need to act quickly? As with a serious illness, early detection is key. The earlier the introduced organism can be detected, the greater the chances for finding an effective treatment and reducing the risk of spread. With over 6,000 lakes and ponds, and thousands of miles of suitable stream habitat, in Maine to be monitored for the presence of aquatic invaders on an ongoing basis, the challenge before us is enormous. We have made excellent headway in a relatively short period of time, but there is much, much more to be done. I strongly encourage all of your readers to visit the Maine Volunteer Lake Monitoring website at www.mainevolunteerlakemonitors.org to learn how they can get involved. Its great work . . . poking around out on the water on fair weather days. Pretty hard to beat!