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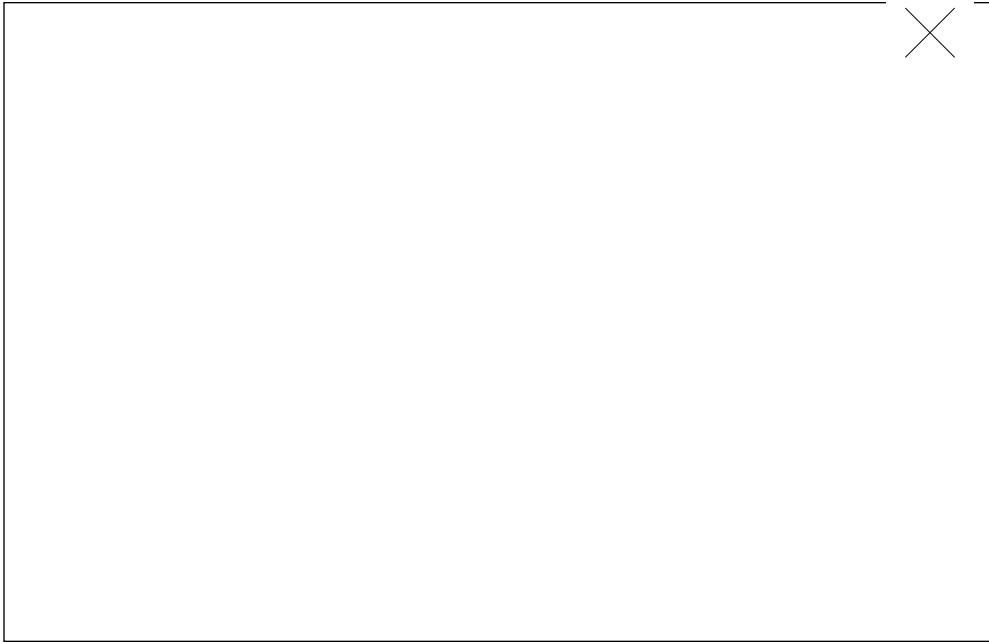
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Candlewood Lake has 'virtually zero plants' this year — a 'bizarre' change that's puzzled experts



Kendra Baker

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Greg Bugbee, an associate scientist with the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station, lifts up a handfull of Eurasian Watermilfoil from Candlewood Lake in August 2016.
Hearst Connecticut Media file photo

An unforeseen shortage in plant life is raising concern and questions among Candlewood Lake officials.

“We are finding virtually zero plants in Candlewood this year,” said Neil Stalter, Candlewood Lake Authority’s ecology and environmental education director, during the authority’s meeting on Wednesday.

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Fisherman have reported this lack of invasive and native plants, and Stalter has seen it himself, adding he’s “talked to many people who would know,” including diver Carl Wise, who conducts weed removal on the lake.

“Nobody has really seen any plant life in the lake, with a few exceptions,” Stalter said. “There was some growing early in the season ... but it is, in large part, no longer there.”

He says the lake vegetation shortage is “bizarre,” considering how much there was last summer.

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“There was a lot of plant life last year and there were no indications that this was coming,” he said. “There was no indication on the chemistry side of any obvious things that would impact the plant community.”

While the cause remains unknown, Stalter said there are a number of things that could have contributed to “very unusual” plant life shortage.

“We had a moderate depth drawdown following a DEEP drawdown this past year — in combination with the fish, it’s possible that the tipping point just happened to be thinner than we thought,” he said.

Each year, the lake’s water is drawn down, which exposes invasive Eurasian watermilfoil to freezing temperatures, helping to prevent the plant from growing during the recreational season.

Although it’s a little too early in the assessment process to draw any definitive conclusions, Stalter said Candlewood’s lack of plant life is “definitely a point of concern” and something that needs to be looked into.

The vegetation shortage may be good for recreation, but it's "not good news for the ecosystem as a whole," according to Stalter, who said he's curious about effects it could have on things like the lake's nutrient profile.

When Squantz Pond experienced a plant shortage several years ago, some suspected the carp released in the lake to eat invasive species might have something to do with it. There are concerns that the fish don't just have an appetite for milfoil — in some cases, they munch on native vegetation, as well.

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Since 2015, the Candlewood Lake Authority has been stocking Candlewood with sterile grass carp to help combat invasive Eurasian watermilfoil.

No mention was made during Wednesday's meeting about whether the lake's lack of vegetation could be connected to the authority's carp program.

When asked about the possibility Thursday, Stalter said "it's too early" to draw any conclusions.

Although the cause of Squantz's plant shortage remains unknown, he said, "what happened there and what's happening in Candlewood may help sort of inform each other once we're able to take a closer look."

Stalter said he plans to keep a close eye on Candlewood's vegetation situation and that an assessment of the lake's plant community will be done in early-August.

The Candlewood Lake Authority is next scheduled to meet at 7 p.m. Aug. 10 via Zoom.

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