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Pest fish threat to Oneida Lake

The round goby could displace native fish valued by anglers, officials say.

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By Pam Greene
Staff writer

People closely associated with Oneida Lake are bracing themselves for the arrival of a new invasive species that could take over habitat, spread disease and damage recreational fishing.

The fish, called a round goby, feeds on native fish and their eggs. But it also eats zebra mussels.

Edward Mills, director of Cornell University's Biological Field Station, said Wednesday that the round goby will most likely be in Oneida Lake within a few years. It is already found in Lake Ontario.

Mills was one of four speakers assembled by the Central New York Regional Planning and Development Board for a conference on Oneida Lake issues. Representatives from the State University College of Environmental Science and Forestry, the New York State Canal Corp. and the state Soil and Water Conservation Districts also spoke at the conference Wednesday at Arrowhead Lodge in Oneida Shores Park, Brewerton.

According to the Great Lakes Science Center and U.S. Geological Survey, the round goby is originally from the region of the Black and Caspian seas in Eastern Europe. The fish is believed to have traveled in the ballast of ships from Eurasia. Since it was first spotted in the United States in 1990, it has spread to all of the Great Lakes, and it is working its way inland through rivers and canals.

"I think we'll see some diseases shortly," Mills said.

The reason: In addition to zebra mussels, the round goby eats a related species, the quagga mussel. Quagga mussels can be contaminated by clostridium, a bacterium that causes botulism. The goby eats a contaminated mussel, becomes contaminated and is eaten by another fish or bird, which in turn also

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becomes contaminated. This type of botulism, Mills said, does not affect humans.

Although quagga mussels are not found in Oneida Lake, they are found in Lake Ontario and probably will arrive in Oneida Lake soon, Mills said.

The round goby also spreads contamination by eating zebra mussels, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

"Because zebra mussels are filter feeders that accumulate contaminants in their body tissues, round gobies that eat zebra mussels may be consuming a high level of contaminants," the agency's Web site states. "When a predatory fish such as a walleye eats a round goby that has fed primarily on zebra mussels, they may be getting a much larger load of contaminants than they would from eating other types of prey fish. This could put dangerous concentrations of contaminants into sport fish at a much faster rate."

Mills said he's not sure what effect gobies would have on Oneida Lake's zebra mussel population.

Round gobies also reproduce at a rapid rate. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the fish can spawn up to five times in a mating season.

Increasing numbers of gobies could displace native fish, including some valued by anglers.

Some native fish, such as bass, will probably feed on the round goby, Mills said. However, he's not sure predation will be enough to control the goby population.

The Great Lakes Science Center is studying possible ways to control the fish's spread. It's testing how the species interacts with other species, including those in its native habitat, and whether electric barriers might slow their spread.

Meanwhile, Mills said, he is lobbying the state and federal government for stricter shipping laws. Ships that bring cargo are supposed to dump ballast tanks filled with fresh water in salt water and vice versa, he said. However, eggs, small animals and plants are often left at the bottom of the ballast tank and are accidentally dumped in the wrong place. As a result, ecosystems are disrupted and species are threatened.

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