Heading for cover on lakes

BY PHILLIP GENTRY
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Earlier this month, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) released its annual plan for aquatic plant management, which governs a number of public bodies of water across the state.

This year, as has been the case the past several years, the plan includes steps to reduce aquatic plant growth in Lake Keowee. At first blush, this seems to go against the wishes of many recreational anglers, as Keowee has earned a reputation as a lake relatively devoid of fish and aquatic wildlife holding cover.

The SCDNR, in conjunction with the Aquatic Plant Management Council, is responsible for the management of nuisance aquatic vegetation in public waters, meaning non-native plant species. Each year, an aquatic plant management plan is developed which identifies aquatic weed problem areas, describes management objectives, prescribes management strategies and determines funding needs and sources.

According to SCDNR fisheries biologist Dan Rankin, Keowee has had an ongoing battle with a cumulative 80-100-acre patch of hydrilla, mostly in the Cane Creek and Little River areas of the lake, for the last 10 to 15 years. Hydrilla is a non-native aquatic plant most associated with subtropical waters typical of southern Florida rather than northern South Carolina.

"The problem with hydrilla is that, in small doses, the plants make for wonderful fish attracting and holding habitats, as well as an acceptable food source for waterfowl," Rankin said. "At elevated levels, hydrilla will choke out entire cove areas, clog water intakes of public utilities and slowly starve out an area, including fish, of useable resources and clog motors of recreational boaters."

Rankin said Duke Energy, which owns and operates Keowee, takes an aggressive approach to hydrilla, which can cost millions to abate once it has taken root.

Biologists do not hold native aquatic grasses and plants, such as maiden cane and water willow, in such low regard. In fact, researchers from Clemson University have experimented with native aquatic plants, which they claim grow readily even in the typically clay bottoms of local impoundments such as Keowee, Hartwell and Lake Russell.

The problem is, unless guarded off from aquatic herbivores such as turtles, birds, and carp, the natives don't get a chance to grow.

Rankin pointed out a recent relicensing agreement between Duke Energy and the federal government will earmark up to $1 million as a habitat-building fund. Rankin said with this agreement in place, a percentage of all dock permit fees will also be allocated to expand this habitat fund.

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While the SCDNR has released its plan for managing invasive aquatic plants in public waters across the state, lakes Hartwell and Keowee may be headed for the introduction of additional aquatic habitat that will bolster fisheries in both lakes.