Opinion: Paddlers have a role in keeping lakes clean

By Ted Thayer and Kimberly Boyd

Paddlers at Lake Tahoe, Fallen Leaf, and Echo Lakes get to enjoy the peace and solitude of skimming over some of the world's clearest water while being surrounded by awe-inspiring mountain scenery. There is a spirit of rugged individualism that kayakers, canoeists and paddle boarders can share in as an experience at Tahoe. Little equipment is needed to enjoy a trip on the lake, and there are many secluded coves to explore and low-key spots from which to effortlessly launch.



However, when it comes to aquatic invasive species and their march between many western lakes and waterways, paddle craft are part of the risk. The risk is not only to native species and systems, but also to the pure, carefree experience that paddlers seek. Now there is something every paddler can do to help protect our pristine waters and to further reduce the threat of aquatic invasive species to Lake Tahoe as well as between Tahoe and neighboring lakes.

Tahoe Keepers is a stewardship initiative and a free training program designed to help non-motorized watercraft operators guard against aquatic invasive species by self-inspecting and decontaminating their boats and gear after each use. Non-native species, such as zebra and quagga mussels, and the New Zealand mudsnail could irreparably damage the Lake Tahoe watershed and their transport is illegal. These invasive species are spread through the transport of water and debris that can collect in cockpits and hatches, cling to outer hulls, rudders, and paddles, and even hide out on your gear long after an outing.

The Tahoe Keepers initiative is voluntary and free. Since 2007, efforts to prevent an introduction of new invasive species to the Lake Tahoe Basin have focused on the high risk from motorized watercraft and trailers. The mandatory inspection program for motorized boats is one of the most comprehensive in the nation and is a leading example of what communities can do to manage the threat posed by aquatic invasive species. The Tahoe Keepers program has the potential to be just as successful.

As part of the stewardship initiative, paddlers learn how to be a Tahoe Keeper online. The website offers instructions on how to properly Clean, Drain, and Dry watercraft and gear after each use, and properly dispose of any plants or debris away from lakes and streams. Taking these few minutes before and after paddling will help protect the Tahoe basin, your gear, and your freedom to launch at undeveloped sites.

You will also learn how to help isolate and control aquatic invasive species already present within the Tahoe Basin. Currently, there is no Eurasian watermilfoil, curly leaf pondweed, or Asian clams in Fallen Leaf Lake, Echo Lake, and Spooner Lake and unaware paddlers can inadvertently transport harmful invasive species to any other body of water if they don’t take the proper precautions.

Paddlers who successfully complete the 10-minute online training program will become members of the Tahoe Keepers stewardship community, and will receive “Proof of Training” credentials. Again, the self-inspection training program for kayaks, canoes, and paddle boards is free and voluntary in 2011 thanks to funding from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Widespread participation in this program can help to protect recreational opportunities and privileges in the Lake Tahoe Basin. Aquatic invasive species inspectors will be providing education and may request to inspect your watercraft. Identifying yourself with Tahoe Keeper credentials will help to demonstrate that your watercraft is not high

risk.

Free kayak, canoe, paddle board, and non-motorized watercraft inspections and decontaminations are available at each roadside watercraft inspection station located at Meyers, Spooner Summit, Homewood Mountain, Northstar-at-Tahoe, and Alpine Meadows.

We encourage and challenge every kayaker, canoeist, and paddle boarder who cares for our Tahoe Basin lakes to spread the word to other paddlers about the Clean, Drain, and Dry method and to join the Tahoe Keepers stewardship community.

Ted Thayer is Aquatic Invasive Species Program coordinator for TRPA and Kimberly Boyd is Invasive Species Program manager for Tahoe RCD.