DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release THURSDAY, MAY 15, 1941

PHOTOS Available from Fish and Wildlife Service

NOTE TO EDITORS: Those who have requested layout photos as released are receiving the pictures with this statement. The advance release date has been set to make it possible for others to write for pictures if they wish.

STRANGE PLANT ON EAST COAST AFFECTS NAVIGATION, WATERFOWL; CONTROL HARD

Tourists to Washington, D. C., and along the Mohawk and Hudson River junctions are warned to avoid collecting a strange plant which is native only to Europe and Asia and which mysteriously appeared in these Eastern waters along the Atlantic Coast about 20 years ago.

The mysterious plant, known as water caltrop or water chestnut, has been giving control experts of the Fish and Wildlife Service and the U. S. Army Engineers a hard time, according to a summary of activities recently received by Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes.

The two agencies apparently are gaining control of the plant in the Potomac River but expressed some fear that it might spread to other sections of the United States.

Water caltrop, or water chestnut, spreads rapidly in fresh waters, where it takes hold and soon impedes navigation and chokes out good waterfowl food

plants. At present it is abundant along the Potomac River, from Alexandria, Virginia, 40 miles downstream to the mouth of Potomac Creek, below Quantico, Virginia; in the Mohawk-Hudson Rivers region; and in a small area in Massachusetts.

"No one seems to know when or how this noxious plant became established on the central Atlantic Coast," Service officials said, "but the Service and Army Engineers are bending every effort to wipe out the plant."

Water caltrop forms a dense vegetation of large mats of floating roseates which are held to the bottom of the stream by long stems, some as much as 14 feet long. Practically all submerged vegetation--including food plants for diving ducks--is eliminated.

Navigation is also impeded and, in water less than 8 feet, it is almost impossible for motorboats, yachts, rowboats, and canoes to pass. Nearly all of the Potomac River, except a narrow channel is less than 10 feet.

Even swimming is impossible in areas infested by water caltrop because the water area becomes covered. The seeds produced are dangerous, as they have long, very sharp, recurved spines that make painful sores.

Though the plant thus far has not spread to other areas in the country, Service officials said that unless care is exercised the water caltrop may be introduced into other waters by tourists.

Visitors to infested areas are a major source of potential distribution. The water chestnut is attractive and its fruit a novelty. Persons have been known to take the plant for transplanting from the Potomac River, Service officials said. This practice is dangerous, officials warned. The plant takes hold quickly and wipes out other plants in the stream.

NOTE TO EDITORS: The following is added for the convenience of those who want a longer story.

The plant was first noted in Washington, D. C., prior to 1919, near the Tidal Basin, scene of the famed cherry blossoms. Efforts were made to control the plant, and it was thought to be extinct, but in 1923 it reappeared in Oxon Run, opposite Alexandria, Virginia.

The plant spread so rapidly along the Potomac River that by 1933 it had formed a solid mat from Washington to the creek below Quantico, a distance of 40 miles. Only a narrow channel was open for river traffic.

In 1933 the Army Engineers and Service plant experts began cooperative efforts to remove the plant. Chemical spraying and underwater mowing were attempted. The Army Engineers do the bulk of the work while Fish and Wildlife Service biologists act in an advisory capacity.

Since control operations began, a 5-mile stretch along the Potomac between Washington and Alexandria has been cleared up, almost entirely by hand. C.C.C. and W.P.A. personnel assisted the Army in this work.

In the Potomac, the seeds sprout early in April. Roseates appear on the surface of the water by the middle of May. Flowers appear in June, and new seeds begin to mature in July. It is during this season that tourists are most attracted to the plant.

In the Mohawk-Hudson area, the plant is established in these rivers in the vicinity of their junction. New York State authorities are planning to take control measures before the caltrop spreads down river.

In the Massachusetts area, the plant is localized, and for some reason has not spread.

Constant watch must be kept on cleared areas because the tide often washes seeds back into the controlled zones and the plant reestablishes itself.

Though the plant has been in the Potomac River for some two decades, it has not spread to Chesapeake Bay. Salt water is an effective barrier to the spread of the plant, Service officials explained, and is apparently a factor which has thus far kept the bay and its upper tributaries from becoming infested.

The mature plant weighs about 20 pounds to the square yard of surface.

Describing the damage to navigation and wildlife, officials said the propellers of smaller craft become fouled in a few moments by going through a bed of water caltrop. Rowboats cannot be operated because the oars are fouled. The beds also gather debris and tend to slow down the current, thereby aiding the deposition of sediment and helping to cause shallows.

Not only does the water chestnut choke out various native water plants, but it is harmful to valuable waterfowl duck foods like wild celery and redhead grass.

Fish avoid these beds. Only carp lay their eggs on these plants.

Hand labor has been very effective in control, but requires much time and is expensive. The plants are pulled up by hand and thrown out on high areas to dry. A water plant, caltrop dies within a few hours after drying on land.

Thus far, chemical methods of exterminating the water caltrop have not proved successful. Underwater cutting, or mowing, machines of different types have been tried with varying success. Army engineers are now working on plans to construct an underwater cutting machine that may meet all known obstacles.

- C -