



Whatcom Weeds

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WATER HYACINTH

Eichhornia crassipes

THREAT: Water hyacinth is an aquatic plant, native to South America, which was introduced to the United States as an ornamental plant in the 1880s. Water hyacinth has been called the worst aquatic plant in the world and has impacted many tropical and subtropical areas in the world. It has become naturalized in much of the southern U.S. Water hyacinth grows in freshwater rivers and lakes. It reproduces by seed and by producing daughter plants on stolons. The daughter plants can break off of the parent plant and further spread the infestation. Water hyacinth forms dense mats of impenetrable floating vegetation that impacts navigation, recreation, power generation and irrigation, as well as native plant populations and fish and wildlife habitat. In some instances, mats of this plant have actually halted shipping traffic. Due to the prolific growth of this plant, it can deplete water of oxygen, affecting other vegetation and animal life in the water body. The stagnation of water caused by its growth also provides good habitat for mosquito larvae. One study found that water hyacinth can double its population in as little as 6 to 18 days.

DESCRIPTION: Water hyacinth is a free-floating aquatic perennial. It has shiny, green, round to oval leaves, up to 10 inches in diameter, which grow above the water. The leaves grow upright, serving as sails to help spread the plant. The leaf stems are swollen and spongy. A mass of dark roots grows below the plant, hanging unrooted in the water. Water hyacinth may become rooted to soil, if it becomes stranded on a bank, but usually it is free-floating. The large attractive flowers grow on an upright spike and are blue-purple or lilac in color (occasionally white). One of the six petals has a yellow spot on it. Due to its colorful flowers, it has been a favorite plant for water gardens. Seeds form in the submerged, withered flowers and often sink after being released. They can germinate in several days or remain dormant for at least 20 years. Reproduction also occurs through daughter plants, formed on stolons, breaking away from the parent plant (this is probably the more common means of reproduction).

MANAGEMENT OPTIONS: Like all aquatic weeds, control is difficult and eradication may be unrealistic. Since water hyacinth is not established in Washington State, it is important to NEVER introduce it to natural water bodies. Although it is not known whether water hyacinth can survive our winters, there is always the possibility of a cold-tolerant strain developing. In areas where water hyacinth has become established, millions of dollars have been spent on control. Control options include mechanical and chemical means. Small infestations can be harvested by hand. Research into biological control agents is continuing and has shown varying results.

