Starry Stonewort

Another exotic plant has invaded Michigan waters. Starry stonewort (*Nitellopsis obtusa*) looks like a rooted plant but it is actually an algae. The plant is native to Europe and Asia and was first discovered in the St. Lawrence River in 1978. In 1983, it was found in the Detroit River near Belle Isle and has since infested several Michigan lakes.

Starry stonewort resembles the native aquatic plant *Chara*. Unlike *Chara*, which is generally considered to be a beneficial plant, starry stonewort has a tendency to colonize deeper portions of the lake and can form dense blankets several feet thick. These mats can severely impede navigation and limit growth of more beneficial plants. Starry stonewort anchors to the sediments through rhizoids (primitive root structures) which can also absorb nutrients. Like *Chara*, starry stonewort also absorbs nutrients from the water through its cell walls. Compared to many other aquatic plants, starry stonewort may begin growing later in the season and persist longer.

Chara (left) and starry stonewort (right)

Starry stonewort has tiny, star-shaped, tan colored reproductive structures called bulbils that are firm to the touch when compared to its soft branches. These reproductive bulbils have been shown to stay viable for several years in lake sediments.

It is unclear what effects starry stonewort may have on a lake's fishery. However, the encroachment of starry stonewort into fish spawning beds may be a cause for concern.

Both algaecides and mechanical harvesting appear to be somewhat effective in controlling starry stonewort. However, given its propensity to produce massive amounts of growth, and the current regulatory limitations on chemical control, efforts to keep this invasive algae at bay will be difficult and expensive.