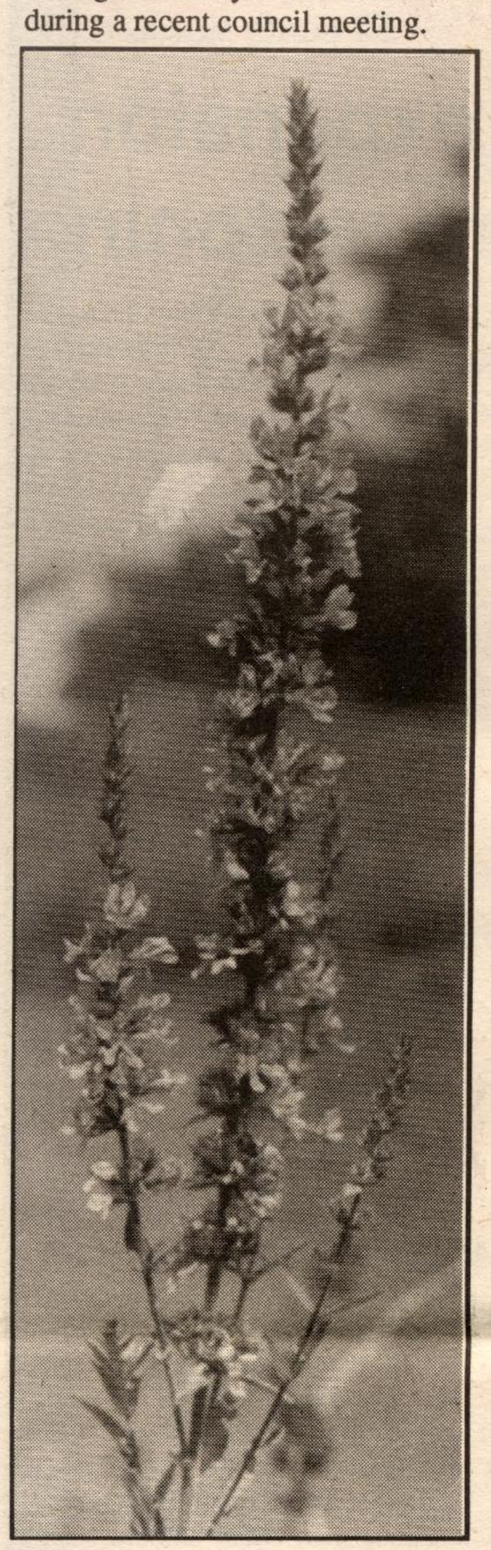
Battle against purple loosestrife may soon start in Halton

By Jamie Harrison

After inhabiting the wetlands of the St. Lawrence Seaway for over one hundred years, the plague of Purple Loosestrife (Lythrum salicaria) has invaded southern Ontario with a vengeance.

The plant has been spotted in abundance along riverbanks in Halton Hills, prompting discussion amongst the mayor and councilors during a recent council meeting.



At the meeting, councilor Gail Rutherford inquired about the feasibility of having town employees work to rid Halton Hills of Purple Loosestrife before the numbers double or triple. She mentioned that the plant had not had a chance to seed due to the summer's wet weather.

Rutherford suggested council should arrange for a public notice urging residents to pull and dispose of any Loosestrife they see.

Mayor Russell Miller told council that in Collingwood, several citizens took it upon themselves to rid the town of the plant. He said he would direct town staff to take action.

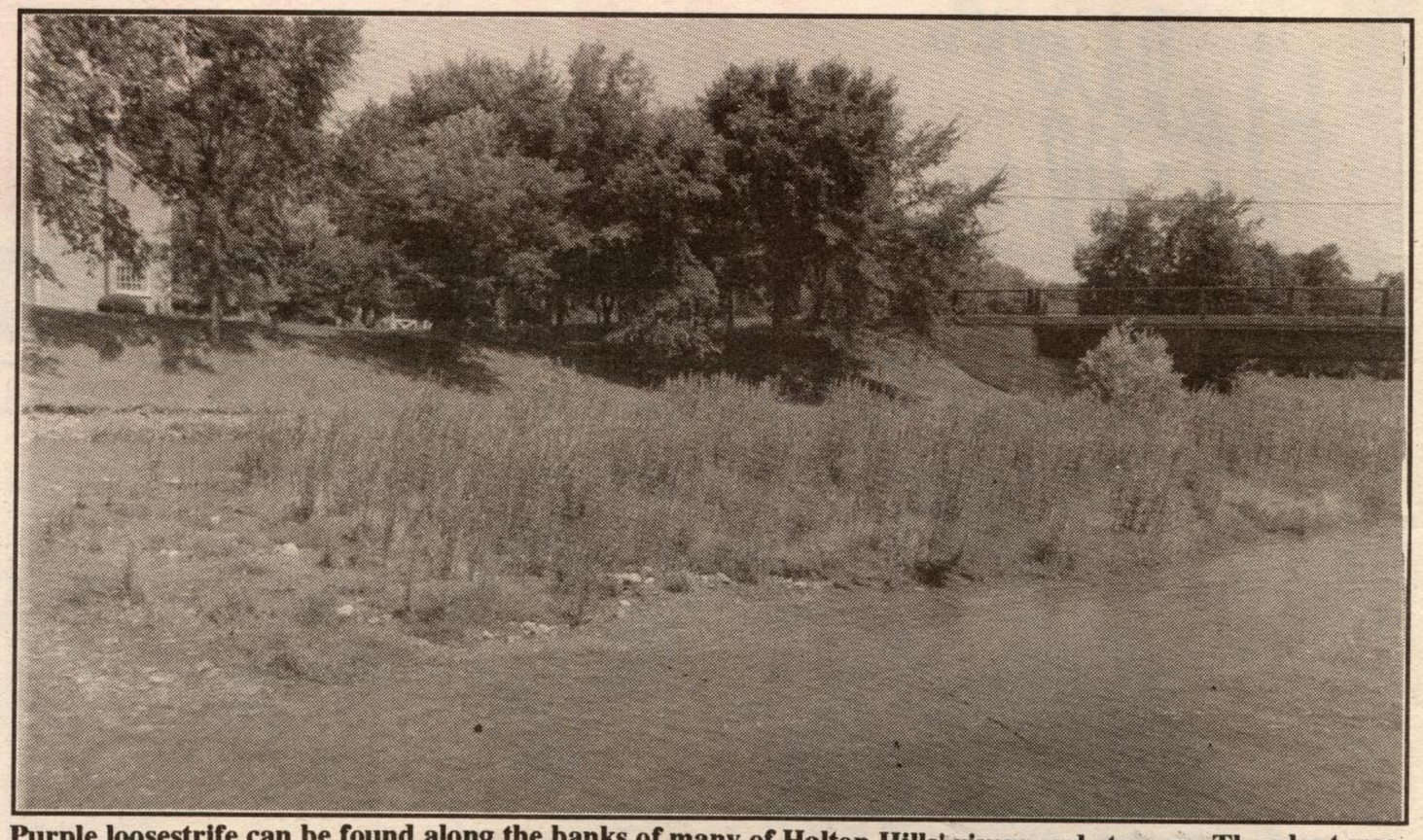
As a result of the Loosestrife infestation in Ontario, a coalition of businesses, government agencies, and environmental groups have taken steps to combat the plant which was accidentally imported into North America in the mid-1800s.

The Ontario Federation of Hunters and Anglers (OFHA) has led the fight against the weed which flourishes in wetlands, often destroying or seriously damaging naturally occurring ecosystems.

Terry Quinney, a botanist with the OFHA, has been active in forming a task force, called Project Purple to eradicate the spread of the plant, employing ten university science students from around the province.

Project Purple employees are spending the summer physically pulling the plants from the marshes mostly in central Ontario, though they have been active in southern Ontario, especially in Toronto's Rouge Beach Park.

"We are very pleased (with the results of Project Purple). We have two crews in the field actively controlling the spread of (Purple) Loosestrife. So far they've removed tens of thousands of plants, and have been very successful in eradicating the plant," Quinney said.



Purple loosestrife can be found along the banks of many of Halton Hills' rivers and streams. The plant was likely introduced to this area through the ballast of ocean going ships in the 1800s.

Each plant in capable of producing about 2.7 million seeds per year over a ten year period.

Purple Loosestrife is thought to have been introduced to the North American habitat through the ballast water expelled by ocean going ships from Europe in the 1800's.

Currently the banks of the St. Lawrence Seaway, Canada's busiest port, are covered with the plant.

Ornamental gardeners and beekeepers are also suspected of introducing Loosestrife to the North American ecosystem.

The spread of the plant has also caught the attention of botanists at the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, who have been monitoring the spread and growth of the plant in conjunction with groups such as OFHA, Ducks Unlimited, and the Federation of Ontario Naturalists.

Daryl Coulson, a botanist with the ministry, has been working on the project.

"Loosestrife is certainly spreading. (There are) areas where it has taken over entire vegetations," Coulson said. "At this point, inventory projects across the province are trying to come up with a good map of distribution and abundance. Specific control techniques have not been successful."

Traditional methods of eliminating unwanted plant life from the environment often end up heightening the problem.

It is damaging and illegal to use herbicides around standing water, and burning Loosestrife not only adds to air pollution, but it does not necessarily kill the seeds from the plant.

Simply cutting the plant does not present a viable solution, either, as the tiny seeds often become airborne with the motion of cutting the stem.

Workers from Project Purple must first place a bag over the head of the plant to ensure that the seeds do not drop off or float away in the wind.

The stems of the plant also present a problem, as they are able to continue growing, regenerating a new head after the old one has been cut off. Workers must pull out the stems, while keeping the root system intact.

However, the news is not all bad regarding the control of Loosestrife. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been experimenting with biological controls in New York State this summer. Scientists for the service are using several species of beetles to feed on the plant, but it is still too early to get clear results.

"(Loosestrife) is as destructive to the wetlands as acid rain is to lakes," Quinney said. "Less than 25 per cent of the original wetlands are left in southern Ontario. If we don't act now, we won't have any left."

As the wetlands disappear, fish life is also effected as their natural habitat and feeding grounds are destroyed. This has already happened in the salmon breeding grounds in British Columbia, where Loosestrife is choking out Sedge, the aquatic grass juvenile salmon feed in. In B.C., sedge is protected by law.

OFHA hopes to expand their project province-wide soon, thanks to continued funding from the Environmental Youth Core and Shimano Canada.