

## Invading seaweed alert!

Have you ever wondered about the green, spongy, branched seaweed washed up more and more frequently on beaches in recent years? Or have you heard from your local lobster fisherman about the Japanese weed that now grows abundantly where kelp beds used to be? Has it been mentioned by oyster growers that a strange green pest is lifting the oysters right off the bottom and floating away with them?



Gradually, word is getting around about a species of seaweed (*Codium fragile*) that is native to Japan, but which is spreading throughout the world with human help. Attached to oysters that are being shipped between countries for aquaculture, or directly stuck to ship's hulls, the 'oyster thief' or 'green fleece' has managed to cross whole oceans, and, since the late 1980s, has become established in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and P.E.I. The 'bio-invader' grows in tide pools and occurs below the low water line, mainly among kelp beds, which have locally changed to green underwater meadows of the new species. Not only does the 'spongweed' spread over long distances, it also reproduces quickly and grows to three feet in one year. Whole plants and broken fragments can drift around and re-attach themselves to any rock, wharf., net or shell, and tiny reproductive cells help spread the newcomer even more effectively.

The local vegetarian critters, especially sea urchins, prefer their regular food, and stick with kelp as much as they can. Only if kelp is not offered on the menu will they try *Codium*. Although our urchins can digest the Japanese spongweed just as well as kelp, it impairs their reproduction. With urchins being harvested in many areas around the Maritimes, and naturally rare in others, there appears to be no species that would be capable of keeping populations of the green fleece in check.

It looks like *Codium* is here to stay, and we might be convinced of its beauty, especially when viewed underwater. However, the green fleece could become another example of a new-comer changing native ecosystems and threatening local, biodiversity.

*Annelise Chapman studies invading species at Dalhousie University.*

[Coastlines is a public education project of the [Ecology Action Centre](#) and is supported by the Nova Scotia Habitat Conservation Fund and the Henry P. Kendall Foundation. This article is reprinted with the permission of the Ecology Action Centre, Halifax,

*NS, and with the assistance of Jennifer Stevens, Project Coordinator, Mushamush River Restoration Project, Bluenose Coastal Action Foundation.]*