

## A Memorable Memorial Day Weekend

Just as people were looking forward to the reopening of businesses and of places such as parks and beaches, they were also getting tired of the word “closed”.

It is all understandable. None of us have ever been through anything like this. Some people are sad about closures because of the COVID-19 pandemic. They are sad about closed stores, closures to visits to the hospital and nursing homes. We are a social species missing out on being social and are getting frustrated with this “new normal” with no end in sight. Others are quite angry and defiant, claiming their civil rights are being violated.

As if that was not enough, on Friday, some bad news arrived for Halifax. Thus, it was very unfortunate timing for me to have to tell people about yet another closure having nothing to do with COVID-19.

On Friday May 23rd, I saw the email from DEP with the results of their first sampling of the West and East Monponsett ponds for cyanobacteria. I was so happy to see it because the person conducting the sampling has a PhD and is so incredibly knowledgeable of this topic. He is at retirement age, but he was back again, and I was so pleased to see that! And then I saw the results.

East Monponsett pond did not have any cyanobacteria.

West Monponsett pond had numbers over the threshold of 70,000 cells per milliliter, established by the Department of Public Health as unsafe for recreational waters. It was the wording, though, that was different for the very first time after so many years.

From that report:

“The *Dolichospermum* taxa are known for their production of several cyanotoxins: microcystin (liver toxin), Anatoxin (targets the nerve synapse), nodularin (liver toxin), and saxitoxin (nerve toxin). Compared to the other cyanobacteria that I have been reporting in the past with cells not greater than 4 or 5 microns, the cells of this alga are huge measuring 9uM x 14uM (microns). With this amount of cellular biomass and the toxin that is locked up in these cells, a cell count on its own is meaningless in quantifying its danger. Signage at this time should be prepared that alerts dog owners that a drink or a bath in these waters can be deadly”.

And so it was, that warnings went out on Facebook, the fast train of messages, both true and false. In this case, true.

Those messages also contained the much-maligned word “Closed”. It was 80 degrees outside on a beautiful sunny day and the state boat ramp parking lot was packed. People were busy getting their boats and kayaks into the water. Building maintenance people had to switch out the huge Open sign for a huge Closed sign. Police officers accompanied them just in case.

The phrase “Be safe” has so many meanings these days.

Of course, there were comments on Facebook. Aren't there always? Most were concerned and grateful for the information. It was an opportunity for some to mention the Monponsett Watershed Association and the importance of understanding how many people have been working on preventing cyanobacteria and improving the overall water quality in the Monponsett ponds for so many years. One person felt that his civil rights were being violated. He was grateful for the information and said that he would make his own choices, and this is what people should be allowed to do, make their own choices. He felt that closures should not happen because they take away people's ability to choose.

I had to explain that there are state laws to protect public health and I need to follow those laws.

That is my job.

*Cathleen Drinan is the Health Agent for Halifax. She can be reached at 781-293-6768 and [cathleen.drinan@halifax-ma.org](mailto:cathleen.drinan@halifax-ma.org)*