

Houghton students battle invasive species

DEB PASCOE | THURSDAY, MAY 21, 2015



THE CHALLENGE TEAM GIVING ITS PRESENTATION.



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The Houghton Weed Pullers, an energetic group of middle schoolers, combined education with fighting invasive plant species, and in the process educated their community, bettered the U.P. environment, and competed in a national challenge.

Springtime in the U.P. means life in bloom. Trees flutter with new leaves, flowers blossom under the warm sun--and unfortunately, invasive plant species flourish. Invasive plant species quickly overrun an ecosystem, causing significant and possibly irreversible harm. Invasives are difficult to contain and eradicate because they typically have no natural controls. However, in Houghton, invasive plants are facing a formidable enemy: the Houghton Weed Pullers.

The seeds for what would become the Houghton Weed Pullers were sown during the 2013-14 school year. Houghton Middle School science teacher Sarah Geborkoff taught her seventh-grade students about invasive species--with an emphasis on invasive plants--as part of her [Lake Superior Stewardship Initiative partnership project](#). The project allots teachers grant money to fund learning projects designed to educate students on the Lake Superior watershed.

"Mike Schira of MSUE (Michigan State University Extension) became a community partner in my project and was a guest in my classroom, giving students background information on invasive plant species in our area," says Geborkoff.

Last summer, Geborkoff found the [Lexus Scholastic EcoChallenge](#) website "by chance," and invited her students to form a team for the 2014-2015 EcoChallenge competition. Ten interested eighth-grade students committed to the project, and the Houghton Weed Pullers team was launched.

The team met with Geborkoff during school lunch hours twice a week throughout this past fall and winter to prepare presentations, do research, and coordinate efforts, combining educational outreach with hands-in-the-dirt manual labor.

The Houghton Weed Pullers' ambitious list of activities included building and updating [the team website](#), organizing and carrying out a native plant species planting in the fall at the Houghton Elementary school building, giving presentations to the fourth and fifth grades at Houghton Elementary, and researching various invasive plant species, with an emphasis on Japanese knotweed, an aggressive non-native plant that kills competing plant life and can contribute to stream bank erosion and flooding.

The group then reached out and shared its knowledge with the community. "They traveled to various community organizations to teach stakeholders about knotweed and its threats to the local ecosystems and property," says Geborkoff. "In addition, the team manned an information booth during parent-teacher conferences, met with Century 21 real estate agents, Michigan Department of Transportation employees in Ishpeming, and MSUE representatives via teleconference."

In March, the team received an invitation from Sen. Tom Casperson, committee chair of the Senate Natural Resources Commission, to travel to Lansing to give a presentation to the committee. Geborkoff says the trip to Lansing was "quick but wonderful."

Houghton Weed Puller Grace Bergstrom agrees. "It was fun to go with the team and feel like all of those big important people were listening and thinking about what we said."

Bergstrom says her favorite overall activity was giving presentations. "I've learned that people are more than willing to listen to you if you just speak up."

The Houghton Weed Pullers were not only heard, they were rewarded. The team was among the winners of the Land and Water Challenge in the Lexus Scholastic EcoChallenge. "It's nice to know how much we've helped our school," says Bergstrom. "\$2,000 of our winnings went to the school, and another \$1,000 went to Mrs. Geborkoff for classroom supplies."

Bergstrom is proud to be a member of a group that's having a positive impact on her school and her community. "I love science and the environment, and I love spreading the word about how we can make a difference in our community."

The Houghton Weed Pullers are definitely making a difference--from the ground up.