Lakewatch

The Alberta Lake Management Society
Volunteer Lake Monitoring Program

Fishing Lake

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2005 Report

Completed with support from:

Alberta Lake Management Society · LICA Lakeland Industry & Community Association · Alberta Environment

Alberta Lake Management Society's Lakewatch Program

Lakewatch has several important objectives, one of which is to collect and interpret water quality on Alberta Lakes. Equally important is educating lake users about their aquatic environment, encouraging public involvement in lake management, and facilitating cooperation and partnerships between government, industry, the scientific community and lake users. Lakewatch reports are designed to summarize basic lake data in understandable terms for a lay audience and are not meant to be a complete synopsis of information about specific lakes. Additional information is available for many lakes that have been included in Lakewatch and readers requiring more information are encouraged to seek these sources.

ALMS would like to thank all who express interest in Alberta's aquatic environments and particularly those who have participated in the Lakewatch program. These people prove that ecological apathy can be overcome, and give us hope that our water resources will not be the limiting factor in the health of our environment.

Acknowledgments

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Fishing Lake

Fishing Lake (Figure 1) lies to the east of much larger Frog Lake, both of which are just west of the Alberta-Saskatchewan border in the Elk Point area. Both lakes are part of the North Saskatchewan River Basin, with Fishing Lake draining into Frog Lake via an outlet stream in the southwest corner.

Figure 1. Fishing Lake. Photo credit: Vien Lam

Landscape surrounding the lake is best described as gently rolling and is typical of the low boreal mixedwood ecoregion in which the lake sits (Table 1). The lake itself is an elongated S-shape, curving slightly from the southwest to the northeast. The shoreline is fairly irregular, creating numerous small bays and coves. No record of a calculated drainage basin was found, nor values for lake area, average depth and maximum depth. Neither was a bathymetric map located, as it appears that the lake has never been sounded. Lakewatch sampling efforts place the maximum depth at about 9 to 10 m. There were also no catch records discovered although judging by the name the fishing must have been good at some point in the lake's history.

Table 1. Summary of details describing the low boreal mixedwood ecoregion in which Fishing Lake is situated (adapted from Strong and Leggat, 1992).

Low Boreal Mixedwood Characteristics*		
Vegetation	Aspen, succeeding to White Spruce	
Summer	Average Temp.	13.8 C^0
	Average Min. Temp.	7 C^0
	Average Max. Temp.	20.4 C^0
	Month of Max. Precip.	July
	Total Summer Precip. (mm)	235.0
Winter	Average Temp.	-10.5
	Average Min. Temp.	-15.8
	Average Max. Temp.	-5.3
	Total Winter Precip. (mm)	61.0
Total Annual Precipitation (mm)		**380.0**

*precipitation numbers are median values

The lake has some connection to groundwater. Test holes drilled in the mid 1970s as part of a water supply program for the Fishing Lake Metis Colony produced water more reliably the closer they were to the outlet, with dry holes occurring at the northeast end around the inlet. At the time of the drilling, very little surrounding land had been cleared of aspen. Groundwater was found to be very hard with iron concentrations requiring treatment for removal (Kerr *et. al*, 1978).

Methods

Lakes monitored under the Alberta Lake Management Society's Lakewatch program are all monitored using standard Alberta Environment procedures: composite samples are collected from numerous sites around the lake and water is profiled at the deep water spot in each lake once per month through the warmer months. This usually results in 4 sampling trips per open-water season. On each trip, the deep-water profiles include measurements for temperature and dissolved oxygen recorded from lake surface to lake bottom, as well as maximum depth. A Secchi depth is also measured, from which the range of the euphotic zone is estimated. Once the euphotic zone depth is known, the composite samples are collected for lab analyses. After the water has been analyzed, results are examined for trends and summarized.

Water Levels

There is no long-term water level monitoring data available for Fishing Lake. The closest lakes for which levels are available are nearby Moose and Muriel Lakes (Figure 3a and 3b). Both lakes show a trend towards declining water levels. While this does not mean for certain that the same thing has occurred in Fishing Lake, the implication is strong.

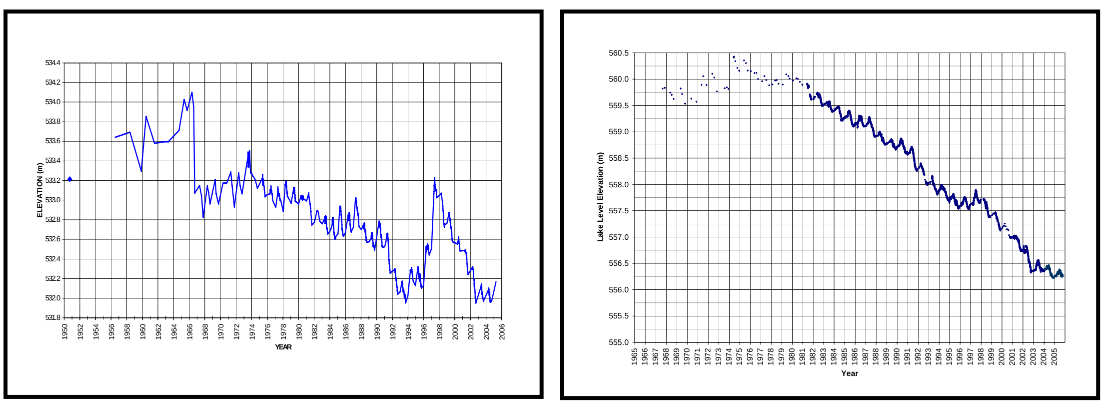

Figure 3a (left) Moose Lake near Bonnyville and 3b (right) Muriel Lake at Gurneyville. Alberta Environment data. Chart produced by Water Supply and Groundwater Team, Alberta Environment.

Temperature and Dissolved Oxygen Profiles

Fishing Lake displays summer profiles that characterize a lake undergoing a late summer algal bloom (Figure 4). Dissolved oxygen (DO) levels in July are moderate at the surface. Although warmer water usually holds less oxygen, by late August DO levels are higher than they were in July. This indicates that oxygen is being added to the water column by some means. Two likely sources are wind action and an actively growing algal bloom. Like higher plants, algae release oxygen as they are growing – it is only once cells die that oxygen is rapidly stripped from the water column by bacteria decomposing dead algal cells. Wind action is also a valid theory in this case as the weak thermocline that existed in July has been lost by late August. Water temperature is almost uniform to the lake bottom as exhibited in the near-horizontal temperature line. This implies a late summer turnover has occurred. Dissolved oxygen is consistently low at the deepest point throughout the season – despite the turnover event, mixing has been incomplete and the deeper waters remain unaerated. This creates conditions where stored phosphorus is released from bottom sediments into the water column, providing a nutrient source for hungry algae.

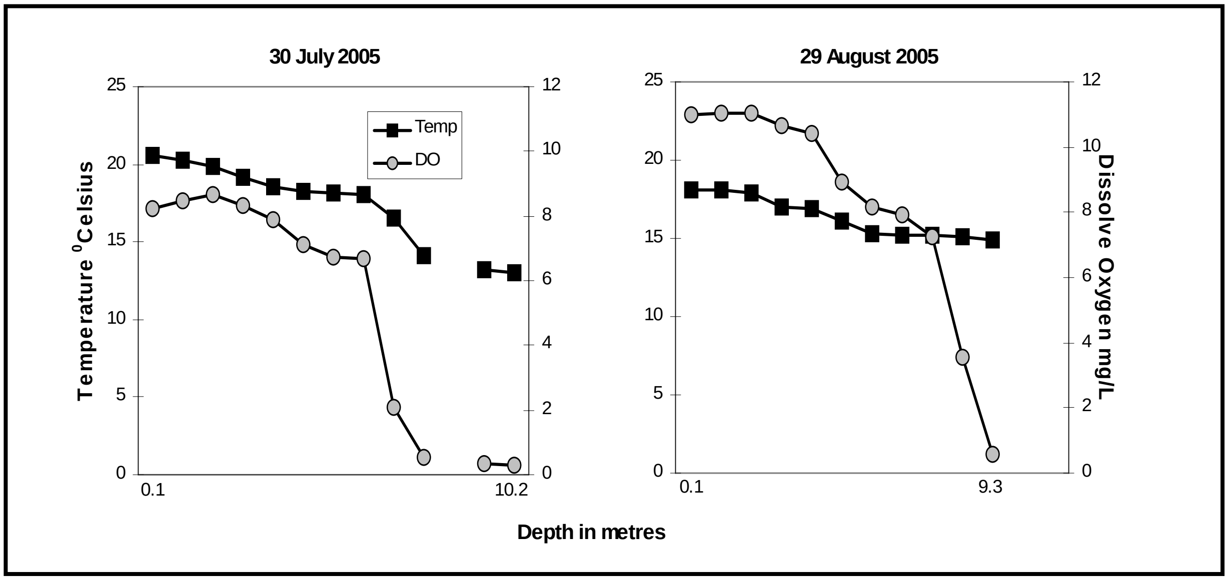

Figure 4. Temperature and dissolved oxygen profiles of Fishing Lake for summer 2005. Alberta Environment data.

Water Clarity

As an algal bloom develops, chlorophyll *a* levels increase and water clarity tends to drop. There was a decline in available nutrients through the summer months in Fishing Lake, which suggests formation of a bloom (Figure 5 and 6). As algae grow their nutrient consumption begins to decrease levels of phosphorus and nitrogen in the water column. It appears that Fishing Lake has enough available nutrients, especially nitrogen, to make it very productive although it is difficult to generalize over two sampling periods and with only one chlorophyll data point.

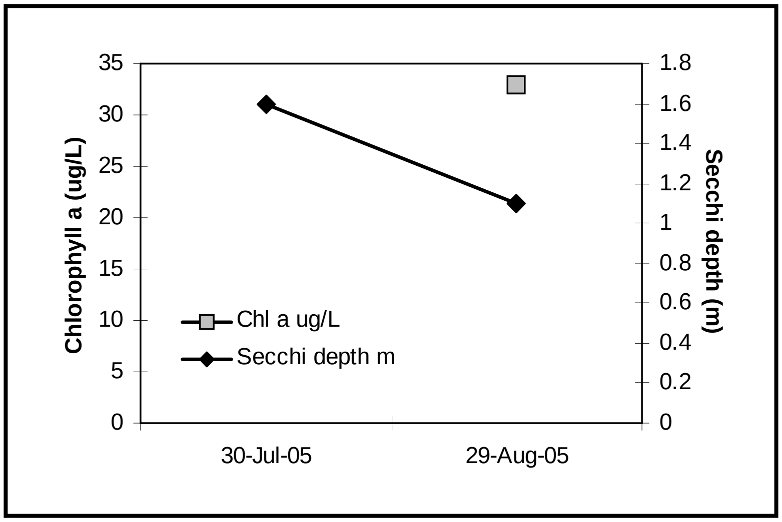

Figure 5. The presence of an algal bloom, represented by chlorophyll *a* concentration, often results in a decrease in Secchi depth.

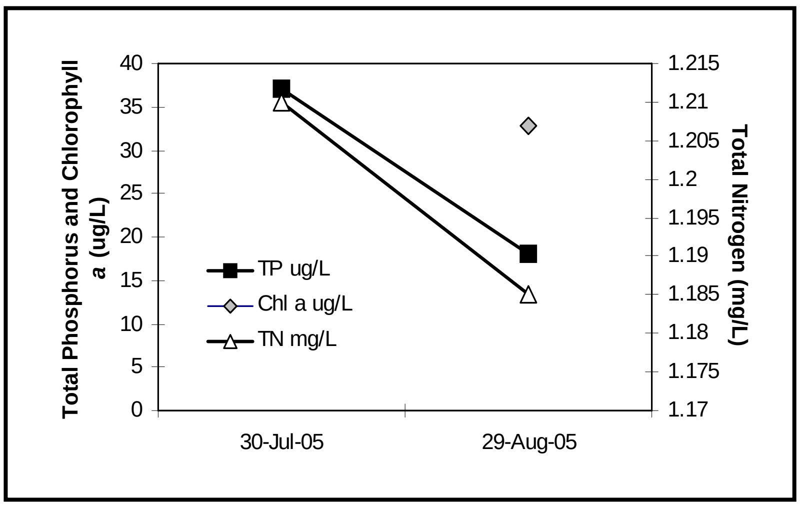

Figure 6. An occurrence of an algal bloom is suggested by the decline in nutrients. The chlorophyll *a* value might indicate an imminent crash for the bloom.

Water Chemistry

There are no recent historical records for Fishing Lake except results from Lakewatch samples so it is not possible to graph changes over time. The 2005 values place the lake in the low salinity range (Table 2). Alkalinity is moderate, as is conductivity. The pH is a little high for surface water but not uncommonly so, and could reflect a strong link to the hard groundwater found in the area (Kerr *et al*, 1978).

Table 2. Fishing Lake cation concentrations from 2005 place the lake in the low salinity range. Adapted from Atlas of Alberta Lakes.				
Salinity Range	**Average Cation Concentrations mg/L**			
(based on Total Dissolved Solids mg/L)	Sodium	Potassium	Calcium	Magnesium
Low salinity (<500)	20	5	29	15
Slightly saline (500-1000)	113	29	31	59
Moderately saline (1000-5000)	379	34	21	46
Fishing Lake (243)	**18.8**	**11.2**	**25.7**	**28.3**

The chlorophyll *a* average places the lake in the hypereutrophic range (Figure 7). This means that the water in Fishing Lake is receiving enough nutrient inputs to fuel good-sized algal blooms when conditions are right.

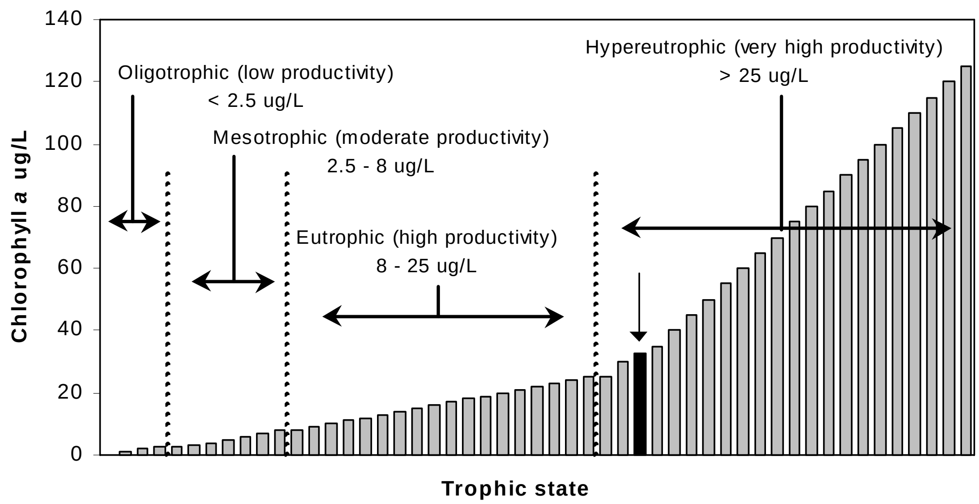

Figure 7. The black bar below the down arrow represents average chlorophyll a concentration for Fishing Lake from summer 2005. Adapted from Mitchell, 1994.

Results for other water quality measurements averaged from 2005 are summarized in Appendix I.

Works Cited

Kerr, H.A. *et. al* 1978. Fishing Lake Northern Water Supply Program. Alberta Environment, Groundwater Branch Report. 76 pp.

Mitchell, P. 1994. Volunteer citizens lake monitoring program (1993) Sandy, Burnstick and Islet Lakes. Alberta Environmental Protection Report. 29 pp.

Mitchell, P. and E. Prepas, eds. 1990. Atlas of Alberta Lakes. University of Alberta Press.

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Appendix I. Summary of summer 2005 averages for various water quality parameters.

Parameter	**2005**
Total Phosphorus ug/L	27.5
Total Dissolved Phosphorus ug/L	8
Total Dissolved Solids mg/L	243
Chlorophyll a ug/L	32.9
Secchi depth m	1.35
Total Nitrogen mg/L	1.2
Nitrate + Nitrite mg/L	0.005
Ammonium mg/L	0.012
Calcium mg/L	25.7
Magnesium mg/L	28.3
Sodium mg/L	18.8
Potassium mg/L	11.2
Sulphate mg/L	22
Chloride mg/L	1.7
Alkalinity mg/L as $CaCO_3$	226
Carbonate mg/L	15
Bicarbonate mg/L	245
pH	8.75
Conductivity uS/cm	455

A brief introduction to Limnology

Indicators of water quality

Water samples are collected in Lakewatch to determine the water quality of lakes. Though not all encompassing, the variables collected in Lakewatch are sensitive to human activities in watersheds that can cause degraded water quality. For example, nutrients such as phosphorus and nitrogen are important determinants of lake productivity. The concentrations of these nutrients in a lake are impacted (typically elevated) by land use changes such as increased crop production or livestock grazing. Elevated nutrient concentrations can cause increases in undesirable algae blooms resulting in low dissolved oxygen concentrations, degraded habitat for fish and noxious smells. A large increase in nutrients over time may also indicate sewage inputs which in turn may result in other human health concerns associated with bacteria or the protozoan *Cryptosporidium*.

Temperature and mixing

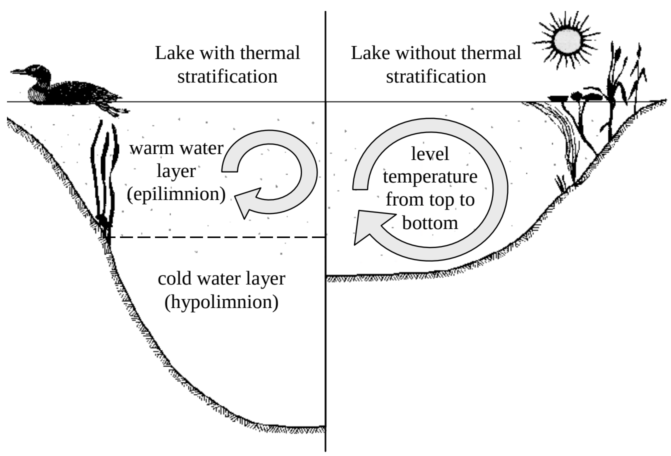

Fig. 1: Difference in the circulation of the water column depending on thermal stratification.

Water temperature in a lake dictates the behavior of many chemical parameters responsible for water quality. Heat is transferred to a lake at its surface and slowly moves downward depending on water circulation in the lake. Lakes with a large surface area or a small volume tend to have greater mixing due to wind. In deeper lakes, circulation is not strong enough to move warm water to depths typically greater than 4 or 5 m and as a result cooler denser water remains at the bottom of the lake. As the difference in temperature between warm surface and cold deeper water increases, two distinct layers are formed. Limnologists call these layers of water the **epilimnion** at the surface and the **hypolimnion** at the bottom. The layers are separated by a transition layer known as the **metalimnion** which contains the effective wall separating top and bottom waters called a **thermocline**. A thermocline typically occurs when water temperature changes by more than one degree within one meter depth. The hypolimnion and epilimnion do not mix, nor do elements such as oxygen supplied at the surface move downward into the hypolimnion. In the fall, surface waters begin to cool and eventually reach the same temperature as hypolimnetic water. At this point the water mixes from top to bottom in what is called a **turnover** event. Surface water cools further as ice forms and again a thermocline develops this time with 4° C water at the bottom and 0° C water on the top.

In spring another turnover event occurs when surface waters warm to 4° C. Lakes with this mixing pattern of two stratification periods and two turnover events are called **dimictic** lakes. In shallower lakes, the water column may mix from top to bottom most of the ice-free season with occasional stratification during periods of calm warm conditions. Lakes that mix frequently are termed **polymictic** lakes. In our cold climate, many shallow lakes are **cold monomictic** meaning a thermocline develops every winter, there is one turnover event in spring but the remainder of the ice free season the lake is polymictic.

Dissolved Oxygen

Oxygen enters a lake at the lake surface and throughout the water column when produced by photosynthesizing plants, including algae, in the lake. Oxygen is consumed within the lake by respiration of living organisms and decomposition of organic material in the lake sediments. In lakes that stratify (see temperature above), oxygen that dissolves into the lake at the surface cannot mix downward into the hypolimnion. At the same time oxygen is depleted in the hypolimnion by decomposition. The result is that the hypolimnion of a lake can become **anoxic**, meaning it contains little or no dissolved oxygen. When a lake is frozen, the entire water column can become anoxic because the surface is sealed off from the atmosphere. Winter anoxic conditions can result in a fish-kill which is particularly common during harsh winters with extended ice-cover. Alberta Surface Water Quality Guidelines suggest dissolved oxygen concentrations (in the epilimnion) must not decline below 5 mg/L and should not average less than 6.5 mg/L over a seven-day period. However, the guidelines also require that dissolved oxygen concentrations remain above 9.5 mg/L in areas where early life stages of aquatic biota, particularly fish, are present.

General Water Chemistry

Water in lakes always contains substances that have been transported by rain and snow or have entered the lake in groundwater and inflow streams. These substances may be dissolved in the water or suspended as particles. Some of these substances are familiar minerals, such as sodium and chloride, which when combined form table salt, but when dissolved in water separate into the two electrically charged components called **ions**. Most dissolved substances in water are in ionic forms and are held in solution due to the polar nature of the water molecule. **Hydrophobic** (water-fearing) compounds such as oils contain little or no ionic character, are non-polar and for this reason do not readily dissolve in water. Although hydrophobic compounds do not readily dissolve, they can still be transported to lakes by flowing water. Within individual lakes, ion concentrations vary from year to year depending on the amount and mineral content of the water entering the lake. This mineral content can be influenced by the amount of precipitation and other climate variables as well as human activities such as fertilizer and road salt application.

Phosphorus and Nitrogen

Phosphorus and nitrogen are important nutrients limiting the growth of algae in Alberta lakes. While nitrogen usually limits agricultural plants, phosphorus is usually in shortest supply in lakes. Even a slight increase of phosphorus in a lake can, given the right conditions, promote algal blooms causing the water to turn green in the summer and impair recreational uses. When pollution originating from livestock manure and human sewage enters lakes not only are the concentrations of phosphorus and nitrogen increased but nitrogen can become a limiting nutrient which is thought to cause blooms of toxic algae belonging to the cyanobacteria. Not all cyanobacteria are toxic, however, the blooms can form decomposing mats that smell and impair dissolved oxygen concentrations in the lake.

Chlorophyll a

Chlorophyll *a* is a photosynthetic pigment that green plants, including algae, possess enabling them to convert the sun's energy to living material. Chlorophyll *a* can be easily extracted from algae in the laboratory. Consequently, chlorophyll *a* is a good estimate of the amount of algae in the water. Some highly productive lakes are dominated by larger aquatic plants, known as macrophytes, rather than suspended algae. In these lakes, chlorophyll *a* and nutrient values taken from water samples do not include productivity from large aquatic plants. As a result, lakes like Chestermere which are dominated by macrophytes can be at a lower trophic state than if macrophyte biomass was included. Unfortunately, the productivity and nutrient cycling contributions of macrophytes are difficult to sample accurately and are therefore not typically included in trophic state indices.

Secchi Disk Depth

Lakes that are clear are more attractive for recreation, whereas those that are turbid or murky are considered by lake users to have poor water quality. Secchi disk depth is the oldest, simplest, and quickest quantitative measure of water clarity. A Secchi disk is a black and white disk that is lowered down through the water column until it can no longer be seen. Secchi disk depth is the midpoint between the depth at which it disappears when lowered and reappears when it is pulled up again. The Secchi disk depth in lakes with high algal biomass will generally be shallow. However, Secchi disk depth is not only affected by algae. High concentrations of suspended sediments, particularly fine clays or glacial till, are common in plains or mountain reservoirs of Alberta. Mountain reservoirs may have exceedingly shallow Secchi disk depths despite low algal growth and nutrient concentrations.

The euphotic zone, calculated as twice the Secchi disk depth, is the portion of the water column that has sufficient light for aquatic plants to grow. Murky waters, with shallow Secchi depths, can prevent aquatic plants from growing on the lake bottom. Aquatic plants are important because they ensure clear lake water by reducing shoreline erosion and stabilizing lake bottom sediments. Many lakes in Alberta are shallow and have bottom sediments with high concentrations of nutrients. Without aquatic plants, water quality may decline in these lakes due to murky, sediment-laden water and excessive algal blooms. Maintaining aquatic plants in certain areas of a lake is often essential for ensuring good water clarity and a healthy lake as many organisms, like aquatic invertebrates and fish, depend on aquatic plants for food and shelter.

Trophic state

Trophic state is a classification system for lakes that depends on fertility and is a useful index for rating and comparing lakes. From low to high nutrient and algal biomass (as chlorophyll) concentrations, the trophic states are: **oligotrophic**, **mesotrophic**, **eutrophic** and **hypereutrophic**. The nutrient and algal biomass concentrations that define these categories are shown in the following table, a figure of Alberta lakes compared by trophic state can be found on the ALMS website. A majority of lakes in Alberta are meso- to eutrophic because they naturally contain high nutrient concentrations due to our deep fertile soils. Thus, lakes in Alberta are susceptible to human impacts because they are already nutrient-rich; any further nutrient increases can bring about undesirable conditions illustrated in Fig 2.

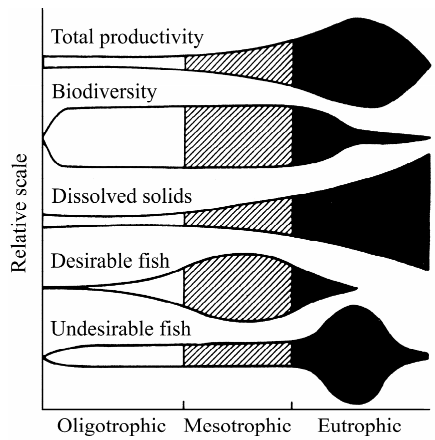

Fig. 2: Suggested changes in various lake characteristics with eutrophication. From “Ecological Effects of Wastewater”, 1980

Trophic status based on lake water characteristics.

Trophic state	Total Phosphorus (µg/L)	Total Nitrogen (µg/L)	Chlorophyll a (µg/L)	Secchi Depth (m)
Oligotrophic	< 10	< 350	< 3.5	> 4
Mesotrophic	10 - 30	350 - 650	3.5 - 9	4 - 2
Eutrophic	30 - 100	650 - 1200	9 - 25	2 - 1
Hypereutrophic	> 100	> 1200	> 25	< 1

Note: These values are from a detailed study of global lakes reported in Nurnberg 1996. Alberta Environment uses slightly different values for TP and CHL based on those of the OECD reported by Vollenweider (1982). The AENV and OECD cutoffs for TP are 10, 35 and 100; for CHL are 3, 8 and 25. AENV does not have TN or Secchi depth criteria. The corresponding OECD exists for Secchi depth and the cutoffs are 6, 3 and 1.5 m.

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