

Lakewatch

*The Alberta Lake Management Society
Volunteer Lake Monitoring Program*

Laurier Lake

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2004 Report

Completed with support from:



**Alberta Lake Management Society
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Water is integral to supporting and maintaining life on this planet as it moderates the climate, creates growth and shapes the living substance of all of Earth's creatures. It is the tide of life itself, the sacred source. David Suzuki (1997). The Sacred Balance.

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.

Acknowledgements

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Laurier Lake

Laurier Lake is one of four beautiful lakes (**Figure 1**) that were left behind 10 000 years ago when glaciers carved a setting of hummocky terrain of kettles, eskers and lake basins. Archeological evidence indicates the area was inhabited at least 7 000 years ago. The first Europeans came through the area in 1754 by way of the nearby North Saskatchewan River. The



Figure 1. Laurier Lake

Photo: L. Kowalchuk, ALMS

Whitney Lakes Provincial Park is adjacent to Laurier Lake (**Figure 2**) this park was established in 1982. It boasts a diverse setting of jack pine (*Pinus banksiana*) (meadows, aspen (*Populus spp.*) groves, willow (*Salix spp.*) thickets, marshes, fens and mixed wood forests. As many as 148 bird species have been observed in the park with an excellent viewing point on the west side of Laurier Lake (SRD 2002). The land surrounding Laurier Lake includes a mixture of recreational cottage development, cleared agricultural land and natural deciduous forest. Protected Crown land makes up the north shore of the lake the remainder of the shoreline is privately owned (Mills 1988). The lake is enjoyed for recreational activities such as hiking, wildlife viewing and water-based recreation. Popular activities include: wind surfing, water-skiing, sailing, swimming and fishing. Yellow perch (*Perca flavescens*), walleye (*Stixostedion vitreum*) and northern pike (*Esox lucius*) are the sport fish of Laurier Lake. Fish stocking occurred in 1953. Sport and forage fish were transferred from Moose Lake to Laurier Lake. The lake has not been managed for commercial or domestic fishing.

Laurier Lake has a surface area of 6.42 km² with a maximum 2004 depth of 6.6 m (**Figure 2**). The lake has been both mesotrophic and eutrophic. Its location and surrounding topography make Laurier open to prevailing winds. These winds mix the water column and Laurier usually does not thermally stratify throughout most of the summer. Mixing also allows nutrients and organic material to remain suspended in the water column making the lake naturally fertile. Algal blooms are known to occur during summer months due to the lakes natural fertility. Detailed studies on phytoplankton have not been completed for the lake. Common emergent plants that fringe the lake are bulrushes (*Scirpus spp.*), cattails (*Typha latifolia*) and sedges (*Carex spp.*).

Water Levels

Laurier Lake shares a 92-km² drainage area with Ross, Borden and Whitney lakes. One intermittent and three permanent streams feed the lake. The outflow, on the northwest end, drains into Borden Lake and

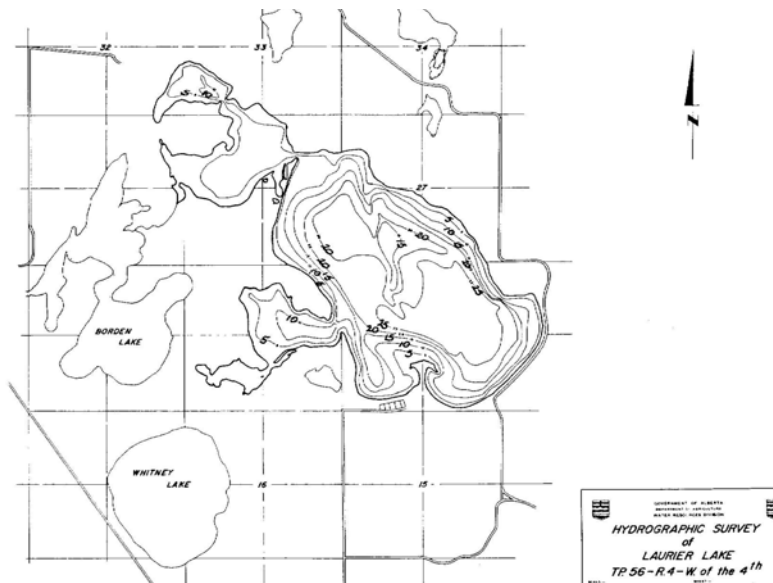


Figure 2. Bathymetry of Laurier Lake. Contours are 5 ft. intervals.

subsequently to the North Saskatchewan

River (Mills 1988). Water levels in Laurier Lake have been monitored since 1968. From the historical records, the water level was at a maximum in 1974 but dropped almost 3 m to a minimum recorded level in 2004 (**Figure 3**). Water levels have been slowly dropping

for the last 2 decades. The average elevation is 565.7 m above sea level. The average water level in 2004 was 1.7 m less than the historical average. Alberta experienced a relatively wet year in 1997 that restored water levels in many lakes. In Laurier Lake, the wet year of 1997 temporarily halted water level declines. The reprieve was short-lived and water levels began to decline precipitously following 1997. Maximum depth during the 2004 sampling season was recorded as 6.6m.

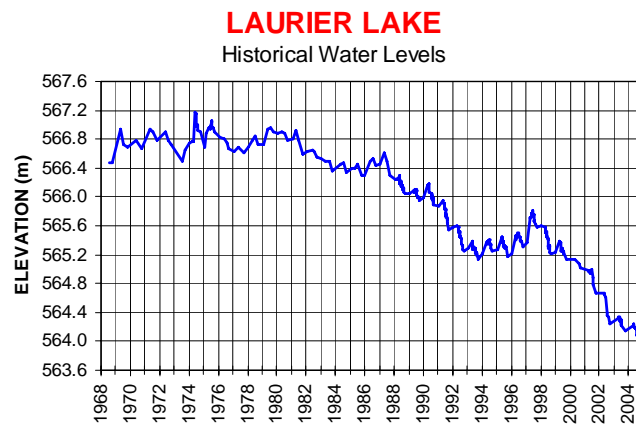
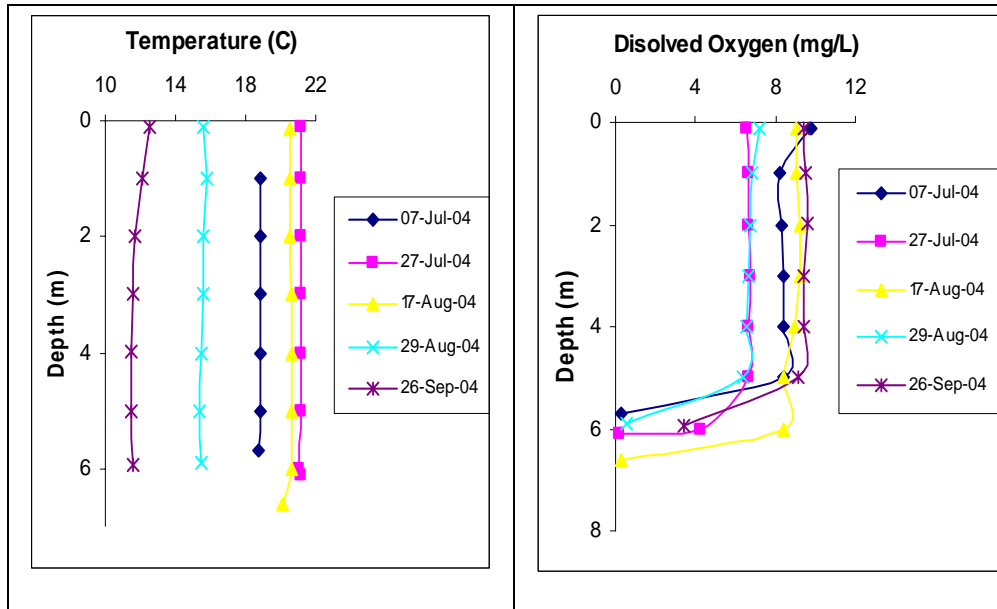


Figure 3. Historical water levels in Laurier Lake.

Results

Water Temperature and Dissolved Oxygen

Water temperature and dissolved oxygen profiles in the water column can provide information on water quality and fish habitat. Please refer to the end of this report for descriptions of technical terms.



Figures 4 & 5. Temperature and dissolved oxygen profiles for Laurier Lake, 2004 sampling

Thermal stratification was not apparent in Laurier Lake during the summer of 2004 (**Figure 4**). Dissolved oxygen concentrations were between 7 mg/L and 9.8 mg/L through most of the summer (**Figure 5**). During the 2004 sampling season, dissolved oxygen dropped sharply to anoxic levels at the lake bottom. Otherwise, Laurier Lake's water column was well aerated to a depth of 5.4 m in the 2004 sampling season.

Water clarity and Secchi Depth

Suspended material, both living and dead, as well as some coloured dissolved compounds in the water column influence water clarity. The most widely used measure of lake water clarity is the Secchi depth. After ice and snowmelt, a lake can have low clarity due to spring runoff and suspended sediments in the lake. Lake water usually clears in the spring but then becomes less clear as algae grow through the summer.

In 2004, Laurier Lake's water was quite clear with an average Secchi Disk depth of 3.17 meters (**Table 1**). Water clarity was best in early summer (Secchi Disk depth 4.5 m). Secchi readings declined to a low of 2.5 m by late July, and maintained this reading through to late August. Secchi depths subsequently increased back up to 3.75 m in late September. The very high water clarity in early and late summer samplings, combined

with the relatively shallow bottom of Laurier Lake meant that for much of the summer the entire water column contained enough light for algal growth.

Water chemistry

In 2004, Laurier Lake was mesotrophic (see a **brief introduction to limnology** on trophic status of lakes) with what is considered medium nutrient concentration compared to lakes throughout Canada. In the Alberta context, Laurier Lake is relatively clean compared to the average in these characteristics. Nutrient concentrations seem to have remained relatively stable on an annual mean basis. There is no evidence to suggest increased nutrient loading from cottages or other land use activities around Laurier Lake. Total nitrogen concentrations

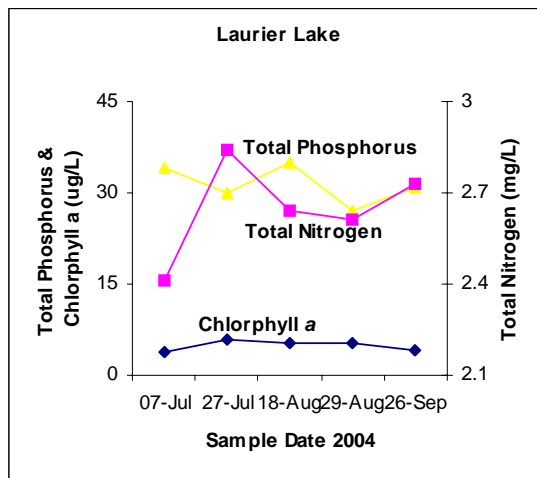


Figure 6. Total phosphorus, total nitrogen and chlorophyll *a* (i.e., water greenness) concentrations, summer 2004.

were higher in late July relative to total phosphorus (**Figure 6** (phosphorus is the limiting factor in algal growth)). Chlorophyll *a* concentrations remained consistent throughout the sampling season. Algal biomass, measured as chlorophyll *a*, in Laurier Lake was relatively low compared to nutrient concentrations (**Figure 6**). Not only was algal growth low but it did not fluctuate much or indicate that blooms were likely to occur.

Metal concentrations were low and none surpassed provincial and federal Water Quality Guidelines for the Protection of Aquatic Life (**Appendix 1**). In general, the water quality of Laurier Lake was good and the water was clear.

Laurier Lake is well buffered: its pH of 9.1 (**Table 1**) is well above that of pure water (i.e., pH 7). Ion levels were high in 2004 and were dominated by bicarbonate, carbonate, sulfate, sodium, and magnesium. Calcium concentrations showed a slight increase over 2003 sampling season. Over the same period, magnesium, sodium and potassium concentrations have also showed a slight increase (**Table 1**). The major anions, sulfate, chloride and bicarbonate have also increased slightly over the last sampling season. Mineral ions such as calcium and sulfate are supplied by weathering in the watershed and from groundwater inflows. The changing ion concentrations in Laurier Lake suggest a fundamental change in its hydrology. Low rainfall has likely reduced the contribution of runoff to Laurier Lake. With a reduction in runoff and particularly through flow (lateral flow through surface soil), groundwater has likely become a more important source of water to Laurier Lake. The increase in ion concentrations such as magnesium and sulfate

source of calcium is from surface soils while groundwater is magnesium and sodium sulfate or chloride dominated. Evaporative concentration could also play a role in the changing ion chemistry of Laurier Lake.

Table 1: Historical water quality in Laurier Lake.

Parameter	JUNE 1978	AUG 1980	AUG 1987	1997	1998	2000	FEB 1999	SEP 2001	2002	2003	2004
Total P (µg/L)	-	-	-	32	48	37	16	-	36	27	40
TDP (µg/L)	-	-	-	-	-	-	22	-	15	15	18
Chla (µg/L)	-	-	-	5.3	8.9	5.5	1.1	-	5.8	2.6	4.98
Secchi (m)	-	1.3	1.2	4.6	1.3	1.8	1.7	2.3	2.5	4.4	3.17
Total N (mg/L)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.5	2.6	2.65
NO ₂₊₃ (µg/L)	<50	50	<1	-	-	-	6	-	3.8	2.11	7.7
NH ₄ (µg/L)	-	-	-	-	-	-	25	-	23	41	76
Ca (mg/L)	23	27	19	20	21	13	18	-	12	10	10.5
Mg (mg/L)	48	54	52	73	81	83	86	-	99	106	107
Na (mg/L)	49	45	59	86	92	98	103	-	77	128	129
K (mg/L)	14	14	17	24	25	25	27	-	26	31	34
SO ₄ (mg/L)	36	40	41	62	66	73	74	-	94	99	105
Cl (mg/L)	5	6	9	12	13	15	17	-	12	18	20
CO ₃ (mg/L)	-	-	-	39	62	66	-	-	102	112	84
HCO ₃ (mg/L)	-	-	-	493	468	469	-	-	515	522	603
TDS (mg/L)	-	-	-	562	598	602	-	-	-	764	
PH	-	-	-	8.8	8.9	8.0	-	-	9.2	9.2	9.1
Total Alkalinity (mg/L CaCO ₃)	310	329	360	470	488	493	562	-	592	615	634

Note. TDP = total dissolved phosphorus, Chla = chlorophyll *a*, NO₂₊₃ = nitrate+nitrite, NH₄ = ammonium, Ca = calcium, Mg = magnesium, Na = sodium, K = potassium, SO₄ = sulphate, Cl = chloride, CO₃ = carbonate, HCO₃ = bicarbonate.

A brief introduction to Limnology

Indicators of water quality

The goal of **Lakewatch** is to collect water samples necessary to determine the water quality of lakes. Though not all encompassing, the variables measured in **Lakewatch** are sensitive to human activities in watersheds that may cause impacts to 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 affected (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 fish habitat and production of noxious odors. Large increases in nutrients over time may also indicate sewage inputs, which in turn, may result in other human health concerns such as harmful bacteria or protozoans (e.g. *Cryptosporidium*).

Temperature and mixing

Water temperature in a lake dictates the behavior of many chemical parameters responsible for water quality (Figure 6). 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. A transition layer known as the metalimnion, which contains the effective wall separating top and bottom waters called a thermocline, separates the layers. 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.

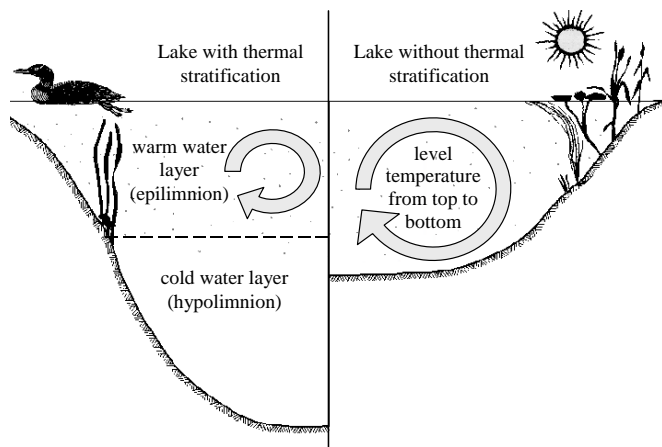


Figure 6: Difference in the circulation of the water column depending on thermal stratification.

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. Larger aquatic plants, known as macrophytes, rather than algae, dominate some highly productive lakes. 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 exist 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, algae do not only affect Secchi disk depth.

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-*a*) concentrations, the trophic states are: **oligotrophic**, **mesotrophic**, **eutrophic** and **hypereutrophic**. The nutrient and algal biomass concentrations that define these categories are shown in table 2 and a graph 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 Figure. 7.

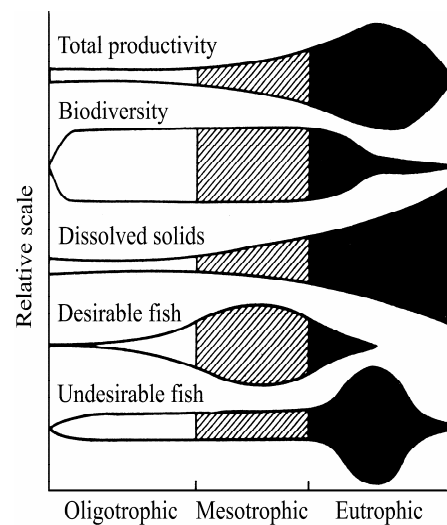


Figure 7: Suggested changes in various lake characteristics with eutrophication. From “Ecological Effects of Wastewater”, 1980.

Table 2: 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.

Appendix 1

Averages of μL of metals tested at Laurier Lake, 2004

METAL	Canadian Environmental Guidelines for the Protection of Freshwater Aquatic Life ug/L	Averages of Metals Tested 2004. ug/L
Silver	0.1	
Aluminum	5 to 100	
Arsenic	5	
Cadmium	0.017	
Chromium III	8.9	
Copper	2.4	
Molybdenum	7.3	
Lead	1 to 7	
Thallium	0.8	
Zinc	30	
Chromium IV	1.0	
Nickel	13000	

*Canadian Council of Ministers for Environment. Maximum acceptable concentrations for Canadian protection of aquatic life.