The Alberta Lake Management Society Volunteer Lake Monitoring Program

Little Beaver Lake

2009 Report

Completed with support from:

Alberta Environment

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 data 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

The Lakewatch program is made possible through the dedication of its volunteers and Lakewatch Chairs, Al Sosiak and Ron Zurawell. We would like to thank Lorne Ferguson and Wendy Blackwell for their efforts in collecting data in 2009. We would also like to thank Noemie Jenni and Cristen Symes who were summer interns with ALMS in 2009. Project Technical Coordinator, Jill Anderson was instrumental in planning and organizing the field program. Technologists, Shelley Manchur, Mike Bilyk, Brian Jackson and John Willis were involved in the logistics planning and training aspects of the program. Doreen LeClair and Chris Rickard were responsible for data management. Théo Charette (ALMS President) and Jill Anderson (Program Manager) were responsible for program administration and planning. Théo Charette, Ron Zurawell (Limnologist, AENV), Lori Neufeld, and Sarah Lord prepared the original report. Alberta Environment and the Beaver River Watershed Alliance (BRWA) were major sponsors of the Lakewatch program.

Little Beaver Lake

Little Beaver Lake (**Figure 1, Figure 2**) is a quiet, scenic lake 35 km south of Camrose and 107 km south of Edmonton. This shallow lake is approximately 3.5 km long and 500 m wide, and is surrounded by forested rolling hills and agricultural development. The county subdivision of Little Beaver Lake Estates lies on its west shore, and the village of Ferintosh lies on its east shore.

Figure 1. Little Beaver Lake, Alberta. Retrieved from NRE2, Concordia University, Montreal.

Little Beaver Lake was historically a meeting place for natives, who called it ‘Amiskoogis Saskihigan’, meaning ‘little lake belonging to the beaver’. During the 1880s European fur traders hunted buffalo in the area, and in the 1890s ranchers established in the watershed discovered rich soils suitable for agriculture.

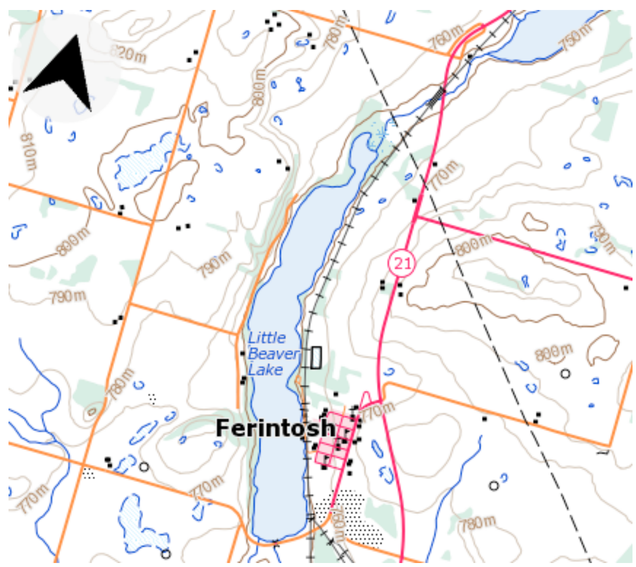

Figure 2. Topographical map of Little Beaver Lake, Alberta. From the Atlas of Canada, 2009.

The first non-aboriginal settlers arrived in the early 1900s by rail from the Edmonton-Calgary railway to establish homesteads. In 1910 the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway arrived, and the village was incorporated in 1911. The village of Ferintosh was originally known as Lassen, named after the first settlement of homesteads in the area belonging to J. H. Lassen. The village was renamed Ferintosh by Dr. J. R. McLeod in 1910, because a nearby town with a similar name created confusion for the postal service.

Results

Water Level

Water levels have been recorded at Little Beaver Lake since 1971. Water levels reached a historic maximum of 746.8 m asl in 1973, then fell more than one metre over the next seven years to a historic minimum of 745.7 m asl in 1978. Since that time, water level at Little Beaver Lake has increased, and until 2007 it fluctuated around an average of 746.2 m asl. Since 2007, Little Beaver Lake has experienced another significant water level decline of nearly one metre, from 746.7 m asl in May 2007 to 745.7 m asl in October 2009 (**Figure 3**).

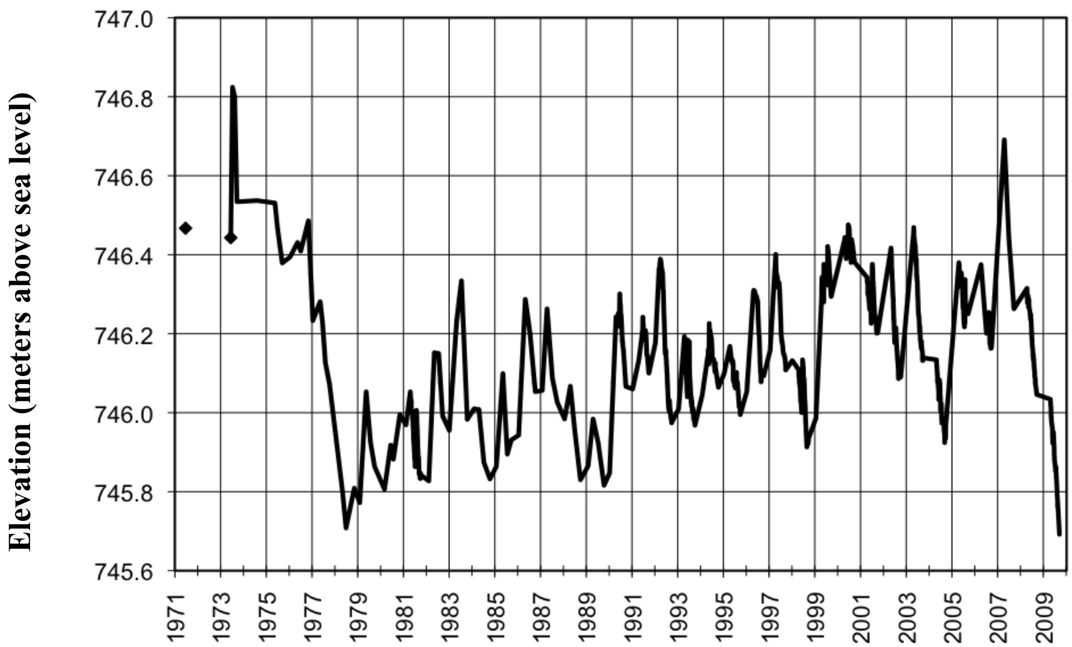

Figure 3. Historical water levels (m asl) in Little Beaver Lake, Alberta 1971 – 2009.

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.

Little Beaver Lake is a shallow, polymictic lake, and no thermal stratification was observed during the summer 2009 (**Figure 3**). On 10 June, surface water temperature was 15.1°C, and water temperature decreased with depth to 14.3°C at 1.5 m. On 5 July, surface water temperature had warmed to 19.2°C and bottom waters reached 18.6°C. By 25 July, surface waters had warmed to the maximum observed temperature of 24.1°C and declined to 21.8°C at the lakebed. By 15 August, surface waters cooled to 16.2°C and the entire water column was isothermic.

Dissolved oxygen (DO) concentrations in upper layers of surface waters of Little Beaver Lake were ≥ 6 mg/L on all sampling dates through the summer, well within the acceptable range for surface water quality (DO ≥ 5.0 mg/L) except on 15 August (**Figure 4**). DO concentrations generally declined over the summer. On 10 June, the entire water column was well-oxygenated with DO > 10 mg/L. By 5 July, surface water DO had declined to 7.45 mg/L. Surface water DO increased to a seasonal observed maximum of 13.7 mg/L on 25 July, but DO declined rapidly at 0.5 m and waters at the lakebed were anoxic (e.g. DO nearly zero) on this date. By 15 August, DO in the entire water column was low, at 2.3 mg/L.

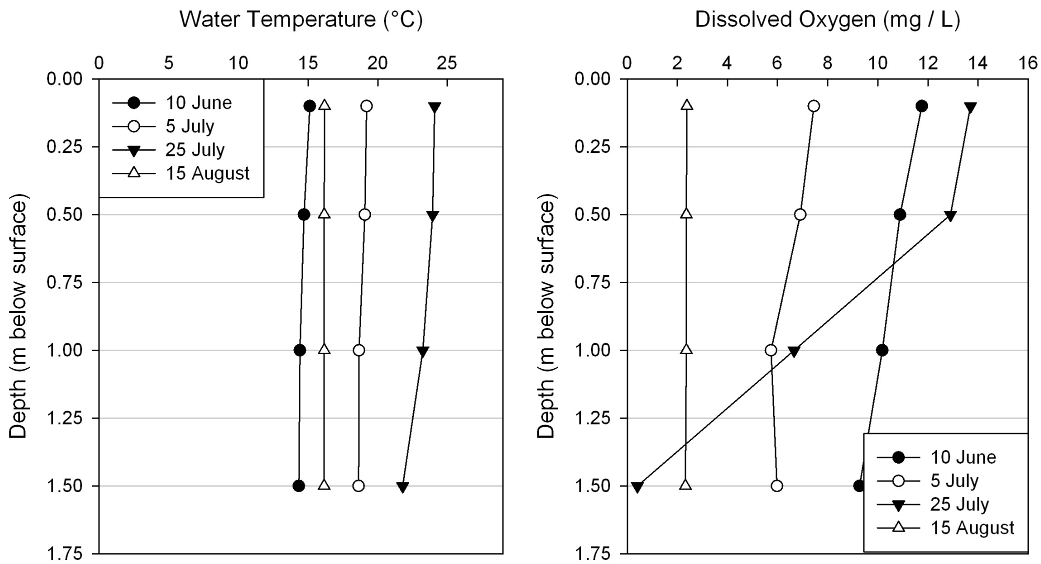

Figure 4. Water temperature (°C) and dissolved oxygen (mg/L) profiles for Little Beaver Lake during the summer of 2009.

Water Clarity and Secchi Depth

Water clarity is influenced by suspended materials, both living and dead, as well as dissolved colored compounds in the water column. During the melting of snow and ice in spring, lake water can become turbid (cloudy) from silt transported into the lake. Lake water usually clears in late spring but then becomes more turbid with increased algal growth as the summer progresses. The easiest and most widely used measure of lake water clarity is the Secchi disk depth.

Water clarity on Little Beaver Lake was measured four times during the summer of 2009. Little Beaver Lake was relatively turbid compared to other lakes in Alberta, with an average Secchi depth of 0.2 m (**Table 1**) in 2009. On 10 June, a seasonal maximum Secchi depth of 0.25 m was observed. On this date, light penetrated ~17% of the total lake depth, which allowed for algal growth in the top 0.5 m of the lake. By 5 July, Secchi depth had decreased to 0.2 m, and remained at 0.2 m through 25 July. The minimum Secchi depth of 0.15 m was observed on 15 August. This pattern of water clarity dynamics is typical of highly productive Alberta lakes, when algal growth during July and August causes reduced water clarity. Water clarity typically recovers in September as lower temperatures limit growth, and dying algae fall out of the water column and settle on the lakebed where they are decomposed by anaerobic bacteria.

Water Chemistry

Based on lake water characteristics, Little Beaver Lake is considered hypereutrophic (see *A Brief Introduction to Limnology* at the end of this report). In 2009, Little Beaver Lake had very high concentrations of total phosphorus (average TP = 516.5 μg/L), total nitrogen (average TN = 8014.6 μg/L), and algal biomass (average chlorophyll *a* = 196.7 μg/L) in 2009 (**Table 1**). Total phosphorous increased over the summer, from 390 μg/L on 10 June to 683 μg/L on 15 August (**Figure 5**). Total nitrogen followed a similar pattern, increasing from 6.00 mg/L on 10 June to a maximum of 9.67 mg/L on 15 August. Chlorophyll *a* (a measure of algal biomass) increased from 69.6 μg/L on 10 June to 203 μg/L on 5 July, and then declined to 188 μg/L on 25 July before reaching a seasonal observed maximum of 322 μg/L on 15 August.

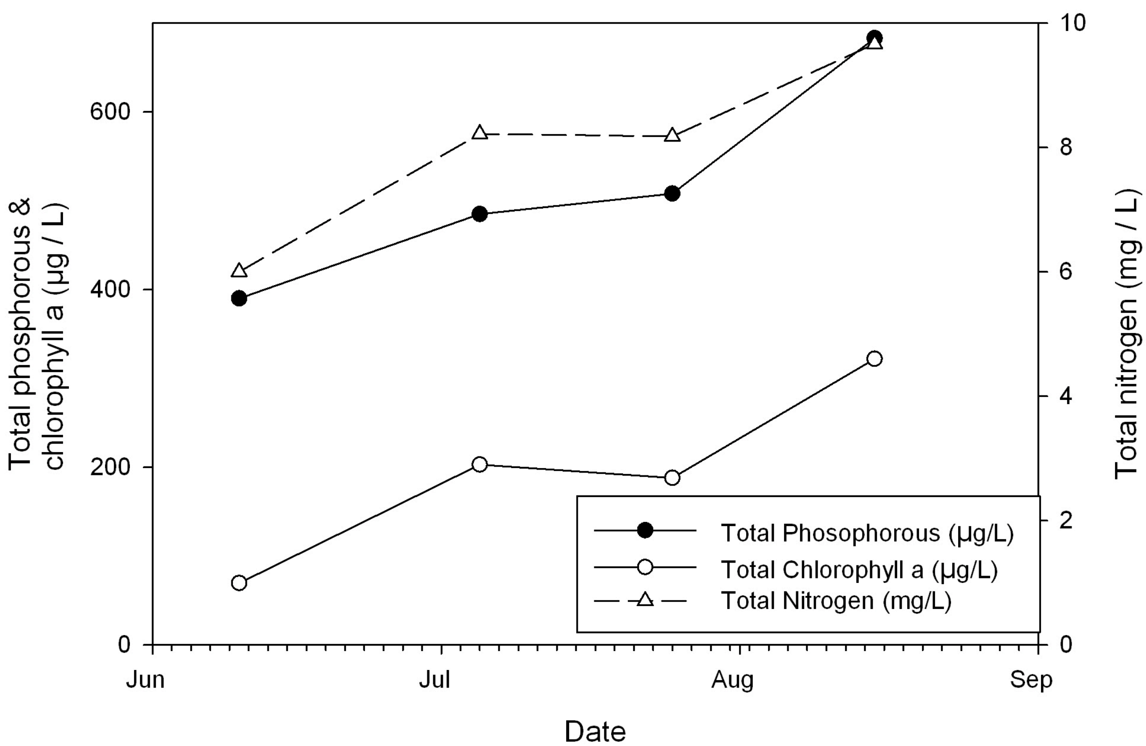

Figure 5. Total phosphorous, chlorophyll *a* (a measure of algal biomass), and total nitrogen concentrations for Little Beaver Lake during the summer of 2009.

During the summer 2009, Little Beaver Lake was well buffered from acidification with an average pH = 9.29, which is well above that of pure water (i.e., pH 7). Dominant ions include bicarbonate, sodium, and sulfate (**Table 1**). Because there are no long-term records of ion concentrations from Little Beaver Lake it is not possible to assess possible changes in ion concentrations over time. The concentrations of various metals in Little Beaver Lake were not measured in the summer of 2009.

Table 1. Mean water chemistry and Secchi depth values for Little Beaver Lake, summer 2009.

Parameter	2009
TP (μg/L)	516.5
TDP (μg/L)	83.5
Chlorophyll-*a* (μg/L)	195.7
Secchi depth (m)	0.2
TKN (μg/L)	7990
$NO_{2,3}$ (μg/L)	99.0
NH_4 (μg/L)	65.5
Dissolved organic C (mg/L)	52.4
Ca (mg/L)	16.3
Mg (mg/L)	30.8
Na (mg/L)	181.3
K (mg/L)	32.6
SO_4^{2-} (mg/L)	140.7
Cl^- (mg/L)	31.3
TDS (mg/L)	686.3
pH	9.29
Conductivity (μS/cm)	1066.7
Hardness (mg/L)	167.7
HCO_3 (mg/L)	385.3
CO_3 (mg/L)	64.3
Total Alkalinity (mg/L $CaCO_3$)	423

Note: TP = total phosphorous, TDP = total dissolved phosphorous, Chla = chlorophyll *a*, TKN = total Kjeldahl nitrogen, NO_{2+3} = nitrate+nitrite, NH_4 = ammonium, Ca = calcium, Mg = magnesium, Na = sodium, K = potassium, SO_4 = sulphate, Cl = chloride, CO_3 = carbonate, HCO_3 = bicarbonate.

*Atlas of Alberta Lakes (Mitchell and Prepas, 1990).

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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

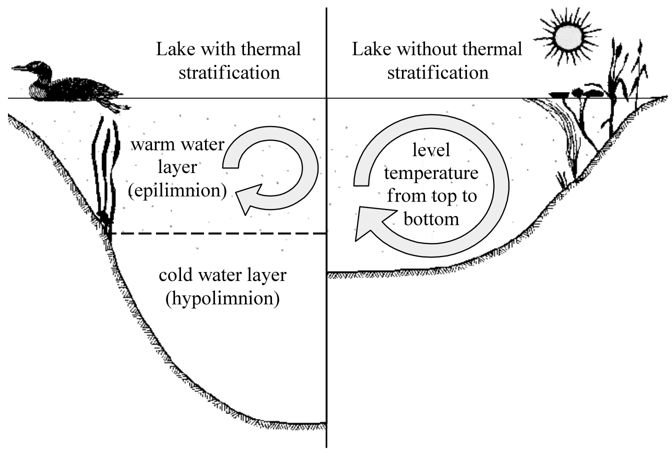

Figure 6: Difference in the circulation of the water column depending on thermal stratification.

Water temperature in a lake dictates the behavior of many chemical parameters responsible for water quality (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. 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. 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, 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-*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.

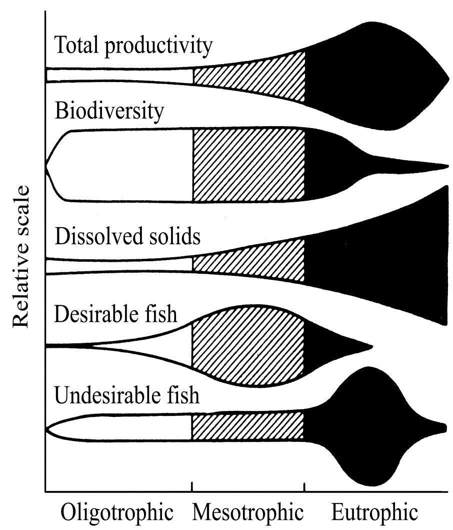

Figure 7: Suggested changes in various lake characteristics with eutrophication. From "Ecological Effects of Wastewater", 1980.

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.