

Lakewatch

*The Alberta Lake Management Society
Volunteer Lake Monitoring Program*

Skeleton Lake

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2005 Report

Completed with support from:



Baptiste, Island, and Skeleton
Lakes 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, 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 usually available for 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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Skeleton Lake

This popular lake is quite extensively developed and is the source of drinking water for the Town of Boyle. It is located in the western portion of the Beaver River Basin, in the County of Athabasca, 160 km northeast of the city of Edmonton and 6.5 km northeast of the village of Boyle. To reach the lake from Edmonton, take Highway 28 northeast to Highway 63. Travel north on Highway 63 to its junction with Secondary Road 663, then turn east and drive until you are about 5 km past Boyle. Local roads from Secondary Road 663 lead north to the summer villages of Mewatha Beach and Bondiss, on the southern shore of the lake. The lake's name is a translation of the Cree *Cheply Sakhahigan*, which means "place of the skeletons" (Holmgren and Holmgren 1976).

Public access to Skeleton Lake is available through two public boat launches in subdivisions in the north basin and in the south basin, just south of the narrows. The summer village of Mewatha Beach has a day-use area and a shallow, sandy beach with a designated swimming area. The summer village of Bondiss offers two day-use areas. One is located south of the golf course and the second area is located on the point of land that juts into the southeast bay. Two commercial campgrounds, one within Bondiss and the other just west of the boundary of Bondiss on the southern shore, offer a variety of facilities to overnight campers and day users.

The watershed is located in the Dry Mixedwood Subregion of the Boreal Mixedwood Ecoregion. Several small intermittent streams flow into the lake and drain a watershed that is four times the size of the lake. The outlet is a small creek located at the southeast end of the lake that drains eastward to Amisk Lake; it is often blocked by beaver dams. Tree cover in the watershed consists primarily of trembling aspen and secondarily of white spruce, balsam poplar and white birch. Peatlands are also significant and most agricultural activity in the watershed takes place in the southern and northwestern sections. The lakeshore has been extensively developed for residential use.

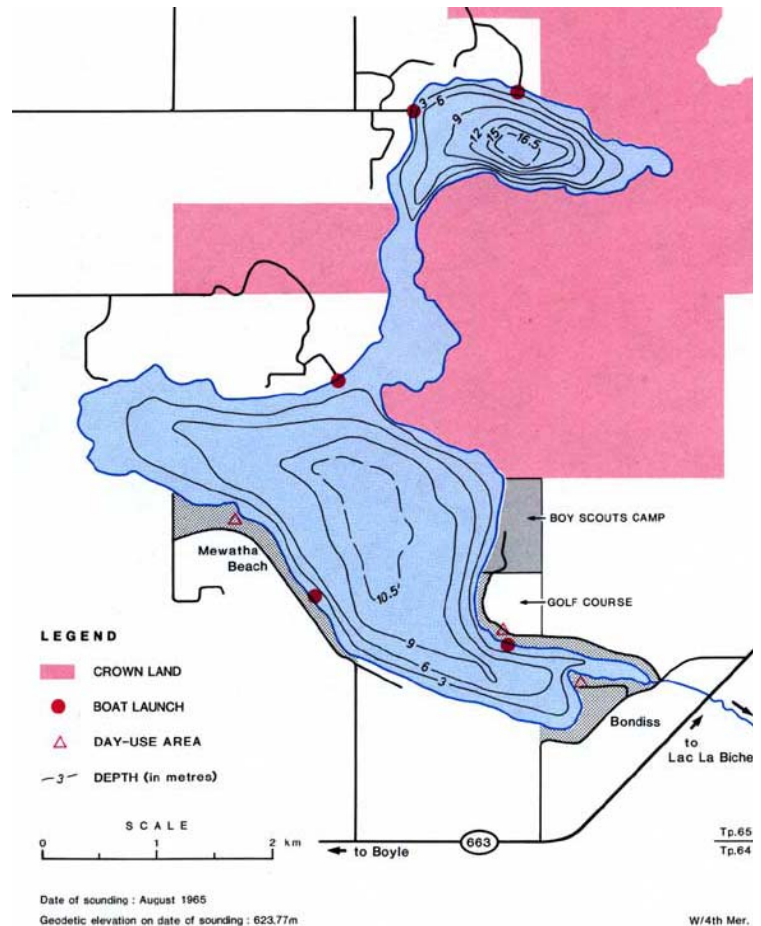


Figure 1: Bathymetry of Skeleton Lake. Each contour represents 3 meters.

Skeleton Lake is divided into two basins. The north basin is separated from the south basin by a shallow, weedy narrows. During the late 1940s, when lake levels were low, the two basins were separated by exposed land at the narrows. The north basin is small and deep, with steeply sloping sides that reach a maximum depth of about 17 m. The larger south basin slopes gradually to a maximum depth of only 11 m. Skeleton Lake is very fertile. Blooms of blue-green algae turn the water green in both basins during summer, but average concentrations of algae in the south basin are higher than in the north basin. Large aquatic plants are common along the entire shoreline and are particularly dense throughout the narrow channel that joins the two basins.

Results

Water Levels

Water levels in Skeleton Lake have been monitored by Environment Canada since 1965 under the joint Federal-Provincial Hydrometric agreement (Figure 2). Similarly to other lakes in the area, water levels have decreased steadily by about 1.5 meters since the 1970s, except for an increase during a wet period in 1997. Over the period of record, water levels ranged from a minimum of 622.3 m (Oct. 2005) to a maximum of 623.9 m (June 1997).

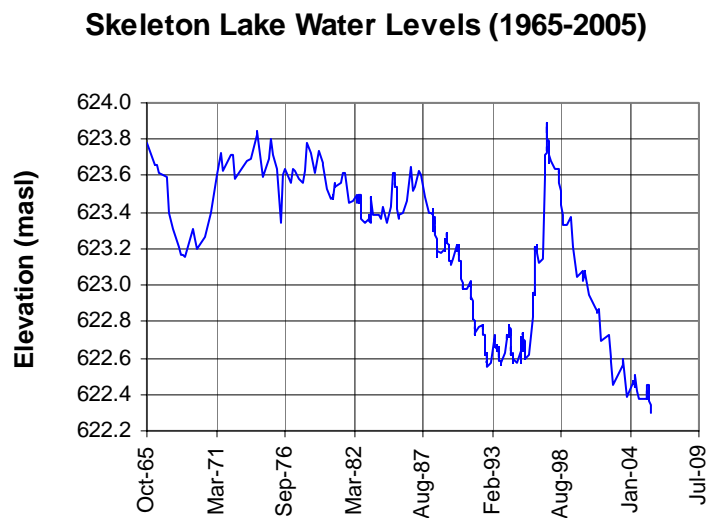


Figure 2: Historical water levels of Skeleton Lake.

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.

In 2005, the north basin of Skeleton Lake exhibited strong thermal stratification (i.e., the condition where water temperature changes by more than one degree within one meter depth), whereas the south basin was weakly stratified (**Figure 3**). In the north basin, stratification occurred throughout the summer from a depth of 5 to 7 meters. In the south basin, weak stratification occurred in June (and likely intermittently throughout the summer) at a depth of about 5 meters. Dissolved oxygen concentrations in the north basin dropped quickly to near-anoxia levels under the line of thermal stratification. In the south basin, oxygen concentrations dropped below the acute provincial guideline for the protection of aquatic life (5 mg/L) only near the lake bottom.

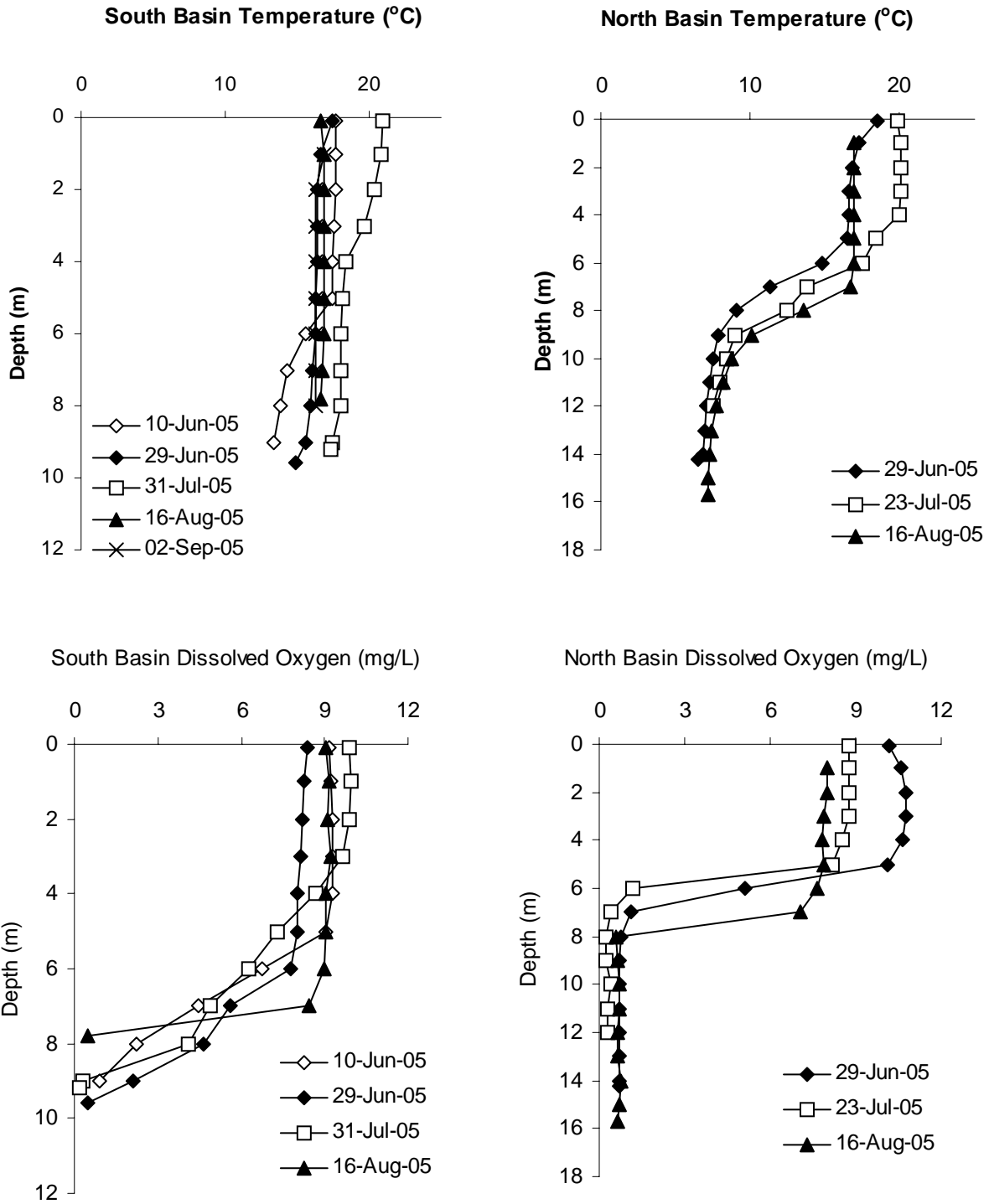


Figure 3. Temperature and oxygen concentration with depth in Skeleton Lake.

Water clarity and Secchi Depth

During the melting of snow and ice in spring, lake water can become cloudy from silt transported into the lake. Lake water usually clears in late spring but then becomes more turbid with increased algal biomass as the summer progresses. The easiest and most widely used measure of lake water clarity is the Secchi disk depth.

In 2005, Skeleton Lake's water was fairly clear. The North Basin was slightly clearer than the South Basin, with Secchi disk depths of 2.6 and 2.3 m, respectively. Water clarity followed patterns in algal biomass, or water greenness (**Figure 4**). Water clarity was highest in early summer and decreased after this point as algal biomass increased.

Water chemistry

Skeleton Lake had moderate nutrient concentrations and algal biomass compared to lakes throughout Canada, and therefore is considered meso-eutrophic (Refer to: *Trophic status based on lake water characteristics: A brief introduction to Limnology at the end of this report*). In 2005, total phosphorus concentrations remained relatively stable throughout the summer, being lowest in early summer and increasing after this time. Chlorophyll *a*, which is a measure of algal biomass, mirrored patterns in total phosphorus and nitrogen concentration (**Figure 4**).

Like most lakes in Alberta, Skeleton Lake is well buffered from acidification; its pH above 8.5 is well above that of pure water (i.e., pH 7). Bicarbonate, calcium, magnesium, and sodium are the dominant ions in Skeleton Lake (**Appendix 1**). The concentrations of most ions and nutrients remained fairly constant since the 1980s, despite an important reduction in water levels. Major nutrients (P, N) and water clarity have not gotten worse since the 80s, indicating no change in nutrient inputs to the lake. From the two years of data (1986 & 2005), it appears that the South Basin may have gotten better in terms of algae and phosphorus concentration. However, trends cannot be assessed due

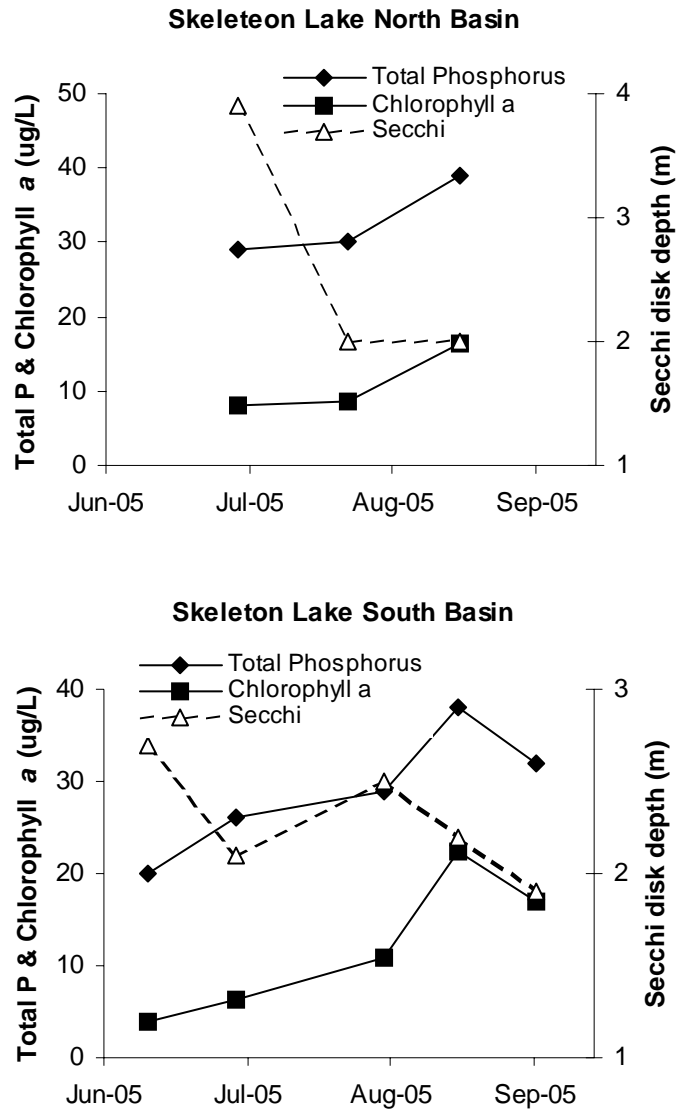


Figure 4: Total phosphorus & chlorophyll-*a* (amount of algae) concentrations, and Secchi disk depth in Skeleton Lake, summer 2005.

to a shortage of water quality information for Skeleton Lake. Further sampling of Skeleton Lake is required to detect long-term trends in water quality.

Appendix 1

Table1: Mean chemical characteristics of Skeleton Lake.

Parameter	North Basin			South Basin		
	1985	1986	2005	1985	1986	2005
Total P ($\mu\text{g/L}$)	-	36	33	-	47	29
TDP ($\mu\text{g/L}$)	-	10	11	-	11	8.4
Chlorophyll <i>a</i> ($\mu\text{g/L}$)	9.2	11	11	16	24	12
Secchi disk depth (m)	2.5	2.5	2.6	2.0	1.6	2.3
Total N ($\mu\text{g/L}$)	1160	1140	1300	1139	1318	1158
NO_{2+3} ($\mu\text{g/L}$)	<3	<4	4	<3	<3	6.8
NH_4 ($\mu\text{g/L}$)	21	32	13	13	37	13
Ca (mg/L)	23		21	26		22
Mg (mg/L)	19		24	19		23
Na (mg/L)	13		18	14		19
K (mg/L)	8		11	9		11
SO_4 (mg/L)	<5		5	<5		3
Cl (mg/L)	<2		3.2	<2		3.1
CO_3 (mg/L)	<5		12	<6		11
HCO_3 (mg/L)	198		204	208		226
Total Alkalinity (mg/L CaCO_3)	170		187	178		203
Total Dissolved Solids (mg/L)	172		193	181		204
pH	8.4-8.8		8.8	8.5-8.8		8.7
Dissolved Organic C (mg/L)	15		17	14		14

Note. TDP = total dissolved phosphorus, NO_{2+3} = nitrate+nitrite, NH_4 = ammonium, Ca = calcium, Mg = magnesium, Na = sodium, K = potassium, SO_4 = sulfate, Cl = chloride, HCO_3 = bicarbonate, CO_3 = carbonate.

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

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

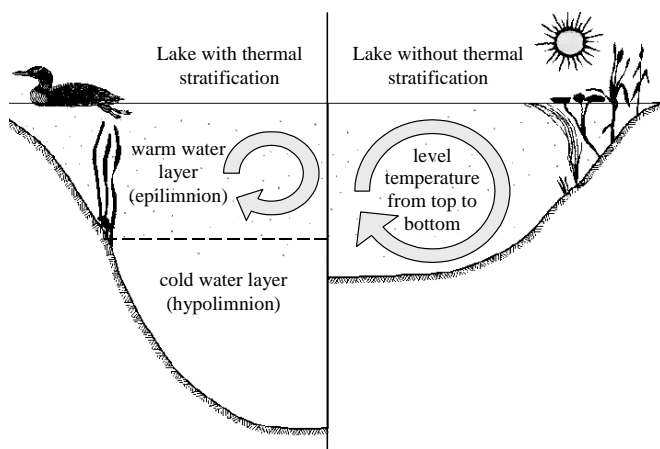


Fig. 1: Difference in the circulation of the water column depending on thermal stratification.

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.

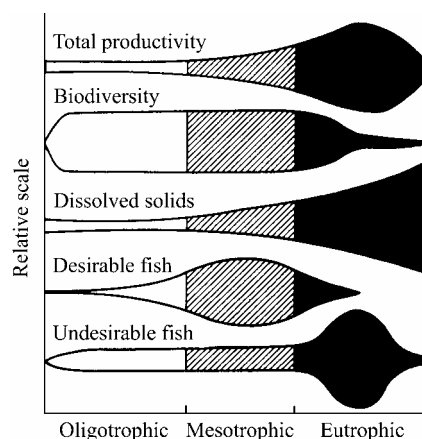


Fig. 2: Suggested changes in various lake characteristics with eutrophication. From “Ecological Effects of Wastewater”, 1980

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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