

Lakewatch

*The Alberta Lake Management Society
Volunteer Lake Monitoring Program*

Whitefish Lake

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2005 Report

Completed with support from:



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

The Lakewatch program is made possible through the Lakewatch Chairs, Théo Charette and Ron Zurawell, and the individual volunteers who dedicate their personal time. Dave Shannon was the local volunteer who made sampling possible. The 2005 summer field technician Vien Lam was a valuable and hard-working addition to the program.

Numerous Alberta Environment staff also contributed to successful completion of the 2005 program. Shelley Manchur was the Technical Program Coordinator, responsible for planning and organizing the field program. Technologists Mike Bilyk, Brian Jackson and John Willis were involved in the logistics and training aspects. Doreen LeClair was responsible for data management. Théo Charette (ALMS President) was also responsible for program administration and planning. ALMS gratefully acknowledges Alberta Environment, the Lakeland Industry and Community Association (LICA) and Lakeland County for their financial support of the Lakewatch program.

Whitefish Lake

Whitefish Lake (Figure 1) is a moderate sized water body located southeast of Lac La Biche off Highway 36. The lake is positioned in the rolling topography of the low boreal mixedwood ecoregion (Table 1). The surrounding grey-



Figure 1. Whitefish Lake.
Photo credit: Vien Lam

wooded soils are covered by a mix of poplar and white spruce, with large sections of black spruce muskeg in poorly drained lowlands (Murry V. Jones & Associates, 1977). Land surrounding the lake is a mix of primarily crown and some private ownership, the latter of which includes personal and resort properties.

Table 1. Summary of details describing the low boreal mixedwood ecoregion in which Whitefish 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

A number of other lakes feed into Whitefish Lake, which itself then drains into the Amisk River as part of the larger Beaver River Basin. The lake's main axis is roughly northwest to southeast, which parallels prevailing wind direction. The lake is fairly deep, with a shallow shelf at lake edge dropping steadily to depths of over 3 m (10 feet) not far from shore (Table 2, Figure 2). Comments in a 1984 planning report describe the lake as having a 'hard bottom, no weeds and clear water' (Ames, 1984). Whitefish Lake is home to a variety of sport and non-sport fish species including pike, perch, whitefish, walleye, cisco, burbot, sticklebacks, darters, shiners and suckers (www.anglersatlas.com). As such, it is a popular angling destination both summer and winter.

Table 2. Physical characteristics of Whitefish Lake (www.anglersatlas.com)	
Lake surface area	3.092 km ²
Drainage basin	unavailable
Mean depth	13.3 m
Maximum depth	approx. 42.7 m

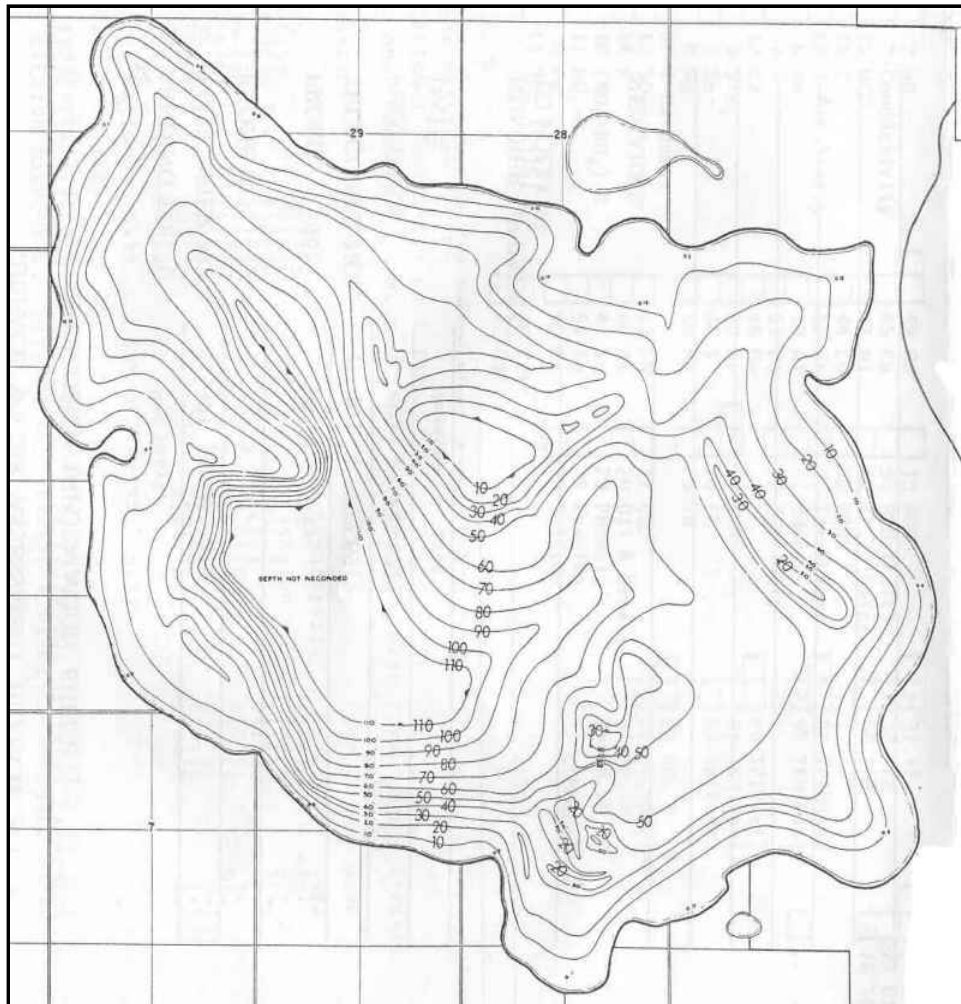


Figure 2. Whitefish Lake bathymetric map. Alberta Environment Historical Library.

Except for two single trips prior to those of Lakewatch, Whitefish Lake has not been consistently sampled. The 2005 Lakewatch data provide a valuable open-water season baseline for a complete suite of water chemistry values.

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

The water levels on Whitefish Lake have been monitored from 1958 to present (Figure 3). Over this period, the lake's surface has ranged from a high of 577.937 m above sea level (asl) on July 19, 1979, to a low of 576.366 m asl on February 8, 1996. The average water level during this time was 577.016 m asl. At the lake's deepest point, this translates into a depth range of about 42 to 43 m, with an average depth of 42.7 m.

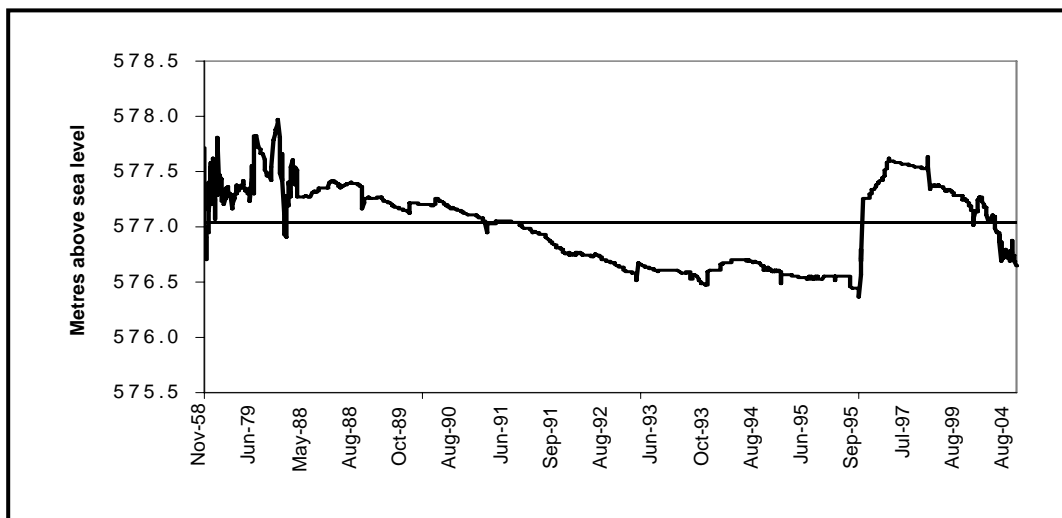


Figure 3. Historical water levels for Whitefish Lake near Lac La Biche. The heavy horizontal line represents the average water level over the sampling period. Alberta Environment data.

Temperature and Dissolved Oxygen Profiles

Whitefish Lake shows a response typical of deep water lakes over the 2005 open-water season (Figure 4). Lake water temperatures in June are starting to warm at the surface and a noticeable thermocline is evident, below which the water is fairly cold. Some of the warmer surface water has mixed into the lower water in early July, bringing the temperatures at depth up somewhat. By late July into August, warm water is sitting as a layer over the deeper, colder water and the lake is again stratified. In deep lakes, water near the lake bottom may always be quite cold, as opposed to a shallow lake where the water is often warm throughout. Dissolved oxygen decreases as surface waters warm, since warmer water will not hold as much oxygen. Once the lake has stratified, oxygen is also no longer being transported to the deeper water via mixing. Levels continue to

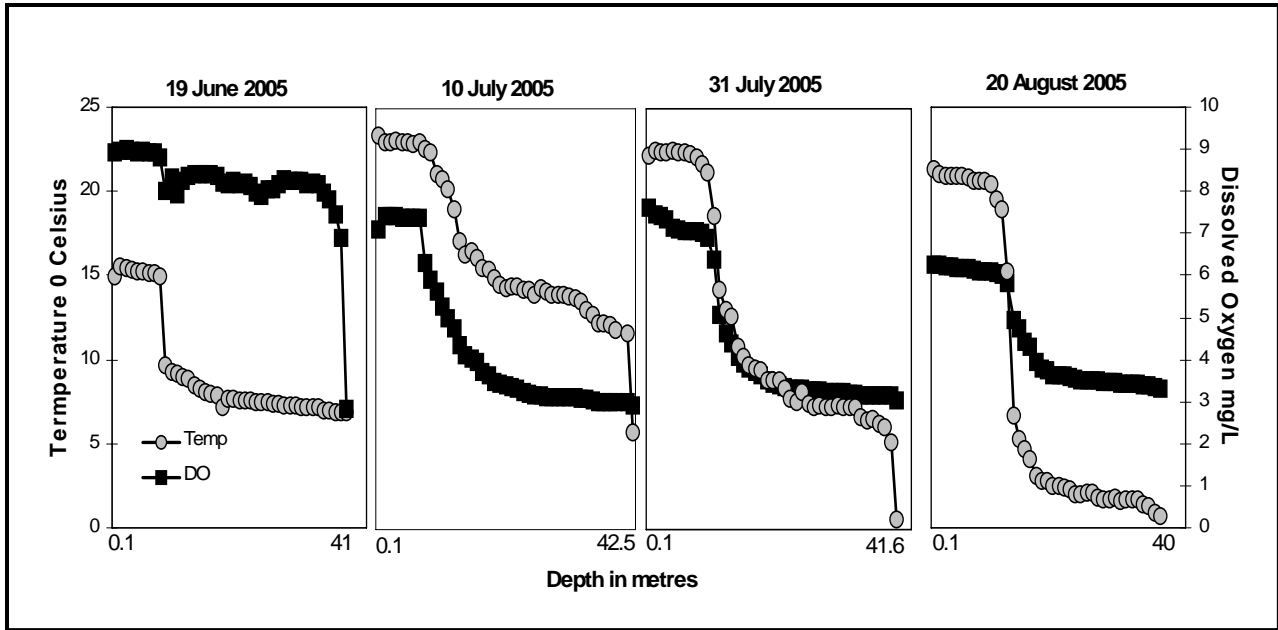


Figure 4. Temperature and dissolved oxygen profiles of Whitefish Lake for summer 2005. Alberta Environment data.

decrease as oxygen is consumed by normal lake functions and will probably not recover until fall turnover.

Water Clarity

Whitefish Lake is mesotrophic, which is a moderate productivity state (Figure 5). The clarity of the lake was very good for the 2005 sampling period, only decreasing in late summer as a response to a fairly low-level increase in chlorophyll a (Figure 6). The

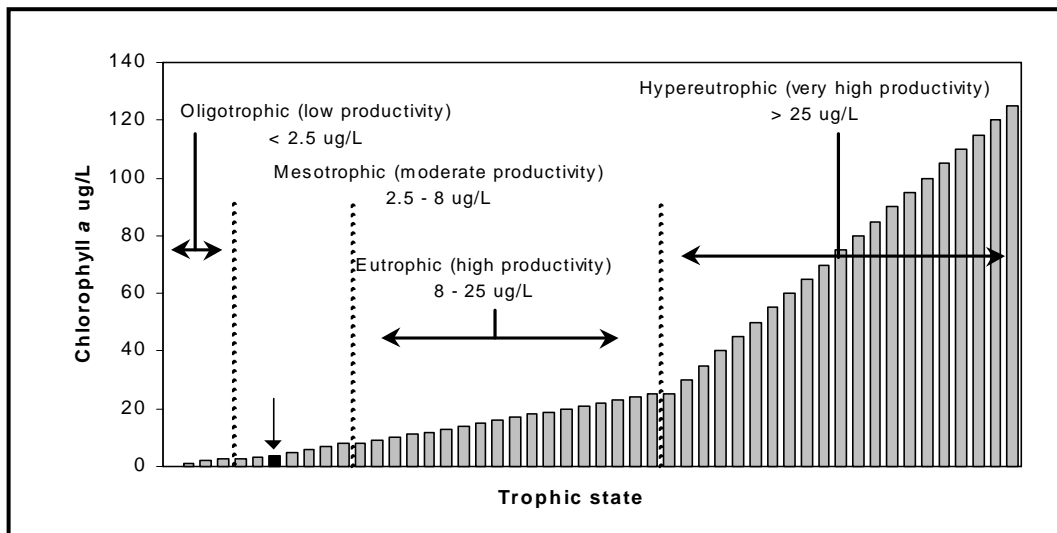


Figure 5. The black bar below the down arrow represents average chlorophyll a concentration for Whitefish Lake from summer 2005. Adapted from Mitchell, 1994.

sharp bends in the graph lines are somewhat misleading – the true story is in the vertical scale for chlorophyll concentrations, which show that at their highest, the levels in Whitefish Lake are lower than many lakes at any time. Low nutrient levels are probably limiting algal growth in this lake, especially those of phosphorus (Figure 7).

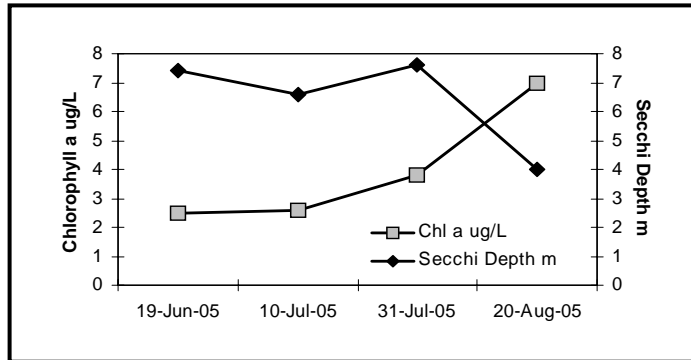


Figure 6. Secchi depth in Whitefish Lake shows a classic response to increasing chlorophyll a levels as summer progresses.

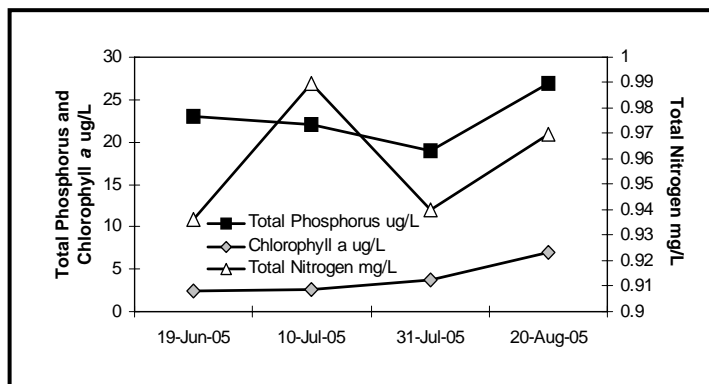


Figure 7. Algal growth as measured by chlorophyll a was steady throughout summer 2005 and did not reach a high level even into late summer.

Water Chemistry

Sampling efforts for 2005 indicate that the water in Whitefish Lake is consistent with the two prior trips in that alkalinity is moderate, conductivity is in the normal range and salinity is low (Table 3). A slight increase in both sodium and chloride is noticeable in comparison to the two historical values. This could be a result of an increased use of road salt somewhere in the drainage basin.

Table 3. Whitefish Lake cation concentrations place the lake primarily in the low salinity range. Adapted from Atlas of Alberta Lakes.				
Salinity Range (based on Total Dissolved Solids mg/L)	Average Cation Concentrations 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
Whitefish Lake (275)	40.7	10.7	26.7	23.0

Results for other water quality measurements averaged from 2005 are summarized in Appendix I, as well as historical values where available.

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Appendix 1. Summary of summer 2005 averages for various water quality parameters. The years 1978 and 1986 represent a single sampling effort. Where L occurs next to a value, it stands for 'less than'.

Parameter	1978	1986	2005
Total Phosphorus ug/L		50	22.8
Total Dissolved Phosphorus ug/L			8.0
Total Dissolved Solids mg/L	235	253	275
Chlorophyll a ug/L			4.0
Secchi depth m			6.4
Total Nitrogen mg/L		1.36	0.959
Nitrate + Nitrite mg/L		0.35	0.016
Ammonium mg/L		0.01	0.012
Calcium mg/L	30.0	33.7	26.7
Magnesium mg/L	22.0	22.7	23.0
Sodium mg/L	28.0	30.0	40.7
Potassium mg/L	9.2	9.7	10.7
Sulphate mg/L	32.0	34.3	34
Chloride mg/L	3.00	3.83	5.4
Alkalinity mg/L as CaCO ₃	184	201	224
Carbonate mg/L			12.5
Bicarbonate mg/L	224.0	244.4	248.5
pH	8.30	6.77	8.7
Conductivity uS/cm	414.0	412.9	463.5
Fluoride mg/L		0.11	0.16
Iron ug/L	L0.05	L0.02	0.007

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

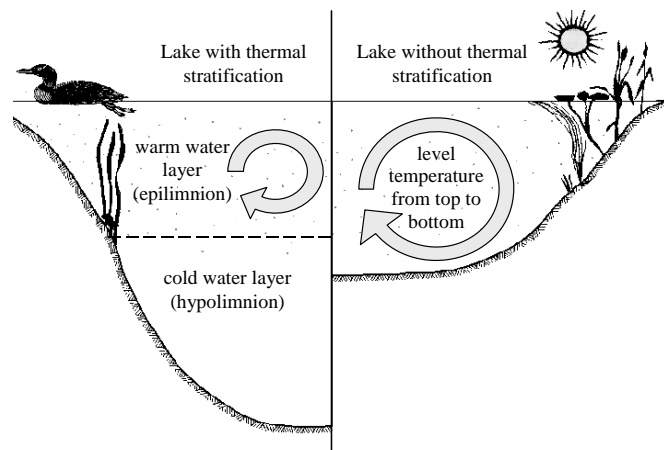


Fig. 1: Difference in the circulation of the water column depending on thermal stratification.

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.

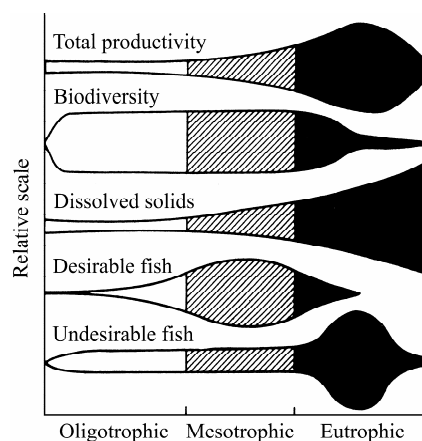


Fig. 2: Suggested changes in various lake characteristics with eutrophication. From “Ecological Effects of Wastewater”, 1980

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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