The Alberta Lake Management Society
Volunteer Lake Monitoring Program

Mons Lake

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2006 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

The Lakewatch program is made possible through the dedication of the Lakewatch Chairs, Théo Charette and Ron Zurawell, and the volunteers. Betty Epp started the process and Ed Boothman supplied the watercraft and made sampling possible through the dedication of his time and expense. Our summer field technicians and volunteer coordinators, Megan Mclean and Amanda Krowski, were valuable additions and contributors to this year's program. Numerous Alberta Environment staff also contributed to successful completion of the 2006 program. Project Technical Coordinator, Shelley Manchur was instrumental in planning and organizing the field program. Technologists, Mike Bilyk, Brian Jackson and John Willis were involved in the logistics planning and training aspects of the program. Doreen LeClair was responsible for data management. David Trew provided valuable comments on the original report and Erika Brown, Zofia Taranu, and Jesse Vermaire, updated the report with 2006 data. The Lakewatch program was financially supported with generous grants from Alberta Environment and the Lakeland Industry and Community Association (LICA).

Mons Lake

Introduction

Mons Lake is a small (2.8 km^2), and relatively shallow (maximum depth 7 m) lake located approximately 5 km northeast of the Town of Smoky Lake. Historically, the lake is eutrophic with a high supply of nutrients and algae. Most nutrient inputs to the lake are from agriculture, which occupies almost half of Mons Lake's drainage basin.

The formation of blooms of filamentous algae at the surface of Mons Lake is common. Algal communities are dominated by blue-green algae (*Anabaena* sp., and *Aphanizomenonflos- aquae*).

Emergent vegetation is patchy, restricted to the shoreline, and consists mostly of bulrushes (Scirpus validus). Submergent aquatic plants are abundant and consist mostly of pondweed (*Potamodeton* sp.). Northern pike and yellow perch are the sport fish found in the lake.

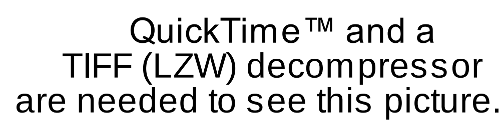


Figure 1: Ernie parking the boat on the shoreline of Mons Lake. Photo: Susan Cassidy

Results

Water Levels

Since monitoring began in 1999 Mons Lake has shown a fluctuation of 0.8 m in its water level (**Figure 2)**. Water levels are measured as the elevation in meters above sea level (m asl) of the surface of the lake. Water level declined from 1999 to 2003, when it reached a low of 605.66 m asl. The lake experienced an increase for the following 2 years; the water level recorded in May 2005 was about equal to that measured in May 1999. 2006 data

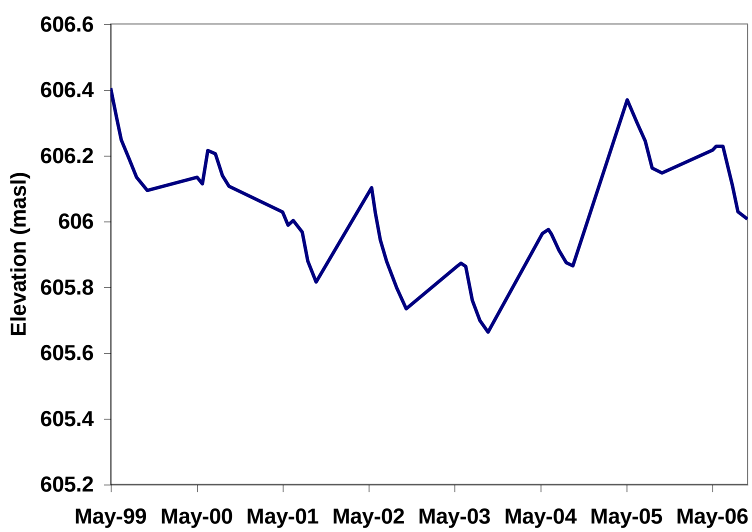


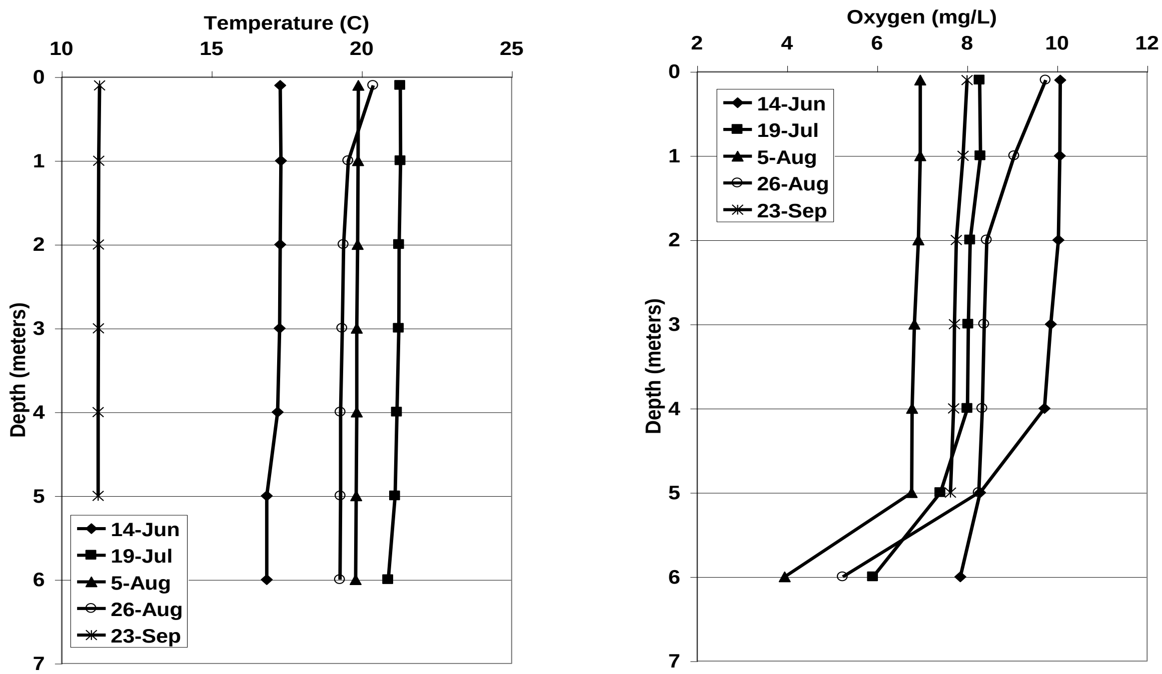
Figure 2: Historical water levels for Mons Lake, 1999 to 2006.

indicates a slight decline in water levels.

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.

The temperature profiles taken from Mons Lake show no thermal stratification at any point during the summer (**Figure 3**). This makes Mons a polymictic lake. Oxygen levels were mostly uniform down the water column except for the bottom meter, where the oxygen content decreased slightly (**Figure 3**). This data indicates good mixing of the water in Mons Lake.



Figures 3: Temperature and dissolved oxygen profiles for Mons Lake, summer 2006.

Water clarity and Secchi Depth

Water clarity is influenced by suspended materials, both living and dead, as well as dissolved coloured 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 biomass as the summer progresses. The easiest and most widely used measure of lake water clarity is the Secchi disk depth.

Secchi disk depth in Mons Lake was up to 2.75 m in mid-June and declined rapidly during the summer, reaching only 1 m by July. The Secchi disk depth only increased to 1.25 m by late September. The decrease in water clarity is consistent with the increase in algal biomass (**Figure 4**).

Water chemistry

Mons Lake has high nutrient concentrations and algal biomass, compared to lakes throughout Canada, and is therefore considered eutrophic (nutrient rich; see details on trophic status classification at end of this report). In the context of the province of Alberta, however, Mons Lake is about average in these characteristics.

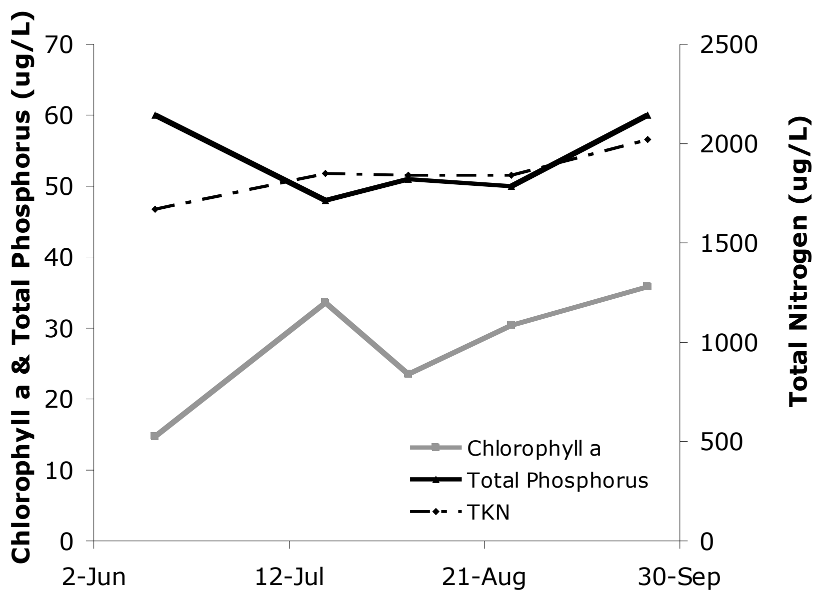


Figure 4: Total phosphorus, chlorophyll *a* and total nitrogen for Mons Lake, summer 2006.

In the summer of 2006, total phosphorus concentrations did not vary greatly, ranging from 48 to 60 µg/L (**Figure 4**). This is a notable increase from the summer of 2001 when total phosphorus concentrations ranged between 26 and 45 µg/L. Algal biomass (measured as chlorophyll *a*) increased from 15 to 36 µg/L in 2006, which again is higher than the chl *a* values recorded in the summer of 2001 (reported between 4 and 22 µg/L) (**Figure 4**). As a result of the continual increase in algal biomass throughout the open water season, bacterial decomposition of algae increased and oxygen concentrations decreased near the bottom sediments during the summer.

Cation chemistry in Mons Lake is dominated by sodium, carbonate, and magnesium, which are indicative of groundwater influence from sodium carbonate formations. The average summer concentrations of these ions have not varied between 2001 and 2006. Reduced water levels observed in other Albertan lakes, as a result of recent drought, typically lead to higher concentration of ions. Mons Lake is well-protected from acidification; its pH of 8.7 is well above that of pure water (i.e., pH 7; **Table 1**).

Table 1: Mean values from summer 2006 samples, Mons Lake.

Parameter	2001	2006
TP (µg/L)	36	53
TDP (µg/L)	15	37
Chl *a* (µg/L)	13	28
Secchi disk depth(m)	2.3	1.4
TN (µg/L)	1466	1850
NO_{2+3} (µg/L)	2	7
NH_4 (µg/L)	24	47
Ca (mg/L)	21	24
Mg (mg/L)	30	32
Na (mg/L)	44	62
K (mg/L)	14	14
SO_4 (mg/L)	21	24
Cl (mg/L)	4	4.7
Total Alkalinity (mg/L $CaCO_3$)	253	312
Si (mg/L)	3	-
Conductivity (µS/cm)	497	597
pH	9	8.7
Colour (mg/L Pt)	20	-
CO_3 (mg/L)	-	18
HCO_3 (mg/L)	-	344
TSS (mg/L)	4	-

Note: TP = total phosphorus, TDP = total dissolved phosphorus, Chla = chlorophyll *a*, TN = total nitrogen, NO_{2+3} = nitrate+nitrite, NH_4 = ammonium, Ca = calcium, Mg = magnesium, Na = sodium, K = potassium, SO_4 = sulphate, Cl = chloride, Si = silica, TSS = total suspended solids.
*Atlas of Alberta Lakes (Mitchell and Prepas, 1990).

References

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

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

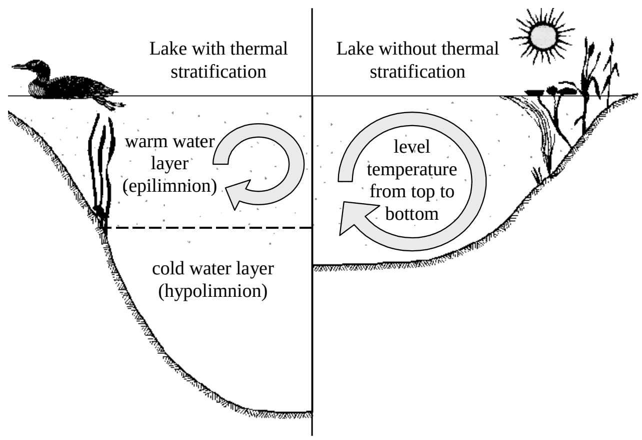


Figure 5: Difference in the circulation of the water column depending on thermal stratification.

Water temperature in a lake dictates the behavior of many chemical parameters responsible for water quality (Figure 5). 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 third layer, known as the metalimnion, provides an effective barrier between the epi- and hypolimnion**.** The metalimnion reflects a rapid transition in water temperature known as the **thermocline**. A thermocline typically occurs when water temperature changes by several degrees within one-meter of depth. The thermocline acts as an effective physico-chemical barrier to mixing between the hypolimnion and epilimnion, restricts downward movement of elements, such as oxygen, from the surface 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 state 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 terrestrial plants and plants and algae of tropical lakes, phosphorus is usually in shortest supply in temperate 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, reflect lower-nutrient trophic states than would otherwise result if macrophyte-based chlorophyll were 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 low. Secchi disk depth, however, is not only affected by algae, high concentrations of suspended sediments, particularly fine clays or glacial till common in plains or mountain reservoirs of Alberta, also impact water clarity. 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.

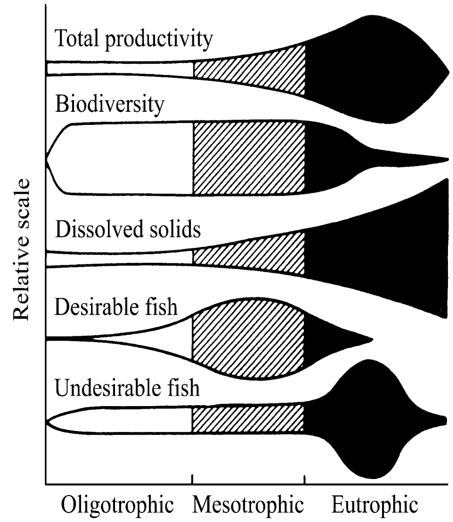


Figure 6: Suggested changes in various lake characteristics with eutrophication. From "Ecological Effects of Wastewater", 1980.

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. 6.

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 and Kerekes (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.

References

Nurnberg, G.K. 1996. Trophic state of clear and colored, soft and hardwater lakes with special consideration of nutrients, anoxia, phytoplankton and fish. Lake and Reservoir Management 12(4):432-447.

Vollenweider, R.A., and J. Kerekes, J. 1982. Eutrophication of Waters. Monitoring, Assessment and Control. Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), Paris. 156p.

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