The Alberta Lake Management Society
Volunteer Lake Monitoring Program

Wakomao Lake

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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

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Wakomao Lake

Wakomao Lake (**Figure 1, Figure 2**) is a shallow lake 70 km north of the city of Edmonton and 19 km east of the town of Westlock. The lake sits at 622 m above sea level, and is approximately 4 km long and less than 1 km wide with its main axis running northwest to southeast. The lake contains several small islands and has a marshy shoreline.

Figure 1. Wakomao Lake, Alberta. Retrieved from www.CampLusson.com, May 2010.

The early history of the area was linked to the fur trade, due to the proximity of the Athabasca Landing Trail, a historic land trail extending between Edmonton and Athabasca. With the arrival of homesteaders, a new road, and a railway in the early 1900s, the surrounding land became developed for agriculture.

The village of Clyde lies 6 km west of Wakomao Lake. Clyde was incorporated in 1914, named after the river and firth of Clyde in Scotland. According to a 2009 municipal census, the population of Clyde is 493 individuals, an increase of 4.3% from 2001. Wakomao Lake receives secondarily treated wastewater from Clyde each spring, and additional nutrients from agricultural runoff.

Figure 2. Wakomao Lake, Alberta. From Google Earth, 2009.

Results

Water Level

Water levels have been recorded by at Wakomao Lake since 1956. From 1956 – present, average water level was 621.5 m asl (**Figure 3**). Between 1998 and 2002, a decrease of 0.8 m in water level was recorded during a dry period, followed by a recovery to the historical average in 2003. The lowest recorded water level was 620.5 m asl in May 2001. The highest recorded water level was 622.5 m asl in January 1974.

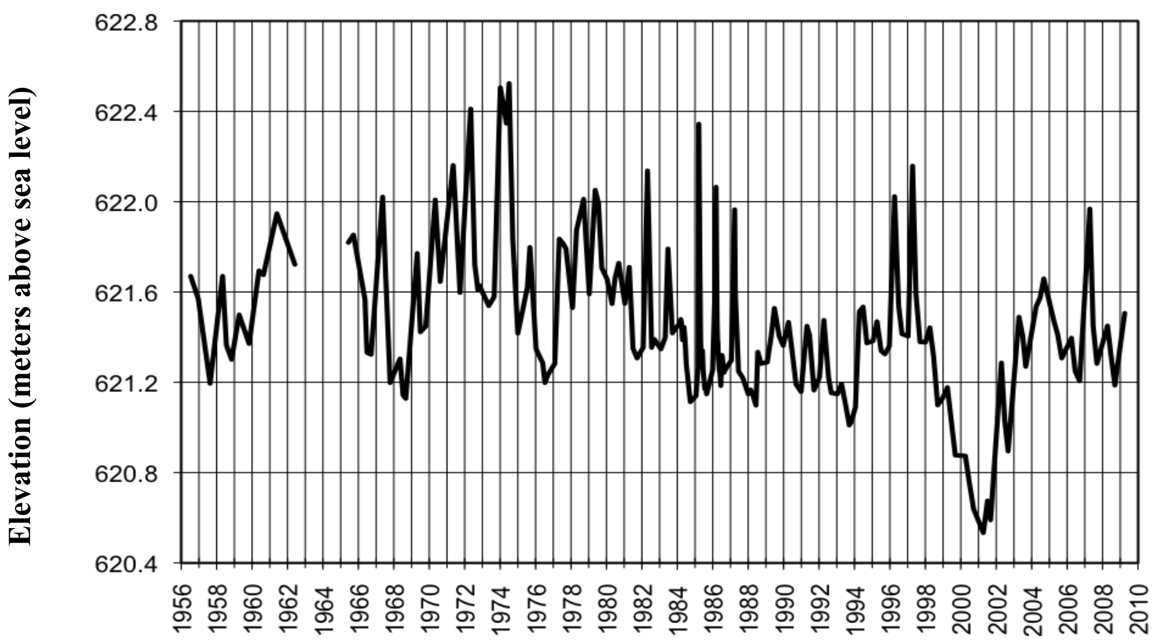

Figure 3. Historical water levels (m asl) in Wakomao Lake, Alberta 1956 – 2009.

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.

Wakomao Lake is a shallow, polymictic lake, and thermal stratification was not observed during the summer of 2009 (**Figure 3**). On 11 June, surface water temperature was 17.7°C and declined to 16.7°C at 1.5 m depth. On 2 July, surface water temperature was 17.2°C, and by 22 July surface waters had warmed to the observed seasonal maximum of 21.6°C. On 13 August, surface waters had cooled to 18.4°C and were isothermic down to the lakebed.

Dissolved oxygen (DO) concentrations in upper layers of surface waters of Wakomao Lake were ≥ 8 mg/L on all sampling dates through the summer, well within the acceptable range for surface water quality (DO ≥ 5.0 mg/L) (**Figure 3**). On 11 June, surface waters were very well oxygenated and DO concentration actually increased with depth below 1 m, indicating a layer of photosynthetic algae producing oxygen. On 2 July, this highly oxygenated bottom layer was not observed, and by 22 July, DO began to decline below 1.0 m depth to 7.5 mg/L. The lowest surface DO concentration of 9.41 mg/L was observed on 13 August. No anoxic (e.g. DO near zero) zones were observed on any sampling date, and the water column remained well-oxygenated throughout the summer.

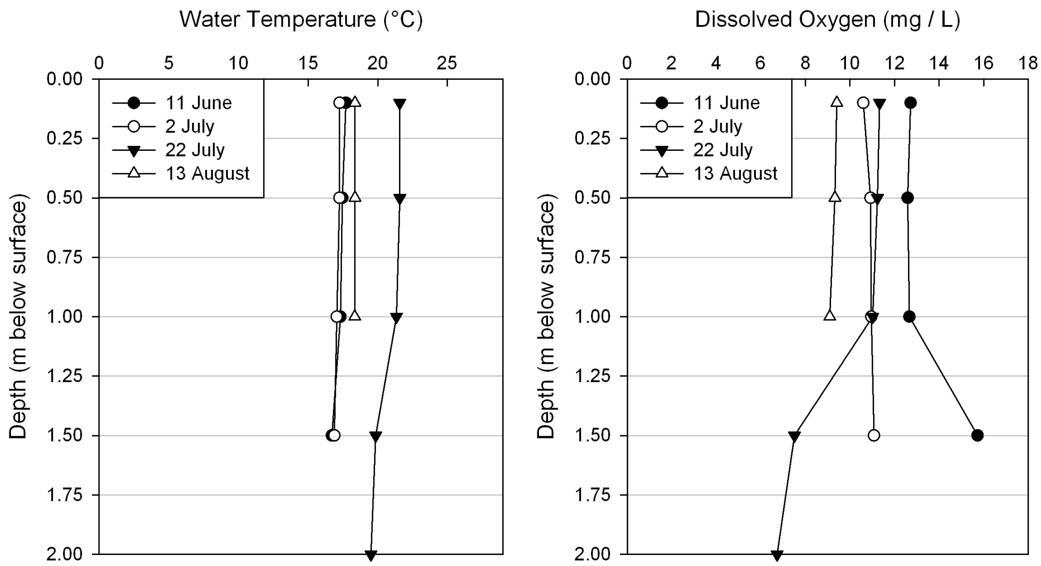

Figure 3. Water temperature (°C) and dissolved oxygen (mg/L) profiles for Wakomao Lake during the summer of 2009.

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 Wakomao Lake was measured four times during the summer of 2009. Wakomao Lake was neither exceptionally turbid nor exceptionally clear compared to similar shallow lakes in Alberta, with an average Secchi depth of 1.29 m (**Table 1**). On 11 June, light penetrated 1.7 m or ~85% of the total lake depth, which allowed for algal growth in the entire water column of the lake. Secchi depth on 2 July was similar at 1.8 m, the observed seasonal maximum. By 22 July, Secchi depth had decreased to 1.25 m, and dropped further to the seasonal observed minimum of 0.4 m in mid-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, Wakomao Lake is considered hypereutrophic (see *A Brief Introduction to Limnology* at the end of this report). In 2009, Wakomao Lake had very high concentrations of total phosphorus (average TP = 178.8 μg/L), total nitrogen (average TN = 3647.5 μg/L), and algal biomass (average chlorophyll *a* = 57.3 μg/L) (**Table 1**). Total phosphorous increased over the summer, from 128 μg/L on 11 June to a maximum of 323 μg/L on 14 September (**Figure 4**). Most of this increase occurred between 22 July and 13 August. Total nitrogen followed a similar pattern, increasing from 2.958 mg/L on 11 June to a maximum of 5.885 mg/L on 13 August. Chlorophyll *a* (a measure of algal biomass) remained low early in the summer, at 2.47 μg/L and 2.52 μg/L on 11 June and 2 July respectively. By 22 July, chlorophyll *a* had increased dramatically to 68.2 μg/L, and continued to increase to its seasonal observed maximum of 156 μg/L on 13 August.

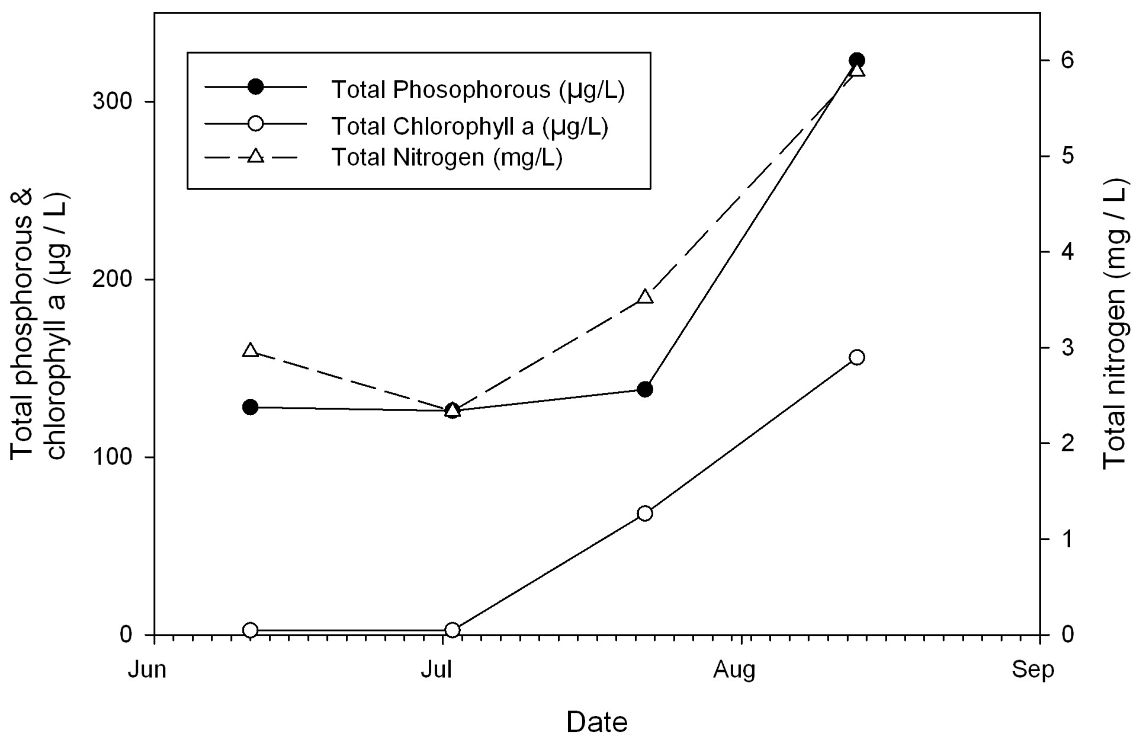

Figure 4. Total phosphorous, chlorophyll *a* (a measure of algal biomass), and total nitrogen concentrations for Wakomao Lake during the summer of 2009.

During the summer 2009, Wakomao Lake was well buffered from acidification with an average pH = 9.07, which is well above that of pure water (i.e., pH 7). Dominant ions included bicarbonate, sulfate, and sodium (**Table 1**). Because there are no long-term records of ion concentrations from Wakomao Lake it is not possible to assess possible changes in ion concentrations over time. The concentrations of various metals in Wakomao Lake were not measured in the summer of 2009.

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

Parameter	2009
TP (μg/L)	178.8
TDP (μg/L)	86.8
Chlorophyll-*a* (μg/L)	57.3
Secchi disk depth (m)	1.29
TKN (μg/L)	3556
$NO_{2,3}$ (μg/L)	119.5
NH_4 (μg/L)	65.6
Dissolved organic C (mg/L)	34.3
Ca (mg/L)	27.9
Mg (mg/L)	13.0
Na (mg/L)	41.3
K (mg/L)	17.6
SO_4^{2-} (mg/L)	48.7
Cl^- (mg/L)	33.7
TDS (mg/L)	264
pH	9.07
Conductivity (μS/cm)	457.7
Hardness (mg/L)	123.0
HCO_3 (mg/L)	117.3
CO_3 (mg/L)	35.5
Total Alkalinity (mg/L $CaCO_3$)	135.7

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

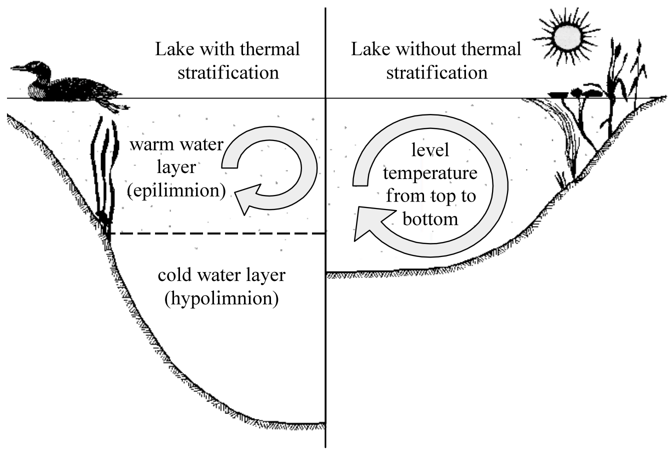

Figure 6: Difference in the circulation of the water column depending on thermal stratification.

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.

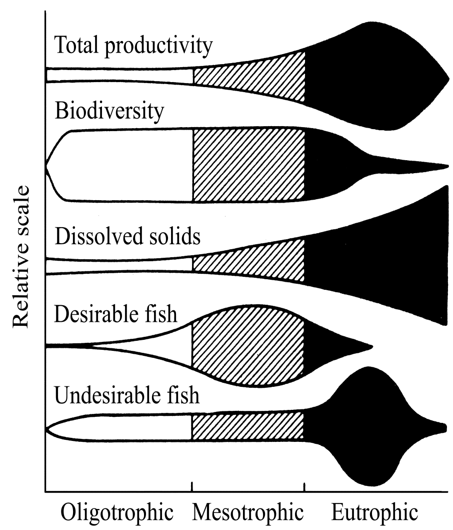

Figure 7: Suggested changes in various lake characteristics with eutrophication. From "Ecological Effects of Wastewater", 1980.

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.