

A centennial look at lake stewardship

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The foundation of our community rests upon the shores of Whitefish Lake. We are inexplicably drawn to its beauty for recreation, and our economy is dependent upon its health. While this centennial year prompts us as a community to reflect upon our history, we must also remember to ponder the future.

Whitefish Lake's beauty was a key component in attracting early settlers to the area. This attraction, combined with the bountiful natural resources surrounding this geographic cornerstone, provided the underpinnings that helped shape our town and cement its character.

The lake provided an immediate livelihood to our founding fathers through abundant fish and game. Industry was not far behind with accessible timber harvested along the shoreline and logs yarded in Whitefish Lake. The construction of the railroad on the west side of the lake in 1903 and 1904 further spurred early commerce.

Recreational opportunities abounded for early townspeople. In particular, the sightseeing boat, the Butte, would take passengers from Ramsey's Lake View Hotel to the Point of Pines for dances and picnics. Within the crystal-clear waters that shouldered the Butte were swarms of whitefish, the inspiration for our community's name.

During the first 100 years of our town's history, the ambitious people of Whitefish changed the scenery around Whitefish Lake from a few small cabins and an occasional fishing party to a summer recreation destination surrounded by homes.

During the early years, more thought may have been given to economic prosperity than to the preservation of our environment, since the wealth of our natural resources seemed so vast. Fortunately, starting in the 1930s, a vision to protect the natural resources of the lake became the focus of many community leaders, this some 40 years earlier than the national environmental movement of the 1970s.

Aimed at increasing enjoyment and preservation of the Whitefish outdoors, various community groups organized throughout the years, including the Whitefish Rod and Gun Club, the Back-to-Nature Club and Outdoors Unlimited.

An environmental milestone was reached in the mid-1970s when community members Charlie Abell, Gene Hedman, Arnold Jacobsen, Art Engelter and Bob Brown were instrumental in getting the Lakeshore Protection Act passed by the Montana State Legislature. This was strengthened by Bob Lawson's work as a legislator in 2001 to remove the cap on local lakeshore protection fees.

As we evaluate Whitefish Lake today, it is apparent that the complexity of the situation has changed. An ever burgeoning population and the multitude of recreationists on the lake have created new issues.

Nutrient loading from failing septic tanks, user conflict, residential development, pollutants, lack of storm drains and a changed fishery are just a few topics needing our consideration. Imagine what the cumulative effects will be over the next 100 years if these issues are not addressed.

The Whitefish Lake Institute was formed this year to evaluate the community interface with the lake and to help protect its health through scientific research and education. Whereas the institute is young, the depth of experience and expertise of its leaders is not. The board of directors consists of Gene Hedman, Frank Morrison, Jr., Charlie Abell, Nancy Svenningsen, Jim Stack, Jack Fletcher, Dan Weinberg, Steve Thompson and Dr. Michael Ricker.

The board of directors are supported by two advisory committees. The Technical Advisory Committee will prioritize scientific research and is comprised of regional scientists, including Tony Nelson (hydrologist, Department of Natural Resources and Conservation), Mark Deleray (fisheries biologist, Fish, Wildlife and Parks), Chris Ruffatto (science teacher, Whitefish School District), Dick Solberg (retired professor, University of Montana) and Wayne Svee (chemist, Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services).

The Citizens Advisory Committee will develop concepts to engage and educate the community about the lake, and is well represented by citizens Sue Moll, Bayard Dominick, Greg Gunderson, Bob McConnell and Dan Keyes.

We can only speculate what the future will hold for Whitefish Lake. Our hope at the Whitefish Lake Institute is that a balanced approach of obtaining scientific data, while incorporating community input, will expand upon past stewardship efforts and provide more sophisticated information to guide future management decisions. We hope that the beginning of the next 100 years of lake stewardship in Whitefish is off to a good start.

Next month, Lake Line's article, "Fishing bear hide flies and red flannel underwear," will explore the early days of fishing on Whitefish Lake.

Mike Koopal is the executive director of the Whitefish Lake Institute. If you have any questions or would like to become a member, contact the institute at 862-4327 or visit them at www.whitefishlake.org.