

News02

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A census of boats and boat docks in use by lake shore residents around Whitefish Lake was recently completed by the Whitefish Lake Institute.

"Preliminarily, this census provides some food for thought for the City of Whitefish," said Mike Koopal, the Institute's director. "We have quantified what many have suspected — the lake is heavily used in the summer."

The census was completed to begin the complex and multi-faceted analysis of the lake's carrying-capacity. It includes issues such as safety, the compatibility of various forms of boating, the quality of experience for both residents and tourists, and the affect that boating has on the lake ecosystem.

"I knew the lake was heavily used, but the actual numbers of boats and docks in use by shoreline residents on the third Saturday in August was surprising," Koopal said.

The study included all boats moored along the lake shore and stored up to 20 feet above the high-water mark on the shore.

The survey counted 475 motorized water craft moored around the lake, including 293 boats (most over 15 feet in length), 115 personal water craft and 67 pontoon boats.

The survey also counted 262 non-motorized boats, including 69 canoes, 71 kayaks, 35 pedal-powered boats, 21 sailboats, eight scull boats, 40 "john boats" and 18 that were classified as other.

The surveyors then counted boats in use on the lake and found 106 motorized water craft, including 65 boats, 28 personal water craft and 13 pontoon boats, as well as two kayaks.

"We made the conservative assumption that at least one in four of these boats came from shoreline docks as opposed to being launched from City Beach or the State Park," he said, "and that immigration and emigration of boats from boat docks were equal during the survey. Adding that percentage to our actual count, that increases the total estimate to 502 motorized and 263 non-motorized water craft parked around the lake by shoreline residents."

The surveyors also inventoried how boats were stored or moored around the lake. They found 721 available parking spots for water craft, including 278 docks (43 of which had 317 boat slips), 81 off-shore mooring buoys, 24 boat houses and 64 elevated-mooring stations.

"If a conservative assumption is made that the average non-boat slip dock can accommodate 1.5 boats on average, this would push the estimated total number of off-shore parking spots for boats around the lake up to 839," Koopal said.

Koopal said motorized water craft were moored almost exclusively off-shore, except for a small number of personal water craft and a few other boats. Conversely, non-motorized water craft were parked almost exclusively on the shore. The surveyors also counted 21 on-water trampolines.

The surveyors broke down the lake into six different geographic areas with similar shoreline lengths for comparison use. They found the lowest density of boats and docks on the west shore, from State Park halfway up to Lazy Bay, compared to 13 times the density from City Beach to Houston Point on East lake shore Drive.

"Our goal should not be to love our lake to death," he said. "Lake communities in the East and Midwest have already experienced this. Many have reached or are close to their carrying-capacities and have enacted strict ordinances to limit boating impact. The National Park Service also has addressed the problem in some areas."

More data is needed to determine what is most appropriate for protecting Whitefish Lake while maintaining the satisfaction of recreationalists, Koopal said.

"We'll need to look at the infrastructure capabilities of boat launches and parking, and complete multiple on-lake surveys," he said. "We'll also have to sit down with the City of Whitefish and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks to develop a plan to get more detailed information from boats that are launched at City Beach and the State Park before the Institute can make any recommendations."

Koopal said the study can also provide tangential information in support of other studies. For instance, this data could help quantify the economic contribution from lake use to the community.

"Defining carrying-capacity on Whitefish Lake will provide our community the information needed to help guide future management before issues reach the boiling point," he said. "Our job at the Institute is to disclose as much relevant information about the lake as we can to support its future management."