

Keeping an eye on the lake's health

Whitefish Lake Institute is involved in numerous projects protecting water quality

Whitefish Pilot

By RICHARD HANNERS

Thursday, August 7, 2008



Whitefish Lake Institute executive director Mike Koopal says it's been a busy summer season for the organization that keeps an eye on the lake's health.

In addition to collecting data for the Montana Department of Environmental Quality's nonpoint-source pollution model, the institute has partnered with John Wachsmuth at Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks to start a volunteer program on 20 smaller lakes between Whitefish and Eureka.

"The lake volunteer program provides us with some basic trend information on these lakes," he said. "For many of these lakes, it will be the first data ever collected."

The institute trains volunteers to collect data on water clarity, temperature, dissolved oxygen, water color, weather, nuisance species "and anything unusual," he said. They have 13 volunteers now, including one high school student and a dozen people who live near the lakes, but they could use more.

Koopal said the partnership will continue this winter, weather permitting, as the institute helps FWP coordinate the second edition of "The Montana Lake Book." The 35-page booklet is currently out of print but has been available for free at FWP's regional offices.

"The lake book is a great tool for anyone to understand lake issues, along with actions we can all take to keep our lakes clean," he said.

Sometimes action speaks louder than words. Following the institute's 2005-2006 study of motor boat pollution in Whitefish Lake, the city agreed to pay for a catchment system at the City Beach boat launch to retain oily bilge water from motor boats.

Koopal said he expects the catchment will be built this year. The institute will collect lake water samples next year to see how effective the system works.

The institute also started an aquatic nuisance species inventory of Whitefish Lake this summer.

"We have drafted a methodology to systematically look for invasive species, like zebra and quagga mussels, New Zealand mudsnails and Eurasian water milfoil," Koopal said. "These exotic species need to be household words in Flathead Valley. I don't think people understand the ramifications to the lake's ecology or their pocketbooks if these species end up here."

The institute is currently looking for these species at 11 sites around Whitefish Lake, especially around boat launches. One tiny larva or piece of milfoil could quickly grow into an infestation that would be tough to deal with later, he said.

"The goal is to keep mussels east of the 100th meridian, but they've already been found in places like Lake Mead," he said.

Koopal also keeps busy with educational efforts. Beyond the presentations he gives to schools and civic groups, the institute also has two summer interns. Kristi Whisler will be a senior this year at Whitefish High School, and Mary Kohnstamm is a sophomore at St. Lawrence University, in Canton, N.Y.

"It's a great opportunity for the interns to learn about lake ecosystems and the data collection process, and they're a big help in getting our workload completed," he said.

Koopal gives talks at schools in Whitefish and Kalispell, from second grade to advanced high school biology classes. That includes the annual fish dissections for fourth graders and coaching the Whitefish team that took third place at the state's annual Envirothon.

The institute also puts out a quarterly newsletter and recently updated its Web site.

The Whitefish Lake Institute relies on memberships and grants for funding. Its pontoon boat was donated, and state agencies have purchased some equipment for their studies.

A 10-member board of directors oversees the institute, which also has a citizens advisory committee and a technical advisory committee. Chris Ruffatto is the institute's "part-time scientist" — when he's not teaching at Whitefish High School.

For more information, call 862-4327 or visit online at www.whitefishlake.org.