

Report looks at historic impacts on lake

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Historically, Whitefish Lake was undoubtedly pristine, subject only to natural events such as fires and floods. Since European settlement, lake conditions have been impacted by the railroad, timber harvest and associated road construction, shoreline development and other land pressures.

The Whitefish Lake Institute outlines the impacts to the lake and the historic time periods of the lake in its recently released watershed report.

Lori Curtis, science and education director for WLI, said the report outlines everything known during specific time period and what impacts it likely had on the lake.

"You can see this kind of human activity was going on and there were some changes happening [in the lake]," Curtis said. "You can start to see maybe the activity had something to do with the changes."

The most recent period is termed the "protection period." The community has recently become more aware of water quality and the need to protect the watershed, noted WLI executive director Mike Koopal. He said this is a positive for the lake, which the report says is at a tipping point in terms of water quality.

"There are a number of action items that the community and resource management agencies have undertaken to protect water quality," Koopal said. "Water quality transcends political parties and ages — people care, but we still need to reach those that haven't been engaging."

There are six distinct time periods that have shaped Whitefish Lake's history.

The pre-European period for Whitefish Lake represents pristine water quality and the water-

shed's ability to buffer natural events like flood and fire. During the time, in the pre-1880s, there was a well-defined native fish species.

The stumptown period, from 1880-1940, represents initial development of the area including construction of the railroad on the westshore of the lake, initial harvest of trees and associated road construction. Real estate development also began around the lake, leading to public infrastructure extension. Also, non-native fish species introductions took place during this period.

The ski town period, 1941-1967, marked expanded development around the lake and in Whitefish. This was the community's transition from a rail-

road and timber economy to a tourism economy as Big Mountain Resort was established. Fish introductions also occurred with the introduction of lake trout and kokanee salmon.

Mysis shrimp explosion period, 1968 to 1980, represents the time for the most deleterious non-native species introduction into the lake. Introduced into the lake in 1968, Mysis shrimp have profoundly impacted the lake's food web and nutrient cycling, according to the report.

Forestry period, 1981-2000, a number of regulatory actions heightened protection and cultural awareness of water quality issues. However, there was a high amount of

timber harvest activity in the watershed, increased shoreline development and an ever increasing pressure by recreational users on the lake.

The protection period, running from 2001 through today, is noteworthy for the expansion of research, management and regulatory measures to protect water quality. This period has seen a number of regulations, conservation plans, and protection of state trust lands around the city and a conservation easement in Haskill Basin.