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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### **Local Economy Gets Boost From Unlikely Source**

WHITEFISH, MT 31 MAY 2011 The Whitefish Lake Institute (WLI) recently finalized two partnerships that help boost the Flathead Valley economy. The organization has developed a unique relationship with the Rapid City, South Dakota-based Educational Travel Institute of America (ETIA) to coordinate local Road Scholar programs. It has also partnered with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) and the Flathead Basin Commission (FBC) to manage the Northwest Montana Lakes Volunteer Monitoring Network (NWMTLVMN). Through these two relationships, WLI is able to further its work on Whitefish water quality.

#### Educational Programs

Through the newly implemented relationship with ETIA, WLI provides a local coordinator to plan and execute Road Scholar lifelong learning programs in the Whitefish area and in Glacier National Park. The coordinator schedules program itineraries; books hotel, meeting, and dining facilities; arranges transportation and entry into parks and other attractions; and engages local field experts to lead programs. Road Scholar—the non-profit leader in educational travel—has been producing educational tour programs for seniors since 1975, and now has almost 8,000 programs in all 50 states and over 90 countries. The coordinator position is held by the WLI Science and Education Director who is responsible for developing and implementing a number of programs key to the work of the organization.

Through the Whitefish and Glacier National Park-centered programs, more than 700 visitors will be coming to the area, bringing revenue to hotels, lodges, restaurants, transportation companies, and downtown businesses where participants spend free time. The program supports the fundamentals of *geotourism*: tourism that sustains and enhances the geographical character of a place, such as its cultural heritage, natural resources, and the well-being of its residents. Dylan Boyle, coordinator for the Crown of the Continent Geotourism Council, endorses the Road Scholar program as a way to connect with travelers through education. “I think the Road Scholar program is a wonderful opportunity to educate visitors on the Crown’s extremely unique sense of place. It will provide visitors with an authentic travel experience, which at the same time benefits the local economy and celebrates its natural, cultural, and historical wonders.”

The ETIA/WLI partnership also enables the employment of the program coordinator and numerous program leaders and field instructors. Participants will leave the summer program with a better understanding of the geophysical and cultural histories of the area, a first-hand knowledge of its habitats, species, and some of the challenges facing communities and resource managers. The program extends WLI’s educational outreach which already includes work with Whitefish grade school classes, Whitefish and Kalispell high school students, FREEFLOW watershed education field trips, mentoring of students competing in the Montana *Envirothon*, summer internship opportunities, and Whitefish School District *in-service* teacher training.

#### Northwest Montana Lakes Volunteer Monitoring Network

The goal of the NWMTLVMN is to engage citizen scientist volunteers in collecting long-term water quality trend data on over 40 Northwest Montana lakes and monitoring them for aquatic invasive species (AIS). The

data will be used by management agencies to make informed decisions, and to create public awareness of lake issues. WLI was contracted by MFWP to execute the program, and MFWP and FBC are funding it. Through this arrangement, WLI provides a program coordinator who recruits and trains volunteers to monitor water quality, identify and report AIS and promote watershed stewardship in Northwest Montana. Important work that would be financially challenging for any one organization is getting done through this combined effort. The coordinator also serves as a staff Environmental Scientist for WLI, collecting and interpreting field data necessary to carry out the work of the organization.

By identifying and combining the needs of various organizations and developing mutually beneficial relationships, the equivalents of two full-time positions were made available and filled. Before joining WLI, Science and Education Director/ETIA Program Coordinator, Lori Curtis published the *Flathead Watershed Sourcebook: A Guide to an Extraordinary Place*, for which WLI's executive director Mike Koopal served as a steering committee member and contributor. Lori is now applying her MS in Environmental Studies and 30 years of experience to multiple tasks at WLI.

Environmental Scientist/NWMTLVMN Coordinator Josh Gubits joined WLI after working as a field education coordinator for the Watershed Education Network where he oversaw the planning, facilitation, and reporting for several water monitoring programs. He is now employing his BA in Environmental Studies and field education experience as he ramps up for the 2011 field season.

Founded in 2005, the Whitefish Lake Institute is a 501 (3)(c) non-profit organization committed to acquiring scientific research, and to educating and engaging the local citizenry to protect the Whitefish area water resources of today, while providing a collective vision for tomorrow.

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