

*“Whitefish Lake is the  
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**MIKE KOOPAL**

FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
WHITEFISH LAKE INSTITUTE, WHITEFISH

**W**hitefish Lake needed a voice, so **Mike Koopal** founded the Whitefish Lake Institute (WLI) in 2005. In the years since, Mike and the rest of the WLI team have worked to protect Whitefish Lake from growth pressure, including pollution, aquatic invasive species (AIS), and other threats.

WLI gathers water quality data throughout the Whitefish Lake watershed, provides it to the public and resource management agencies to support informed resource use, and generally serves as a sentinel of the lake.

At the same time, Mike knows WLI can't do this work alone.





“The health of the lake in the long term will depend on our citizens,” he said. “Whitefish Lake is the heart of this community, and everyone needs to embrace small changes they can make to ensure the lake remains clean and healthy.”

“People make a choice to live here largely because they fall in love with our natural amenities. But without continued vigilance, the lake that draws so many people here can be loved to death.”

Luckily for the lake, Mike sees evidence that residents are beginning to come on board. Demand has grown for WLI’s outdoor education programs for youth and adults. And when invasive zebra mussel larvae first appeared in central Montana in 2016, the community and the city council embraced WLI’s stepped-up management plan to keep AIS out of the watershed.

WLI and project partners now manage two watercraft inspection stations on the lake, as well as a decontamination station for high-risk watercraft just outside of town, and the program’s success is often cited statewide as an example to follow.

As executive director of WLI, Mike works to build relationships community-wide to make sure that support for the lake continues. Today, WLI counts the City of Whitefish, Whitefish Community Foundation, Whitefish School District, state agencies, and a host of businesses and local residents among its partners.

“I think I was naive when I started WLI,” Mike said. “But I found that if you’re passionate and persistent, others will help to make your organization grow.” ■

