

TOWN & COUNTRY

Lake group broadens its reach

Partnerships assist institute in expanding research, education efforts

By HEIDI DESCH
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Whitefish Lake Institute is expanding while remaining true to its core of education and scientific research.

The institute recently finalized two partnerships. One with the South Dakota-based Educational Travel Institute of America to coordinate a local Road Scholar program. The other is a partnership with the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the Flathead Basin Commission to manage a volunteer monitoring network and further work on Whitefish water quality.

The partnerships have allowed the institute to hire two employees to coordinate the programs. Lori Curtis is the new science and education director and coordinator for the Road Scholar program. Josh Gubits heads up the volunteer network.

Mike Koopal, the institute's executive director, credits the partnerships for allowing for the expansion and creation of Curtis and Gubits' positions. Since 2005, the non-profit has been performing scientific research and educational outreach to protect Whitefish area water resources. This work has been accomplished primarily by Koopal and scientist Chris Ruffatto and volunteers.

"We wouldn't be able to expand the scientific and education programs without them," he said.

Education

Before joining the institute Curtis published the "Flathead Watershed Sourcebook: A Guide to an Extraordinary Place." She coordinates the education program.

The Road Scholar program — formally known as Elderhostel — provides life-long learning programs. Curtis oversees the *Whitefish and Glacier National Park*-centered education programs geared toward senior citizens. Four programs totaling 20



Lori Curtis and Josh Gubits stand in front of an overcast Whitefish Lake. Both are heading up two new endeavors with Whitefish Lake Institute.

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weeks will be offered beginning this summer.

"This is an exciting opportunity to educate people," Curtis said. "Not only in Glacier Park, but in the wildlife urban interface."

During one class, institute staff will introduce participants to wetlands and then go on a field trip to the institute's wetland complex. The courses will teach 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 institute's primary education work has been with school-age children and through an internship program. The institute is looking to combine the two younger and older education programs to develop a new intergenerational program for 2012. The program would be offered to seniors and their grandchildren as an opportunity for educational travel.

Volunteer research

Gubits previously served as the field education coordinator for the Watershed Education Network in Missoula. He will apply his experience as the institute expands its use of citizen scientist volunteers for the Northwest Montana Lakes Volunteer Monitoring Network.

The monitoring network will collect data on 40 lakes throughout the region. Volunteers are trained on protocols and methodology for data collection. They take visual and weather observations, record temperatures and perform visual surveys for aquatic invasive species.

"It's amazing," Gubits said. "We're able to bring in a lot of volunteers. About 40 volunteers will contribute 800 volunteer hours each year — which is huge for us."

Partnerships with volunteers include Flathead Valley Community College, Salish Kootenai College and the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program.

"Volunteers go out on the lakes twice

per month, collect and submit information," Gubits said. "They learn about the aquatic environment. It's an opportunity to get involved."

The data will be used by management agencies to make decisions and to create public awareness of lake issues.

As program coordinator, Gubits recruits and trains volunteers and also serves as a staff environmental scientist collecting and interpreting field data to carry out work for the organization.

Economic benefit

The Institute crew sees the partnerships as a benefit to the local economy as well.

Besides the two full-time positions, 19 seasonal positions will be created as part of the partnerships. The seasonal positions are program leaders and field instructors that will lead the Road Scholar classes.

"Many of the instructors are biologists or retired persons with some expertise in Whitefish or Glacier National Park," Curtis said. "Some take vacation time to lead the programs and they're paid a stipend."

The Road Scholar program is expected to bring 700 participants through the area. These visitors will come from around the United States and are expected to bring revenue to hotels, restaurants and area businesses.

Koopal said the institute has provided education and science data, but the new positions and programs are a new way to give more.

"What I'm most excited about is giving back to the community," Koopal said. "We've been able to contribute third-party scientific data, but this helps us contribute to the economy. This is unique for a small environmental non-profit."

Volunteers are still needed for the 2011 field monitoring season which runs through September. For more information contact Gubits at 862-4327 or josh@whitefishlake.org.