



BC Lake Stewardship and Monitoring Program

Alta Lake 2005

A partnership between the BC Lake Stewardship Society (BCLSS)
and the Ministry of Environment



The Importance of Alta Lake & its Watershed

British Columbians want lakes to provide good water quality, aesthetics, and recreational opportunities. When these features are not apparent in our local lakes, people begin to wonder why. Concerns often include whether the water quality is getting worse, if the lake has been impacted by land development or other human activities, and what conditions will result from more development within the watershed.

The BC Lake Stewardship Society (BCLSS), in collaboration with the Ministry of Environment, has designed a program, entitled *The BC Lake Stewardship and Monitoring Program*, to address these concerns. Through regular water sample collections, we can come to understand a lake's current water quality, identify the preferred uses for a given lake, and monitor water quality changes resulting from land development within the lake's watershed. There are different levels of lake monitoring and assessment. The level appropriate for a particular lake depends on the funding and human resources available. In some cases, data collected as part of a Level I or II program can point to the need for a more in-depth Level III program. This report gives the results of a Level I program for Alta Lake for the first year of monitoring.

The BCLSS can provide communities with both lake-specific monitoring results and educational materials on general lake protection issues. This useful information can help communities play a more active role in the protection of the lake resource. Finally, this program allows government to use its limited resources efficiently with the help of local volunteers and BCLSS.

A **watershed** is defined as the entire area of land that moves the water it receives into a common waterbody. The term watershed is misused when describing only the land immediately around a waterbody or the waterbody itself. The true definition represents a much larger area than most people normally consider.

Watersheds are where much of the hydrologic cycle occurs and play a crucial role in the purification of water. Although no "new" water is ever made, it is continuously recycled as it moves through watersheds and other hydrologic compartments. The quality of the water resource is largely determined by a watershed's capacity to buffer impacts and absorb pollution.

Every component of a watershed (vegetation, soil, wildlife, etc.) has an important function in maintaining good water quality and a healthy aquatic environment. It is a common misconception that detrimental land use practices will not impact water quality if they are kept away from the area immediately surrounding a waterbody. Poor land use practices in a watershed can eventually impact the water quality of the downstream environment.



Alta Lake falls within the boundaries of the Resort Municipality of Whistler in the Coast Mountains. The lake has a surface area of 99.56 ha, perimeter of 5438 m and lies at an elevation of 641 m. The average depth of Alta Lake is 9.5 m, while the deepest spot is 24.4 m. The lake contains cutthroat trout, bull trout, kokanee, prickly sculpin, stickleback, and rainbow trout. Both the rainbow trout and kokanee populations are augmented with hatchery stocks.

Alta Lake is unique in that, historically it drained at both the north end into Alta Creek and at the south end into Nita and Alpha Lakes. Fluctuating lake water levels resulted in boggy shorelines at times of low water. This resulted in the ditching of Alta Creek and eventual placement of a dam to stabilize water levels. In addition, land and rail development at the south end cut off the drainage route to Nita Lake and the outflow of Alta Lake is now entirely redirected to the north end. Approximately 40% of shoreline is developed on Alta Lake, most as single family homes, with the remaining 60% designated as parkland. It is difficult to estimate the number of full time residents at Alta Lake as Whistler serves as a second home to many and has an abundant transient community.

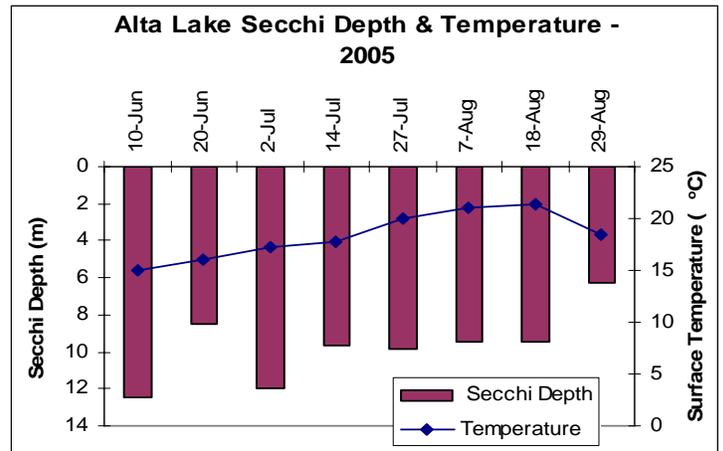
What's Going on Inside Alta Lake?

Temperature

Lakes show a variety of annual temperature patterns based on their location and depth. Most interior lakes, such as Alta Lake, form layers (stratify), with the coldest water at the bottom. Because colder water is more dense, it resists mixing into the warmer upper layer for much of the summer. In spring and fall, these lakes usually mix from top to bottom (overturn) as wind energy overcomes the reduced temperature and density differences between surface and bottom waters. In the winter, lakes re-stratify under ice with the densest water (4°C) near the bottom. These lakes are called dimictic lakes because they turn over twice per year. They are the most common type of lake in British Columbia.

Coastal lakes in BC are more often termed warm monomictic lakes because they turn over once per year. These lakes have temperatures that do not fall below 4°C. Warm monomictic lakes generally do not freeze and circulate freely in the winter at or above 4°C, and stratify only in the summer.

Ice-on and ice-off dates for BC lakes are important data for climate change research. Local residents report that Alta Lake freezes every year. By comparing these dates to climate change trends, we can examine how global warming is affecting our lakes. There are historic ice-on and ice-off dates for Alta Lake, dating back to 1942. In analyzing these dates, it shows that the ice-on date usually occurs in mid-December and ice-off is usually in mid-April. Also apparent from the data is that the ice-off date is much more variable than the ice-on date.



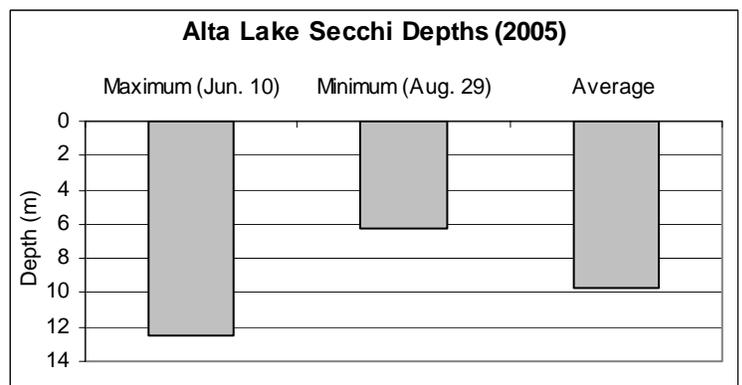
Surface temperature readings serve as an important indicator of the effects of climate change. By measuring surface temperature, we can record and compare readings from season to season and year to year. Surface temperature also helps to determine much of the seasonal oxygen, phosphorus, and algal conditions.

Temperature and Secchi depth were measured at one location on Alta Lake. The graph above illustrates the Alta Lake Secchi depth and temperature for 2005. The maximum surface temperature was 21.3 °C (August 18th) and the minimum surface temperature was 15.0 °C (June 10th).

Trophic Status and Water Clarity

The term *trophic status* is used to describe a lake's level of productivity and depends on the amount of nutrients available for plant growth, including tiny floating algae called phytoplankton. Algae are important to the overall ecology of the lake because they are food for zooplankton, which in turn are food for other organisms, including fish. In most lakes, phosphorus is the nutrient in shortest supply and thus acts to limit the production of aquatic life. When in excess, phosphorus accelerates growth and may artificially age a lake. Total phosphorus (TP) in a lake can be greatly influenced by human activities.

One measure of productivity is water clarity. The more productive a lake, the higher the algal growth and, therefore, the less clear the water becomes. The clarity of the water can be evaluated by using a Secchi disk, a black and white disk that measures the depth of light penetration.



Natural variation and trends in Secchi depth and temperature not only occur between years, but also throughout one season. For example, the upper graph indicates that the Secchi depth varied throughout the season, while the surface temperature increased over the summer (with the exception of the August 29 reading). Generally, as the temperature of the lake increases, so do some species of algae. Due to an increase in algae, the water clarity can decrease. This pattern is not evident for Alta Lake. Further monitoring of the lake will provide a better interpretation of data.

The graph on the previous page illustrates that the highest Secchi reading occurred in June (12.5 m) and the lowest reading occurred in August (6.3 m). The average Secchi reading for Alta Lake was 9.7 m. Alta Lake has been identified as a low productivity (oligotrophic) lake (Cascade Environmental Resource Group, 1999). The 2005 Secchi depths for Alta Lake reinforce this classification as they are all greater than the 5 m minimum for oligotrophic lakes. A single summer of Secchi depth provides only a *snapshot* of water quality within a lake. In order to get an overall idea of the health of an individual lake, the Secchi disk readings should be compared consistently over a number of years.

Land Use and Pollution Sources

Human activities that impact water bodies range from small, widespread and numerous *non-point* sources throughout the watershed to large *point* sources of concentrated pollution (e.g. outfalls, spills, etc.). Undisturbed watersheds have the ability to purify water and repair small amounts of damage from pollution and alteration. However, modifications to the landscape and increased levels of pollution impair this ability.

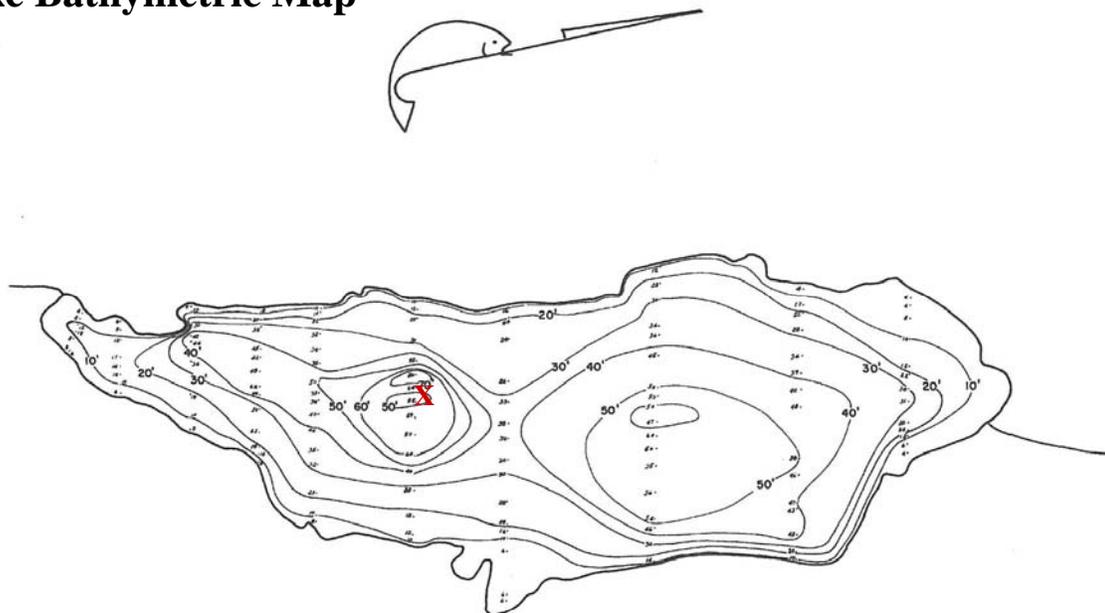
The Ministry of Environment believes the area immediately surrounding Alta Lake is likely to have the most influence on the lake's water quality. At this time, there are no obvious land use impacts on water quality in this area. Local residents are encouraged to ensure their septic systems are up to standard and that their land use activities are following good environmental practices. Further information can be found on the following page.

Should Further Monitoring be Done on Alta Lake?

The Ministry of Environment recommends a minimum of three years of monitoring to establish a water quality baseline. This time frame is preferred because if data is collected for only one or two years, there is the risk of only sampling during atypical weather or other environmental conditions that would not reflect the true nature of the water. In other words, three years of data helps take into account annual changes in local climate. Therefore, three years of consistently collected data is beneficial.

Local volunteer monitors are encouraged to keep recording ice-on and ice-off dates for long term climate change records. This information is important for climate change research. Please send ice-on and ice-off information to BCLSS so that it can be incorporated into climate change studies..

Alta Lake Bathymetric Map



X = sampling location

Map obtained from www.fishwizard.com



Tips to Keep Alta Lake Healthy

Onsite Sewage Systems

- Inspect your system yearly, and have the septic tank pumped every 2 to 5 years by a septic service company. Regular pumping is cheaper than having to rebuild a drain-field.
- Use phosphate-free soaps and detergents.
- Do not put toxic chemicals (paints, varnishes, thinners, waste oils, photographic solutions, or pesticides) down the drain because they can kill the bacteria at work in your onsite sewage system and can contaminate water-bodies.
- Conserve water: run the washing machine and dishwasher only when full and use only low-flow shower-heads and toilets.

Yard Maintenance, Landscaping and Gardening

- Minimize the disturbance of shoreline areas by maintaining natural vegetation cover.
- Minimize high-maintenance grassed areas.
- Replant lakeside grassed areas with native vegetation. Do not import fine fill.
- Use paving stones instead of pavement.
- Stop or limit the use of fertilizers and pesticides.
- Do not use fertilizers in areas where the potential for water contamination is high, such as sandy soils, steep slopes, or compacted soils.
- Do not apply fertilizers or pesticides before or during rain due to the likelihood of runoff.
- Hand pull weeds rather than using herbicides.
- Use natural insecticides such as diatomaceous earth. Prune infested vegetation and use natural predators to keep pests in check. Pesticides can kill beneficial and desirable insects, such as ladybugs, as well as pests.
- Compost yard and kitchen waste and use it to boost your garden's health as an alternative to chemical fertilizers.

Boating

- Do not throw trash overboard or use lakes or other water bodies as toilets.
- Use biodegradable, phosphate-free cleaners instead of harmful chemicals
- Conduct major maintenance chores on land.
- Keep motors well maintained and tuned to prevent fuel and lubricant leaks.
- Use absorbent bilge pads for minor leaks or spills.
- Recycle used lubricating oil and left over paints.
- Check for and remove all aquatic plant fragments from boats and trailers before entering or leaving a lake.
- Do not use metal drums in dock construction. They rust, sink and become unwanted debris. Use Styro-foam or washed plastic barrel floats. All floats should be labelled with the owner's name, phone number and confirmation that barrels have been properly maintained

Who to Contact for More Information

Ministry of Environment

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BC Lake Stewardship Society

Photo Credit:

www.sharphooks.com

Bathymetric Map Credit:

Fish Wizard (www.fishwizard.com)

Additional Resources

Cascade Environmental Resource Group. 1999. Alta Lake limnology study. Prepared for Resort Municipality of Whistler by Cascade Environmental Resource Group, Garibaldi Highlands, BC.

Confluence Environmental Consulting. 2005. Exploring carrying capacity and “acceptable change”: a study of recreation use, the environment and management of Alta Creek, Whistler, BC. Prepared for Parks and Recreation Department, Resort Municipality of Whistler by Confluence Environmental Consulting, Whistler, BC.