

TOWN & COUNTRY

Scholars study issues facing Whitefish Lake

By HEIDI DESCH
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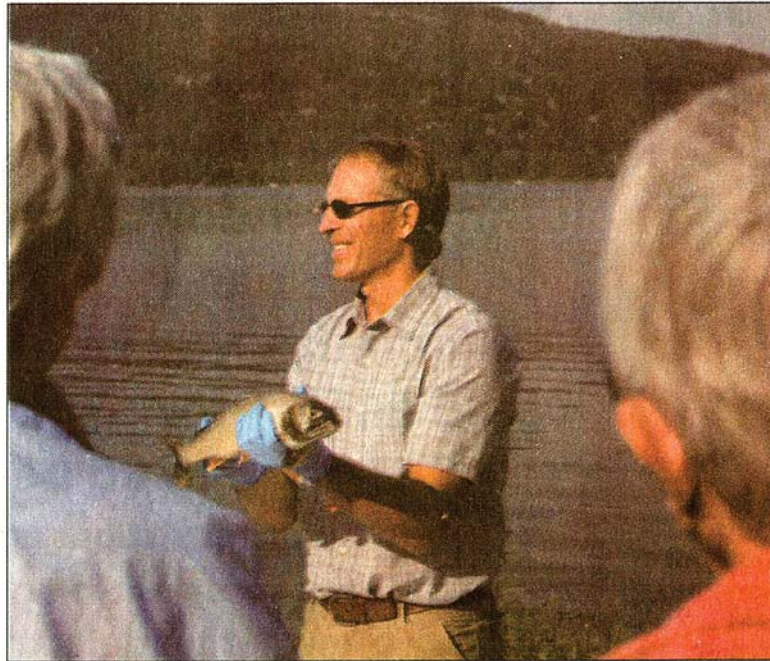
The time of human influence on Whitefish Lake has been relatively short, but still has changed its landscape.

That was the message the Whitefish Lake Institute Executive Director Mike Koopal tried to impress upon a group of Road Scholars visiting Whitefish Lake last week.

"We've been here 125 years," he said. "That's 1 percent of the lake's history."

Still, there has been great environmental pressure on the watershed from development and biological threats.

Koopal gave a group of about 20 a crash course in the history and concerns of Whitefish Lake. The program was part of a Road Scholar program — formally known as Elderhostel — which held Whitefish and Glacier National Park-centered education programs here this summer. The Whitefish Lake Institute has part-



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Whitefish Lake Institute Executive Director Mike Koopal holds up a fish before dissecting it Friday for members of the Road Scholar program.

nered with Road Scholar to bring participants to the area for educational series.

The participants came from all across the United States. Many of them were familiar with the issues

facing Whitefish Lake because they had seen similar things in their home states. They also wanted to know more.

"We want people to be excited about the resource," Koopal explained. "They can collect this information and take it back with them to their communities. They might be different ecosystems, but a lot of the issues are universal."

Koopal gave a short talk on the threats facing the lake and reasons why it's important to thwart those threats.

"The city draws part of its drinking water from Whitefish Lake," he said. "It's very important to residents to keep that water clean. Not only just for that, but also for contact exposure from recreation."

Historically Whitefish Lake has been changed with the introduction of non-native fish and mysis shrimp. Originally planted to improve feed for fish, the shrimp eventually negatively

impacted the fishery.

Future invasive species, such as the threat of zebra mussels, could change the lake again, he noted.

"Ecosystem could be in even more chaos if other (non-natives) are introduced," he said.

Development and timber harvest have had impacts on the lake as well, with runoff moving more easily into the lake, particularly during flood years.

"As timber harvest has increased so has sediment in Whitefish Lake resulting from flooding," Koopal said.

After getting a basic lesson on Whitefish Lake, the Road Scholars moved to the edge of Whitefish Lake for a fish dissection demonstration and lesson on water bugs. The scholars learned that fish have very good eyesight that includes seeing color and that a fish's scales have rings that tell its age. They also got to identify bugs taken from Viking Creek near the lake.