

New book shares community's history with Whitefish Lake

By DANIEL MCKAY
Whitefish Pilot

The story of Whitefish Lake is best told by the community.

That's the thinking behind "Voices of Our Lake," a new book published by the Whitefish Lake Institute that combines scientific reports with vignettes written by community members telling their personal history with the lake.

"We thought it would be interesting to ask the people who live here — some of them who've lived here all their lives — what's their connection to the lake? What's important about the lake to them?" Lori Curtis, Science & Education Director for WLI, said.

"It's a way of communicating science in a non-science way," added WLI's founder and executive director Mike Koopal.

Curtis said the idea for the book came after she and Koopal compiled pages upon pages of data for a full status report on the lake's health in 2015, the first of its kind.

However, that report



Mike Koopal and Lori Curtis of the Whitefish Lake Institute have woven science with personal recollections of Whitefish Lake in their new book, "Voices of Our Lake." (Daniel McKay/Whitefish Pilot)

was not exactly digestible to the average person, Curtis said.

"It would communicate to resource management agencies but not to regular people who live in Whitefish. It wasn't going to communicate to the public the condition or history of the lake and all these things that we worked so hard to learn and communicate. So we started thinking, 'What can we do to make a community-level project out

of it?'" she said.

Within the book are thoughts and memories from a variety of ages and walks of life in Whitefish.

Charlie Abell, who was born in Whitefish and spent all but a few years of his life here, attested to both the personal and community ties the lake has.

"The lake is a family heritage, having been associated with us for over 100 years," he writes

in the book. "We have fished in it, water skied on it, race boats on it, and been involved in protecting it through the Lakeshore Protection Committee and the Whitefish Lake Institute. I hope our community stories about the lake will encourage the community and resource managers to protect the lake and work to improve its water quality."

Someone who has spent relatively less years on the lake, seventh-grader Matthew Peschel, shares the ways he and his family enjoy Whitefish Lake and the reasons he feels strongly about protecting it.

"Lots of times our family goes to my grandparents' house on the lake, and we go on their boat and go swimming. It's a great way to cool off and spend our summer having fun," Peschel writes. "Whitefish Lake should be protected in order to keep a clean lake for people to enjoy."

Contributions for the book also come from Whitefish Mayor John

Muhlfeld, Whitefish Community Foundation President Linda Eng-Grady, Whitefish Chamber director Kevin Gartland and others.

Getting readers to connect with the ways other Whitefish residents enjoy the lake should be an effective way to get everyone thinking about the lake's health, Curtis said.

"General water quality is really tough because if you go out to the lake, it looks great. It generally looks good, and you can't see the things going on in the lake that are, over time, going cause it to become a less healthy lake," she said.

And while WLI can provide information on what's affecting Whitefish Lake, Koopal said it all comes down to the community's values.

"We report the data and make recommendations on how we can improve lake health, but it's really up to the community to make those changes and decide what their value system is for that lake."

Koopal and Curtis

noted that within the book are a variety of ways anyone can keep the lake's health in mind, such as adhering to the 200-foot no wake zone rules, leaving buffers of natural vegetation on lake front properties, getting septic tanks pumped and more.

Keeping the lake clean and healthy should be a goal for everyone in Whitefish, Koopal said, and the book shows how much the community cares already.

"What I've found since the early days of the institute is that water quality does transcend all age groups and political boundaries, and if there's anything in Whitefish that can bring a community together it's the lake," he said. "And I guess that's why this book is neat, because those voices come alive."

The book was funded through Whitefish Community Foundation and Cadeau Foundation grants and is available at the WLI office on East First Street.