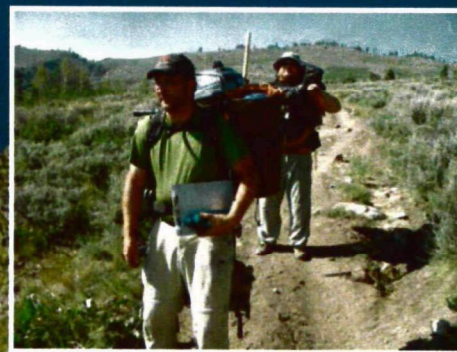
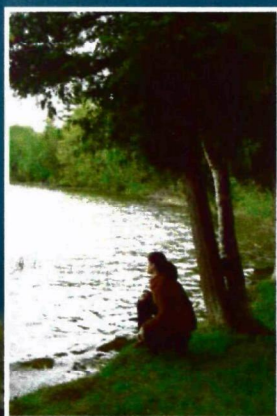




# National Lakes Assessment

## A Collaborative Survey of the Nation's Lakes

### DRAFT







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## Acknowledgements

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## Additional NLA Reports and Information

To augment the findings of this report, EPA is providing two additional reports. The first is the *National Lakes Assessment - Technical Report*. This report describes in detail the data analyses and scientific underpinnings of the results. It is intended to aid States and other institutions who would like a more in-depth explanation of the data analysis phase with the possible intention of replicating the survey at a smaller scale. [The Technical Report, Field Methods and Laboratory Protocols are currently available on EPA's web site at <http://www.epa.gov/owow/lakes/lakessurvey/>.] The second document is the *National Lakes Assessment - Supplemental Report*. Due to a number of reasons, EPA is not able to report at this time the results from several indicators (e.g., invasive species, sediment mercury, *enterococci*, and benthic macroinvertebrates). Work is on-going for each of these indicators and results will be published when complete.

For those wishing to access data from the survey to perform their own analyses, EPA is making flat files of the data available via the internet at the above address. Additionally, raw data and information on the sampled lakes will be uploaded to EPA's STOrage and RETrieval (STORET) warehouse at <http://www.epa.gov/STORET>.



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## Executive Summary

*"A lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature."*

These words by the American poet Henry David Thoreau underscore America's love of lakes. Lakes are places of reflection, relaxation, and repose, but like all our waters, they are being increasingly stressed. Growing anthropogenic pressures have prompted many governments, associations, and individuals to invest time in preserving or restoring the water quality of their lakes. To protect our nation's lakes, Americans must strive to understand how their actions as individuals and as a society are affecting them.

Under the Clean Water Act (CWA), the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) must report periodically on the condition of the nation's water resources by summarizing water quality information provided by the states. However, approaches to collecting and evaluating data vary from state to state, making it difficult to compare the information across states, on a nationwide basis, or over time. EPA and the states are continually working on ways to address this problem to improve water quality reporting.

Congress, environmental groups, and concerned citizens routinely ask EPA about the quality of the nation's waters with questions such as: What are the key problems in our waters? How widespread are the problems? Are there hotspots? Are we investing in water resource restoration and protection wisely? Are our waters getting cleaner? To better answer questions about

the condition of waters across the country, EPA along with its state and tribal partners have embarked on a series of surveys to be conducted under the National Aquatic Resource Surveys (NARS) program. This relatively new program provides statistically valid data and information vital to describing water resource quality conditions across the country and how these conditions vary with geographic setting as well as human and natural influences.

The National Lakes Assessment (NLA) is one in a series of annual NARS surveys. The NLA is the first statistical survey of the condition of our nation's lakes, ponds, and reservoirs.<sup>1</sup> Based on the sampling of over 1,000 lakes across the country, the survey results represent the state of nearly 50,000 natural and man-made lakes that are greater than 10 acres in area and over one meter deep. In the summer of 2007, lakes were sampled for their water quality, biological condition, habitat conditions, and recreational suitability. Field crews used the same methods at all lakes to ensure that results were nationally comparable. Analysts analyzed the results against a reference condition. Reference conditions were derived from a set of lakes that were determined to be the least disturbed lakes for a region.



<sup>1</sup>The full report including technical supporting documents is available on-line at <http://www.epa.gov/owow/lakes/lakesurvey>.

## Key Findings

**Biological Quality** - 56% of the nation's lakes are in good biological condition. Natural lakes are more than one-and-a-half times more likely to be healthy than man-made lakes (Figure ES-1).

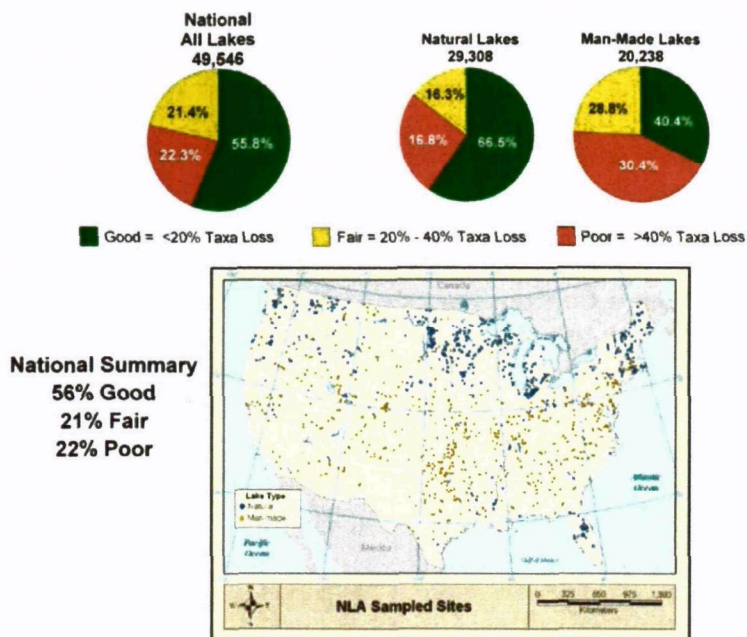


Figure ES-1. Biological condition of lakes nationally and based on lake origin.

**Lake Physical Habitat** - Of the stressors included in the NLA, poor lakeshore habitat is the biggest problem in the nation's lakes; over one-third exhibit poor shoreline condition. Poor biological health is three times more likely in lakes with poor lakeshore habitat (Figure ES-2).

**Nutrients** - About 20% of lakes in the U.S. have high levels of phosphorus and nitrogen. High nutrient levels are the second biggest problem in lakes. Lakes with excess nutrients are two-and-a-half times more likely to have poor biological health (Figure ES-2).

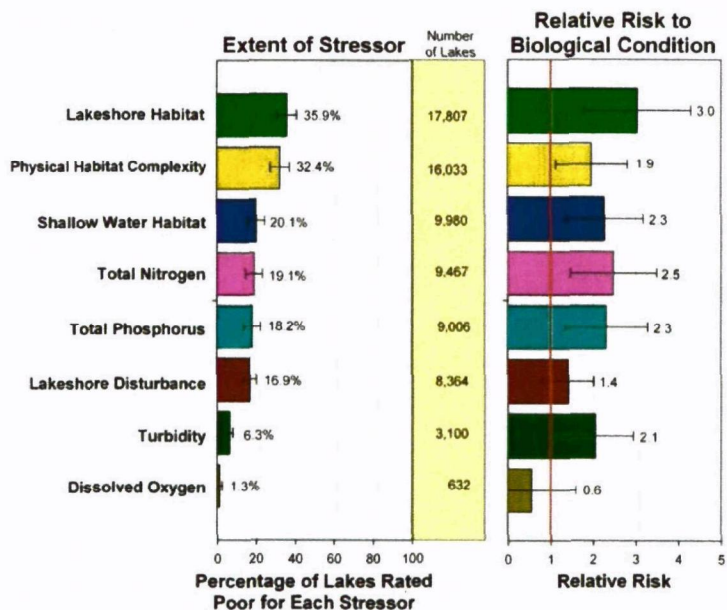


Figure ES-2. Extent of stressor and relative risk of stressor to biological condition.



**Algal Toxins** - The NLA conducted the first-ever national study of algal toxins in lakes. Microcystin – a toxin that can harm humans, pets, and wildlife - was found to be present in about one-third of lakes and at levels of concern in 1% of lakes.

**Fish Tissue Contaminants** - A parallel study on fish tissue shows that mercury concentrations in game fish exceed health based limits in about half of lakes (49%); polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) at potential levels of concern are found in 17% of the lakes.

**Trophic Condition** - The NLA establishes the first nationally consistent baseline of trophic status. Over 36% of the nation's lakes are mesotrophic, based on chlorophyll-*a* concentrations.

**Changes in Trophic Condition** - When compared to a subset of wastewater-impacted lakes 35 years ago, trophic status improved in one-quarter (26%) of those lakes (Figure ES-3). This indicates that investments in wastewater pollution control are working.

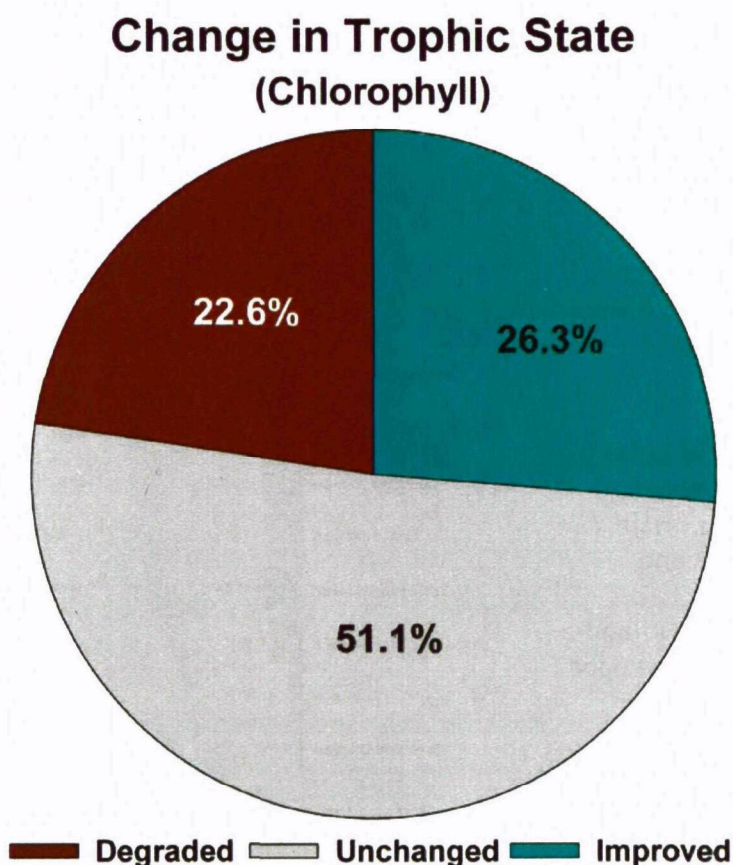


Figure ES-3. Proportion of NES lakes that exhibited improvement, degradation, or no change in trophic state based on the comparison of the 1972 National Eutrophication Survey and the 2007 National Lakes Assessment.

## Implications

As these results show, EPA and its state and tribal partners have begun to answer important national questions about the condition of the country's lakes. The results establish a national baseline status for future monitoring efforts which can be used to track scientifically credible trends in lake conditions. Successive surveys will help answer the question "Are our lakes getting better?"

For water resource managers, policymakers, boaters, swimmers, and others, the NLA findings suggest:

- Our lakes are vulnerable to excess human disturbances. This finding supports reports from state lake management programs which increasingly report that development pressures on lakes are steadily growing.
- Poor habitat condition imparts a significant stress on lakes and could suggest the need for stronger management of lakeshore development.

Managers, residents, businesses, and community leaders should work together and enhance their efforts to preserve, protect, and restore their lakes and the natural environment surrounding them.



# CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION



## *IN THIS CHAPTER*

- ▶ A Highly Valued and Valuable Resource
- ▶ Why a National Survey?
- ▶ The National Aquatic Resource Surveys



## Chapter 1 Introduction

### A Highly Valued and Valuable Resource

For anyone who went fishing as a child, water-skiing as a teen, or bird-watching as an adult, lakes are special places. Healthy lakes enhance the quality of life. In addition to supplying people with essential needs like drinking water, food, fiber, medicine, and energy, a lake's ecosystem is important in providing habitat for wildlife, recreation, aesthetics, reducing the frequency and severity of floods, shaping landscapes, and affecting local and regional climates. Lakes provide habitat for wildlife and enjoyment for people while supporting intrinsic ecological integrity for all living things.

It is difficult to put a price on a natural treasure. Certainly, from a vacationer's perspective, lakes are invaluable, providing endless enjoyment and relaxation year-round. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 30 million Americans went fishing in 2006 and \$30 billion was spent on recreational fishing. Locally, this translates into important economic and recreational benefits. For example, Lake Champlain, on the border of Vermont and New York, has over 65 beaches and 98 fishing-related businesses. According to the 2003 Lake Champlain Management Plan, in 1998 a total of \$3.8 billion was generated from tourism. As more and more people use lakes for their livelihood, the competition for lake resources will continue.

Protecting lake ecosystems is crucial not only to protecting this country's public and economic health, but also to preserving and restoring the natural environment for all aquatic and terrestrial living things. Lake protection and preservation can only

be achieved by making informed lake management policy decisions at and across all jurisdictional levels.

### Why a National Survey?

Water resource monitoring in the U.S. has been conducted by many different organizations over many decades using a variety of techniques. States and tribes conduct monitoring to support many Clean Water Act (CWA) programs. Section 305(b) of the CWA requires the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to report periodically on the condition of the nation's water resources by summarizing information provided by the states. Yet approaches to collecting and assessing data vary from state to state, making it difficult to compare the information across states or on a nationwide basis. Each of these monitoring efforts provides useful information relative to the goals of the individual programs, but integrating the data to form a nationwide assessment has been difficult.





In recent years, a number of reports have identified the need for improved water quality monitoring and analysis at a national scale. Among these, the General Accounting Office (2000) reported that EPA and states cannot make statistically valid assessments of water quality and lack the data to support key management decisions. The National Research Council (2001) recommended that EPA and states promote a uniform, consistent approach to water monitoring and data collection to better support core water management programs. The National Academy of Public Administration, in their 2002 report entitled: *Understanding What States Need to Protect Water Quality*, concluded that improved water quality monitoring is necessary to help state agencies make better decisions and use limited resources more effectively. These reports underscore the need for more efficient and cost-effective ways to understand the magnitude and extent of water quality problems, the causes of these problems, and practical ways to address the problems.

### **The National Aquatic Resource Surveys**

To bridge this information gap, EPA, other federal agencies, states and tribes are collaborating to provide the public with improved environmental information. Statistical surveys are one way of addressing water resource assessment needs. By choosing a statistical design with standardized field and laboratory protocols, the EPA, states and tribes are able to analyze data that are nationally consistent and representative of waterbodies throughout the U.S. These statistical surveys offer a cost-effective and scientifically valid way to fulfill statutory requirements, complement traditional monitoring programs, and support

a broader range of management decisions. The surveys are designed to answer such questions as:

- What is the extent of waters that support a healthy biological condition, recreation, and fish consumption?
- How widespread are major stressors that impact water resource quality?
- Are we investing in water resource restoration and protection wisely?
- Are our waters getting cleaner?

### **State Water Quality Reports**

Under section 305(b) of the Clean Water Act the states must submit biannual reports on the quality of their water resources. According to the most recently published National Water Quality Inventory Report, 2004, the states assessed little over a third of the nation's waters — 37% or 14.8 million acres of the nation's 40.6 million acres of lakes, ponds and reservoirs. Of the lakes that were assessed, over half, 58% or 8.6 million acres, were identified as impaired or not supporting one or more of their designated uses such as fishing or swimming. The states cited nutrients, metals (such as mercury), sewage, sedimentation and nuisance species as the top causes of impairment. Leading known sources of impairment included agricultural activities and atmospheric deposition, although for many lakes, the sources of impairment remain unidentified.



To help fulfill the need for nationwide statistical surveys, the National Aquatic Resources Survey (NARS) program was established in 2005. The specific goals of NARS are to generate scientifically valid information on the condition of water resources at national and ecoregional scales, establish baseline information for future trends assessment, and assist states and tribes in enhancing their water monitoring and assessment programs. The focus of NARS is on lakes as groups, or populations, rather than individual lakes. For example, a local lake manager and perhaps a state manager will be interested in Lake Okeechobee, Florida, and the changes it has experienced in nutrients over the past 30 years. The NARS assessments will focus more on the percentage of all lakes that have experienced changes in nutrient status over time. This is similar to public health where an individual and their physician track that person's weight, whereas national public health policy is driven more by the percentage of people in the country that are classified as obese.

The national statistical surveys and other statistical surveys have begun to provide answers to water resource questions with a known level of confidence. Working with its partners in states, tribes, territories, and other federal agencies, EPA has in recent years conducted statistical surveys of coastal

waters, rivers and streams, and contaminants in lake fish tissue. The agency's plans are to survey each of the five waterbody types, (lakes, rivers, streams, wetlands, and estuaries), on a 5-year rotating basis. EPA and its partners anticipate that the national surveys will continue to foster collaboration across jurisdictional boundaries, build state and tribal infrastructure and capacity for enhanced monitoring efforts, and achieve a robust set of statistically-sound data for better, more informed water resource quality management policies and decisions.

The National Lakes Assessment (NLA) is one component of the National Aquatic Resource Surveys. This report summarizes the first-ever assessment of lakes across the continental United States using consistent protocols and a modern, scientifically-defensible statistical survey approach.

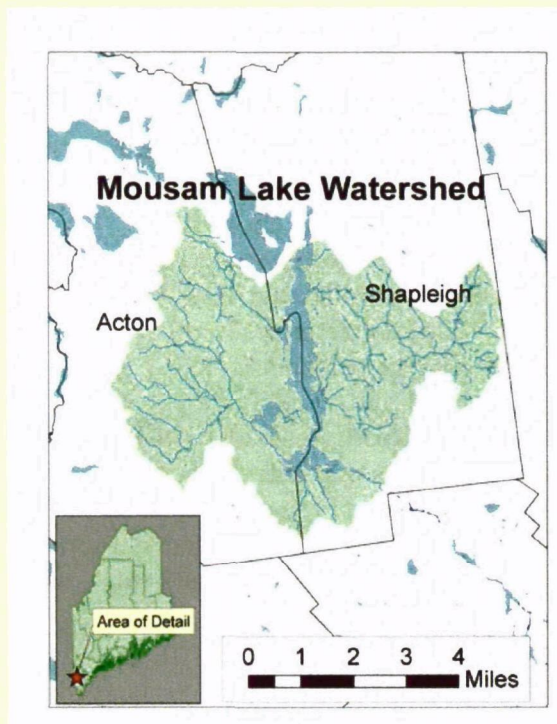
### Using the National Aquatic Resource Surveys

Because of their scientific credibility, results from these surveys are being used in other scientific contexts. Most notably is the recent Heinz Center Report; *The State of the Nation's Ecosystems*, 2008. The Heinz Center's report is designed to provide a high level, comprehensive and scientifically sound account on the state of the nation's ecosystems. The Heinz Center uses data derived from EPA's Wadeable Streams Assessment report and National Coastal Conditions Report in answering a number of outstanding questions about surface water health in our country. Information from ongoing and upcoming national surveys will help fill gaps identified for other water resources and show trends in national water quality.



# HIGHLIGHT

## Think Globally — Act Locally. Restoring Mousam Lake



"Every little bit helps," is perhaps the fundamental tenet of the estimated 3,000 to 4,000 local watershed groups across the country. Many communities are proving that they can make a noticeable difference in their neighborhood water resource. In York County, Maine, the Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and the Mousam Lake Regional Association (MLRA) together with residents, townships, state agencies and others embarked on the Mousam Lake Water Quality Improvement Project. With widespread collaboration and a little bit of funding, they were able to clean up an impaired lake.

### Confronting Environmental Challenges

Mousam Lake, a 863-acre lake located at the southern point of Maine, is a popular spot for boaters, anglers, and vacationers with its sandy shores and excellent cold and warm water trout fisheries. However, this 21- square mile watershed suffered from suburbanization and the conversion of forested land to driveways and parking lots. The lake's shoreline is heavily developed with over 700 seasonal and year-round homes and a heavily used boat ramp. For the past

several decades, Mousam Lake has endured increased soil erosion and pollution from stormwater runoff from home construction, lawns, roads, and failing septic systems. Higher levels of phosphorus has led to increased algal growth, decreased water clarity and lower levels of dissolved oxygen. In the 2003 Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) assessment, excess phosphorus was identified as the major impairment. This downward trend in water quality resulted in a steady decline in the lake's once viable ecology and that of its surrounding aquatic habitats. Maine's Department of Environmental Protection (MDEP) attributes the problem to soil erosion and polluted runoff from residential properties and camp roads and effluent from inadequate septic systems located in the sandy soils around the lake. The TMDL assessment estimated that to meet Maine water quality standards, the annual amount of phosphorus reaching the lake would need to be reduced by 27%.

### A Decade of Effort

Since 1997, the York County SWDC, MLRA, MDEP, and the towns of Acton and Shapleigh have been working together to address sources of pollution in Mousam Lake and foster long-term watershed stewardship. In 1999, the Mousam Lake Water Quality Improvement Project began. With help from EPA, the Maine Department of Transportation and the Maine Department of Agriculture, negotiated cost share agreements with public and private landowners and best management practices were initiated at 45 priority sites. Technical assistance was provided to another 77 landowners. Projects included stabilizing shoreline erosion, improving gravel road surfaces and installing and/or upgrading roadside drainages. Twenty-one roads were repaired. In 2001, the Lake Youth Conservation Corps program was established to help with the implementation of best management practices, raise local awareness and commitment



to lake protection, and involve local youth in environmental stewardship. Since 2007, the youth have completed over 115 projects and continue to repair an average of 18 sites each year with annual support from the towns of Acton and Shapleigh. The total cost for the project was \$1.1 million with local townspeople and others contributing over \$400,000 in matching funds or in-kind services.

### A Cleaner, Healthier Lake

In 1998 MDEP designated Mousam Lake as impaired and added it to the state's section 303(d) list of waters not meeting water quality standards, a requirement of the federal Clean Water Act. From 1999 through 2006, a galvanized community tackled the problem and in 2007, monitoring results indicated that pollution loads in the lake were reduced by more than 150 tons/per year of sediment and 130 pounds/per year of phosphorus. Water clarity depth has increased by a full meter from what it was in the lake ten years ago. Today, erosion control projects continue thus keeping an estimated 76 tons of sediment and 64 pounds of phosphorus out of the lake each year. In 2006, Mousam Lake was removed from the state's 303(d) list of impaired waters.

Staff and a small cadre of local leaders are continuing their campaign to keep the lake in good health. Community outreach and education activities are ongoing to inform residents on how they can help. As part of the project, numerous newsletters have gone to every household in the watershed; MLRA holds annual meetings; the SWCD conducts workshops and delivers presentations; 30 construction sites have been acknowledged with "Gold Star" signs for environmental stewardship; and more than 200 homeowners attended one of the thirteen "Septic Socials" to learn about septic system function, proper maintenance and water conservation.

### Every Little Bit Helps

In many, many instances, small, local efforts can provide incentives and moral support for others. The success of the Mousam Lake project has inspired protection efforts on several neighboring lakes. The Acton Wakefield Watershed Alliance, the Square Pond Association, and the Loon Pond Association are now busy with their own restoration activities. For more information or tips from the people at Mousam Lake, contact Joe Anderson at York County SWCD at (207) 324-0888, [janderson@yorkswcd.org](mailto:janderson@yorkswcd.org) or Wendy Garland (MDEP) at (207) 822-6320, [wendy.garland@maine.gov](mailto:wendy.garland@maine.gov).



Vegetated buffer planting by Master Gardeners.





## CHAPTER 2. DESIGN OF THE LAKES SURVEY



### *IN THIS CHAPTER*

- ▶ Areas Covered by the Survey
- ▶ Selecting Lakes
- ▶ Lake Extent - Natural and Man-Made Lakes
- ▶ Choosing Indicators
- ▶ Field Sampling
- ▶ Setting Expectations





## Chapter 2

# Design of the Lakes Survey

Lakes in the U.S. are as varied and unique as the landscape surrounding them. Receding glaciers formed thousands of lakes in the northwestern, upper midwestern, and northeastern parts of the country. Glacial action formed the Finger Lakes in New York, the Adirondack region, the kettle ponds in New England, as well as numerous lakes and “prairie potholes” located in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, and the Dakotas. In contrast, Oregon’s Crater Lake is a water-filled volcanic depression, as is Yellowstone Lake in Wyoming. Lake Tahoe in California and Pyramid Lake in Nevada were formed by tectonic action. Along major rivers, like the Mississippi, oxbow lakes were formed from meandering river channels. Similarly, damming of the Columbia River and the Colorado River has created large man-made lakes and reservoirs. Smaller previously impounded streams comprise thousands of man-made lakes that provided energy for mills during industrialization. Natural lakes are scarce across the southern U.S. Many of

the lakes in the arid southwestern and the humid southeastern U.S. are man-made lakes or reservoirs. The NLA survey included examples of all of these lake types.

## Areas Covered By the Survey

The NLA encompasses the lakes, ponds and reservoirs of the continental U.S. This land comprising the lower 48 states includes private, state, tribal and federal land. Although not included in this report, a lake-sampling project is underway in Alaska. It should also be noted that Hawaii does not have any lakes and thus was not included. Information from the NLA is also presented both for natural and man-made lakes because of the expectation that natural and man-made lakes might be of different biological condition or respond to stressors in different ways.

NLA results are reported for the continental U.S. and for 9 ecological regions (ecoregions). Areas are included in an ecoregion based on similar landform and climate characteristics (see Chapter 6 and Figure 20). Assessments were conducted at the ecoregion level because the patterns of response to stress are often best understood in a regional context. Some states participating in the NLA assessed lake condition at an even finer state-scale resolution than the ecoregional scale by sampling additional random sites within their state boundaries. Although these data are included in the analysis described in this report, state-scale results are not presented.



## Alaska's Lake Assessment



The State of Alaska is about one-fifth the land mass of the continental U.S. Most of it is sparsely populated with extremely limited access. This limited access has helped preserve its rugged beauty and abundant natural resources. But Alaska is facing pressure from climate change and natural resource development. In the populated areas, the main causes for waterbody pollution are urban runoff and agricultural activity.

There are an estimated 3 million lakes in Alaska. Instead of being a full participant in the National Lakes Survey, the State of Alaska opted to conduct a regional assessment. It focused on the Cook Inlet Basin, an area located in the southcentral part of the state, and at 39,325 Square miles, is slightly smaller than the state of Kentucky. The State selected this area because the only agricultural activity of significance occurs within the Cook Inlet Basin.

Alaska's lake assessment began in 2007 with a pilot study of four lakes. This pilot study was focused on access and coordinating logistics of sampling, procedures, and analysis. In 2008, the full project was completed with sampling of 50 lakes in the Cook Inlet ecoregion. The field crew was from the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation and the University of Alaska Anchorage Environment & Natural Institute. In addition to the National Lakes Assessment indicators, fish tissue for metals and mercury, sediment trace metals, and core dating were added to the study.

To date, all water chemistry, habitat, and lake profile data has been analyzed. Biological indicators, sediment metals and mercury, and fish tissue samples are currently being analyzed. All data collected must undergo quality assurance review before a final release of the data. However, initial results indicate that lakes in the Cook Inlet ecoregion of Alaska are healthy.

## Selecting Lakes

Since a census of every lake in the country is cost prohibitive and beyond the reach of any program, EPA used a statistical sampling approach incorporating state-of-the-art survey design techniques developed by its research program. The first step, to ascertain the number of lakes in the country, was challenging because there is no comprehensive list or source for all lakes in the U.S. The best resource available is the USGS/EPA National Hydrography Dataset or NHD. The NHD is a multi-layered series of digital maps that reveal topography, area, flow, location, and other attributes of the nation's surface waters. When queried,

NHD has 389,005 features listed that could potentially be lakes, ranging in size from less than 1 hectare (2.4 acres) up to the largest lakes in the country. Many were excluded at the outset for a number of reasons, such as being a wetland. Figure 1 illustrates the sample framework for the survey.

Initial discussion by states and EPA regarding the scope of the survey focused on the size of lakes that were to be considered in the target population. It was agreed that, to be included, the site had to be a natural or man-made freshwater lake, pond or reservoir, greater than 10 acres (4 hectares), at least 3.3 feet (1 meter) deep, and with a minimum of a quarter acre (0.1 hectare) open water. The Great Lakes and the Great Salt Lake



were not included in the survey, nor were commercial treatment and/or disposal ponds, brackish lakes, or ephemeral lakes. After applying the criteria, 68,223 waterbodies were considered lakes by the NLA definition and thus comprised the target population.

Other factors in lake selection included accessibility. In some cases, crews were either denied permission by the landowner or unable to reach the lake for safety reasons, such as sharp cliffs or unstable ridges. Using data from the crews' experience, it was estimated that 27% or 18,677 lakes fell into this category. This leaves 49,546 lakes the NLA data is able to assess which is called the inference population. In the end, a total of 909 lakes were sampled in the survey. These 909 lakes will represent the population. For quality assurance purposes, 10%, or 91, of the target lakes were randomly selected for a second sampling later in the summer, bringing the total sampling incidents to 1,000. Because of the selection process, the sampled NLA lakes represent 49,546 lakes or 73% of the target population. Thus, throughout this report, percentages reported for a given indicator are relative to the 49,546 lakes. For example, if the condition is described as poor for 10% of lakes nationally, this means that the number of lakes estimated to be poor for that indicator is 4,955 lakes. As an added feature, some of the survey sites were part of EPA's 1972 National Lake Eutrophication Study (NES).

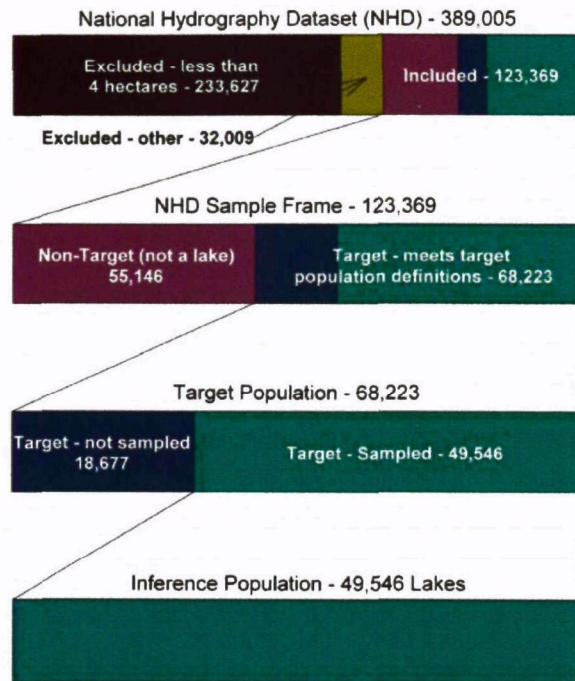


Figure 1. The process of lake selection from NHD and the elimination of potential waterbodies for sampling at various

By including this subset of lakes EPA hoped to be able to evaluate changes that occurred between the 1970s and 2007.

In conjunction with the national survey, a number of states opted to sample additional lakes to achieve a state-wide probabilistic survey. EPA provided a list of additional lakes to the states so that any state wishing to conduct a state-scale statistical survey could do so. Sampling and processing methods from these additional lakes had to adhere to both the national field and laboratory protocols. Nine states (MI, WI, IN, MN, TX, OK, ID, OR and WA) took advantage of the opportunity and the results from the additional sites were analyzed along with the national data. Some states increased the number of sites, but only collected a subset of indicators. Still other states opted to expand the list of indicators to address issues specific to their state; for example, Minnesota used its state-scale survey to assess pesticides.



Figure 2 shows the location of the lakes that were sampled for the NLA. In total, 1,028 lake sites were sampled and included in the survey estimates (909 national target sites; 119 state added sites). The surveyed lakes cover an area of 3.8 million acres of surface water spread across the national landscape.

The site selection for the survey ensures that EPA can make unbiased estimates concerning the health of the waters throughout the nation with statistical confidence. The greater the number of sites sampled, the more confidence in the

results. The number of sites included in the survey allows EPA to determine the percentage of lakes nationwide and within predetermined ecoregions that exceed a threshold of concern with 95% confidence. In the graphs throughout this report, the margin of error is provided as thin lines on either side of the bars and represent the 95% confidence interval for the estimate. For national estimates, the margin of error around the NLA findings is approximately  $\pm 5\%$  and for ecoregions the margin of error is approximately  $\pm 15\%$ .

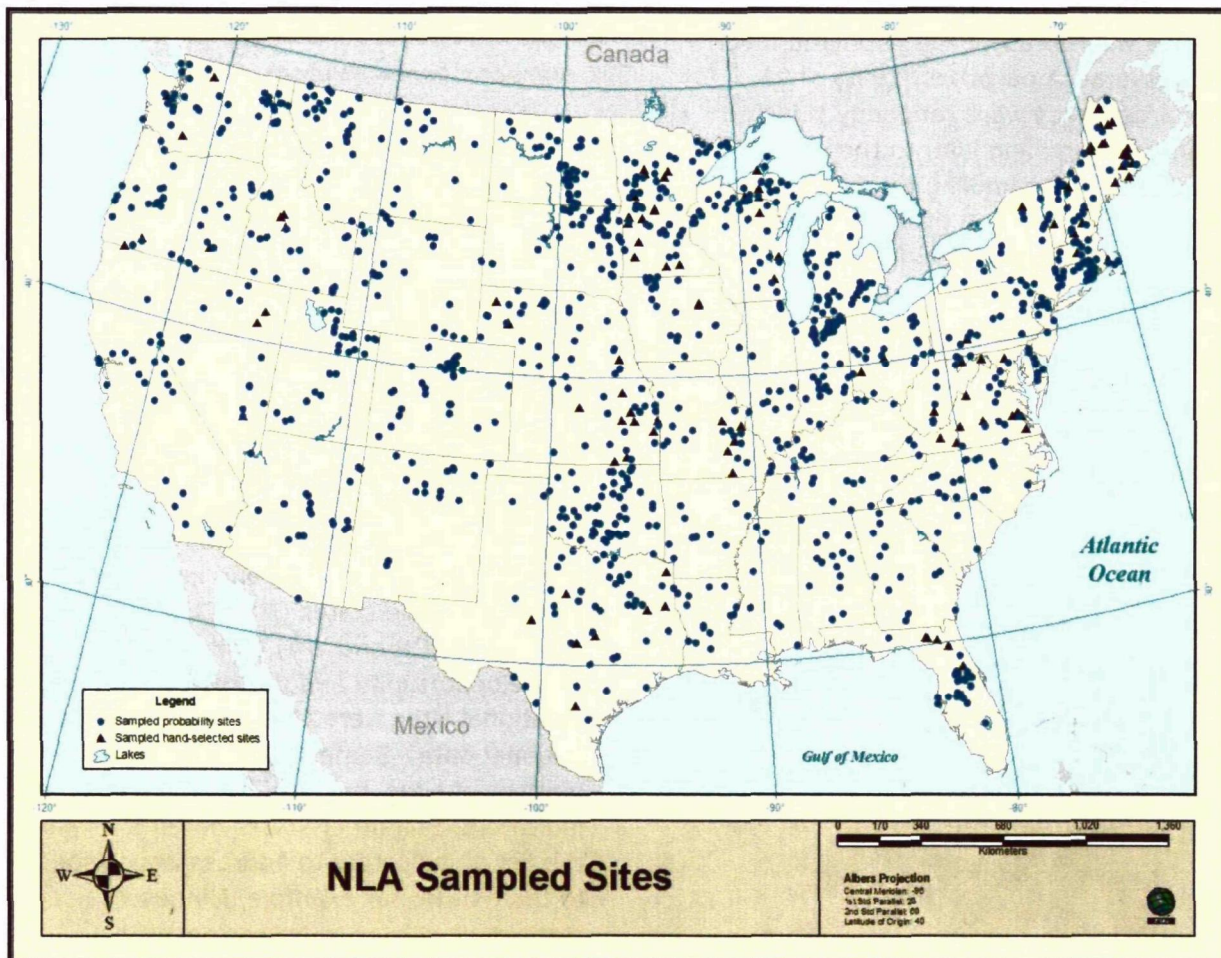


Figure 2. Location of lakes sampled in the NLA.



## Lake Extent - Natural and Man-made Lakes

NLA analysts, comprised of lake science experts both within and outside the Agency, carefully examined available records for each sampled lake to determine its origin, using the guideline that lakes that existed pre-European settlement are considered natural, even if presently augmented by means of an impoundment or other earthworks. Using this operational definition, 41% of the estimated 49,546 lakes are man-made reservoirs, while 59% are of natural origin. This means that nearly one-half of today's lakes were not here when the colonists arrived.

Natural lakes come in many different sizes and man-made lakes do as well. While many people hold the image of man-made lakes as large reservoirs, most man-made lakes are relatively small. A total of 52% of man-made lakes are 10-25 acres (4-10 hectares) in size compared with only 34% of the natural lakes in that small lake size category. Large lakes, over 12,500 acres (5,000 hectares), are rare in the U.S., comprising only 0.3% of natural lakes and 0.6% of man-made lakes (Figure 3).

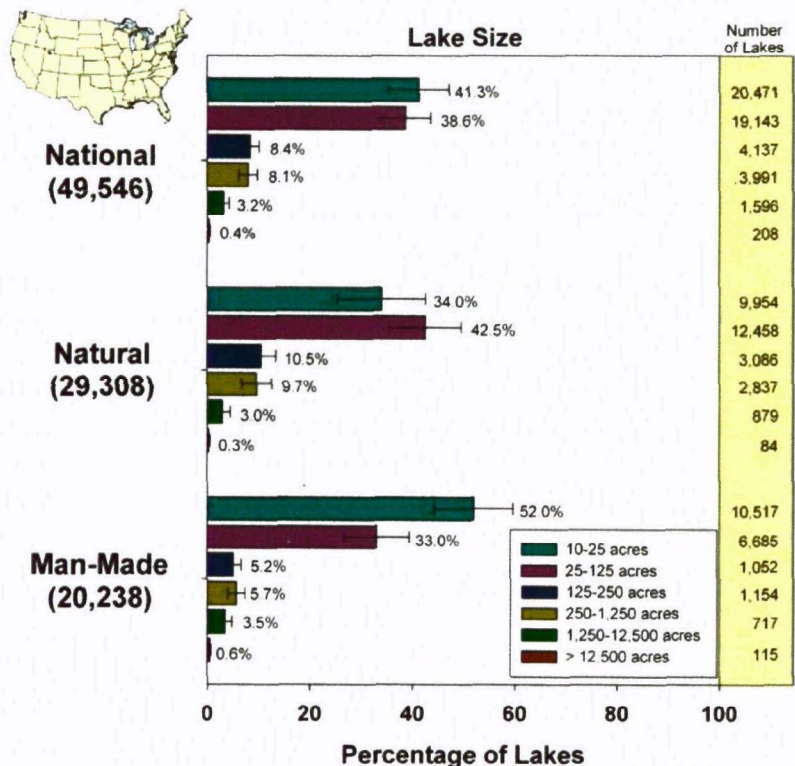


Figure 3. Size distribution of lakes in the U.S. overall and for natural and man-made lakes.

## Choosing Indicators

Scientists and lake managers recognize that lake ecosystems are dynamic and indicators selected to characterize lakes must represent important aspects of water resource quality. For the NLA, a suite of chemical, physical and biological indicators were chosen to assess biological integrity, trophic state, recreational suitability, and key stressors impacting the biological quality of lakes.

Although there are many more indicators and/or stressors that affect lakes, NLA analysts believe these to be the most representative at a national scale. The NLA survey marks the first time all these indicators have been applied consistently and simultaneously to lakes on a national scale.



Biological	Recreational	Water Quality	Physical Habitat
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sediment diatoms</li> <li>• Phytoplankton (algae)</li> <li>• Zooplankton</li> <li>• Benthic macroinvertebrates*</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pathogens*(<i>enterococci</i>)</li> <li>• Algal toxin (microcystins)</li> <li>• Algal cell counts (Cyanobacteria)</li> <li>• Algal density (chlorophyll-<i>a</i>)</li> <li>• Sediment mercury*</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nutrients (phosphorus &amp; nitrogen)</li> <li>• Water column profile (dissolved oxygen, temperature, pH, turbidity, acid neutralizing capacity, salinity)</li> <li>• Algal density (chlorophyll-<i>a</i>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lakeshore habitat cover and structure</li> <li>• Shallow water habitat cover and structure</li> <li>• Lakeshore human disturbance</li> <li>• Invasive species*</li> </ul>

\* These indicators are still under evaluation and are not included in this report. A supplemental report will be issued with these results.

For this survey, NLA analysts used phytoplankton and zooplankton as the main biological endpoints for lake condition. Diatoms, a type of phytoplankton, are also used to look at biological condition. To address recreational/human health related concerns, the NLA looked at actual levels of the algal toxin, microcystin, along with cyanobacterial cell counts and chlorophyll-*a* concentrations as indicators of the potential for the presence of algal toxins. Although fish samples were not collected in the survey, NLA analysts also looked at the findings of a parallel study of contaminants in fish tissue. For the NLA, cyanobacteria levels are used as the primary end point for recreational condition. Chlorophyll-*a* was used to assess trophic status.

Both physical and chemical stressor indicators were measured. Shorelines affect biological communities in many ways, such as providing food and shelter for aquatic wildlife, and by moderating the magnitude, timing, and pathways of water, sediment, and nutrient inputs. Shorelines also buffer the lake from human activities. Water quality characteristics, such as nutrient levels and dissolved oxygen, create environments essential for aquatic organisms to survive and grow. At the bottom of the lake, sediment diatoms, a type of algae that live

on the bottom and leave fossil remains, allow examination of current water quality conditions, such as phosphorus levels, along with historical conditions. These indicators were selected because water quality stressors impact the biological health of lakes– from primary producers (phytoplankton or algae) to small openwater animals (zooplankton) to macroinvertebrates (insects, mollusks and crustaceans) and fish.

## Field Sampling

In preparation for the survey, each target lake was screened to verify that it met the inclusion criteria. Throughout the summer of 2007, 86 field crews, consisting of 2 to 4 people each, sampled lakes from Maine to California. To ensure consistency in data collection and quality assurance, the crews attended a three-day training session, used standardized field methods and data forms, and followed strict quality control protocols including field audits.





At each lake site, crews collected samples at a single station located at the deepest point in the lake and at ten stations around the lake perimeter (Figure 4). At the mid-lake station, depth profiles for temperature, pH, and dissolved oxygen were taken with a calibrated water quality probe meter or multi-probe sonde. A Secchi disk was used to measure water clarity and depth at which light penetrates the lake or the euphotic zone. NLA analysts used these vertical profile measurements to determine the extent of stratification and the availability of the appropriate temperature regime and level of available oxygen necessary to support aquatic life. Single grab water samples were collected to measure nutrients, chlorophyll-*a*, phytoplankton, and the algal

toxin microcystin. Zooplankton samples were collected using a fine mesh (80µm) and course mesh (243µm) conical plankton net. A sediment core was taken to provide data on sediment diatoms and mercury levels. The top and bottom layer of the sediment core was analyzed to detect possible changes in diatom assemblages over a period of time.

Along the perimeter of the lake, crews collected data and information on the physical characteristics that affect habitat suitability. Information

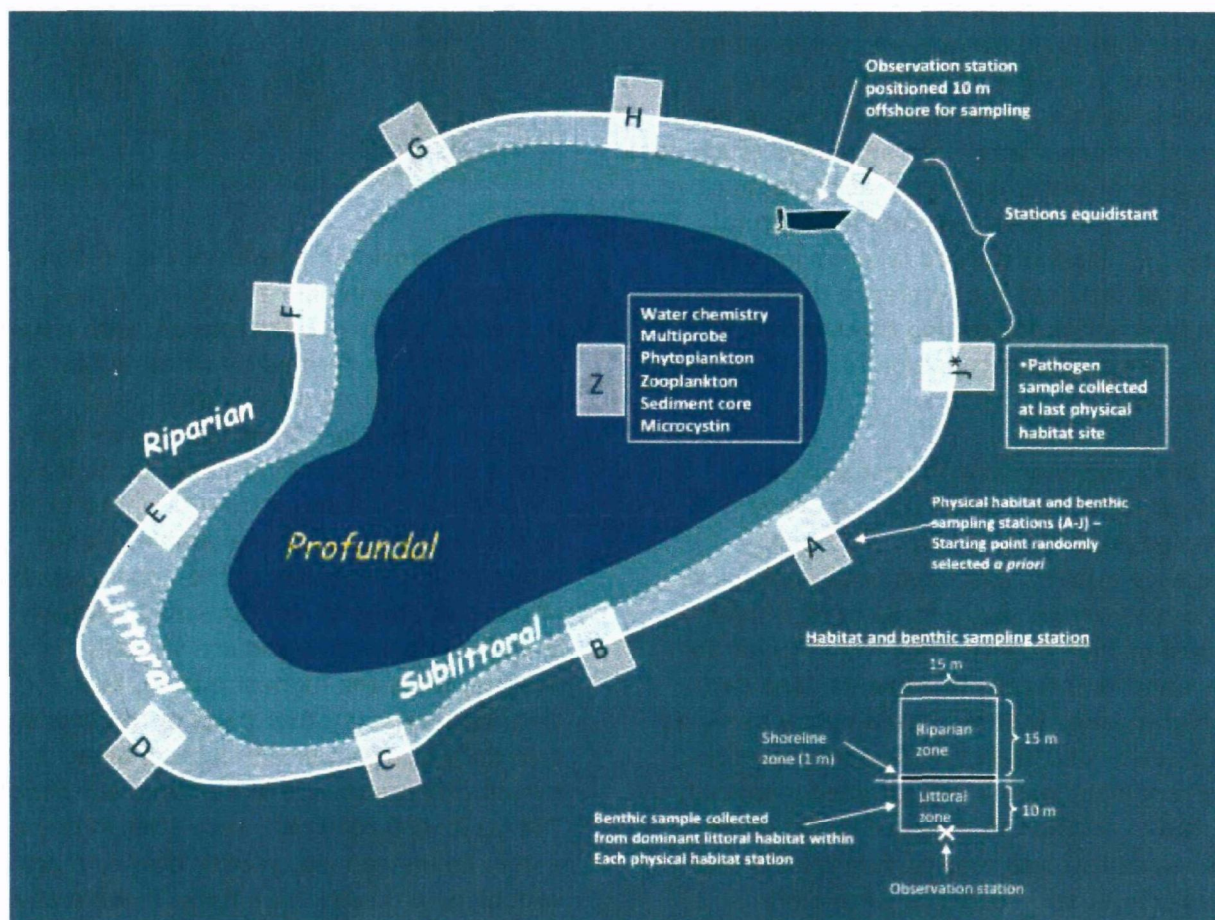


Figure 4. NLA sampling approach for a typical lake. Sampling locations are denoted by letters A-J and Z. Riparian, littoral, sublittoral, and profundal lake zones are depicted, as is the schematic design of a shoreline physical habitat station.



on substrate composition was recorded along ten predetermined stations. Benthic macroinvertebrates, collected with a 500µm D-frame net, and water samples for pathogen analysis were collected at the first and last station, respectively. Filtering and other sample preparations took place back on shore. Sampling each lake took a full day and many crews spent weeks in the field. At the end of the season, field crews collected 8,536 water and sediment samples; took over 5,800 direct measurements, and recorded in excess of 620,000 observations.

## Setting Expectations

### *Selecting Reference Lakes*

In order to assess the condition of the country's lakes, findings were compared to conditions in a suite of "reference lakes". A reference lake in the NLA is a lake (either natural or man-made) with attributes (such as biological or water quality) that come as close as practical to those expected in a natural state, *i.e.*, least-disturbed lake environment. NLA analysts used the reference distribution as a benchmark for setting thresholds for good, fair, and poor condition for each of the indicators.

EPA's experience with past surveys showed that only a small portion of the sampled population of lakes will be of reference quality. EPA used both hand-picked lakes that were thought to be of high quality as well as high quality lakes from the random site selection process to serve as candidate reference lakes that might ultimately serve as "least-disturbed" benchmark reference sites. The candidate lakes were sampled identically to, and in addition to the core target lakes. Subsequently, data results from all sampled lakes (target and hand-selected) were evaluated against the reference screening criteria to determine the final set of lakes that

would be used to characterize the reference condition. NLA analysts used a number of independent variables reflecting human influence as classification and screening criteria, *e.g.*, limnological shoreline index, chloride content, total water column calcium, and others. Two parallel groups of reference lakes were set; one for biological condition, and another for nutrient stressors. The later set of sites was developed so that nutrient levels could be used in screening reference lakes for biological condition.



When considering reference condition, it is important to remember that many areas in the United States have been altered, with natural landscapes transformed by cities, suburban sprawl, agricultural development, and resource extraction. To reflect the variability across the American landscape, these least-disturbed lakes diverge from the natural state by varying degrees. For example, highly remote lakes like those in the upper elevation wilderness areas of Montana may not have changed in centuries and are virtually pristine, while the highest quality, least-disturbed lakes in other parts of the country, especially in urban or agricultural areas, may exhibit different levels of human disturbance. The least-disturbed reference sites in these widely influenced watersheds display more variability in quality than those in watersheds with little human disturbance. Thus in reference conditions across the country, the



“bar” for expectations may be different. The resulting reference lakes represent the survey team’s best effort at selecting lakes that are the least disturbed nationally in specific areas across the country.

### Thresholds – Good, Fair, and Poor

After the reference lakes were selected and reference condition was determined, thresholds against which the target lakes are compared were set. Two types of assessment thresholds were used in the NLA. The first is fixed thresholds. Fixed thresholds are based on longstanding accepted values from the peer reviewed scientific literature. They are well established, and widely and consistently used. An example of this is standard chlorophyll-*a* thresholds which are used to classify lakes into the different trophic categories.

The second type of threshold type is based on the distribution (*i.e.*, the range of values) of a particular indicator derived from the reference lakes data. For NLA, each indicator for a lake was classified as either “good”, “fair” or “poor” condition relative to the conditions found in reference lakes. That is, “good” denotes an indicator value similar to

that found in reference lakes, “poor” denotes conditions definitely different from reference conditions, and “fair” indicates conditions on the borderline of reference conditions. Specifically, these thresholds are then applied to the results from the target lakes and are classified as follows: lake results above 25% of the reference range values are considered “good;” below the 5% of the reference range value are “poor;” and those between the 5% and 25% are “fair” (Figure 5). These designations are not intended to be a replacement for the evaluation by states and tribes of the quality of lakes relative to the concept of specific designated uses.

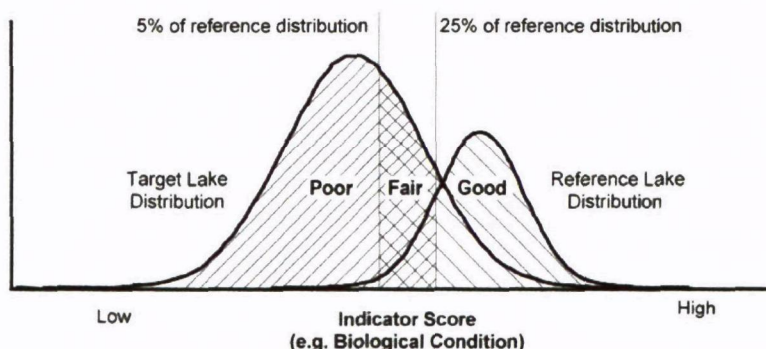
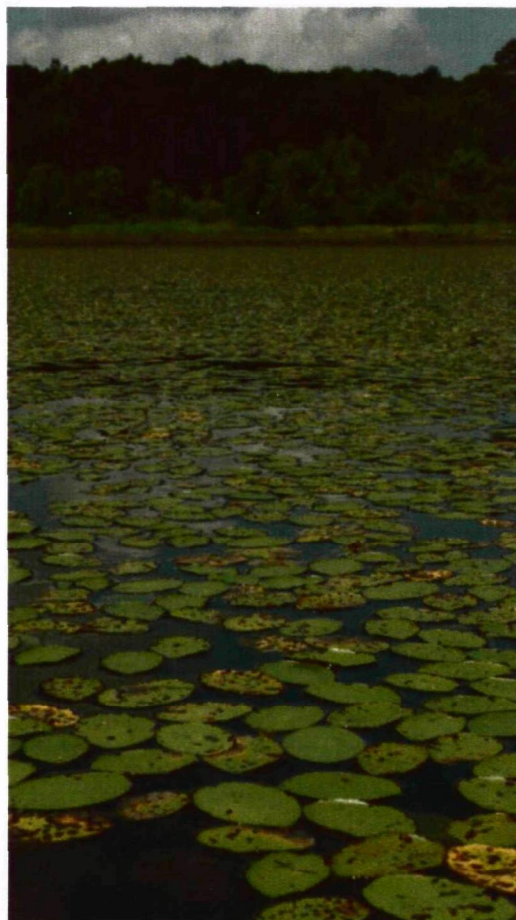


Figure 5. Reference condition thresholds used for good, fair, and poor assessment.







# HIGHLIGHT

## Surveying the Nation's Lakes for Invasive Aquatic Species

Amy P. Smagula

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Invasive species have long been purported as the next great environmental crisis on a national and even global scale. On every continent in nearly all aquatic habitat types, at all levels of the food web, invasive species have made an impact. Invasive aquatic species (also termed exotic or introduced species) can be described as those species that live in water but are generally not native to a particular waterbody. In general they have traits or characteristics that suggest a competitive ecological advantage over native

species. Invasive species grow rapidly and/or aggressively, so that they can eventually dominate a habitat to the detriment of native creatures that already live there. Invasive aquatic species include a whole range of organisms, including plants, animals, pathogens, and others.

### Invasive Aquatic Species:

- Grow very quickly and occupy large areas in a short timeframe;
- Have various strategies for reproduction;
- Survive in a range of conditions;
- Have no natural predators to control them;
- Take over areas from native plants/animals and can thus be ecologically devastating;
- Pose serious economic problems in terms of control costs and costs attributable to habitat loss and recreational impairments to waterbodies, including reductions in property values on infested waterbodies;
- Are very difficult if not impossible to control; and
- Threaten nearly half of the species listed under the Endangered Species Act.

The types of invasive aquatic species in our lakes are numerous and diverse, and can include aquatic plants that either root in substrate (like Eurasian watermilfoil or Hydrilla) or that float on the surface of the water (like the giant salvinia). They include larger animals such as fish (like the snakehead fish), and macroinvertebrates (like the zebra mussel). They also include those seen only with the aid of a microscope, such as exotic algae or the spiny water flea.

The pathways for invasive aquatic species introductions are varied, and include ballast water discharges from large vessels, retail industries like the aquarium and home water garden trades, and even internet suppliers of aquatic species. Once a species becomes established in a waterbody, either by accidental (e.g., contaminated boat) or intentional means (e.g., dumping of an aquarium or direct planting), it is transient recreational equipment (motor boats, kayaks, diving gear, etc.) that causes the lake-to-lake spread of these species.

Depending on the point of introduction and transport pathways, species can become widely distributed or remain as localized infestations. Unfortunately, many invasive aquatic

species are highly adaptive, and can survive and thrive in a wide range of environmental conditions. Big or small, plant or animal, invasive aquatic species in our lakes can have detrimental effects on the very attributes of those waterbodies that scientists, citizens, and environmental stewards are trying to evaluate and preserve.

### How Can Data from the NLA Survey Help?

One of the goals of the National Lakes Assessment (NLA) is to help citizens and government entities have current information on the health of our lakes so that they can take action to prevent further degradation. Data on invasive aquatic species can be used to help determine which of these species has been documented in a state or region, and if those are well established populations or if they are





pioneering and can be eliminated or halted before other waterbodies in the area are affected. These data may also be used to assist with risk assessments for an area, based on what has been found in neighboring states, coupled with tourism and recreational data for that region.

### The Key is Prevention, Early Detection, & Rapid Response

Preventing the introduction of invasive aquatic species, is paramount to protecting a waterbody. Many states and regional working groups have established education campaigns to alert lake users and others about the threats posed by invasive aquatic species and to hopefully prevent a new infestation by proper care of transient recreational vessels and gear. Additionally, many states have developed prohibited species lists in an effort to prevent overland transport and sale of these invasive species.

When prevention fails and an infestation does occur, early detection is critical. Individual lake associations, special interest groups, and other such entities are encouraged to look for new infestations on a regular basis during the growing season, particularly if they live on a waterbody that receives a high level of use by transient boaters. A small new infestation is much more easily contained or eradicated than a dense and large-scale infestation. A network of volunteer monitors around a waterbody can look for signs of invasive species and report to key officials who can effectively deal with a potentially new infestation.

State officials should be knowledgeable and poised for a rapid response to contain and control an infestation. They should be aware of appropriate management actions for the species in question and how to best approach the problem. Fortunately many states have developed specific plans for aquatic nuisance species management, so that an immediate response can be made.

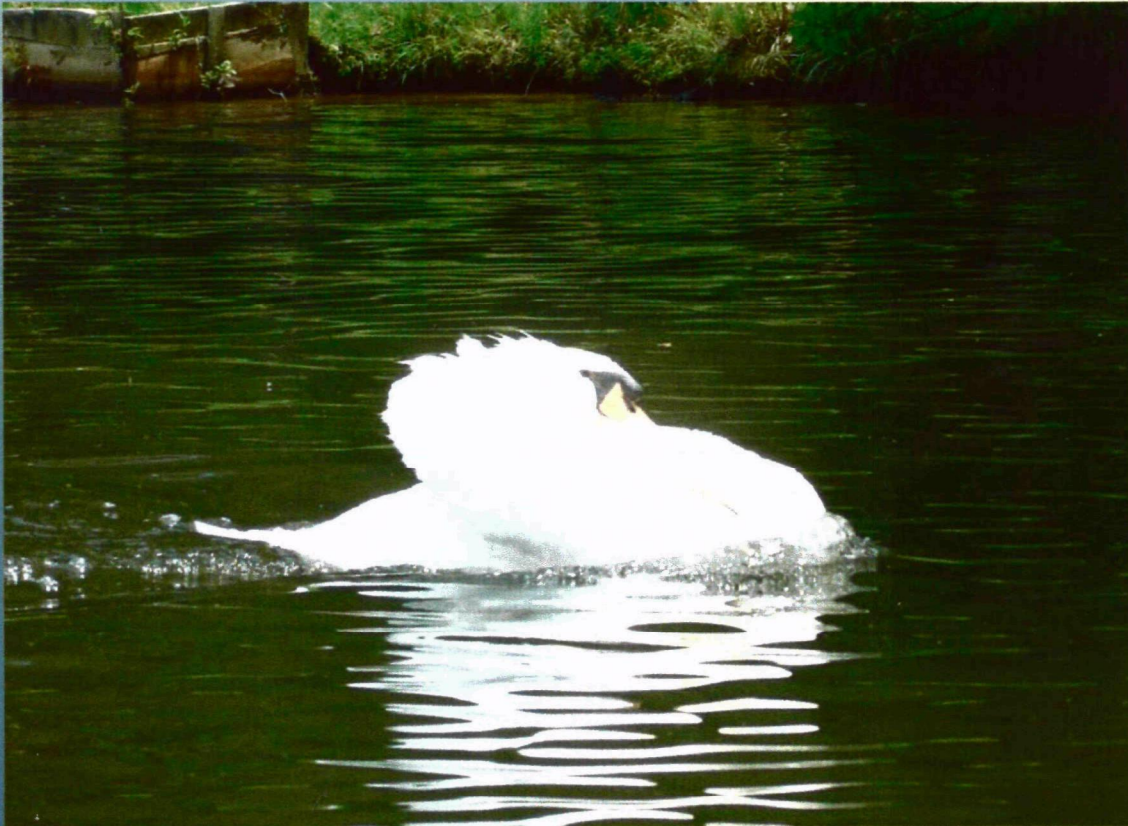
<p><b>Hydrilla</b> (<i>Hydrilla verticillata</i>)</p>	<p><b>First Identified in US:</b> 1960  <b>Native Range:</b> Africa  <b>U.S. Distribution:</b> WA, CA, AZ, TX, IA, LA, MS, AL, TN, FL, GA, SC, NC, VA, DE, PA, CT, MA, ME  <b>Description:</b> Narrow leaves whorled around the 20 ft main stem. It is the most invasive submergent plant in the U.S., and can even out-compete invasive watermilfoil by canoping over the surface. It has been observed to grow up to a half-inch per day in optimum conditions.  <b>Impacts:</b> This plant forms thick impenetrable growth in the water column of lakes. It can impact native aquatic plants and animals and cause problems for recreation and navigation on waterbodies that it infests.</p>	
<p><b>Zebra mussel</b> (<i>Dreissena polymorpha</i>)</p>	<p><b>First Identified in US:</b> 1988  <b>Native Range:</b> Eurasia  <b>U.S. Distribution:</b> All of the Great Lakes and many associated tributaries, plus other states throughout the U.S.  <b>Description:</b> Sticky strands secreted from one side of shell. Can grow very thick on surfaces.  <b>Impacts:</b> Documented to grow very thick on surfaces, foul marine engines, clog intake pipes, wash up in windrows on beaches, and alter the aquatic food web by reducing the amount of algae in the water due to high filter-feeding rates.</p>	

Photos credits: Hydrilla, Amy P. Smagula, NH DES. Zebra mussels, NH SeaGrant.



## CHAPTER 3.

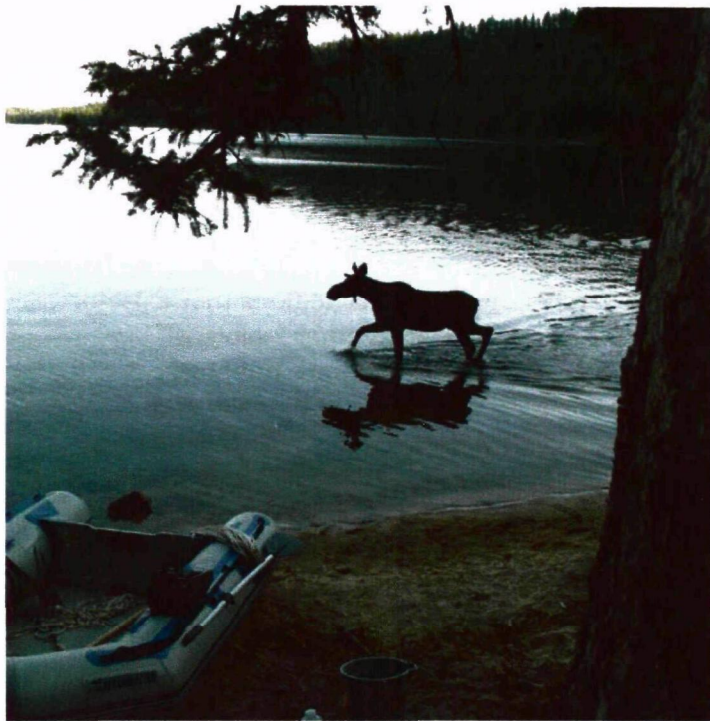
# THE BIOLOGICAL CONDITION OF THE NATION'S LAKES



### *IN THIS CHAPTER*

- ▶ Lake Health – The Biological Condition of Lakes
- ▶ Stressors to Lake Biota
- ▶ Ranking of Stressors





## Chapter 3

# The Biological Condition of the Nation's Lakes

The Clean Water Act explicitly aims “to restore and maintain the chemical, physical and biological integrity of the nation’s waters”. Although the NLA report does not include all aspects of biological integrity or review all possible chemical, physical or biological stressors known to affect water quality, it does present the results of some important indicators for estimating the condition of the nation’s lakes and characterizing the key influences.

This and the following two chapters describe the results of the NLA using three approaches to assess lake condition. The first approach evaluates whether lakes are able to support healthy aquatic plant and animal communities. Analysts evaluated key stressors to lake biota, such as chemical and physical habitat attributes, and ranked the

stressors in order of importance. Second, the recreational suitability of lakes was assessed and the risk of exposure to algal toxins was evaluated (Chapter 4). Finally, the third approach was to evaluate trophic state based on chlorophyll-*a* levels (Chapter 5).

## Lake Health – The Biological Condition of Lakes

The biology of a lake is characterized in terms of the presence, number, and diversity of fish, insects, algae, plants and other organisms that together provide accurate information about the health and productivity of the lake ecosystem. The number and kinds of plant and animal species present in a lake system are a direct measure of a lake’s overall well-being.

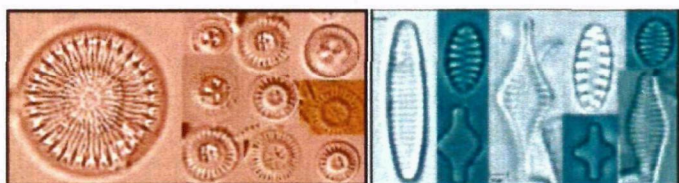
The NLA includes information from two biological communities or assemblages – phytoplankton and zooplankton — in its evaluation of lake condition. The primary basis for assessing biological health in the NLA is an index of taxa loss which is applied to the phytoplankton and zooplankton data. The NLA uses planktonic O/E taxa loss as the predominant measure of overall lake condition because it is based on both plant and animal data and thus will reflect a broader perspective of trends in lakes. A second approach is also presented using an index of biotic integrity that is applied to sediment diatoms, a distinct type of phytoplankton. Both models use the biological reference conditions developed from the set of reference lakes (see Chapter 2).

### *Phytoplankton and Zooplankton*

Phytoplankton are microscopic plants (algae) that float in the water and are usually responsible for both the color and clarity of lakes. Because of their ability to photosynthesize, they are a primary source



of energy in most lake systems, providing the food source for higher order organisms such as zooplankton or small fishes. Phytoplankton are remarkably diverse. For example, certain phytoplankton can regulate the depth at which they reside, optimizing their ability to access both nutrients and light. Others are specific to certain habitats within lakes, and to certain nutrient and chemical conditions.



**Centrate (left) and pinnate (right) diatoms.** Image courtesy of J. Smol as provided by D. Charles.

Zooplankton are small free-floating aquatic animals. The zooplankton community constitutes an important element of the aquatic food chain. These organisms serve as an intermediary species in the food chain, transferring energy from planktonic algae (primary producers) to larger invertebrate predators and fish. Both phytoplankton and zooplankton are highly sensitive to changes in the lake ecosystem. The effects of environmental disturbances can be detected through changes in species composition, abundance, and body size distribution of these organisms.

### *Diatoms*

Diatoms are a group of algae. Typically abundant in marine and freshwater habitats, diatoms account for at least 20% of the primary production on earth (*i.e.*, they use the sun's energy to turn carbon dioxide and water into food and energy). Unique among the algae, diatoms have cell walls composed of silica (glass), which are intricate and beautiful as well as useful for identifying individual species. In lakes, diatoms grow

suspended in water as well as attached to substrates. Biologists use the diatoms in the water column and those on the lake bottom as a reflection of conditions in the lake water column. When diatoms die, they settle to the bottom and the silica shell remains intact. Over time their silica shells are preserved in layer upon layer of lake sediments enabling researchers to look at conditions that existed in the past. Similar to other biological indicators, diatoms integrate the physical and chemical conditions of the lake and surrounding watershed in which they reside. The environmental conditions under which particular diatom species flourish vary greatly and have been well-described, making them a useful indicator.



### *Index of Taxa Loss – The Observed/Expected (O/E) Ratio*

NLA analysts used the planktonic O/E taxa loss model to assess the condition of the planktonic community combining data from both phytoplankton and zooplankton. The O/E measure looks at whether or not



organisms (taxa) one would expect to find, based on reference lakes, are in fact present. The model allows a precise matching of the taxa found in the sample — in this case phytoplankton and zooplankton taxa — with those that should occur under the specified natural environmental conditions defined by the reference sites. The list of expected taxa (or “E”) at individual sites are predicted from a model developed from data collected at reference sites. By comparing the list of taxa observed (or “O”) at a site with



those expected to occur, one can quantify the proportion of taxa that have been lost presumably due to stressors present in the lake. The O/E model is widely used nationally and internationally to assess the condition of aquatic communities. The index is particularly attractive because it allows a direct comparison of conditions across the different types of aquatic systems (*e.g.*, lakes, wetlands, streams, and estuaries) that will be assessed by the national aquatic resource surveys.

Typically O/E values are interpreted as the percentage of the expected taxa present. Each tenth of a point less than 1 represents a 10% loss of taxa at the site; thus, an O/E score of 0.9 indicates that 90% of the expected taxa are present and 10% are missing. The higher the percentage, the healthier the lake. As with all indicators, O/E values must be interpreted in context

of the quality of reference sites because the quality of reference sites available in a region sets the bar for what taxa may be expected. Regions with lower-quality reference sites may have fewer taxa or different taxa and thus will have a lower bar. Although an O/E value of 0.8 means the same thing regardless of a region, *i.e.*, 20% of taxa have been lost relative to reference conditions in each region, the true amount of taxa loss will be under-estimated if reference sites are of lower quality, meaning more disturbed than reference sites in comparable regions.

For the phytoplankton and zooplankton data, NLA analysts developed three regionally-specific O/E models to predict the extent of taxa loss across lakes of the United States. They defined three categories of plankton taxa loss: good (<20% taxa loss), fair (20-40% taxa loss), and poor (>40% taxa loss).

### *Index of Biological Integrity - The Lake Diatom Condition Index*

The Lake Diatom Condition Index (LDCI) — or the Diatom IBI — is similar in concept to an economic indicator (*e.g.*, the Consumer Confidence Index) in that the total index score is the sum of scores for a variety of individual measures. To calculate economic indicators, economists look at a number of metrics, including new orders for consumer goods, building permits, money supply, and others that reflect economic growth. To determine the LDCI, ecologists looked at taxonomic richness, habit and trophic composition, sensitivity to human disturbance, and other aspects of the assemblage that are reflective of a natural state. For the LDCI, NLA analysts calculated regionally-specific thresholds that were based on percentages of reference lake distributions of LDCI values.



The development of the LDCI is a groundbreaking addition to the tools available to perform lake assessments. The metrics used to develop the LDCI for the NLA covered five characteristics of diatom assemblages that are routinely used to evaluate biological condition:

**Taxonomic richness:** This characteristic represents the number of distinct taxa, or groups of organisms, identified within a sample. A greater number of different kinds of taxa, particularly those that belong to pollution-sensitive groups, indicate a variety of physical habitats and an environment exposed to generally lower levels of stress.

**Taxonomic composition:** Ecologists calculate composition metrics by identifying the different taxa groups, determining which taxa in the sample are ecologically important, and comparing the relative abundance of organisms in those taxa to the whole sample. Healthy (good quality) lake systems have diatoms from across a larger number of taxa groups, whereas stressed (poor quality) lakes are often dominated by a high abundance of organisms in a small number of taxa that are tolerant of pollution.

**Taxonomic diversity:** Diversity metrics look at all the taxa groups and the distribution of organisms among those groups. Healthy lakes should have a high level of diversity of diatoms present.

**Morphology:** Organisms are characterized by certain adaptations, including how they move and where they live. These habits are captured in morphological metrics. For example, some are designed to move freely up and down within the water column to maximize nutrient uptake or light exposure, while others may develop adaptations, such

as coloration, to avoid predation. A diversity of such attributes is reflective of a lake that naturally includes a diversity of habitat niches.

**Pollution tolerance:** Each taxa can tolerate a specific range of chemical contamination,



which is referred to as their pollution tolerance. Once this range is exceeded, the taxa are no longer present. Highly sensitive taxa, or those with a low pollution tolerance, are found only in lakes with good water quality.

### *Findings of the Biological Assessments*

Using the planktonic O/E, or taxa loss model, 56% of the nation's lakes are in good condition, while 21% are in fair condition, and 22% are in poor condition (Figure 6). The LDCI shows similar results with 47% of lakes in good condition, 27% in fair condition, and 23% in poor condition. For the continental U.S., this means about half of the country's lakes are in good condition, while the other half are experiencing some level of stress that is negatively affecting the aquatic biological communities.



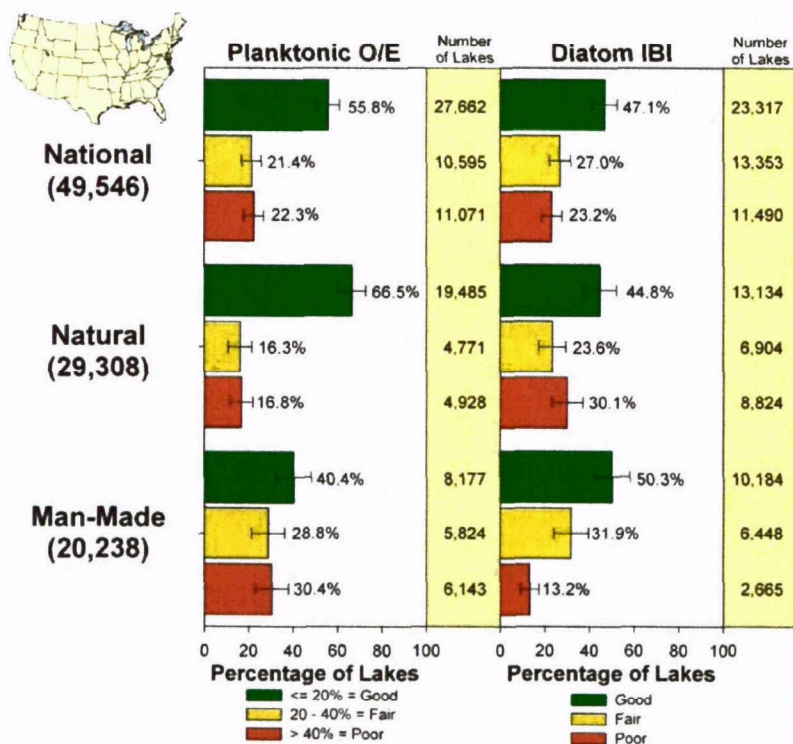
Natural lakes in general exhibit slightly lower overall plankton taxa loss than man-made lakes. Sixty-seven percent of natural lakes are in good condition as compared to 40% of man-made lakes. The LDCI indicates that the proportion of lakes exhibiting good conditions does not vary significantly between natural and man-made lakes. However, 30% of natural lakes as compared to 13% of man-made lakes exhibit poor biological condition based on the diatom LDCI.

Although in many cases the results of the planktonic O/E analysis are similar to the results of the LDCI analysis, such agreement will not always occur. The taxa loss index examines a specific aspect of biological condition (biodiversity loss) and the index of biological integrity analysis combines multiple characteristics to evaluate biological condition. In this instance, the two

communities may be responding differently to the stresses impacting lakes or to different stresses.

## Stressors to Lake Biota

In the aquatic environment, a stressor can be anything (chemical, biological or physical) that has the potential to impact its inhabitants by altering their surroundings outside their normal ecological range. There are many external occurrences that can alter a creature's ability to thrive, both natural and otherwise. Drought or rapid draw-down can be a stressor; an invading species can be a stressor; and human activity can be a stressor. An important dimension of the national lakes assessment is to evaluate key chemical and physical stressors of lake quality that, when altered, have the potential to impact lake biota.



### 1. Chemical Stressors

For this report, five key chemical indicators of lake stress were evaluated. These are total phosphorus concentration, total nitrogen concentration, turbidity, acid neutralizing capacity (ANC), and dissolved oxygen concentration (DO).

Figure 6. Assessment of quality using the Planktonic O/E Taxa Loss and Lake Diatom Condition Index for lakes nationwide and for natural vs. man-made lakes.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For this and all figures in this report, values for good, fair and poor may not add to one hundred percent. Lakes sites that were not assessed and indicators for which no value was recorded are not included. Please refer to the Technical Report for further discussion on the statistical significance of these two terms and how they were evaluated.



## Phosphorus, Nitrogen, and Turbidity

Phosphorus and nitrogen are critical nutrients required for all life. In appropriate quantities, these nutrients support the primary algal production necessary to support lake food webs. In many lakes, phosphorus is considered the "limiting nutrient," meaning that the available quantity of this nutrient controls the pace at which algae are produced in lakes. This also means that modest increases in available phosphorus can cause very rapid increases in algal growth (measured as chlorophyll-*a*). Some lakes are limited by nitrogen. In these lakes, modest increases in available nitrogen will yield the same effects. When excess nutrients from human activities enter lakes, cultural eutrophication is often the result. The culturally-accelerated eutrophication of lakes has a negative impact on everything from species diversity to lake aesthetics.

Turbidity is a measure of light scattering; more specifically, murkiness or lack of clarity. Lakes that are characterized by high concentrations of suspended soil particles and/or high levels of algal cells will have high measured turbidity. Turbidity in lakes is natural in some instances, resulting from natural soil deposition and resuspension within the lakes themselves. When human activities in lake watersheds and riparian zones increase soil erosion, increased turbidity often results in smothering of nearshore habitats by sediments and/or changing algae growth patterns. These changes affect biological and recreational conditions.

## Findings for Nutrients and Turbidity

Phosphorus, nitrogen, and turbidity are linked indicators that jointly influence both the clarity of water and the concentrations of algae that are measured in a lake. The levels of these three indicators vary regionally, as do the relationships between nutrients and turbidity, and between nutrients and chlorophyll-*a*. For phosphorus, nitrogen, and turbidity, lakes were assessed in relation to regionally-specific thresholds based on the distributions in a distinct set of reference lakes (see Chapter 2).

Survey results show that slightly over half of the nation's lakes are in good condition with respect to phosphorus and nitrogen (Figure 7). Fifty-eight percent and 54% of lakes are not stressed for the two nutrients, respectively. Conversely, 42% of lakes are in fair or poor condition for phosphorus levels and 46% are in fair or poor condition for nitrogen. For both nutrients, there are no significant differences between natural lakes and man-made lakes.

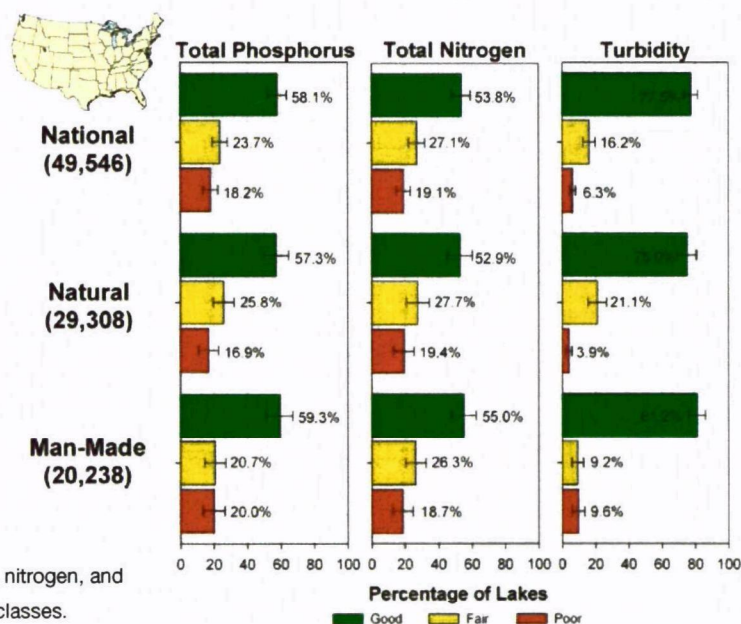


Figure 7. Phosphorus, nitrogen, and turbidity in three lake classes.



For turbidity, 78% of lakes are in good condition, 16% are in fair condition, and 6% are in poor condition. When comparing the natural lakes to the man-made lakes for this indicator, 75% of natural lakes are in good condition as compared to 81% of man-made lakes.

## Lake Acidification

While not a widespread problem, lake acidification continues to be an important indicator of lake condition in a small number of spots around the country. Acid rain and acid mine drainage are major sources of acidifying compounds and can change the pH of lake water, impacting fish and other aquatic life. Acid neutralizing capacity (ANC) serves as an indicator for sensitivity to changes in pH. The ANC of a lake is determined by the soil and underlying geology of the surrounding watershed. Lakes with high levels of dissolved bicarbonate ions (*e.g.* limestone watersheds) are able to neutralize acid depositions and buffer the effects of acid rain. Conversely, watersheds that are rich in granites and sandstones and contain fewer acid-neutralizing ions have low ANC and therefore a predisposition to acidification.

ANC Assessment Thresholds	
Non-acidic	> 50 µeq ANC
Acidic-natural	≤ 50 µeq. ANC and DOC ≤ 5 mg/L
Anthropogenically acidified	≤ 0 meg ANC and DOC < 5 mg/L

Maintaining stable and sufficient ANC is important for fish and aquatic life because ANC protects or buffers against drastic pH changes in the waterbody. Most living organisms, especially aquatic life, function at the optimal pH range of 6.5 to 8.5. Sufficient ANC in surface waters will buffer acid rain

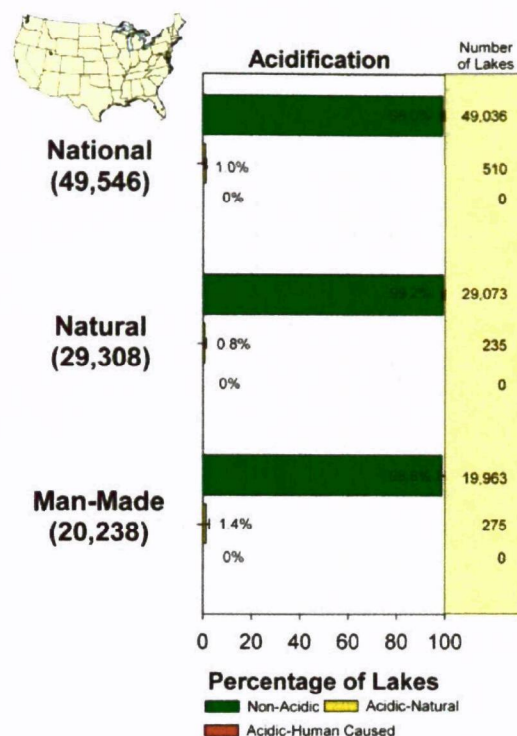


Figure 8. Acid Neutralizing Capacity for lakes of the U.S.

and prevent pH levels to stray outside this range. In naturally acidic lakes, the ANC may be quite low, but the presence of natural organic compounds in the form of dissolved organic carbon, or DOC, can mitigate the effects of pH fluctuations.

## Findings for Lake Acidification

Results from the NLA indicate that almost all, or 99%, of the nation's lakes can be classified as in good condition with respect to ANC (Figure 8). When looking at these results, however, it is also important to note that although the NLA indicates that lake acidification is not a widespread problem, acidification on a smaller scale, *i.e.*, "hot spots," do occur. While only a relatively small proportion of lakes may be impacted by acidification, the effects of acidification in the impacted lakes, and the contribution of acidity to other stressors, can be severe in specific geographic regions.



## Dissolved Oxygen

Dissolved oxygen, or DO, is considered one of the more important measurements of water quality and is a direct indicator of a lake's ability to support aquatic life. Aquatic organisms have different DO requirements for optimal growth and reproduction. Decreases in DO can occur during winter or summer when the available dissolved oxygen is consumed by aquatic plants, animals, and bacteria during respiration. While each organism has its own DO tolerance range, generally levels below 3 mg/L are of concern. Conditions below 1 mg/L are referred to as hypoxic and are often devoid of life.

### Findings for Dissolved Oxygen

For the NLA, DO assessment thresholds were established as high ( $\geq 5$  mg/L), moderate ( $>3$  to  $<5$ ), and low ( $\leq 3$  mg/L), and were based on measurements from the top two meters in the middle of the lake (Figure 9). Eighty-eight percent of the country's lakes display high levels of DO and are in good condition (Figure 9). Natural lakes perform slightly better than the nation as a whole with 94% in good condition. Man-made lakes results show 80% with high levels of DO.

These findings provide insights that low DO is not a chronic problem near the lake surface, which was not surprising given the sampling approach used in the survey. Future surveys may be able to more adequately address DO conditions in the bottom waters of lakes where low DO conditions are more likely to occur first.

## 2. Physical Habitat Stressors

Lakes are highly interactive systems. The physical and chemical make-up of a lake supports a specialized community of biological

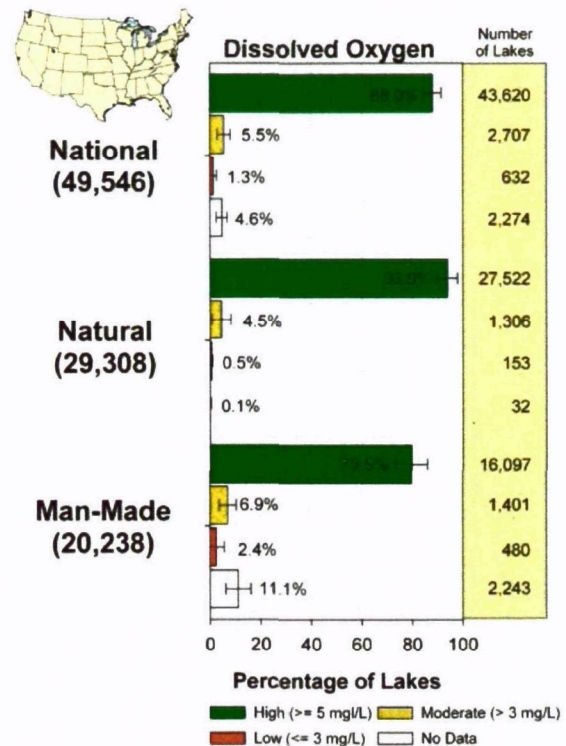


Figure 9. Dissolved oxygen for lakes of the U.S.

organisms unique to the surrounding environment. Lakes and ponds are still-water habitats that host a large array of floating organisms that cannot survive in flowing water. Shoreline and shallow water habitats provide refuge for many organisms from predation, living and egg-laying substrates, and food. Due to the distinct habitat of lakes, many creatures have developed special features for an aquatic or semi-aquatic lifestyle. Frogs and other amphibians, for example, lay their eggs in the water. Here the juveniles will grow and only as they mature, venture onto land. Emergent plants along the lake's edges (irises, arrowheads and cattails), floating plants (water lilies), free-floating leaved plants (duckweed and bladderwort), submerged plants (milfoil and pondweed), and algae (phytoplankton and diatoms) provide food, shelter, protection, and nesting places for the lake's invertebrates, amphibians, fish, and aquatic mammals. In addition to aquatic inhabitants, a wide number of terrestrial animals rely on



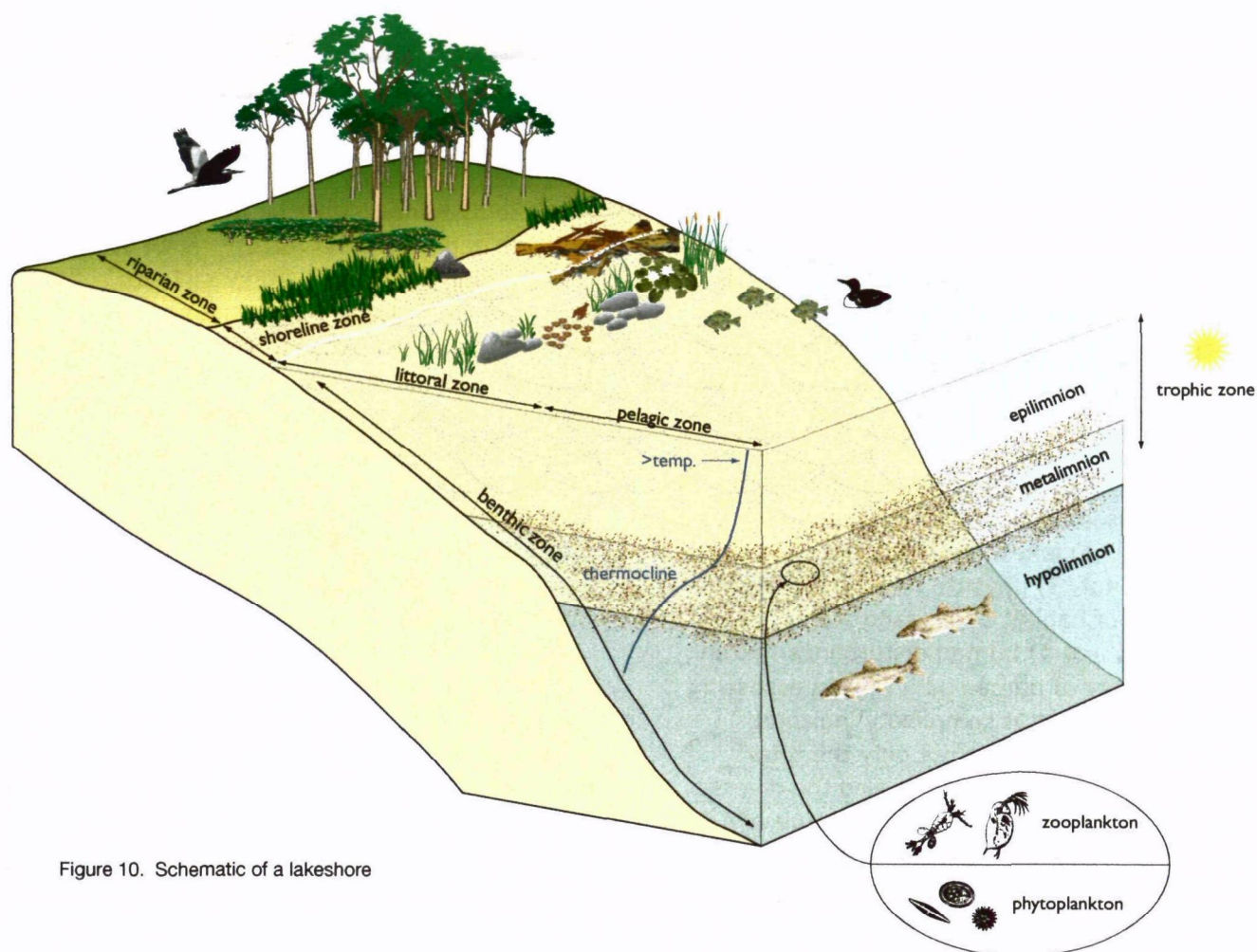


Figure 10. Schematic of a lakeshore

lakes for their food. For example, in a typical summer, a moose can eat over 17½ lbs of aquatic plants per day. A 3½ lb adult osprey can consume some 270 lbs of fish in one year.

The condition of lakeshore habitats (Figure 10) provides important information relevant to lake biological health. The indicators include the vegetation and physical features along shorelines and adjacent upland areas, and the aquatic plants living in the near shore shallows including the natural features (snags, rock outcrops, etc). Shoreline structure affects nutrient cycling, biological production, and even sedimentation rates within the lake. The zone of transition

between the lakeshore and the water's edge is an area where considerable biological interactions occur and is critically important to benthic communities, fish, and other aquatic organisms. The relationship between the terrestrial and aquatic environments is characterized by the movement of nutrients/ food from the shore to the water (e.g., fish making use of emergent plants for food or shelter), and the reverse movement from the water back to the shore (e.g., seasonal flooding of shorelines, shore birds feeding on aquatic insects and crustaceans). Therefore, the physical habitat condition of the land-water interface is critically important to overall lake condition.



Human activities along lakeshores often adversely affect these ecosystem functions by lessening the amount and type of optimal habitat available. Habitat cover or protection, in the form of woody snags, overhanging trees, and aquatic plants, becomes markedly reduced. A poor habitat cover adversely impacts macrophytes, fish, and other living things in and around the lake. Alterations of these and other types of habitat features can affect biological integrity even in lakes where the water is not polluted.

For the NLA, physical habitat condition was assessed based on observations for four indicators: 1) lakeshore habitat, 2) shallow water habitat, 3) physical habitat complexity (an index of habitat at the land-water interface), and 4) human disturbance (extent and intensity of human activity). In assessing the physical habitat complexity indicator, NLA analysts looked at not only the total amount of cover present but also the diverse types of cover and the complex nature of potential ecological niches. For each lake habitat indicator, values were compared to the distribution of the indicator value in the reference sites.

### *Habitat Stressors*

The lakeshore habitat indicator examines the amount and type of shoreline vegetation. It is based on observations of three layers of coverage (understory grasses and forbs, mid-story non-woody and woody shrubs, and overstory trees). In general, lakeshores are in better condition when shoreline vegetation cover is high in all three layers. It is important to note, however, that not all three layers naturally occur in all areas of the country. For example, in the northern plains areas, there is typically no natural overstory tree cover. Similarly, in some areas of the intermountain west, steep rocky shores are the norm for high-mountain and/or canyon lakes. These

natural features have been factored into the calculation of the lakeshore habitat indicator.

The shallow water habitat indicator examines the quality of the shallow edge of the lake by utilizing data on the presence of living and non-living features such as overhanging vegetation, aquatic plants (macrophytes), large woody snags, brush, boulders, and rock ledges. Lakes with greater and more varied shallow water habitat are typically able to more effectively support aquatic life because they have more, and more complex, ecological niches. Like the lakeshore habitat indicator, the shallow water indicator is related to conditions in reference lakes and is modified regionally to account for differing expectations of natural condition.

The third indicator, physical habitat complexity, combines data on from the lakeshore and shallow water interface. This indicator estimates the amount and variety of all cover types at the water's edge. Like the other indicators, this index is related to conditions in reference lakes and is modified regionally to account for differing expectations of natural condition.





## Findings for Habitat Stressors

The findings for the three habitat stressor indicators are depicted in Figures 11, 12 and 13. Nationally, 46% of lakes exhibit good lakeshore habitat condition, while 18% of lakes are in fair condition and 36% are in poor condition. With respect to the shallow water areas of lakes, 59% of lakes exhibit good habitat condition, while 21% of

indicators, more natural lakes support healthy combined habitat condition than man-made lakes.

### Lakeshore Human Disturbance

In the above discussion of the lakeshore environment, the condition of lakes was described in terms of habitat integrity in both the lakeshore and shallow water areas of the

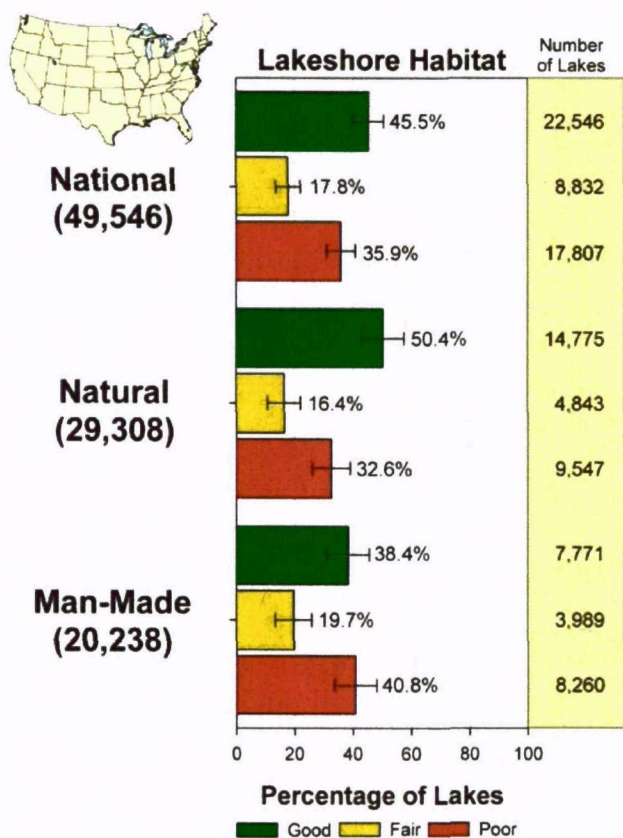


Figure 11. Lakeshore habitat for lakes of the U.S. as percent of lakes in three condition classes.

lakes are in fair condition, and 20% are in the most disturbed, or poor condition. For physical habitat complexity of the land/water interface, 47% of lakes are in good condition, 20% of lakes are in fair condition, and 32% are in poor condition. For all three habitat

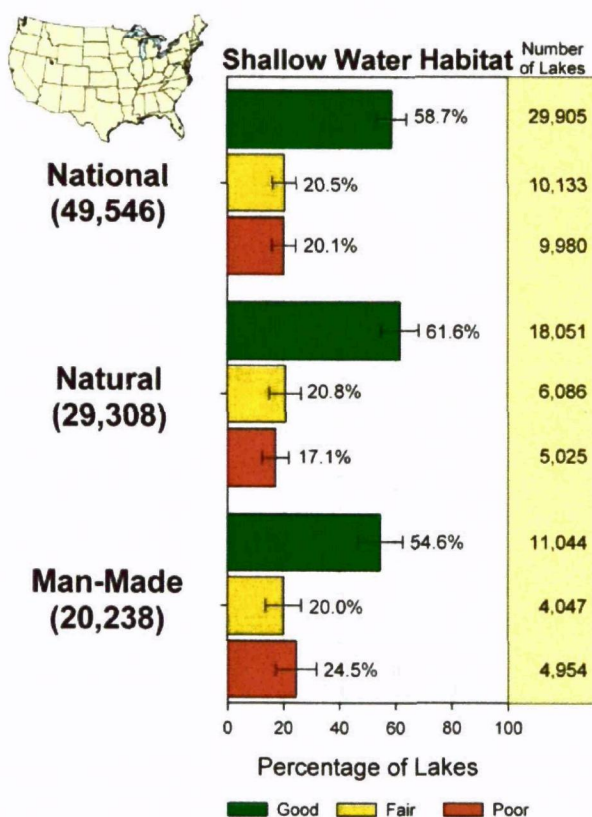


Figure 12. Shallow water habitat for lakes of the U.S. as percent of lakes in three condition classes.

lake. The fourth indicator of physical habitat is lakeshore human disturbance and reflects direct human alteration of the lakeshore itself. These disturbances can range from minor changes (such as the removal of trees to develop a picnic area) to major alterations

(such as the construction of a large lakeshore residential complex complete with concrete retaining walls and artificial beaches). The effects of lakeshore development on the quality of lakes include excess sedimentation, loss of native plant growth, alteration of native plant communities, loss of habitat structure, and modifications to substrate types. These impacts, in turn, can negatively affect fish, wildlife, and other aquatic communities.

(Figure 14). In contrast to the other three habitat indicators, the percentage of natural lakes that have low lakeshore disturbance is substantially higher than that of man-made lakes. Forty-six percent of natural lakes are in good condition compared to 18% of man-made lakes. These findings also show that there are twice as many man-made lakes with high lakeshore disturbance (poor condition) as natural lakes.

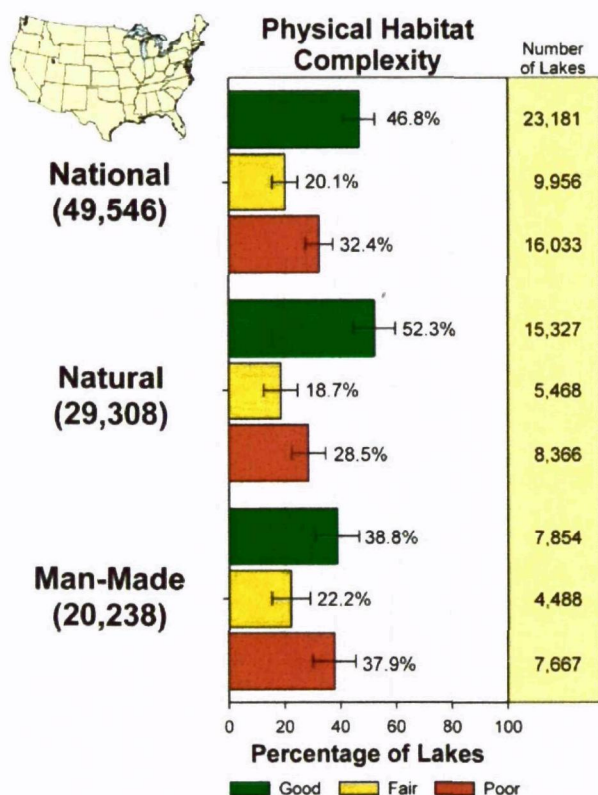


Figure 13. Physical habitat complexity for the lakes of the U.S. as percent of lakes in three condition classes.

### Findings for Lakeshore Disturbance

Across the lower 48 states, 35% of lakes exhibit good conditions representative of relatively low human disturbance levels, while 48% of lakes exhibit moderate disturbance, and 17% exhibit poor, or highly disturbed conditions

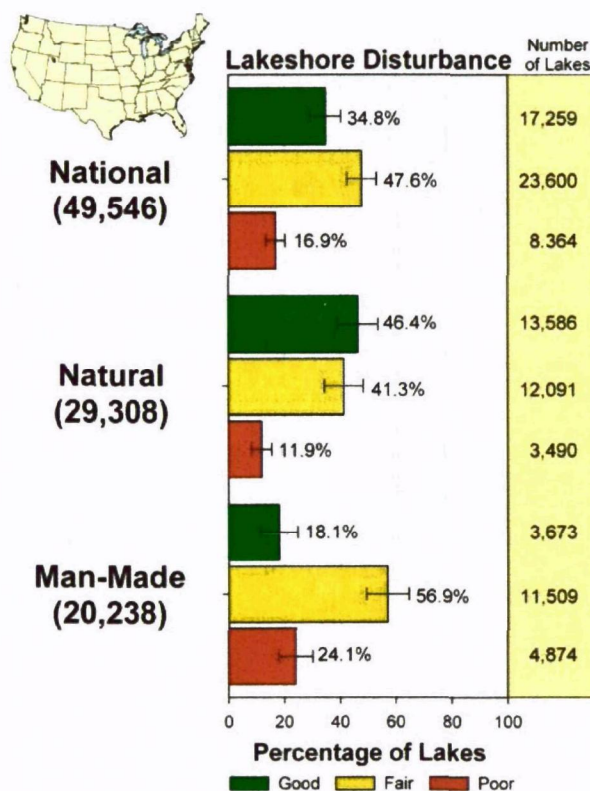


Figure 14. Lakeshore disturbance for lakes of the U.S. as percent of lakes in three conditions classes.



## Lakeshore Alteration Stress

By Kellie Merrell, VT Department of Conservation

Transformation of lakeshores from natural forested and wetland cover to lawns and sandy beaches, accompanied by residential homes development (and redevelopment) is a stressor to many lakes. In a survey of 345 lakes in the Northeast during the early 1990s, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined that the stress from shoreline alteration was a more widespread problem than eutrophication and acidification. In recent years, many state agencies have documented the effects of shoreline development on nearshore and shallow water habitat quality with notable results.

As lakeshores are converted from forests to lawn, impervious surfaces, and sand, enhanced runoff results in increased embeddedness, less shading, and in most cases, more abundant aquatic plant growth in the shallows. Shallow water habitat is further simplified by the direct removal of woody structure, and interruption in the resupply of this critical habitat component. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources has estimated that unbuffered developed sites contribute **five times** more runoff, **seven times** more phosphorus and **18 times** more sediment to a lake than the naturally forested sites.

This alteration of the nearshore and shallow water habitat affects a variety of both terrestrial and aquatic wildlife and has been described in the literature. Green frog, dragonfly, and damselfly populations decline. The nesting success and diversity of fish species also declines, with sensitive native species being replaced by more disturbance tolerant species. Turtles lose basking sites and corridors to inland nest sites. Bird composition shifts from insect-eating to seed-eating species. Even white-tailed deer are affected, with reduction in winter browse along shorelines reducing winter carrying capacity. The removal of conifers along shores also reduces shoreline mink activity. Ultimately, the cumulative effects of lakeshore development have negative implications for many species of fish and wildlife.

## Ranking of Stressors

An important key function of the national assessments is to provide a perspective on key stressors impacting biological condition in lakes and rank them in terms of the benefits expected to be derived from reducing or eliminating these stresses. For the NLA, analysts used three approaches to rank stressors. The first looks at how extensive or widespread any particular stressor is, *e.g.*, how many lakes have excess phosphorus concentrations. The second examines the severity of the impact from an individual stressor when it is present, *e.g.*, how severe is the biological impact when excess phosphorus levels occur. Ranking ultimately requires taking both of these perspectives into consideration. Finally the third approach is attributable risk, which is a value derived by combining the first two risk values into a single number for ranking across lakes.

Throughout this section, the stressors are assessed and reported independently and as such do not sum to 100%. Most lakes are likely to experience multiple stressors simultaneously which can result in cumulative effects rather than those elicited by a single stressor.

## Relative Extent

Relative extent in the NLA is simply a way of evaluating how widespread and common a particular stressor is among lakes. Stressors that occur over a small area (*i.e.*, hotspots) or that occur over a wide area but are sparse have a low relative extent. It is important for water resource managers to take into account the extent of the stressor when setting priority actions at the national, regional, and state scale.





Nationally, the most widespread stressors measured as part of the NLA are those that affect the shoreline and shallow water areas, which in turn can affect

biological condition. Results from the NLA show that the most widespread of these is the alteration of lakeshore habitat.

Thirty-six percent of lakes nationally have poor lakeshore habitat (Figure 15 – left graph). The second most prevalent stressor is the physical habitat complexity, which is poor in 32% of lakes nationally. Total nitrogen and total phosphorus ranked fourth and fifth, respectively, in terms of how widespread excess levels are across the country.

The ranking of these stressors according to extent is similar across natural and man-made lakes with most stressors being more widespread in man-made lakes (*e.g.*, lakeshores with poor habitats occurring at 41% of man-made lakes compared with 33% of natural lakes).

### Relative Risk

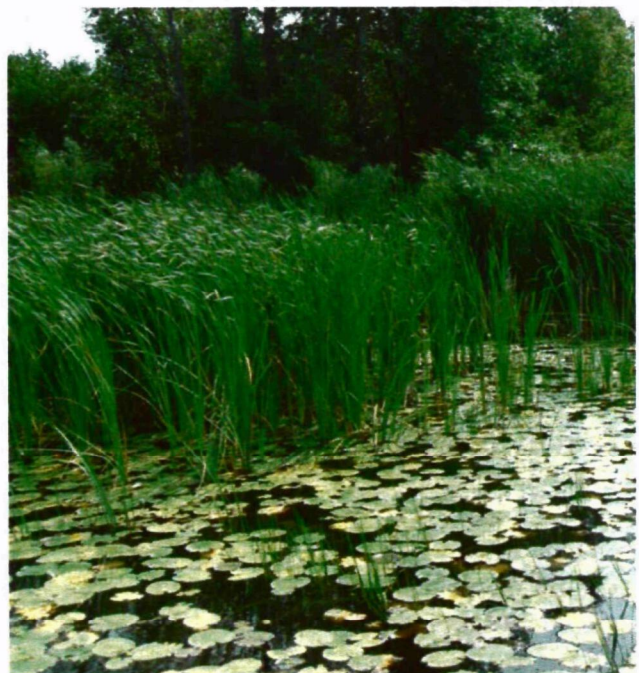
The evaluation of relative risk is a way to examine the severity of the impact of a stressor when it occurs. Relative risk is used frequently in the human health field. For example, a person who smokes is 10-20 times more likely to get and die of lung cancer<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, one can examine the likelihood of having poor biological conditions when phosphorus concentrations are high compared with the likelihood of poor biological conditions when phosphorus concentrations are low. When these two

likelihoods are quantified, their ratio is called the relative risk. For the NLA, only the relative risk of stressor to poor conditions is presented.

Results of the relative risk analyses for NLA are presented in the middle graph of Figure 15. The highest relative risk nationally was found for lakeshore habitat disturbance with a relative risk just over 3. This means that lakes with poor surrounding vegetation are about 3 times more likely to also have poor biological conditions, as defined for this assessment. The remaining stressors, with the exception of dissolved oxygen and lakeshore disturbance, have relative risks near 2 (*i.e.*, twice as likely to have poor biological conditions). The relative risks for stressors in natural lakes appear consistently greater than the relative risk values for man-made lakes.

### Attributable Risk

As mentioned, attributable risk is derived by combining the relative extent and the relative risk into a single number



<sup>3</sup>Center of Disease Control. [http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/lung/risk\\_factors.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/lung/risk_factors.htm)



for the purposes of ranking. Conceptually, attributable risk provides an estimate of the proportion of poor biological conditions that could be reduced if poor conditions of a particular stressor were eliminated. This risk value represents the magnitude or importance of a potential stressor and one that can be ranked and prioritized for policy makers and managers.

Estimates for attributable risk based on the planktonic O/E indicator of biological condition are presented in right graph of Figure 15. Lakeshore habitat alteration has the highest attributable risk for plankton taxa

loss while other stressors (with the exception of lakeshore disturbance, turbidity and dissolved oxygen) have similar attributable risk values. Thus one might expect that to improve lake condition to the greatest extent, lakeshore vegetative habitat would have to be increased to the point that it is no longer a stressor. Natural lakes show a slightly different pattern in attributable risk with lakeshore habitat being a high priority followed closely by total nitrogen, total phosphorus and physical habitat complexity. For man-made lakes, three of the four habitat indicators rank the highest in attributable risk.

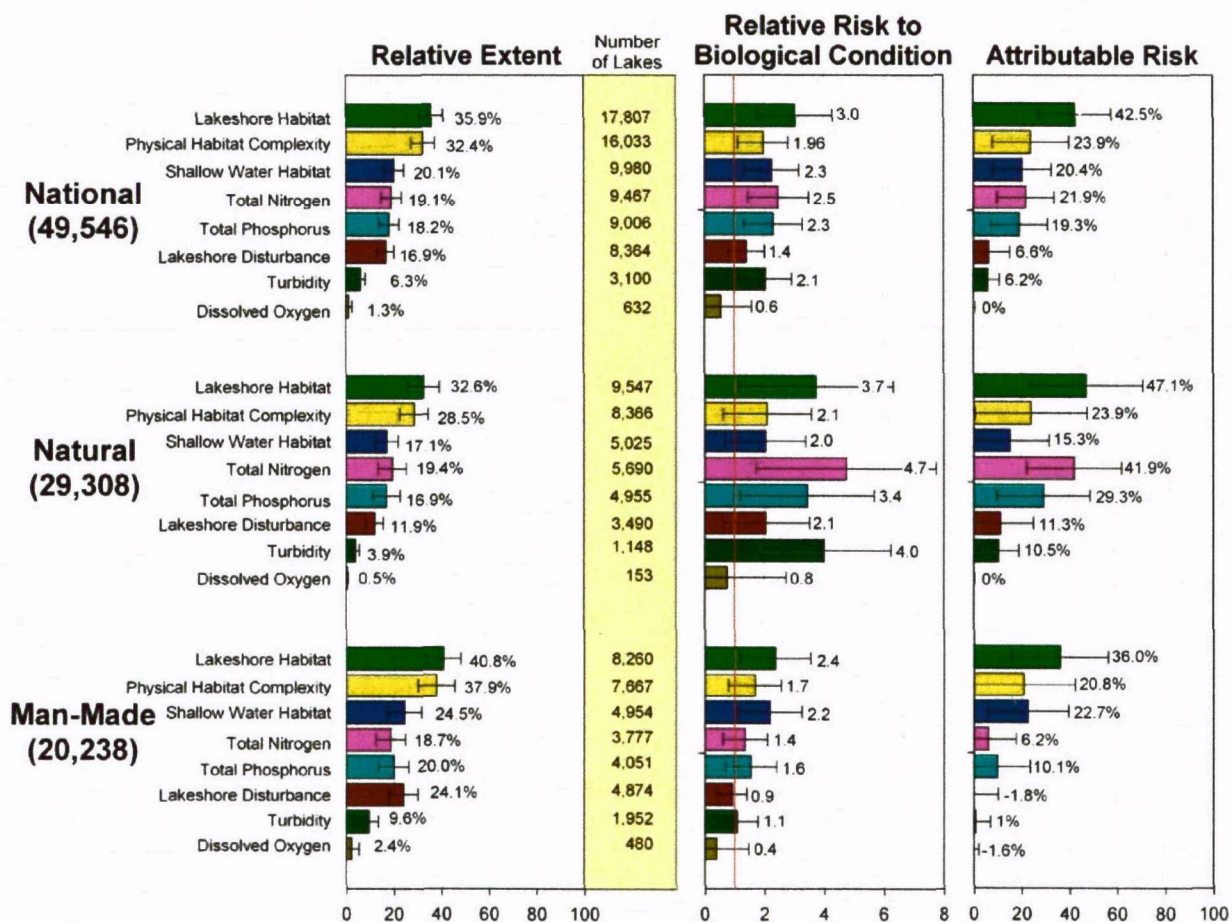


Figure 15. Relative Extent of Poor Stressors Conditions Nationally and in Natural and Man-Made Lakes, Relative Risks of Impact to Plankton O/E and Attributing Risk (combining Relative Extent and Relative Risk).



## CHAPTER 4.

# SUITABILITY FOR RECREATION



### *IN THIS CHAPTER*

- ▶ Algal Toxins
- ▶ Contaminants in Fish Tissue
- ▶ Pathogen Indicators





## Chapter 4 Suitability for Recreation

Another perspective on lake condition views lake quality in terms of its suitability or safety for recreational use. Lakes are used for a wide variety of recreational opportunities that include swimming, waterskiing, windsurfing, fishing, boating, and many other activities. However, a number of microbial organisms, algal toxins, and other contaminants present in lakes can make people sick. NLA analysts assessed three indicators with respect to recreational condition: 1) microcystin – one type of algal toxin, 2) cyanobacteria – one type of algae that often produces algal toxins, and 3) chlorophyll-*a* – a measure of all algae present. Samples were collected for two other indicators, pathogens and sediment mercury, however results are unavailable at this time. Results from a companion study of contaminants in fish tissue are available and are also discussed in this chapter.

### Algal Toxins

One group of phytoplankton, the cyanobacteria, produces a biochemically and bioactively diverse number of toxins, called cyanotoxins. Cyanobacteria (also called blue-green algae) are a natural part of all freshwater ecosystems. Eutrophication often results in conditions that favor their growth and cyanobacterial blooms frequently occur in these types of lakes. Cyanobacterial blooms can be unsightly, often floating in a layer of decaying, odiferous, gelatinous scum. Many types of cyanobacteria have the potential to producing cyanotoxins, including *Anabaena*, *Microcystis*, and *Oscillatoria/Planktothrix*, and several different cyanotoxins may be produced simultaneously. In assessing the risk of exposure to algal toxins for recreational safety, it is important to remember that algal density *i.e.*, chlorophyll-*a* concentrations and cyanobacteria cell counts serve as proxies for the actual presence of algal toxins. This is because not all phytoplankton are cyanobacteria and not all cyanobacteria produce cyanotoxins.



Although there are relatively few documented cases of severe human health effects, exposure to cyanobacteria or their toxins may produce allergic reactions such as skin rashes, eye irritations and respiratory symptoms and in some cases gastroenteritis, liver and kidney failure, or death. The most likely exposure route for humans is through accidental ingestion or inhalation during recreational activities, though cyanotoxins

cyanotoxin, or any other algal toxins, the World Health Organization (WHO) has established recreational exposure guidelines for chlorophyll-*a*, cyanobacterial cell counts, and microcystin (Table 1).

These thresholds, along with the presence or absence of microcystin, were used to assess the condition of lakes of the nation with respect to this indicator suite.

Indicator (units)	Low Risk	Moderate Risk	High Risk
Chlorophyll- <i>a</i> (µg/L)	<10	10 - <50	>50
Cyanobacteria cell counts (#/L)	< 20,000	20,000 - <100,000	≥ 100,000
Microcystin (µg/L)	<10	10 - ≤20	>20

Table 1. World Health Organization thresholds of risk associated with potential exposure to cyanotoxins.

are also cause for concern in drinking water. Cyanotoxins can also kill livestock and pets that drink affected water. While many varieties of cyanotoxin exist, microcystin, produced by several cyanobacterial taxa, is currently believed to be the most common in lakes. Microcystin is a potent liver toxin, a known tumor promoter, and a possible human carcinogen.

Because of the potential for human illness, several states have issued guidelines for recreational use advisories associated with the presence of microcystin or associated indicators. These guidelines vary and rely on visual observations of algal scums, measured chlorophyll-*a* concentrations, cyanobacteria cell counts, and/or direct measurements of microcystin. While EPA does not presently have water quality criteria for microcystin,

### *Findings for Algal Toxins*

Using the WHO thresholds, the levels of risk associated with the exposure to algal toxins varied by region and by indicator (Figure 16). Using the cyanobacteria cell count as the indicator, 27% of lakes nationwide pose a high or moderate risk for potential exposure to algal toxins. There was no significant difference in the proportion of natural and man-made lakes with high or moderate exposure risks for cyanobacteria. The potential high or moderate exposure risk to algal toxins based on chlorophyll-*a* concentration or microcystin levels is 41%.

It is important to note, however, that while the risk of exposure is extremely low, microcystin was present in 30% of lakes nationally (Figure 17). This could



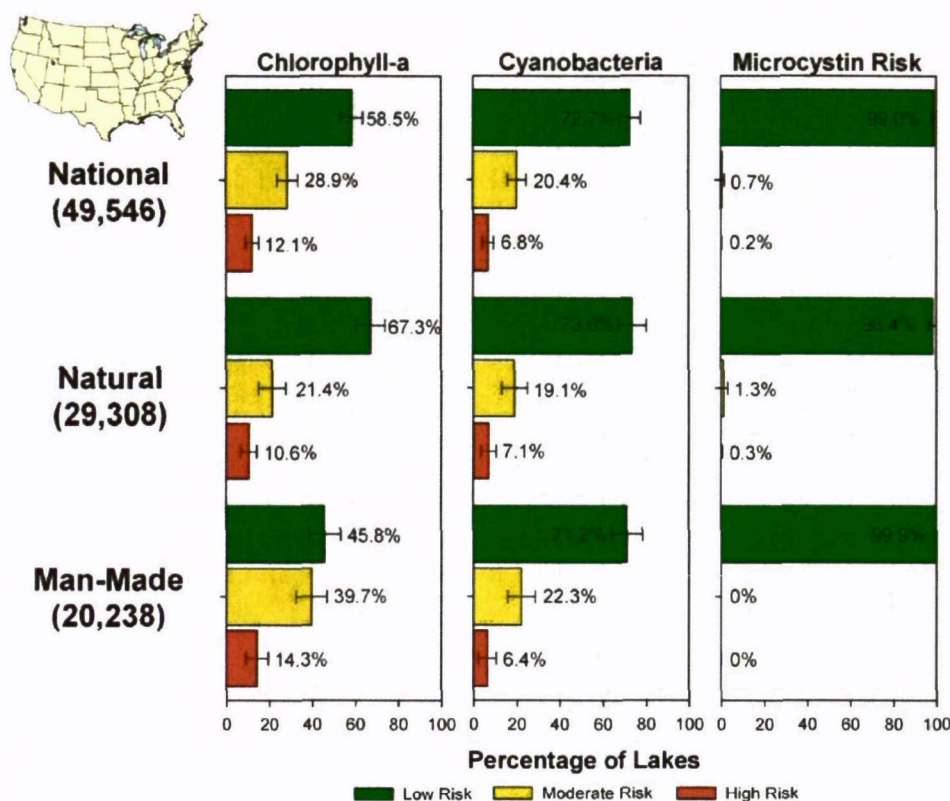


Figure 16. Percent of lakes in three algal toxin risk categories, using three different indicators.

potentially have wide ranging impacts on human health and the swimmability of many lakes. When interpreting the data of this first ever national-scale study of microcystin in lakes, it is necessary to consider how the sampling was conducted. During the 2007 survey, microcystin samples were collected at mid-lake, in open water. However, large windblown accumulations of cyanobacteria often occur at nearshore areas in lakes and it is the concentrations along the lake's edge that are of most concern to municipal health officials. Some studies indicate that cell counts and cyanotoxin concentrations are greater in nearshore scums than in open water areas. However, while concentrations are often greater in nearshore accumulations than in open water areas, concentrations large enough to cause human health concerns may still occur in open waters (with or without surface accumulations or scums). Sampling at mid-lake provides a conservative

estimate and because of this, the NLA results may underestimate certain types of recreational exposure when accumulations or scums are present.

Another important point to consider when looking at the data is whether the single sample of microcystin truly represents what is in the lake. Chlorophyll-a levels, cyanobacteria densities, and cyanotoxin concentrations may change quite rapidly, depending on bloom intensity and weather conditions. The concentrations of microcystin measured on one particular day

may over or underestimate season-wide central tendencies. The NLA is not intended to assess the specific condition of any given lake, but rather provide information on the general conditions across the population of lakes. Finally, it is currently unknown how well microcystin occurrence correlates with the occurrence of other classes of cyanotoxins that were not measured, or how human health risks might be altered because of toxin mixtures. While the survey results are a good start in our understanding, much more is to be learned about algal toxins in lakes.

## Contaminants in Lake Fish Tissue

Fish acquire contaminants and concentrate them in their tissues by uptake from water (bioconcentration) and through ingestion (bioaccumulation). Fish can often bioaccumulate chemicals at levels of



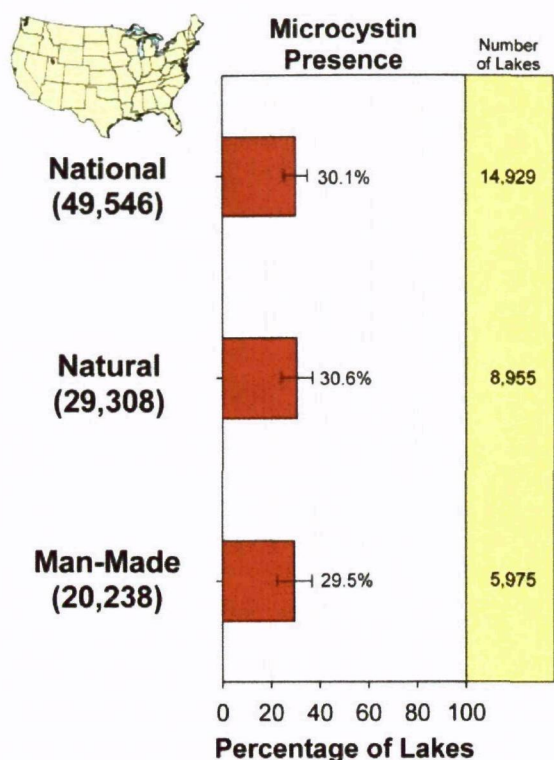


Figure 17. Occurrence of microcystin in lakes.

more than a million times the concentration detected in the water column. In a review of existing studies and programs, a need emerged for a comprehensive characterization of chemical contamination in freshwater fish tissue and identification of the extent of that contamination in U.S. lakes and reservoirs.

In a study conducted by the Office of Water's Office of Science and Technology, EPA surveyed contaminants in lake fish tissue. *The National Study of Chemical Residues in Lake Fish Tissue* characterized contaminant levels in fillet tissue for predators and in whole bodies for bottom-dwelling fish species. The study targeted pollutants that were classified as persistent, bioaccumulative, and toxic (PBT) chemicals, including mercury, arsenic, PCBs, dioxins and furans, DDT, and chlordane. This survey provided data to develop national estimates for 268 PBT chemicals in fish tissue from lakes and reservoirs in the 48 continental states (excluding the Great Lakes and the Great Salt Lake).

The study focused on fish species that are commonly consumed in the study area, have a wide geographic distribution, and potentially accumulate high concentrations of PBT chemicals. Fish samples were collected over a 4-year period (2000-2003) from 500 randomly selected lakes and reservoirs, which ranged in size from 1 hectare (2.5 acres) to 365,000 hectares (900,000 acres), were at least 1 meter (3 feet) deep, and had permanent fish populations.





The data show that mercury, PCBs, dioxins and furans, and DDT are widely distributed in lakes and reservoirs across the country. Mercury and PCBs were detected in all fish samples (Figure 18). Dioxins and furans were detected in 81% of the predator samples and 99% of the bottom-dwelling fish samples. DDT was detected in 78% of the predator samples and 98% of the bottom-dwelling samples. Cumulative frequency distribution plots showed that established human consumption limits were exceeded in 49% of the sampled lakes for mercury, in 17% of the lakes for total PCBs, and in 8% of the lakes for dioxins and furans. In contrast, 43 targeted chemicals were not detected in any sample. Full results from this study can be found at <http://www.epa.gov/waterscience/fishstudy>.

## Pathogen Indicators

*Enterococci* are bacteria that live in the intestinal tracts of warm-blooded creatures, including humans. They are most frequently found in soil, vegetation, and surface water because of contamination by animal excrement. Most species of *enterococci* are not considered harmful to humans however the presence of *enterococci* in the environment indicates the possibility that other disease-causing agents also carried by fecal material may be present. Epidemiological studies of marine and freshwater beaches have established a relationship between the density of *Enterococci* in the water and the occurrence of gastroenteritis in swimmers. *Enterococci* are believed to provide a better indication of the presence of pathogens than fecal coliform, which is an older indicator of potential pathogenicity.

For the NLA, *enterococci* were measured using a method to assess ambient

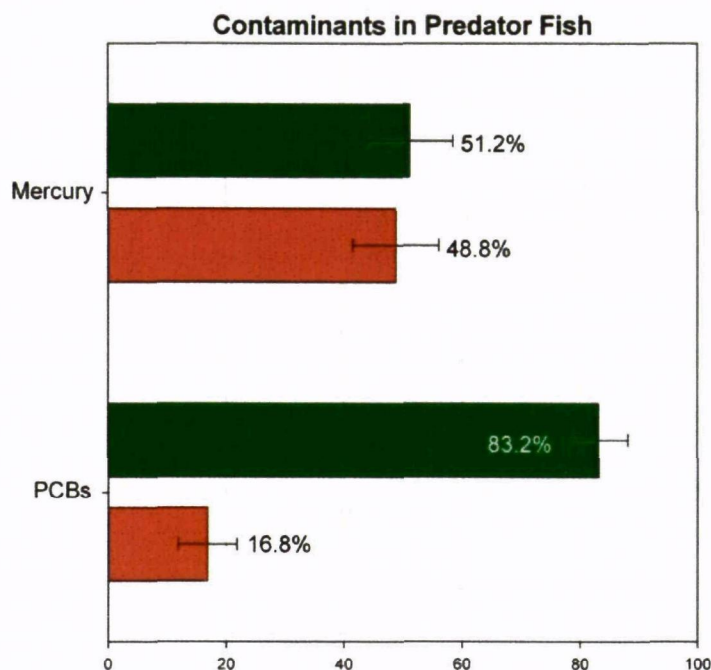


Figure 18. Percentage predator fish with mercury and PCB levels above and below EPA recommend limits.

concentrations. This Quantitative Polymerase Chain Reaction (qPCR) method quantifies DNA that is specific to *enterococci*. Published epidemiological studies report a clear relationship between levels of qPCR-measured *enterococci* and sickness. EPA research is still underway to develop health-based thresholds for interpreting qPCR results.







# HIGHLIGHT

## Atmospheric Contaminants: Mercury and Acid Rain

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Of the many stressors that affect lakes, atmospheric contaminants are perhaps the most difficult to address. This is because sources of atmospheric contaminants are often hundreds or even thousands of miles from the lakes into which the contaminants are ultimately deposited. The intertwined issues of freshwater acidification and mercury contamination are not new. The popular press began reporting on acid rain in the 1970s. It took another 10-15 years for the press to also focus on mercury. Today, many people are aware of both issues, yet often do not fully comprehend nor appreciate the degree to which the two are linked. In this section, the sources, fate, and transport of mercury and acid-forming chemicals are outlined to provide an understanding of where these contaminants occur, how they are manifested, and how they are related. In the case of both these pollutants, the cycle is initiated by emissions into the air.

Mercury is a naturally occurring metal that is found in the environment in many forms, all of which are toxic to aquatic life in varying degrees. The release of mercury to the environment is enhanced by human activities such as the combustion of fossil fuels (such as coal and petroleum). In the U.S. the largest sources of mercury are coal-fired generation or utility boilers, followed by waste incinerators. Mercury is present in many household items, notably thermostats and fluorescent lamps, and is released when these items end up in landfills or incineration facilities. Depending on its chemical form, air-borne mercury may remain in the atmosphere for a period of minutes (as reactive gaseous mercury), days (as particulate mercury), or weeks or years (as gaseous elemental mercury).

Methylmercury, one of the most toxic forms of mercury, can be prevalent in fish and has documented adverse health effects on humans. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that up to 6% of women of childbearing age have blood mercury levels in excess of established safety levels. Fish and fish-eating wildlife such as the common loon and American bald eagle are also at risk from mercury toxicity. While the mercury cycle in lakes is quite complex, there are five basic stages: emission, deposition, methylation\*, bioaccumulation, and finally sequestration to lake sediments.

Lake acidification is most commonly caused by acidic deposition (rain, snow and dust). The acidic deposition pathway begins with the release into the air of acid-forming chemicals, most notoriously sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides, and ends when sulfuric and nitric acids are deposited to the landscape. Sulfur dioxide, like mercury, results largely from the burning of fossil fuels. Some forms of coal are very rich in sulfur, and poorly controlled facilities released massive quantities, particularly during the period 1960-1992. Both sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides are common components of vehicular emissions. Once emitted, these two compounds undergo complex atmospheric transformations, resulting in rain and snow that contain dilute concentrations of nitric and sulfuric acids. Thankfully, the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990 have resulted in profound reductions in acid-forming precursors. In very sensitive regions, however, lakes remain at risk for acidification even with reduced levels of acid rain.

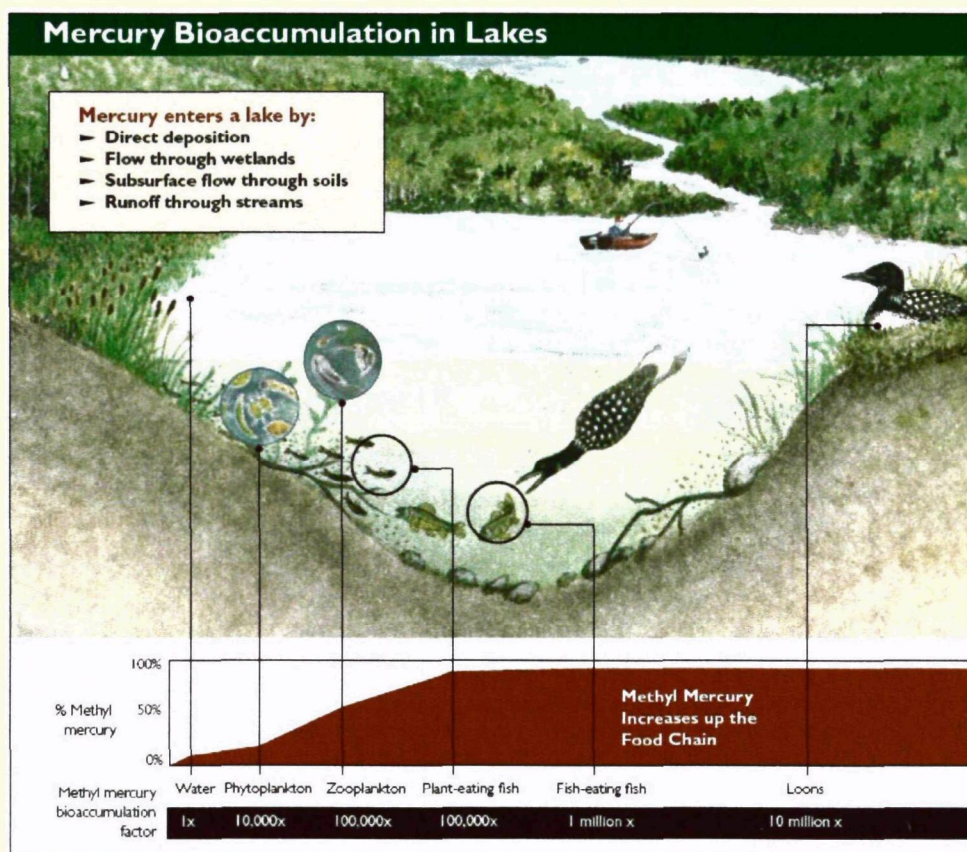
In one sense, the process of lake acidification is not as complex as that of mercury accumulation in that there is neither methylation nor bioaccumulation of the acids. Yet acidification has more pernicious effects that can exacerbate mercury problems. Acidification of watersheds renders the watersheds more efficient at creating and transporting methylmercury to lakes, along with other soil-bound toxic metals such as aluminium. Moreover, acidification of the lakes themselves renders the bioaccumulation of

\*The natural and biologically-mediated process by which mercury is transformed into toxic organic methylmercury.

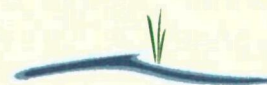


methylmercury more efficient. Therefore, acidic lakes: 1) receive more mercury from their watershed, 2) have more of the mercury in the toxic methylated form, and 3) have more efficient bioaccumulation of the methylmercury.

Studies throughout the United States, Canada, Russia, and Scandinavia all show a very strong connection between lake acidification and mercury bioaccumulation. Researchers have documented the occurrence of mercury hotspots in various parts of the U.S. and attribute these to one of three basic causes — proximity to poorly-controlled emissions sources, water level management in reservoirs, or acid sensitive landscapes. In regions of North America where lake acidification is in fact already improving, minor reductions in mercury in fish and fish-eating wildlife can be anticipated. Much more consequential reductions in environmental mercury contamination are expected as EPA and states strive to control mercury emissions from coal-fired utilities and other sources.



Graphical depiction of methylmercury bioaccumulation in lake biota. This figure is reproduced from the Hubbard Brook Research Foundation's ScienceLinks publication *Mercury Matters: Linking Mercury Science with Public Policy in the Northeastern United States*. Used with permission.





## CHAPTER 5. TROPHIC STATE OF LAKES



### *IN THIS CHAPTER*

- Findings for Trophic State



## Chapter 5

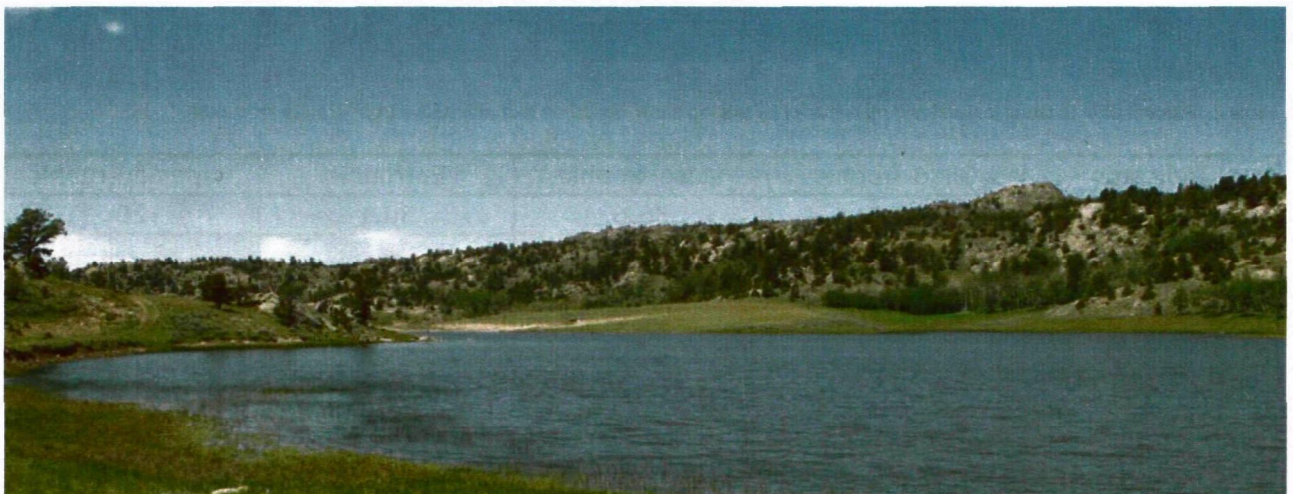
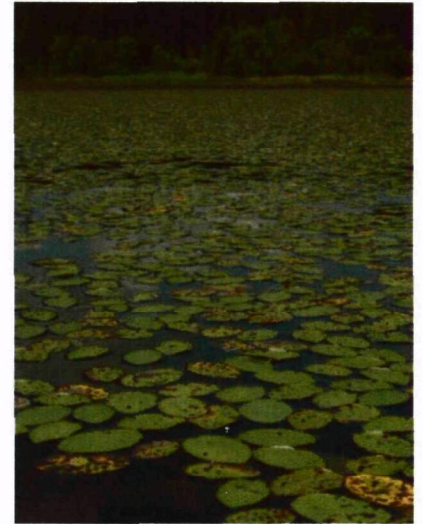
# Trophic State of Lakes

The third approach to assessing the condition of lakes is to look at lakes with respect to their primary production. Trophic state depicts biological productivity in lakes, especially primary productivity. Lakes with high nutrient levels, high plant production rates, and an abundance of plant life are termed eutrophic, whereas lakes that have low concentrations of nutrients, low rates of productivity and generally low biomass are termed oligotrophic. Lakes that fall in between are mesotrophic, and those on the extreme ends of the scale are termed hypereutrophic or ultra-oligotrophic. Lakes exist across all trophic categories, however hypereutrophic lakes are usually the result of excessive human activity and can be an indicator of stress conditions.

There is no ideal trophic state for lakes as a whole since lakes naturally fall in all of these categories. Additionally, the determination of "ideal" trophic state depends on how the lake is used or managed. For example, for drinking water purposes an oligotrophic lake is a better source than a eutrophic lake because the water is easier or less expensive to treat. Swimmers and

recreational users also prefer oligotrophic lakes because of their clarity and aesthetic quality. Eutrophic lakes can be biologically diverse with abundant fish, plants, and wildlife. For anglers, increased concentrations of nutrients, algae, or aquatic plant life generally result in higher fish production.

Eutrophication is a slow, natural part of lake aging, but today human influences are significantly increasing the amount of nutrients entering lakes. Human activities such as poorly managed agriculture or suburbanization of lakeshores can result in excessive nutrient concentrations reaching lakes. This can lead to accelerated eutrophication and related undesirable effects including nuisance algae, excessive plant growth, murky water, odor, and fish kills.





## Findings for Trophic State

For the NLA, trophic state of lakes is characterized using nationally-consistent chlorophyll-*a* concentrations (Figure 19). Based on these thresholds, 13% of lakes are oligotrophic, 37% are mesotrophic, 30% are eutrophic, and 20% are hypereutrophic. The results also show that natural lakes tend towards mesotrophic conditions and man-made lakes towards eutrophic conditions.

Many states and lake associations classify their lakes by trophic state using a variety of thresholds for nutrients (phosphorus or nitrogen), Secchi disk transparency, or chlorophyll-*a*, depending on the data available. For this assessment, NLA analysts, in consultation with a number of state and local lake experts, decided to base trophic state on chlorophyll-*a*. The group considered this indicator the most relevant and straightforward estimate of trophic state because it is based on direct measurements of live organisms, yet acknowledges that other indicators also could be used. Table 2 illustrates the percentages that would fall into the different trophic categories if different indicators were used. Total nitrogen and total phosphorus, (which ranked fourth and fifth in terms of how widespread excess levels are across the country) together or individually are primary drivers of eutrophication.

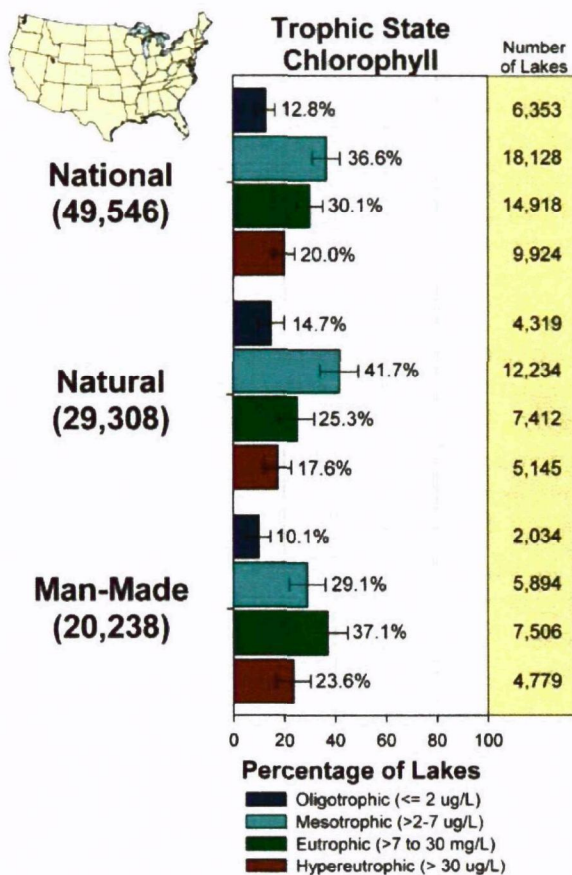


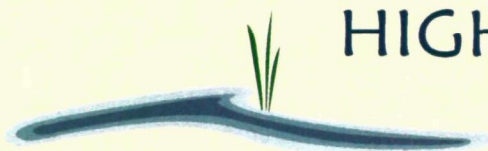
Figure 19. Trophic state of lakes in the U.S.

Table 2. Percent of U.S. lakes (natural and man-made) by trophic state, based on four alternative trophic state indicators. \*

Indicator	Oligo-trophic	Meso-trophic	Eutrophic	Hyper-eutrophic
Chlorophyll- <i>a</i>	12.8	36.6	30.1	20
Secchi transparency	10.5	22.5	39.8	18.4
Total Nitrogen	22.1	37.5	22.0	18.4
Total Phosphorus	25.0	28.8	24.7	21.4

\* Rows may not sum to 100% due to unassessed lakes.





# HIGHLIGHT

## Volunteer Power: Monitoring Lakes with Volunteers

Hundreds of organizations monitor lakes in the U.S. using trained volunteers. Some volunteer groups are run by state environmental agencies. Others are managed by local residential lake associations determined to protect the quality of their local lake, pond or reservoir. Universities, often as part of U.S. Department of Agriculture Cooperative Extension, manage a number of statewide lake volunteer monitoring programs. In some states, trained volunteers are the leading source of consistent, long-term lake data. Volunteer-collected lake data are widely used in state water quality assessment reports, identification of impaired waters, local decision making, and scientific study.

One national program designed to promote the use of volunteers in lake monitoring is the Secchi Dip-In (<http://dipin.kent.edu/index.htm>). Run by limnologist Dr. Robert Carlson of Kent State University. Since 1994, the Dip-In encourages individuals who are members of a volunteer monitoring program to measure lake transparency at or around the 4th of July and report their results on a national website. These values are used to assess the transparency of volunteer-monitored waters in the U.S. and Canada. One goal of the Dip-In is to increase the number and interest of volunteers in environmental monitoring and to provide national level recognition of the work that they perform.

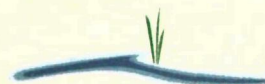


### Volunteer Monitoring and the National Lakes Assessment

The relationship between lake volunteer monitoring and the National Lakes Assessment (NLA) is in its earliest stages. However, volunteers did participate in a few states where links between volunteer programs and state monitoring staff were strong. The Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) conducted its own statistically valid assessment of 50 lakes including NLA-selected lakes about half of which are also routinely sampled by volunteers in the DEC-managed Vermont Lay Monitoring Program. Volunteers were informed ahead of time when NLA sampling crews were going to arrive, and in some cases were able to provide boats for the crews as well as welcome local advice regarding lake navigation and access. In Rhode Island, some volunteers conducted side-by-side sampling with the NLA crews for later analysis and comparison using Rhode Island Watershed Watch methods. Volunteers observed the sampling, assisted crews with equipment, provided firsthand knowledge of local lakes, and contacted news media to provide publicity. In Michigan, at two lakes also monitored by Michigan's Cooperative Lake Monitoring Program, volunteers sampled side-by-side with Michigan Department of Environmental Quality staff and NLA survey crews. Local newspaper reporters observed these monitoring events and provided press coverage of the volunteers working alongside the survey crews.

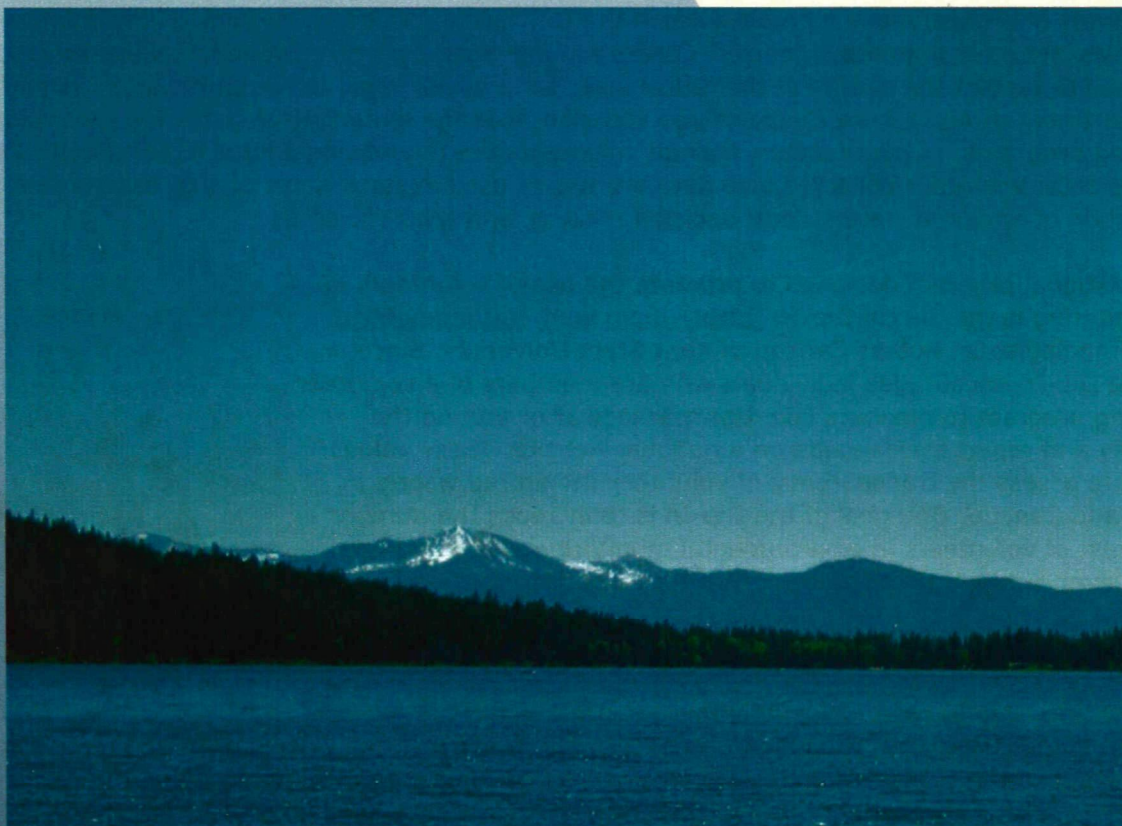


Volunteer monitors are important partners in the assessment and protection of the nation's lakes, and state agencies and EPA should continue to explore pathways for improved communication and cooperation with volunteer programs in future surveys of the nation's lakes.





## CHAPTER 6. ECOREGIONAL RESULTS



### IN THIS CHAPTER

- ▶ Nationwide Comparisons
- ▶ Northern Appalachians
- ▶ Southern Appalachians
- ▶ Coastal Plains
- ▶ Upper Midwest
- ▶ Temperate Plains
- ▶ Southern Plains
- ▶ Northern Plains
- ▶ Western Mountains
- ▶ Xeric



## Chapter 6

# Ecoregional Results

Taken individually, each lake is a reflection of its watershed. The characteristics of the watershed, *i.e.*, its size relative to the lake, topography, geology, soil type, land cover, and human activities, together influence the amount and nature of material entering the lake. For example, a deep alpine lake located in a Rocky Mountain watershed will likely have clear, pristine water and little biological productivity. Conversely, a lake in a coastal plains watershed of the mid-Atlantic region, an area of nutrient-rich alluvial soils and a long history of human settlement, will more likely be characterized by high turbidity, high concentrations of nutrients and organic matter, prevalent algal blooms, and abundant aquatic weeds and other plants. Atmospheric deposition of airborne pollutants, as well as nutrients traveling in groundwater from hundreds of miles away, can affect the watershed and influence the lake condition.

Lakes in high population areas are especially vulnerable. Combined sewer overflow and stormwater runoff can carry marked amounts of pollutants, such as metals, excess sediment, bacteria, and most recently, pharmaceuticals. As a result, expectations and lake condition vary across the country.

Because of this diversity in landscape, it becomes important to assess waterbodies in their own geographical setting and the NLA was designed to report findings on an ecoregional scale. Ecoregions are areas that contain similar environmental characteristics and are defined by common natural characteristics such as climate, vegetation, soil type, and geology. By looking at lake conditions in these smaller ecoregions, decision makers can begin to understand patterns based on landform and geography – in other words, whether the problems are isolated in one or two adjacent regions, or whether they are widespread.

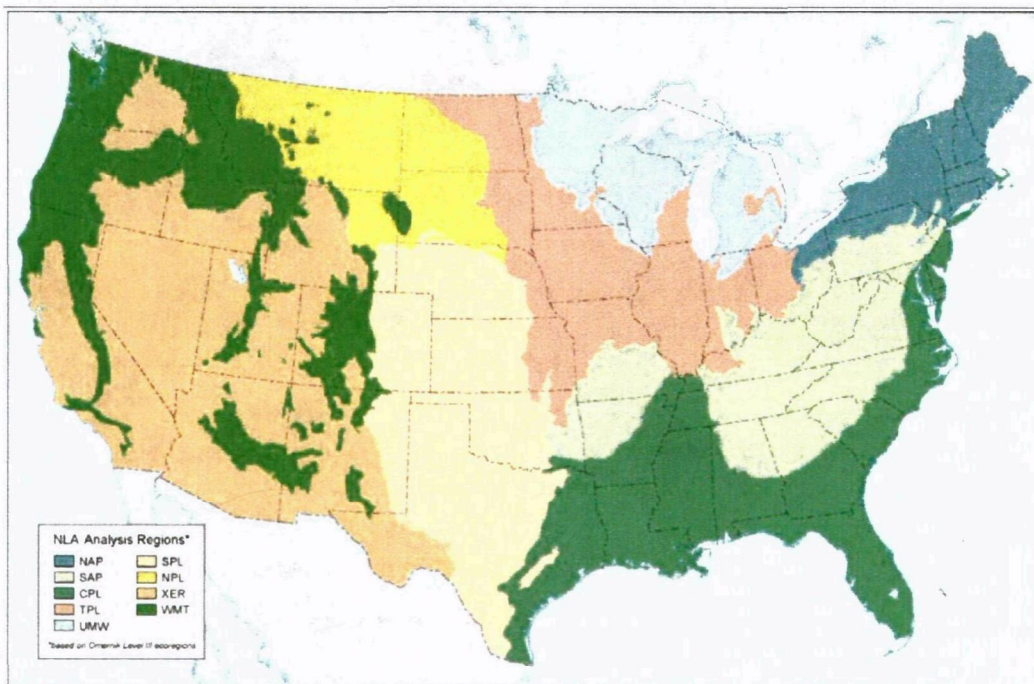


Figure 20. Ecoregions used as part of the National Lakes Assessment.



EPA has defined ecoregions at various scales, ranging from coarse ecoregions at the continental scale (Level I) to finer ecoregions that divide the land into smaller units (Level III or IV). The nine NLA ecoregions are aggregations of the Level III ecoregions delineated by EPA for the continental U.S. These nine ecoregions as shown in Figure 20 are:

- Northern Appalachians (NAP)
- Southern Appalachians (SAP)
- Coastal Plains (CPL)
- Upper Midwest (UMW)
- Temperate Plains (TPL)
- Southern Plains (SPL)
- Northern Plains (NPL)
- Western Mountains (WMT)
- Xeric (XER)

To assess waters within each ecoregion, the NLA captures the geographic variation in lakes using regionally-specific reference conditions. The resulting set of reference lakes all share common characteristics and occur within a common geographic area.<sup>4</sup> This approach not only allows lakes in one region to be compared with the particular reference lakes of that region, but also allows for the comparison of one ecoregion to another. This means that lakes in the arid west are not being assessed against lakes in the Southern Plains. At the same time, this also means that if 10% of the Xeric west

lakes were in poor condition and 20% of the southern plains lakes were relatively poor, one can compare the two ecoregions and say that the Southern Plains have twice the proportion of lakes in poor condition.

## Nationwide Comparisons

### *Biological Condition – Taxa Loss*

Regionally, the proportion of lakes with good biological condition ranges from 91% in the Upper Midwest to < 5% in the Northern Plains (Figure 21). In general, the glaciated and/or mountainous regions have the highest proportion of lakes exhibiting good biological condition, followed by Coastal Plains lakes. The Xeric west and Northern Plains exhibit the highest proportions of lakes in poor condition biologically. Forty nine percent of lakes are in poor biological condition in the Xeric region, while just under 85% of Northern Plains lakes are in poor biological condition.

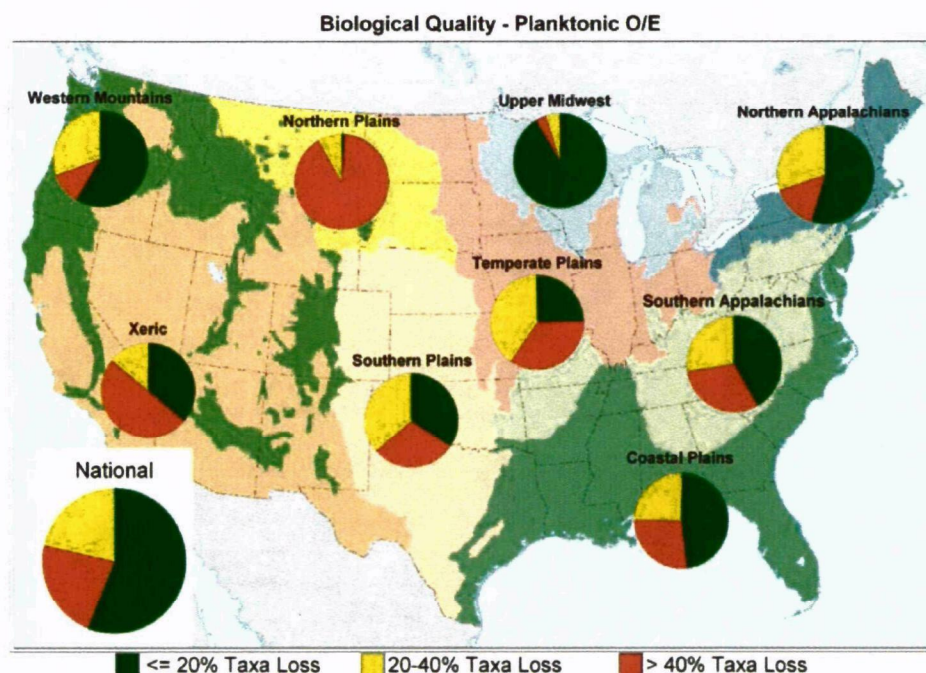


Figure 21. Biological condition of the nation's lakes across nine ecoregions based on planktonic O/E taxa loss.

4. It is important to note that the geographic boundaries of the regionally-specific reference areas do not specifically match those of the nine ecoregions. More detailed information about how regional reference lakes were determined can be found in the Technical Report.



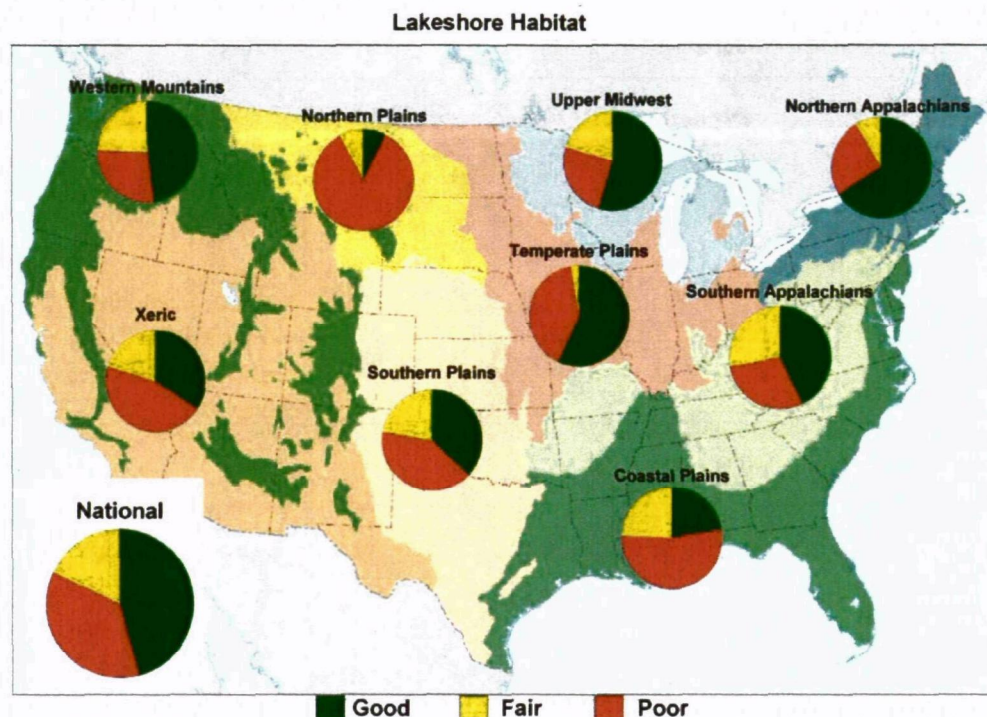


Figure 22. Habitat condition of the nation's lakes across nine ecoregions based on lakeshore habitat.

### *Habitat Stressors – Lakeshore Habitat*

In the NLA, habitat stress was assessed using four indicators: lakeshore habitat, shallow water habitat, physical habitat complexity and human disturbance. Of these, the most revealing indicator, based on the relative and attributable risk analyses, is lakeshore habitat. This analysis indicates that biological integrity of lakes is three times more likely to be poor when the lakeshore habitat area is classified as poor. Regionally, the proportion of lakes with poor lakeshore habitat ranges from a low of 25% in the Northern Appalachians to a high of 84% in the Northern Plains (Figure 22). High proportions of poor lakeshore habitat are most prevalent in the Plains and Xeric ecoregions.

### *Trophic Status*

Regionally, the proportion of lakes classified as oligotrophic, based on measures of chlorophyll-*a*, ranges from 54% in the

Western Mountains to < 5% in the Temperate Plains (Figure 23). The highest proportions of mesotrophic waters are found in the Northern and Southern Appalachians, and the Upper Midwest. The proportion of eutrophic lakes is highest in the Coastal and Southern Plains. Hypereutrophic lakes are most prevalent in the Temperate Plains, where nearly 50% of lakes are classified hypereutrophic.

### *Recreational Suitability – Cyanobacteria (blue-green algae)*

Regionally, the proportion of lakes presenting low risk of human exposure to cyanobacteria-derived toxins (< 20,000 cells/L) exceeds 75% in the Western Mountains, Xeric west, Upper Midwest, and Northern and Southern Appalachians. The highest proportions of lakes at high risk (> 100,000 cells/L) occur in the Southern, Coastal, and Temperate Plains. The Northern Plains have over 50% of lakes in the moderate risk category (Figure 24).



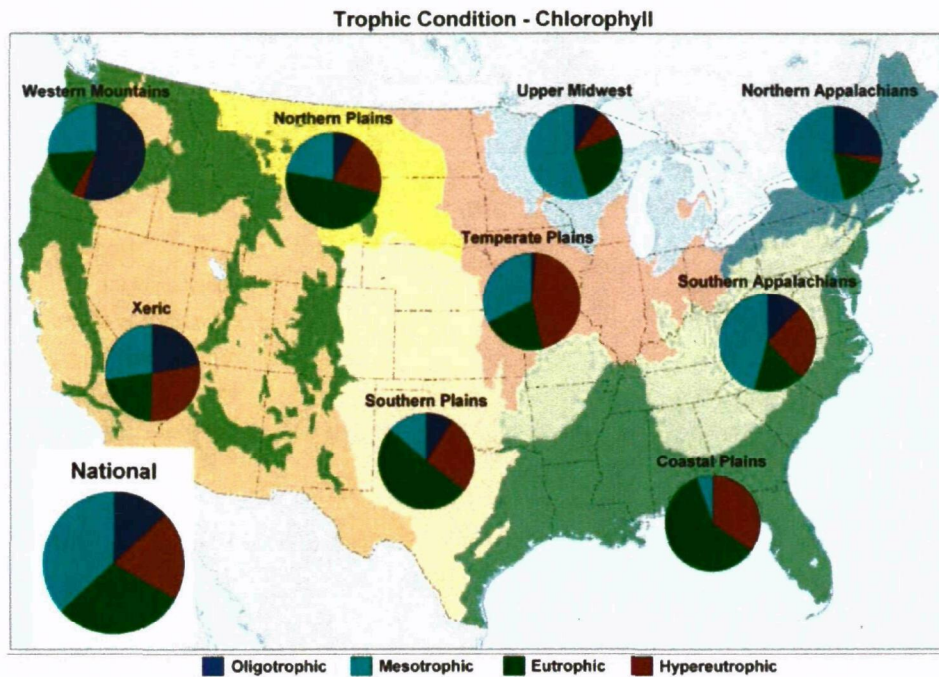


Figure 23. Trophic state of the nation's lakes across nine ecoregions based on chlorophyll-a.

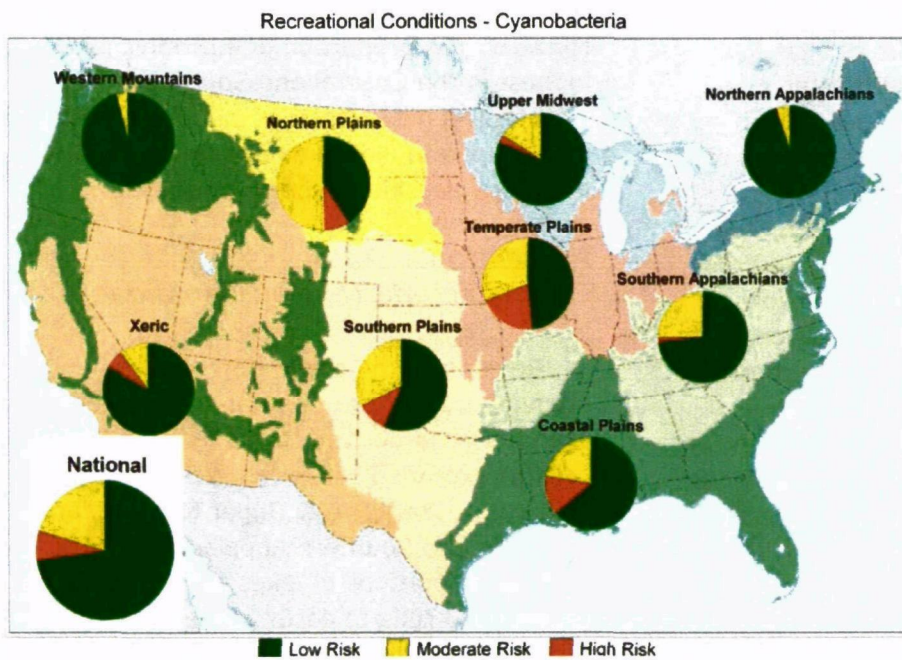


Figure 24. Comparison of recreational risk of the nation's lakes across nine ecoregions, based on blue-green algae levels corresponding to World Health Organization risk levels.



## Northern Appalachians

### *The Landscape*

The Northern Appalachians ecoregion covers all of the New England states, most of New York, the northern half of Pennsylvania, and northeast Ohio. It encompasses New York's Adirondack and Catskill Mountains and Pennsylvania's mid-northern tier, including the Allegheny National Forest. Major waterbodies include Lakes Ontario and Erie, New York's Finger Lakes, and Lake Champlain. There are 5,226 lakes in the Northern Appalachians that are represented by the NLA, 54% of which are constructed reservoirs. The ecoregion comprises some 139,424 square miles (4.6% of the United States), with about 4,722 square miles (3.4%) under federal ownership. Based on satellite images in the National Land Cover Dataset (1992), the distribution of land cover is 69% forested and 17% planted/cultivated, with the remaining 14% of land in other types of cover.

Many lakes in the region were created for the purpose of powering sawmills. During the 18th and early 19th centuries, lakes were affected by sedimentation caused by logging, farming, and damming of waterways. When agriculture moved west and much of eastern farmland converted back into woodlands, sediment yields declined in some areas. In many instances, lakes in what appears to be pristine forested settings are in fact still recovering from prior land use disturbances. In the mountainous regions of the Northern Appalachian ecoregion, many large reservoirs were constructed throughout the early 20th century for the purpose of hydropower generation and/or flood control.

### *Findings*

A total of 93 of the selected NLA sites were sampled during the summer of 2007 to

characterize the condition of lakes throughout the ecoregion. An overview of the NLA findings for Northern Appalachian lakes is shown in Figure 25.

### **Biological Condition**

Fifty-five percent of lakes are in good biological condition based on planktonic O/E, and when using the diatom IBI, 67% of lakes in the ecoregion are in good biological condition relative to reference condition. Conversely, the percentages of lakes in poor condition are 15% and 10% based on the two analyses, respectively.

### **Trophic Status**

Based on chlorophyll-*a*, 26% of lakes are oligotrophic, 54% are mesotrophic, 17% are eutrophic, and only 3% are considered hypereutrophic.

### **Recreational Suitability**

Using the indicators and World Health Organization guidelines described in Chapter 3, most lakes in the Northern Appalachian ecoregion exhibit relatively low risk of exposure to cyanobacteria and associated cyanotoxins. Based on cyanobacterial counts, 95% of lakes exhibit low risk. Microcystin was present in 9% of lakes.

### **Physical Habitat Stressors**

Lakeshore habitat is considered good in 66% of the lakes in this ecoregion. However, given the long history of land use and settlement in this ecoregion, the shorelines of Northern Appalachian lakes exhibit relatively disturbed conditions due to human activities. Fifty-seven percent of lakes show moderate to high levels of lakeshore disturbance.



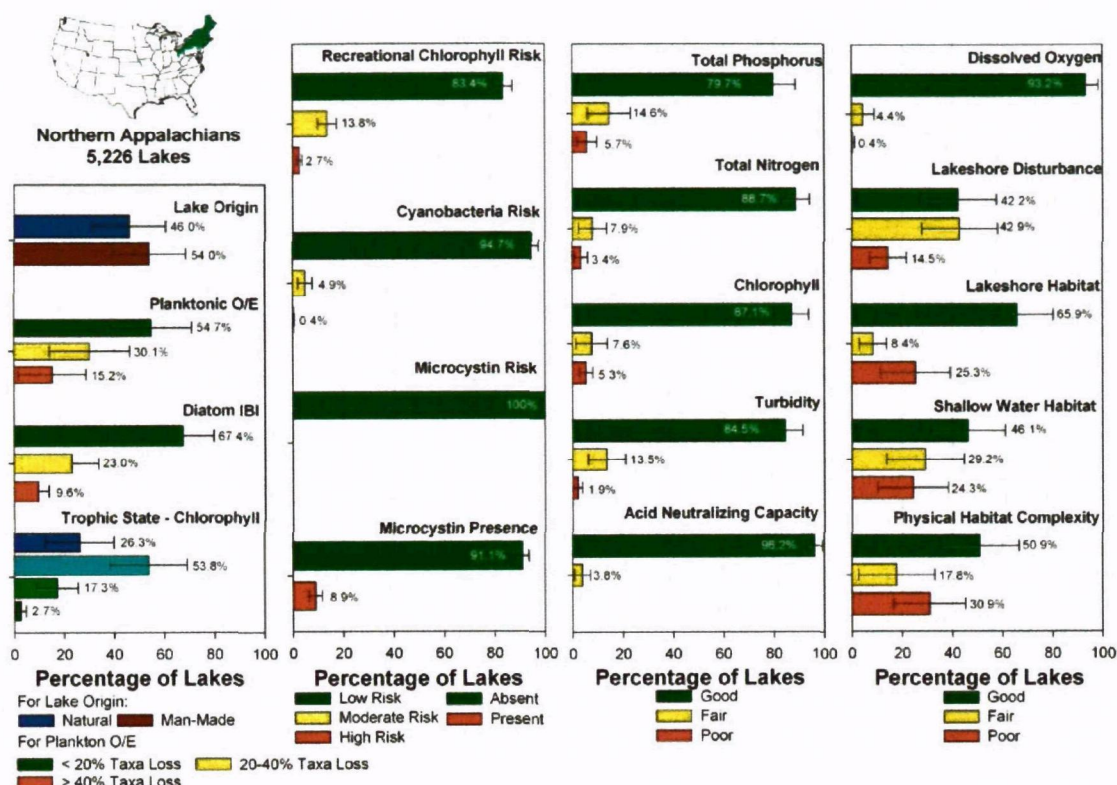


Figure 25. NLA results for the Northern Appalachian Plateau Ecoregion. Bars show the percentage of lakes within a condition class for a given indicator.

## Chemical Stressors

In contrast to physical habitat conditions, the majority of Northern Appalachian lakes exhibit high-quality waters based on the NLA stressor indicators. Relative to regionally-specific reference expectations, total phosphorus and nitrogen, chlorophyll-*a*, and turbidity levels are considered good in 80% or more of lakes in this ecoregion. Lakes are in good condition based on ANC and DO when compared to nationally-consistent thresholds.

## Southern Appalachians

### The Landscape

The Southern Appalachian Plateau ecoregion stretches over 10 states, from northeastern Alabama to central Pennsylvania. Also included in this region are the interior highlands of the Ozark Plateau

and the Ouachita Mountains in Arkansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma. The region covers about 321,900 square miles (10.7% of the United States) with about 42,210 square miles (10.7%) under federal ownership. Many important public lands, such as the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and surrounding national forests, the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, the George Washington and Monongahela National Forests, and the Shenandoah National Park are located within the region. Topography is mostly hills and low mountains with some wide valleys and irregular plains. Piedmont areas are included within the Southern Appalachians ecoregion.

Natural lakes are nearly non-existent in this ecoregion. The 4,690 lakes in the Southern Appalachian ecoregion represented by the NLA are all man-made. The



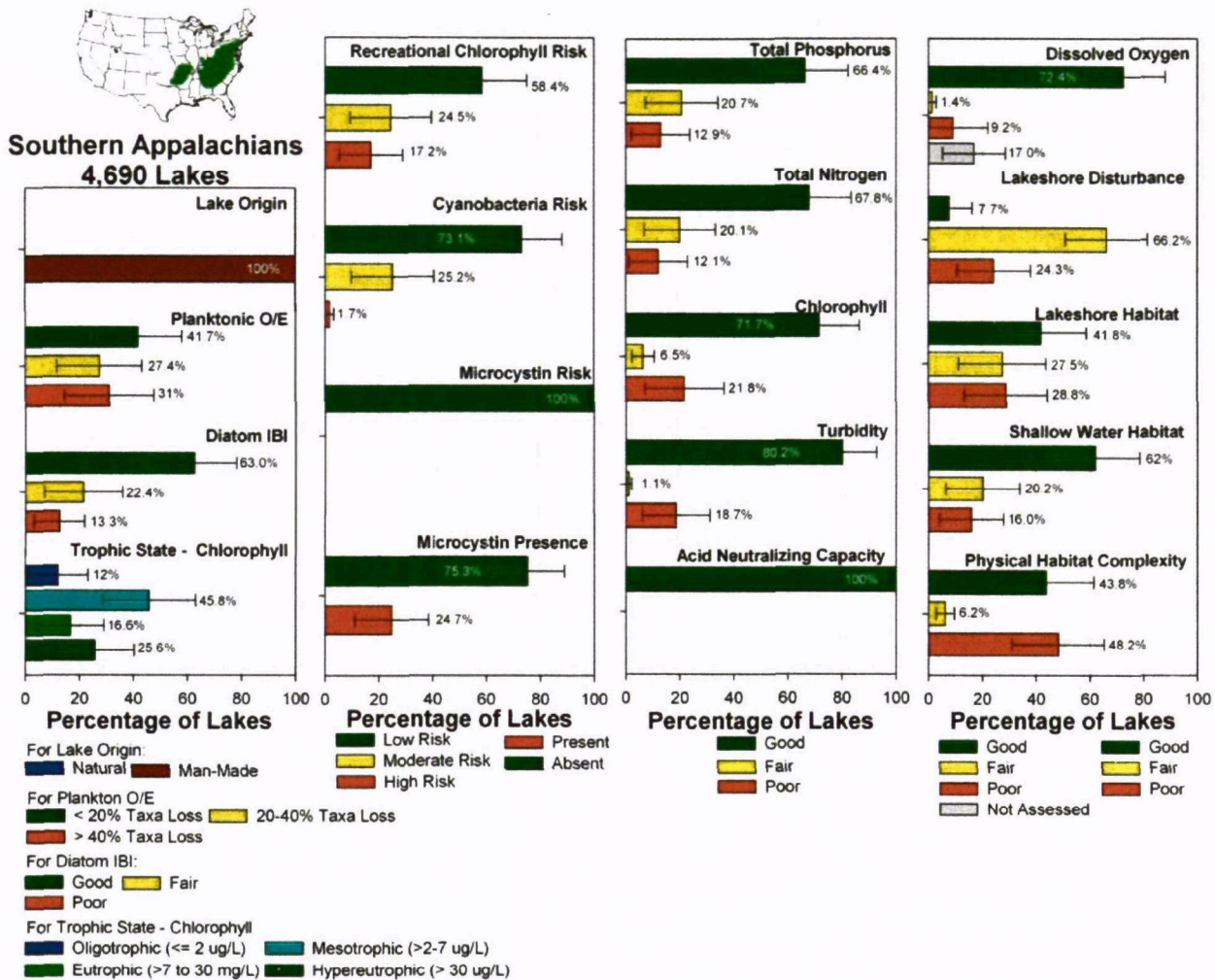


Figure 26. NLA results for the Southern Appalachian Ecoregion. Bars show the percentage of lakes within a condition class for a given indicator.

configuration of the Southern Appalachian valleys has proven ideal for the construction of man-made lakes, and some of the nation's largest hydro-power developments can be found in the Tennessee Valley.

### Findings

A total of 116 of the selected NLA sites were sampled during the summer of 2007 to characterize the condition of lakes throughout the ecoregion. An overview of the NLA findings for the Southern Appalachian lakes is shown in Figure 26.

### Biological Condition

Forty-two percent of lakes are in good biological condition based on planktonic O/E and when using the diatom IBI, 63% of lakes in the ecoregion are in good biological condition relative to reference condition. Conversely, the percentages of lakes in poor condition are 31% and 13% based on the two analyses, respectively. The apparent difference between these two biological indices goes beyond the scope of this assessment but may suggest that the two indicators are responding to different stressors in lakes in this particular ecoregion.



## Trophic Status

Based on chlorophyll-*a*, 12% of lakes are oligotrophic, 46% are mesotrophic, 17% are eutrophic, and 26% are considered hypereutrophic.

## Recreational Suitability

While many lakes in the Southern Appalachian ecoregion exhibit relatively low risk of exposure to cyanobacteria and associated cyanotoxins, a large portion of lakes exhibit moderate risk levels. When looking at the cyanobacterial counts, 73% of lakes exhibited low risk. Microcystin was present in 25% of lakes.

## Physical Habitat Stressors

Lakeshore habitat is considered good in 42% of the lakes in this ecoregion. Yet the shorelines of Southern Appalachian Plateau lakes indicate considerable lakeshore development pressure. Over 90% of lakes show moderate to high levels of lakeshore disturbance.

## Chemical Stressors

Based on the NLA stressor indicators, a considerable proportion of Southern Appalachian lakes exhibit good quality waters. Total phosphorus and nitrogen are considered good in 66% and 68% of lakes, respectively. Relative to regionally-specific reference expectations, chlorophyll-*a* and turbidity levels are considered good in 72% or more of the man-made lakes in this ecoregion. The man-made lakes are in good condition based on ANC and DO when compared to nationally consistent thresholds, although 9% of lakes were ranked poor due to low dissolved oxygen.

## Coastal Plains *The Landscape*

The Coastal Plains ecoregion covers the Mississippi Delta and Gulf Coast, north along the Mississippi River to the Ohio River, all of Florida, eastern Texas, and the Atlantic seaboard from Florida to New Jersey. Total area is about 395,000 square miles (13% of the United States) with 25,890 square miles (6.6%) under federal ownership. Based on satellite images in the 1992 National Land Cover Dataset, the distribution of land cover is 39% forested, 30% planted/cultivated, and 16% wetlands, with the remaining 15% of land in other types of cover. Damming, impounding, and channelization in this ecoregion have altered the rate and timing of water flow and delivery to lakes.

A subset of major lakes of the region includes the Toledo Bend (TX) and Sam Rayburn Reservoirs (TX/LA), Lake Okeechobee (FL), Lake Marion (SC), and the massive lake-wetland complexes north of the Gulf Coast. The Coastal Plains is also home to a variety of lakes and ponds, such as Cape Cod kettleholes, New Jersey Pine Barren ponds, southeastern blackwater lakes, Carolina "Bays", and the limestone-rich clear lakes of the Florida peninsula. A total of 7,009 lakes and reservoirs in the Coastal Plains ecoregion are represented in the NLA, and 69% of these are man-made.





## Findings

A total of 102 of the selected NLA sites were sampled during the summer of 2007 to characterize the condition of lakes throughout the ecoregion. An overview of the NLA findings for the Coastal Plains lakes is shown in Figure 27.

### Biological Condition

Forty-seven percent of lakes are in good biological condition based on planktonic

O/E, and when using the diatom IBI, 57% of lakes in the ecoregion are in good biological condition relative to reference condition. Conversely, the percentages of lakes in poor condition are 27% and 6% based on the two analyses, respectively

### Trophic Status

Based on chlorophyll-*a*, 6% are mesotrophic, 60% are eutrophic, and 34% are considered hypereutrophic.

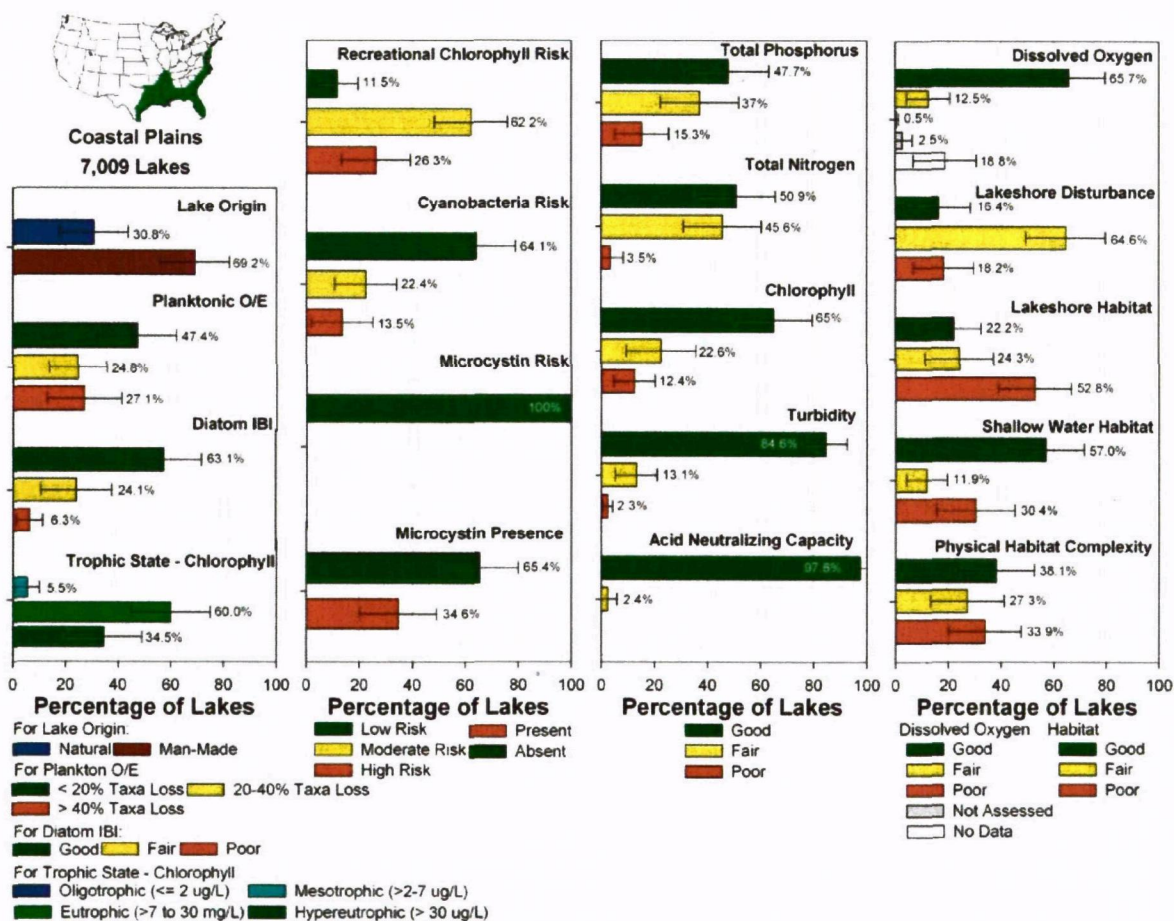


Figure 27. NLA findings for the Coastal Plains Ecoregion. Bars show the percentage of lakes within a condition class for a given indicator.



## Recreational Suitability

Lakes in the Coastal Plains Ecoregion exhibit moderate risk of exposure to cyanobacteria and associated cyanotoxins. Based on cyanobacterial counts, 64% of lakes exhibited low risk. Microcystin was present in 35% of lakes.

## Physical Habitat Stressors

Lakeshore habitat is considered good in 22% of the lakes in this ecoregion. Moreover, the shorelines of the Coastal Plains lakes are highly disturbed, indicating considerable lakeshore development pressure in this region. Just about 84% of lakes show moderate to high levels of lakeshore human disturbance.

## Chemical Stressors

Based on the NLA stressor indicators, water quality is somewhat variable across the Coastal Plains. Total phosphorus and nitrogen are considered good in 48% and 51% of lakes, respectively, and are poor in 15% and 4% of lakes, respectively. Relative to regionally-specific reference expectations, chlorophyll-*a* concentrations are considered good in 65% of lakes, and turbidity levels are considered good in 85% of lakes in this ecoregion. Lakes are in good condition based on ANC and DO when compared to nationally-consistent thresholds, although 13% of lakes were ranked fair due to low dissolved oxygen.

## Upper Midwest

### *The Landscape*

The Upper Midwest ecoregion covers most of the northern half and southeastern part of Minnesota, two-thirds of Wisconsin, and almost all of Michigan, extending about 160,374 square miles (5.4% of the United States). A total of 15,562 lakes in the



ecoregion are represented in the NLA, nearly all of which are of natural origin, reflecting the glaciation history of this region. Sandy soils dominate with relatively high water quality in lakes supporting warm and cold-water fish communities. Major lakes of the region include the Great Lakes (which, for design considerations, were not represented by the NLA), and also Lake of the Woods and Red Lake (MN), and Lake Winnebago (WI). The glaciated terrain of this ecoregion is typically plains with some hill formations. The northern tier of this ecoregion has a very high number of smaller lakes, both drainage and seepage, which range widely in geochemical makeup. Much of the land is covered by national and state forest. Federal lands account for 15.5% of the area at about 25,000 square miles. Based on satellite images in the 1992 National Land



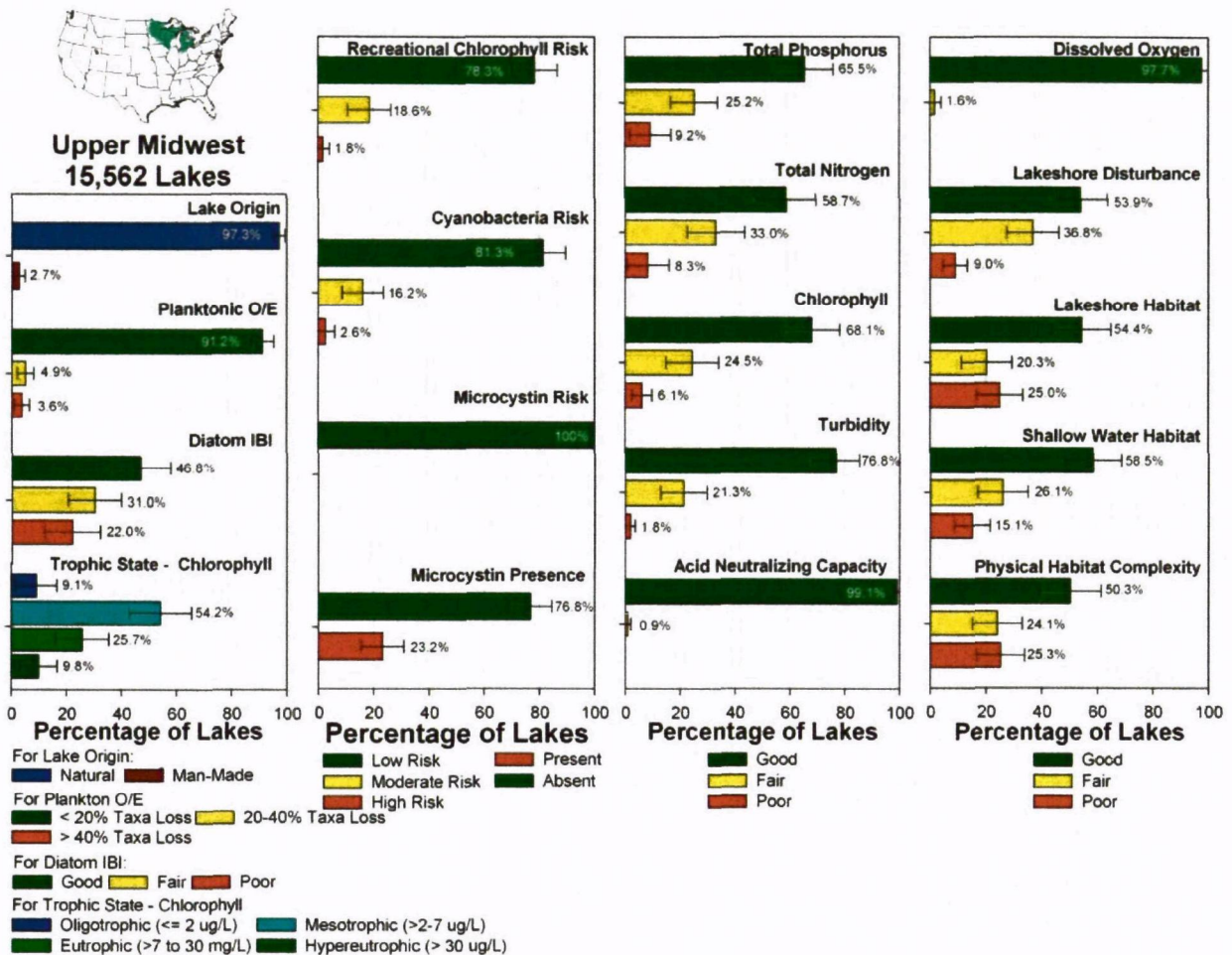


Figure 28. NLA findings for the Upper Midwest ecoregion. Bars show the percentage of lakes within a condition class for a given indicator.

Cover Dataset, the distribution of land cover is 40% forested, 34% planted/cultivated, and 17% wetlands, with the remaining 9% of land in other types of cover. Most of the landscape was influenced by early logging and agricultural activities.

## Findings

A total of 148 of the selected NLA sites were sampled during the summer of 2007 to characterize the condition of lakes throughout the ecoregion. An overview of the NLA findings for the Upper Midwest lakes is shown in Figure 28.

## Biological Condition

Ninety-one percent of lakes are in good biological condition based on planktonic O/E, and when using the diatom IBI, 47% of lakes in the ecoregion are in good biological condition relative to reference condition. Conversely, the percentages of lakes in poor condition are 4% and 22% based on the two analyses, respectively. The apparent difference between these two biological indices goes beyond the scope of this assessment but may suggest that the two indicators are responding to different stressors in lakes in this particular ecoregion.



## Trophic Status

Based on chlorophyll-*a*, 9% are oligotrophic, 54% are mesotrophic, 26% are eutrophic, and 10% are considered hypereutrophic.

## Recreational Suitability

Lakes in the Upper Midwest exhibit relatively low risk of exposure to cyanobacteria and associated cyanotoxins. Based on cyanobacterial counts, 81% of lakes exhibited low risk. Microcystin was present in 23% of lakes.

## Physical Habitat Stressors

Lakeshore habitat is considered good in 54% of the lakes in this ecoregion. Yet the shorelines of the Upper Midwest lakes, indicate considerable lakeshore development pressure in this region. Forty-six percent of lakes show moderate to high levels of lakeshore human disturbance.

## Chemical Stressors

Based on the NLA stressor indicators, water quality is relative good across the Upper Midwest. Total phosphorus and nitrogen are considered good in 66% and 59% of lakes, respectively, and are poor in 9% and 8%, of lakes respectively. Relative to regionally-specific reference expectations, chlorophyll-*a* concentrations are considered good in 68% of lakes, and turbidity levels are considered good in 77% of lakes in this ecoregion. Lakes are in good condition based on ANC and DO when compared to nationally-consistent thresholds.

## Temperate Plains

### *The Landscape*

The Temperate Plains ecoregion includes the open farmlands of Iowa; eastern North and South Dakota; western Minnesota; portions of Missouri, Kansas, and Nebraska; and the flat farmlands of western Ohio, central Indiana, Illinois, and southeastern Wisconsin. This ecoregion covers some 342,200 square miles (11.4% of the United States), with approximately 7,900 square miles (2.3%) in federal ownership. The terrain consists of smooth plains, numerous small lakes, prairie pothole lakes, and wetlands. A total of 6,327 lakes in the Temperate Plains ecoregion are represented in the NLA, of which 75% are of natural origin. Lakes of this region are generally small, with over 60% of lakes smaller than 100 hectares in size. Agriculture is the predominant land use. Based on satellite images in the 1992 National Land Cover Dataset, the distribution of land cover is 9% forested and 76% planted/cultivated, with the remaining 15% of land in other types of cover.





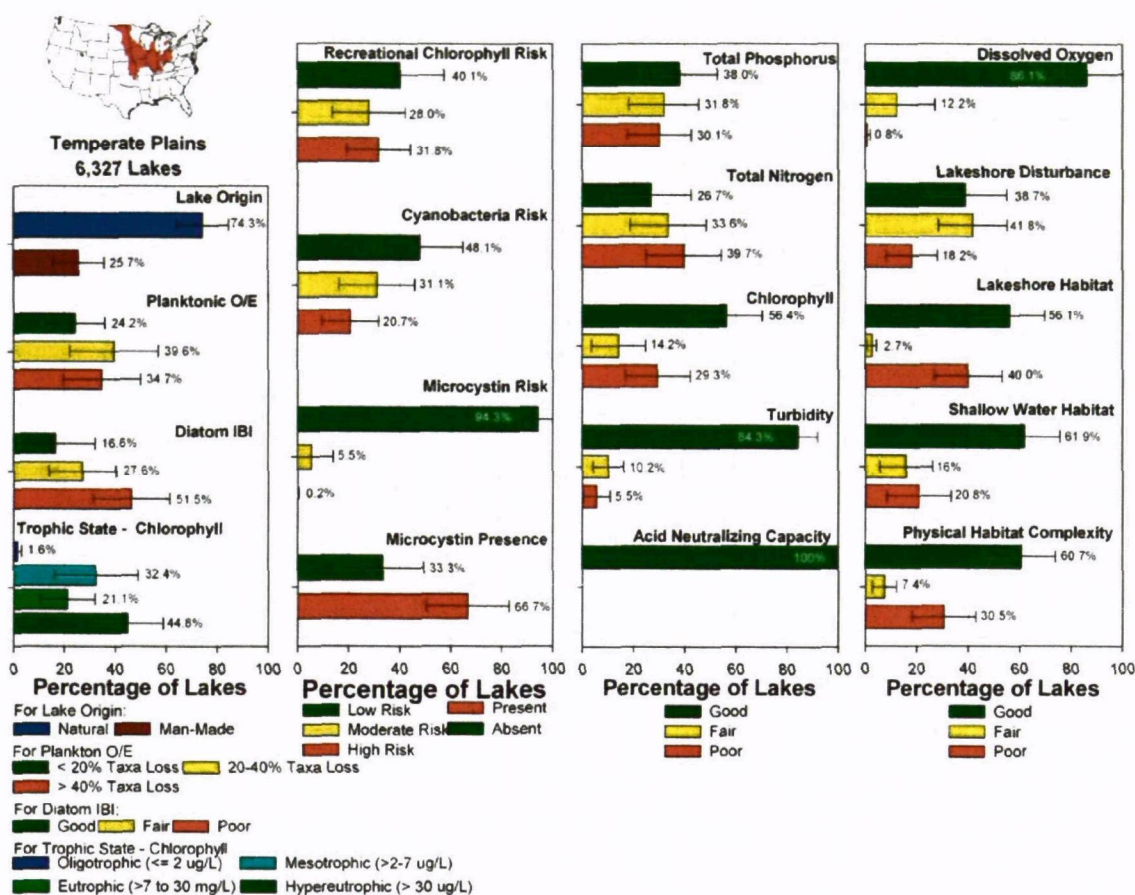


Figure 29. NLA findings for the Temperate Plains ecoregion. Bars show the percentage of lakes within a condition class for a given indicator.

## Findings

A total of 137 of the selected NLA sites were sampled during the summer of 2007 to characterize the condition of lakes throughout this ecoregion. An overview of the NLA findings for the Temperate Plains lakes is shown in Figure 29.

### Biological Condition

One quarter, or 24%, of lakes are in good biological condition based on planktonic O/E, and when using the diatom IBI, 17% of lakes in the ecoregion are in good biological condition relative to reference condition. Conversely, the percentages of lakes in poor condition are 35% and 52% based on the two analyses, respectively.

### Trophic Status

Based on chlorophyll-*a*, 2% are oligotrophic, 32% are mesotrophic, 21% are eutrophic, and 45% are considered hypereutrophic.

### Recreational Suitability

Lakes in the Temperate Plains exhibit moderate risk of exposure to cyanobacteria and associated cyanotoxins. Based on cyanobacterial counts, 48% of lakes exhibited low risk. Microcystin was present in 67% of lakes.



## Physical Habitat Stressors

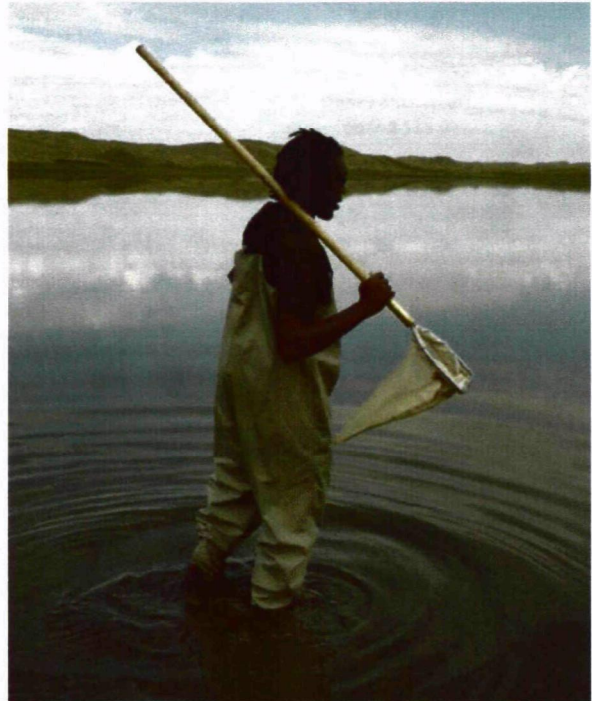
Lakeshore habitat is considered good in 56% of the lakes in this ecoregion. The shorelines of the Temperate Plains lakes exhibit human activity disturbances, urban development, and agricultural pressures in this region. Sixty percent of lakes show moderate to high levels of lakeshore human disturbance.

## Chemical Stressors

Based on the NLA stressor indicators, water quality in the Temperate Plains is somewhat variable. Total phosphorus and nitrogen are considered good in 38% and 27% of lakes, respectively, and are poor in 30% and 40% of lakes, respectively. Relative to regionally-specific reference expectations, chlorophyll-*a* concentrations are considered good in 56% of lakes, and turbidity levels are considered good in 84% of lakes in this ecoregion. Lakes are generally in good condition based on ANC and DO when compared to nationally-consistent thresholds. However, turbidity levels are poor in 6% of lakes, chlorophyll-*a* is poor in 29% of lakes, and dissolved oxygen is fair in 12% of lakes.

## Southern Plains *The Landscape*

The Southern Plains ecoregion covers approximately 405,000 square miles (13.5% of the United States) and includes central and northern Texas; most of western Kansas and Oklahoma; and portions of Nebraska, Colorado, and New Mexico. The terrain is a mix of smooth and irregular plains interspersed with tablelands and low hills. Most of the great Ogallala aquifer lies underneath this region.



Based on satellite images in the 1992 National Land Cover Dataset, the distribution of land cover is 45% grassland, 32% planted/cultivated, and 14% shrubland, with the remaining 9% of land in other types of cover. The Great Prairie grasslands, which once covered much of the Southern Plains region, are considered the most altered and endangered large ecosystem in the United States. About 90% of the original tall grass prairie was replaced by other vegetation or land use. Federal land ownership in the region totals about 11,980 square miles or approximately 3% of the total, the lowest share of all NLA aggregate ecoregions. A total of 3,148 lakes in the Southern Plains ecoregion are represented in the NLA, 97% of which are constructed reservoirs.



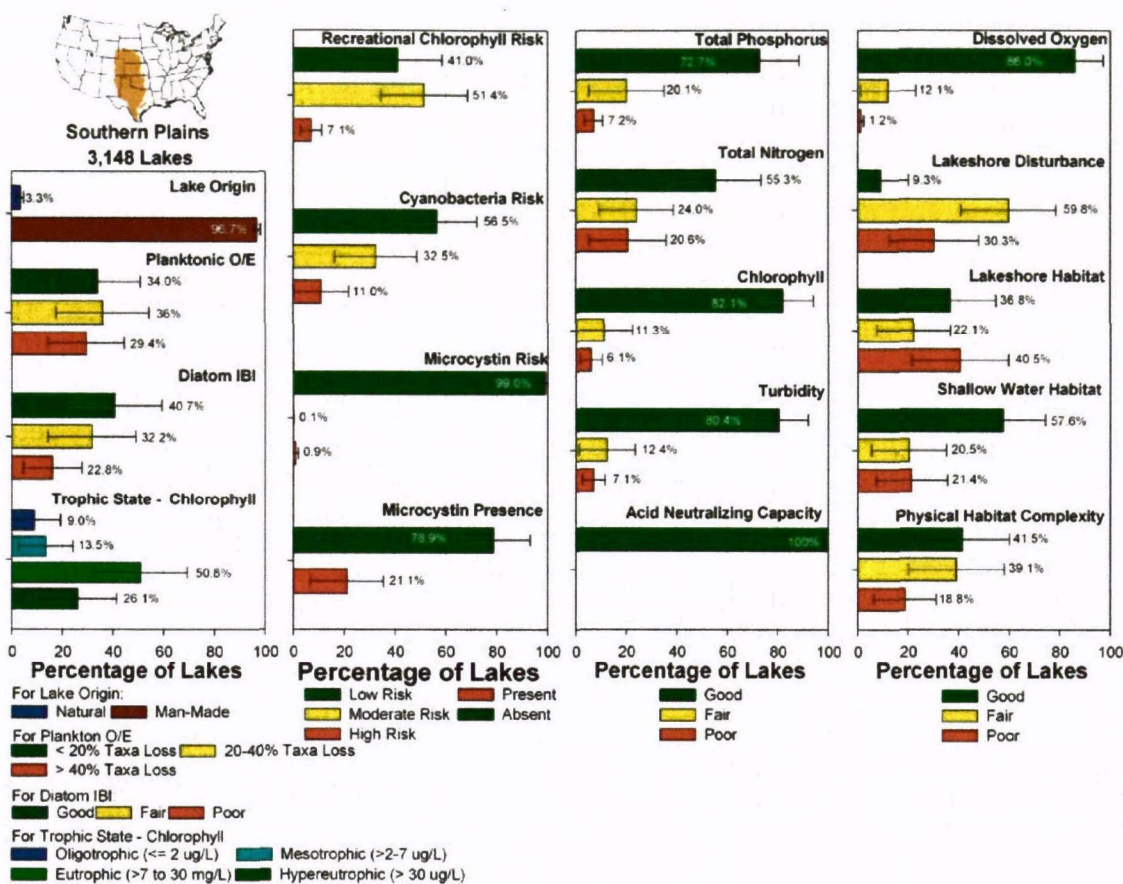


Figure 30. NLA findings for the Southern Plains ecoregion. Bars show the percentage of lakes within a condition class for a given indicator.

## Findings

A total of 128 of the selected NLA sites were sampled during the summer of 2007 to characterize the condition of lakes throughout this ecoregion. An overview of the NLA findings for the Southern Plains lakes is shown in Figure 30.

### Biological Condition

Thirty-four percent of lakes are in good biological condition based on planktonic O/E, and when using the diatom IBI, 41% of lakes in the ecoregion are in good biological condition relative to reference condition. Conversely, the percentages of lakes in poor condition are 29% and 23% based on the two analyses, respectively.

### Trophic Status

Based on chlorophyll-*a*, 9% are oligotrophic, 14% are mesotrophic, 51% are eutrophic, and 26% are considered hypereutrophic.

### Recreational Suitability

Lakes in the Southern Plains exhibit moderate risk of exposure to cyanobacteria and associated cyanotoxins. Based on cyanobacterial counts, 57% of lakes exhibit low risk. Microcystin was present in 21% of lakes.



## Physical Habitat Stressors

Lakeshore habitat is considered good in 37% of the lakes in this ecoregion. However, the shorelines of Southern Plains lakes exhibit considerable disturbed conditions due to human activities. Ninety percent of lakes show moderate to high levels of lakeshore human disturbance.

## Chemical Stressors

Water quality, based on the NLA stressor indicators, is relatively good in the Southern Plains. Total phosphorus and nitrogen are considered good in 73% and 55% of lakes, respectively, and are poor in 7% and 20% of lakes, respectively. Relative to regionally-specific reference expectations, chlorophyll-*a* concentrations and turbidity levels are considered good in >80% of lakes in this ecoregion. Lakes are generally in good condition based on ANC and DO when compared to nationally-consistent thresholds. However, dissolved oxygen is fair in 12% of lakes.

## Northern Plains *The Landscape*

The Northern Plains ecoregion covers approximately 205,084 square miles (6.8% of the United States), including western North and South Dakota, Montana east of the Rocky Mountains, northeast Wyoming, and a small section of northern Nebraska. Federal lands account for 52,660 square miles or a relatively large 25.7% share of the total area. Terrain of the area is irregular plains interspersed with tablelands and low hills. This ecoregion is the heart of the Missouri River system and is almost exclusively within the Missouri River's regional watershed. Several major reservoirs are along the

Missouri River mainstem, including Lake Oahe and Lake Sacajawea. The total surface area of lakes in this region is growing owing to increased runoff coupled with flat topography. Devil's Lake (ND) is one example, which in 1993 had a surface area of 44,000 acres and presently covers in excess of 130,000 acres.

Based on satellite images in the 1992 National Land Cover Dataset, the distribution of land cover is 56% grassland and 30% planted/cultivated, with the remaining 14% of land in other types of cover. A total of 2,660 lakes in the Northern Plains ecoregion are represented in the NLA, 77% of which are of natural origin.

## Findings

A total of 65 of the selected NLA sites were sampled during the summer of 2007 to characterize the condition of lakes throughout this ecoregion. An overview of the NLA findings for the Northern Plains ecoregion is shown in Figure 31.

## Biological Condition

One percent of lakes are in good biological condition based on planktonic O/E, and when using the diatom IBI, 7% of lakes in the ecoregion are in good biological condition relative to reference condition. Conversely, the percentages of lakes in poor condition are 90% and 88% based on the two analyses, respectively.

## Trophic Status

Based on chlorophyll-*a*, 8% are oligotrophic, 22% are mesotrophic, 48% are eutrophic, and 22% are considered hypereutrophic.



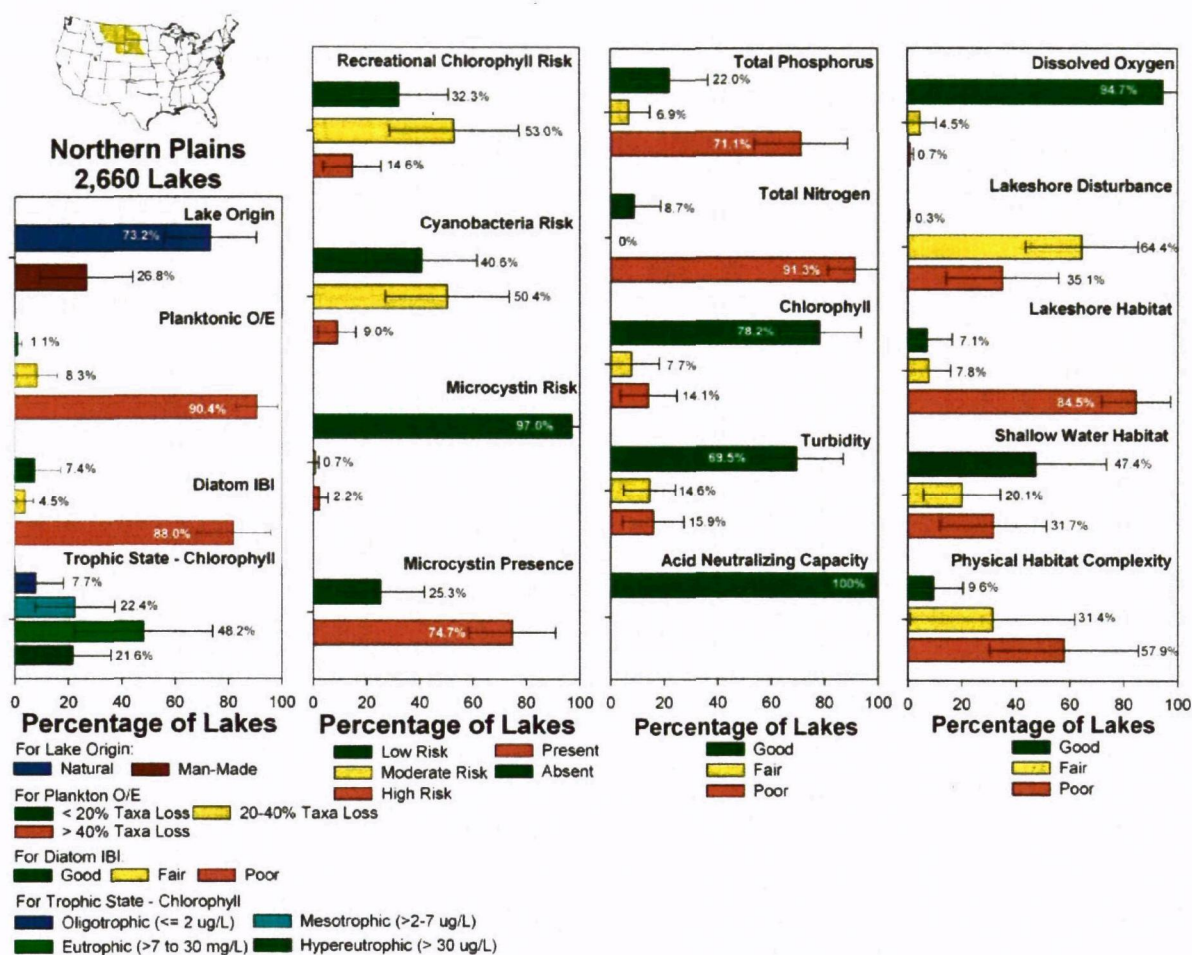


Figure 31. NLA findings for the Northern Plains ecoregion. Bars show the percentage of lakes within a condition class for a given indicator.

## Recreational Suitability

Lakes in the Northern Plains exhibit the highest risk of exposure to cyanobacteria and associated cyanotoxins of all ecoregions. Based on cyanobacterial counts, 41% of lakes exhibit low risk. Microcystin was present in 75% of lakes.

## Physical Habitat Stressors

Lakeshore habitat cover is considered good in only 7% of the lakes in this ecoregion. Regionally-specific habitat reference condition for the Northern Plains is comprised of grasses and shrubs and is different from many of the other ecoregions where expectations include a tree layer in

addition to a middle and lower story. Even taking into account the regional-specific expectations, the NLA data show that the Northern Plains lake shorelines exhibit very high levels of disturbance due to human activities. Ninety-nine percent of lakes show moderate or high levels of lakeshore human disturbance.

## Chemical Stressors

Based on the NLA stressor indicators, water quality is variable in the Northern Plains. In general, lakes tend to have high levels of nutrients. Relative to regionally-specific reference expectations, total phosphorus concentrations are considered poor in 71% of lakes, while total nitrogen



concentrations are considered poor in 91% of lakes. By contrast, based on chlorophyll-*a*, 78% of lakes are considered in good condition, and turbidity levels are good in 70% of lakes.

In the Northern Plains ecoregion, the conventional limnological wisdom that biomass production is controlled simply by nutrient concentrations may not apply. Lakes are generally in good condition based on ANC and DO when compared to nationally-consistent thresholds.

## **Western Mountains**

### *The Landscape*

The Western Mountains ecoregion includes the Cascade, Sierra Nevada, Pacific Coast ranges in the coastal states; the Gila Mountains in the southwestern states; and the Bitterroot and Rocky Mountains in the northern and central mountain states. This region covers approximately 397,832 square miles, with about 297,900 square miles or 74.8% classified as federal land — the highest proportion of federal property among the nine aggregate ecoregions. The terrain of this area is characterized by extensive mountains and plateaus separated by wide valleys and lowlands. Lakes in this region, in particular those within smaller, high-elevation drainages are very low in nutrients, very dilute in other water chemistry constituents (*e.g.*, calcium), and therefore productivity in these systems is limited in their natural condition. Accordingly, these smaller, high elevation lakes are very sensitive to effects of human disturbances

Lakes and ponds of the region range from large mainstem impoundments to high-mountain caldera and kettle lakes. Most famous among these mountain caldera lakes are Crater Lake (OR) and Lake Yellowstone (WY). The single deepest measurement of Secchi disk transparency made during the

NLA of 122 feet (37 meters) occurred in this ecoregion in Waldo Lake (OR). Based on satellite images in the 1992 National Land Cover Dataset, the distribution of land cover is 59% forest, 32% shrubland and grassland with the remaining 9% of land in other types of cover. A total of 4,122 lakes in the Western Mountains ecoregion are represented in the NLA, 67% of which are of natural origin.

### *Findings*

A total of 155 of the selected NLA sites were sampled during the summer of 2007 to characterize the condition of lakes throughout this ecoregion. An overview of the NLA findings for the Western Mountains lakes is shown in Figure 32.

### **Biological Condition**

Fifty-eight percent of lakes are in good biological condition based on planktonic O/E, and when using the diatom IBI, 50% of lakes in the ecoregion are in good biological condition relative to reference condition. Conversely, the percentages of lakes in poor condition are 11% and 3% based on the two analyses, respectively.

### **Trophic Status**

Based on chlorophyll-*a*, 54% of lakes are oligotrophic, 26% are mesotrophic, 16% are eutrophic, and 4% are considered hypereutrophic. The Western Mountains ecoregion has the highest proportion of oligotrophic (very clear with low productivity) lakes of any of the ecoregions cross the country.



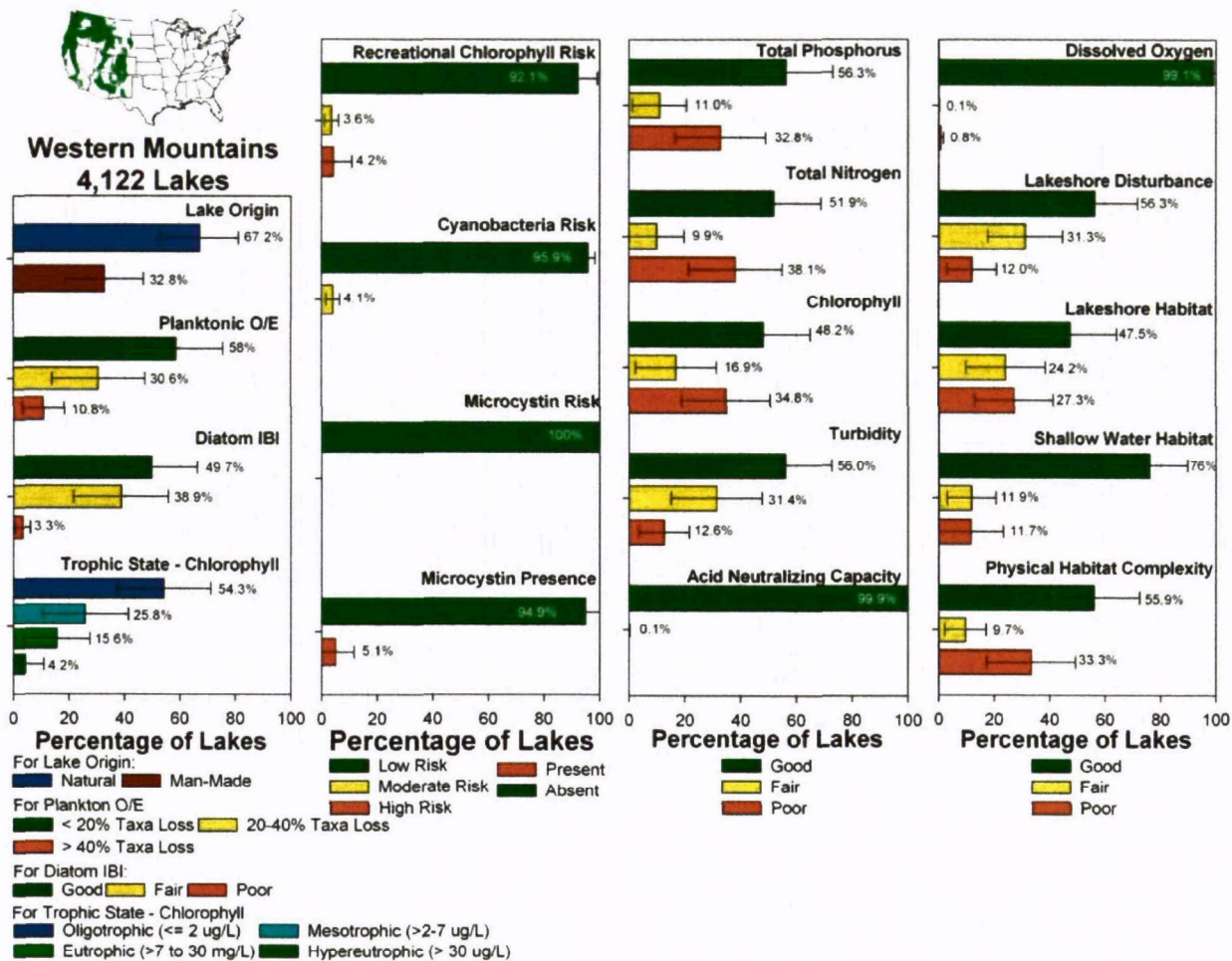


Figure 32. NLA findings for the Western Mountains ecoregion. Bars show the percentage of lakes within a condition class for a given indicator.

## Recreational Suitability

Lakes in the Western Mountains exhibit the lowest risk of exposure to cyanobacteria and associated cyanotoxins of all ecoregions. Based on cyanobacterial counts, 96% of lakes exhibit low risk. Microcystin was present in only 5% of lakes.

## Physical Habitat Stressors

Lakeshore habitat is considered good in 48% of the lakes in this ecoregion. Similar to the Northern Plains, regionally-specific reference conditions were modified in this ecoregion to account for sparse natural vegetation cover types expected in this

mountainous region. With respect to human activity along the lakeshore, this ecoregion has the lowest percentage of lakes with human disturbance of all regions. Forty-three percent of lakes show moderate to high levels of lakeshore human disturbance.

## Chemical Stressors

Based on the NLA stressor indicators, water quality in the Western Mountains is consistently in the medium range, *i.e.*, half good and half bad. Relative to regionally-specific reference expectations, total phosphorus concentrations are considered good in 56% of lakes, fair in 11%, and poor in 33%. Total nitrogen concentrations are

considered good in 52% of lakes, fair in 10%, and poor in 38%. Based on chlorophyll-*a* 48% of lakes are considered in good condition, 17% in fair condition, and 35% in poor condition. Turbidity levels are good in 56% of lakes and fair in 31% of lakes. Lakes are in good condition based on ANC and DO when compared to nationally-consistent thresholds.

## **Xeric**

### *The Landscape*

The Xeric ecoregion covers the largest area of all NLA aggregate ecoregions. The ecoregion covers portions of eleven western states and all of Nevada for a total of about 636,583 square miles (21.2% of the United States). Some 453,000 square miles or 71.2% of the land is classified as federal lands, including large tracts such as the Grand Canyon National Park (AZ), Big Bend National Park (TX), and the Hanford Nuclear Reservation (WA). The Xeric ecoregion is comprised of a mix of physiographic features. The region includes the flat to rolling topography of the Columbia/Snake River Plateau; the Great Basin; Death Valley; and the canyons, cliffs, buttes, and mesas of the Colorado Plateau. All of the non-mountainous area of California falls in the Xeric ecoregion. In southern areas, dry conditions and water withdrawals produce internal drainages that end in saline lakes or desert basins without reaching the ocean. Large lakes in the southwestern canyon regions are the products of large dam construction projects. Water levels in these lakes fluctuate widely due to large-scale water removal for cities and agriculture. Recently, shifts in climate and rainfall patterns have resulted in considerably reduced water levels on several of the major Colorado River impoundments including Lake Mead, Lake Powell, and Lake Havasu. Based on satellite images in the 1992 National Land Cover Dataset, the distribution of land cover

is 61% shrubland and 15% grassland, with the remaining 24% of land in other types of cover. A total of 802 lakes in the Xeric ecoregion are represented in the NLA, 91% of which are constructed reservoirs.

### *Findings*

A total of 84 of the selected NLA sites were sampled during the summer of 2007 to characterize the condition of lakes throughout the ecoregion. An overview of the NLA results for the Xeric ecoregion is shown in Figure 33.

### **Biological Condition**

Thirty-seven percent of lakes are in good biological condition based on planktonic O/E, and when using the diatom IBI, 70% of lakes in the ecoregion are in good biological condition relative to reference condition. Conversely, the percentages of lakes in poor condition are 49% and 6% based on the two analyses, respectively. The apparent difference between these two biological indices goes beyond the scope of this assessment but may suggest that the two indicators are responding to different stressors in lakes in this particular ecoregion.

### **Trophic Status**

Based on chlorophyll-*a*, 22% of lakes are oligotrophic, 27% are mesotrophic, 22% are eutrophic, and 28% are considered hypereutrophic.

### **Recreational Suitability**

Lakes in the Xeric ecoregion exhibit low to moderate risk of exposure to cyanobacteria and associated cyanotoxins. Based on cyanobacterial counts, 82% of lakes exhibit low risk. Microcystin was present in 23% of lakes.



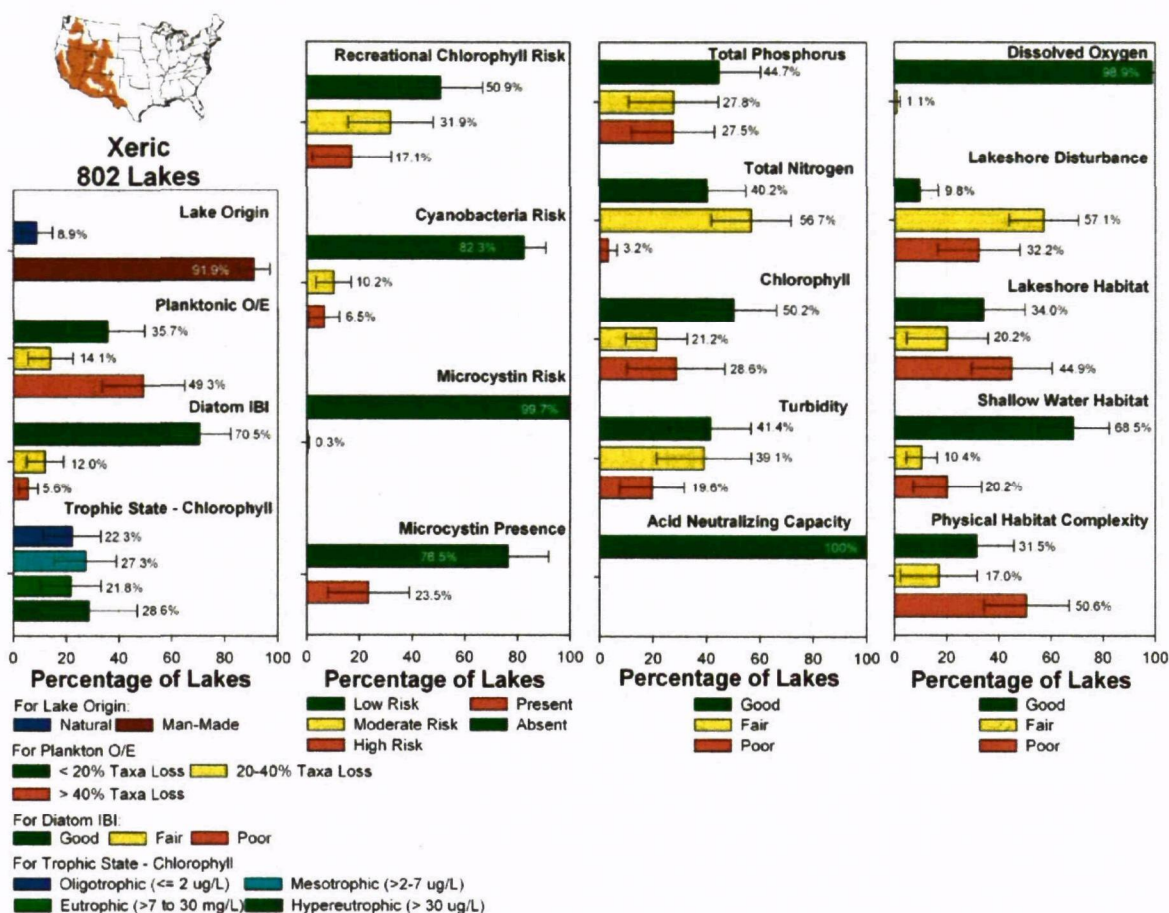


Figure 33. NLA findings for the Xeric ecoregion. Bars show the percentage of lakes within a condition class for a given indicator.

## Physical Habitat Stressors

Lakeshore habitat is considered good in 34% of the lakes in this ecoregion. In the Xeric ecoregion, regionally-specific reference conditions were modified to account for sparse natural vegetation cover types expected in this dry region. Lakes in the Xeric ecoregion exhibit considerably disturbed conditions due to human activities. Over 89% of lakes show moderate to high levels of lakeshore human disturbance.

## Chemical Stressors

Like the Western Mountain ecoregion to the north, the water quality in the Xeric ecoregion is in the medium range, *i.e.*, half good and half bad, based on the NLA chemical stressor indicators. Relative to regionally-specific reference expectations, total phosphorus concentrations are considered good in 45% of lakes, fair in 28%, and poor in 28%. Total nitrogen concentrations are considered good in 40% of lakes, fair in 57%, and poor in 3%. Based on chlorophyll-*a*, 50% of lakes are considered in good condition, 21% in fair condition, and 29% in poor condition. Turbidity levels are good in 41% of lakes, and fair in 39%. Lakes are good condition based on ANC and DO when compared to nationally-consistent thresholds.

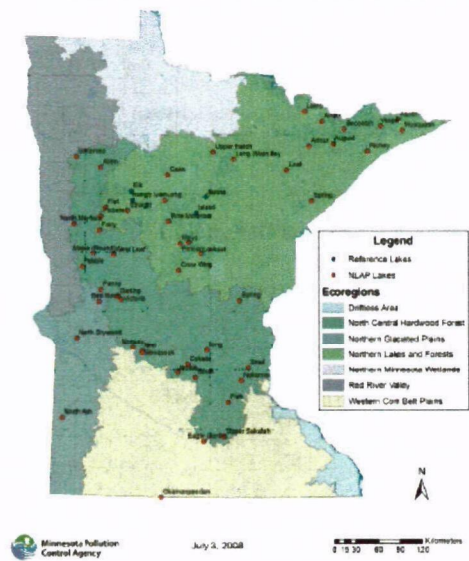


# HIGHLIGHT

## Partnerships for a Statewide Assessment of Lake Condition

Steve Heiskary  
Minnesota Pollution Control Agency

**National Lake Assessment Program  
Random and Reference Lake Locations**



In 2007, the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) along with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) led the State's participation in USEPA's National Lakes Assessment (NLA) survey. Various other collaborators were engaged in this study as well, including the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA), and U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). MPCA and MDNR combined on initial planning of the survey and conducted the vast majority of the sampling. USFS staff were instrumental in sampling of remote lakes in the northeastern Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.

Minnesota was assigned 41 lakes as a part of the original draw of lakes for the national survey – the most of any of the lower 48 states. The State then chose to add nine additional lakes (randomly selected) to the survey to yield the 50 lakes needed for statistically-based statewide estimates of lake condition. In addition to the 50 lakes, three reference lakes were later selected and sampled by USEPA as a part of the overall NLA effort.

As part of its statewide assessment, Minnesota opted to add several measurements of unique interest to its overall state program. Examples of these add-ons are: pesticides, water mercury; sediment analysis of metals, trace organics and other indicators; macrophytes species richness; fish-based lake Index of Biotic Integrity (IBIs); and microcystin (at the index site and at a random near-shore site). A few of the findings are highlighted here. All of the reports completed to date can be found at: <http://www.pca.state.mn.us/water/nlap.html>.

### Pesticides

With the exception of the corn herbicide atrazine, pesticide degradates were more frequently detected than were the parent compounds. Possibly more of these parent compounds may have initially been present in a greater number of lakes, but had degraded prior to sampling. Alternately, parent compounds may have degraded early in the process, with degradates being subsequently transported to the lakes via overland runoff. Since the peak pesticide application period is late spring to early summer, mid-summer (July – August) lake sampling may have allowed ample time for degradation products to reach affected lakes. MDA was a key collaborator in this effort and conducted the pesticide analysis.



## Detection of Pesticides and Pesticide Degradates in Minnesota Lakes

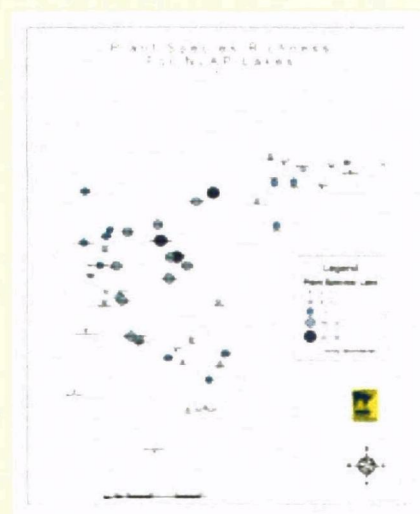
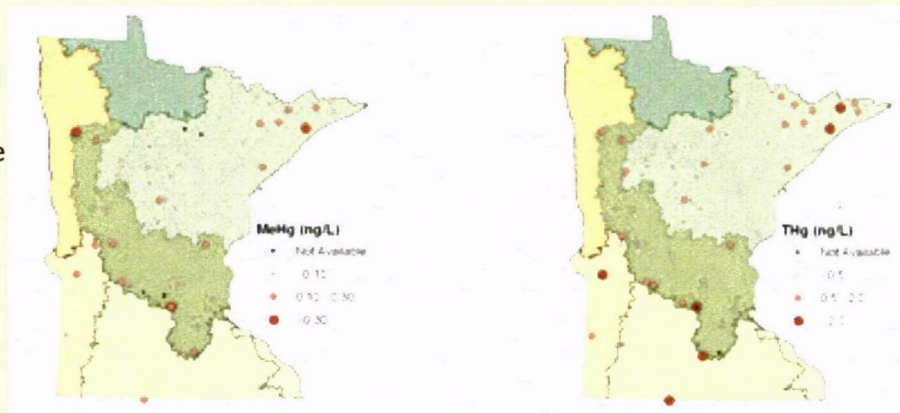
	Atrazine	Deisopropyl-atrazine	Desethyl-atrazine	Metolachlor	Metolachlor ESA	Metolachlor OXA
Detection	present	non-detect	present	present	present	present
Detection freq.	87%	2%	64%	4%	27%	7%

## Mercury levels

Measurement of total mercury (THg) and methyl mercury (MeHg) concentrations indicate that high levels of THg and MeHg are distributed throughout the state. The northeastern region has higher THg and MeHg concentrations compared to the southwestern region; although the MeHg fraction may actually be somewhat higher in the southwestern region. Otherwise, high THg and MeHg concentrations are distributed throughout the range of NLA lakes. These data can be used as a baseline against which to evaluate the efficacy of mercury emissions controls in MN. The USGS was an important partner in this effort

## Aquatic Macrophytes

Plant species richness was assessed at ten random near-shore sites on each lake. Species richness increase generally from south to north peaking in the north central portion of the State before decreasing in the northeastern arrowhead region. The general trend of increasing species richness from north to south can be explained by water clarity, water chemistry and human disturbance and reaffirms previous observations. The decrease in species richness in the northeastern portion of the state can be attributed to tannin stained waters and rocky substrate associated with Canadian Shield lakes located throughout this region.



## Continuing Partnerships

Minnesota also is collaborating on a regional assessment of lakes in the Prairie Pothole Region with the states of North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana and Iowa and EPA Regions V and VIII. This collaboration will expand applications of statistically-derived data and serve to enhance state, regional and national lake assessment efforts.



## CHAPTER 7. CHANGES AND TRENDS



### *IN THIS CHAPTER*

- ▶ Subpopulation Analysis of Change –  
National Eutrophication Study
- ▶ Subpopulation Analysis –  
Trends in Acidic Lakes in the Northeast
- ▶ Sediment Core Analysis



## Chapter 7

# Changes and Trends

Among the long term goals of the National Aquatic Resource Surveys is detection of changes and trends in both the condition of our Nation's aquatic resources and in the stressors impacting them. Trends in particular can be critical for policy makers to evaluate, whether policy decisions have been effective or whether a different approach is necessary in order to achieve important water quality goals.

A distinction must be made in the type of changes and trends of interest for development and on-going implementation of policy as distinguished from the changes and trends typically of interest to site managers and researchers. Typically, researchers and site managers think of changes and trends at individual sites while policy makers think of changes and trends in groups or populations of systems. Detection of changes and trends in characteristics affecting broad policy issues requires repeated surveys over time rather than intensive monitoring of individual waterbodies. As planned, the National Aquatic Resource Surveys are designed to provide the data needed for detection of changes and trends necessary for the evaluation of policy. Repeated measurements on at least a good portion of the same individual lakes in the regional surveys will,

in time, provide the needed information for detection of changes and trends necessary for the evaluation of regional practices. This first survey of lakes and reservoirs provides clear information on current status but obviously cannot, by itself, provide the necessary information for changes and trends. The National Lakes Assessment, however, incorporated three features that begin to provide decision makers with an initial glimpse at what changes have occurred in lakes. Over time, EPA intends to use further analysis and future surveys to enhance the trends analyses.

The first indication of change comes from the analysis of a specific subset of lakes that was the subject of a previous study. While EPA does not have past probability surveys of all lakes in the U.S., the Agency and the states implemented the National Eutrophication Survey (NES) in the 1970s – a survey that included more than 800 lakes. The second example of changes uses data external to the NLA. This information is based on data in a regional study of acidic lakes in a specific subpopulation of interest, the northeastern U.S. Finally, a third examination of change involves the use of cores from the lake sediments. By examining different cross sections within the core and the microscopic algae present, analysts can infer past conditions in each lake. Each of these approaches is presented below.





## Subpopulation Analysis of Change - National Eutrophication Survey

Monitoring and surveillance programs have in the past often dealt with site-specific questions of ecosystem condition, thus concentrating on single lakes or small groups of lakes. For example, specific sites of interest are often regularly monitored for nutrient levels, frequency of algal blooms, fisheries, bacterial counts at swimming beaches, etc. However, pressures on aquatic systems across large geographic areas has provided the impetus to assess lakes over far wider regions. In response, the NES was conducted in 1972-1976. While national in scope, it was unlike the NLA in that it was not a probability selection of lakes. Rather it was a targeted selection of over 800 lakes, designed to assess the trophic condition (defined as the nutrient enrichment) of lakes influenced by domestic wastewater treatment plants (WWTP). The specific purpose of the survey was to measure nutrient inputs from all sources in the watershed relative to those of the WWTP source to determine if WWTP upgrades might be successful in modifying the lake or reservoir trophic state.

For the NLA, a subset of 200 lakes from the 1972-1976 NES survey was randomly selected using the same probability design principles from the broader survey. This allows the condition of all 800 lakes from the original NES survey to be inferred from the subsample of 200 lakes from 2007. The phosphorus levels, chlorophyll-*a* concentrations, and trophic condition of the NES population in 2007 can then be compared to what was observed in the 1970s to determine how these metrics have changed over the last thirty-plus years.

When making comparisons between then and now, some design differences between

the two studies must be considered. The NLA sampling consisted of a single, mid-summer integrated water sample at the deepest spot in the lake and from just below the surface to a depth of up to 2m (a sampling tube). The NES sampling consisted of sampling several sites on the lake as well as the inlets and outlets. NES sampling also included a site at the perceived deepest spot in the lake. Sampling was done with a depth-specific sampler (bottle) at just below the surface and at 1-2 m depth intervals. Analysts compared the integrated sample NLA chlorophyll concentrations and NES samples taken at the site nearest the NLA site and from depth(s) that most nearly mimicked the depth of the NLA integrated depth sample. The accuracy and precision of chemical analytical results are considered comparable to each other based on the methods and the quality assurance of both surveys.

The NLA analysts looked at changes in the NES lakes over the past thirty-plus years using two approaches: by comparing concentration levels of key indicators and by examining trophic status. In both cases, researchers are able to estimate the number and percentage of NES lakes that showed a change since the original sampling in the 1970s. It is worth noting that this type of analysis provides an estimate of net change but little information on change in individual





**Change in Phosphorus  
NES Lakes 1972 - 2007**

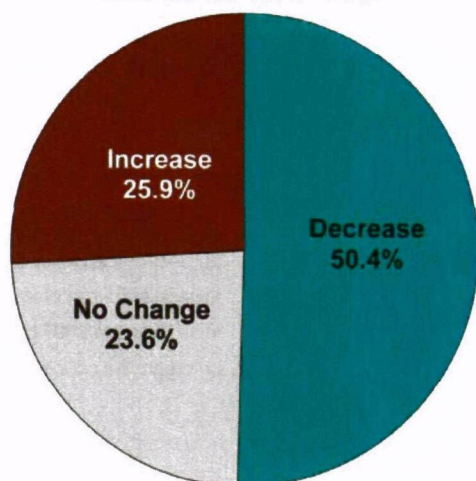


Figure 34. Proportion of NES lakes that exhibited improvement, degradation, or no change in phosphorus concentration based on the comparison of the 1972 National Eutrophication Survey and the 2007 National Lakes Assessment

lakes.

Phosphorus levels have decreased in more than 50% of the NES lakes (403); for almost 24% (189) no change was detected. An increase in phosphorus levels was seen in 26% of the lakes (207) (Figure 34).

Trophic status based on chlorophyll-*a* also changed. Trophic status improved in 26% (184) of the lakes, and over half (51% or 408 lakes) of the NES lakes remained unchanged with respect to their trophic state. Trophic state degraded in 23% (208) of the NES lakes (Figure 35). Specifically, using chlorophyll-*a* as the indicator of trophic state, 49% of the lakes (394 lakes) in NES were classified as hypereutrophic in 1972. In 2007, that number had fallen to 35% (279) of the lakes. In 1972, just over 5% of the lakes were classified as oligotrophic and by 2007, over 14% of the lakes (117) were classified as oligotrophic (Figure 36).

**Change in Trophic State  
(Chlorophyll)**

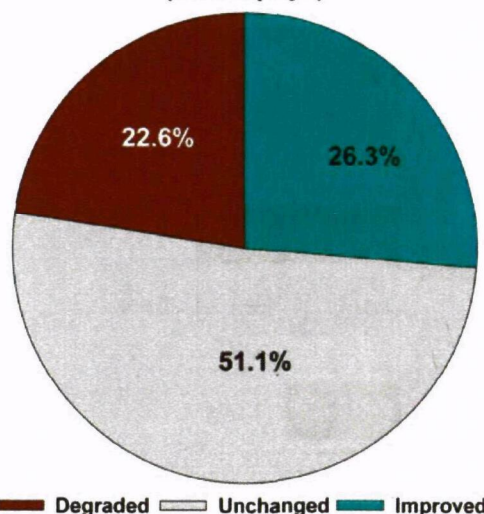


Figure 35. Proportion of NES lakes that exhibited improvement, degradation, or no change in trophic state based on the comparison of the 1972 National Eutrophication Survey and the 2007 National Lakes Assessment.

## Subpopulation Analysis - Trends in Acidic Lakes in the Northeast

A similar approach was taken for lakes that are either acidic or sensitive to acidification, as assessed under the EMAP Temporally Integrated Monitoring of Ecosystems/Long Term Monitoring (TIME/LTM) program. During the 1980s, the National Surface Water Survey was conducted nationally of lakes in acid sensitive regions. The NLA results show that acidification of lakes affects a very small number of lakes nationally. However, in certain regions of the country, the problem is of concern, particularly when lakes smaller than 10 acres (4 hectares) are included. The results below are another example of the use of surveys through time to track changes and trends in population of lakes. These results have been previously reported in the EPA's Report on the Environment and the peer-reviewed literature.



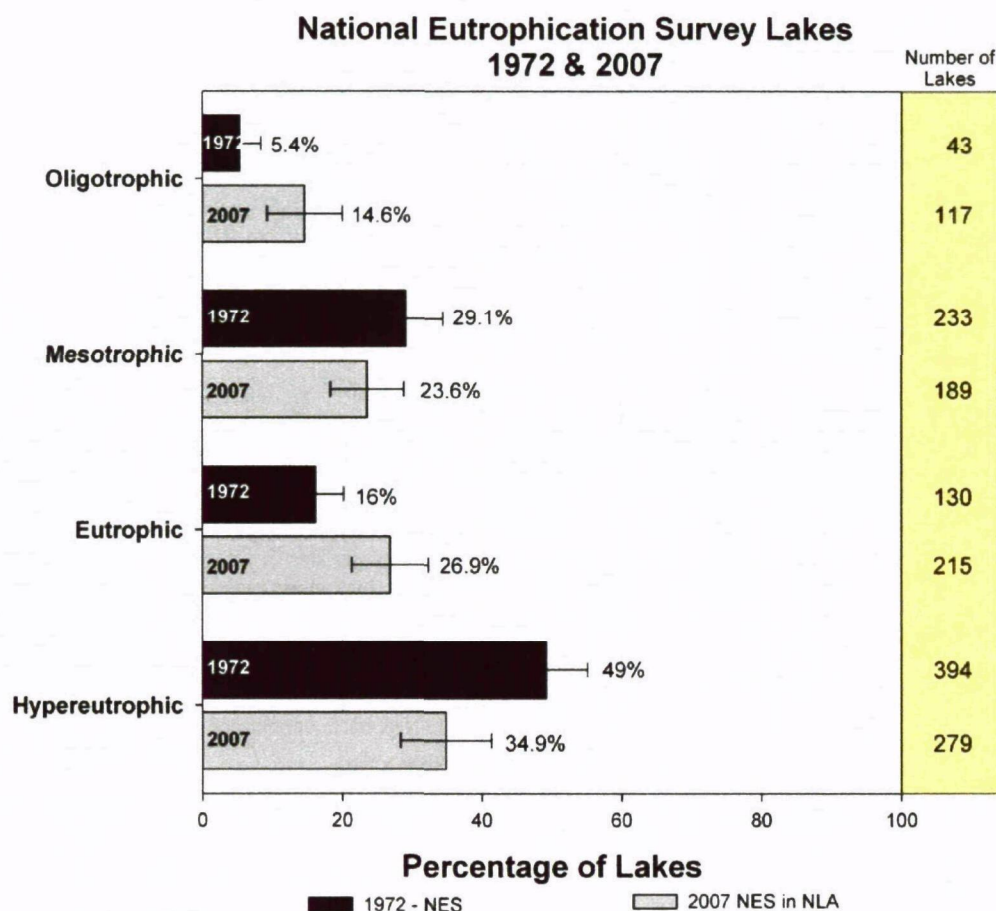


Figure 36. Percentage and number of NES lakes estimated in each of four trophic classes in 1972 and in 2007 based on chlorophyll-a concentrations.

Between the early 1990s and 2005, the acid neutralizing capacity (ANC – a measure of a lake's ability to withstand acidification) in lakes in the Adirondack Mountains increased to a degree where many water bodies that were considered "chronically acidic" in the early 1990s were no longer classified as such in 2005 (Figure 37). Specifically, between 1991-1994 and 2005, the percent of chronically acidic waterbodies decreased in the Adirondack Mountains (from 13.0% to 6.2%). Additionally, acid-sensitive lakes in New England were beginning to show a decrease in acidity. The percent of chronically acidic lakes in this region decreased from 5.6% in 1991-1994 to 4.3% in 2005. This trend suggests that lakes in these two regions are beginning to recover from acidification, though acidic surface waters are still found in these regions.

The trend of increasing ANC in the Adirondack Mountains and New England between the early 1990s and 2005 corresponds with a decrease in acid deposition in each of these regions and reduced air emissions of the main precursors to acid deposition, which are sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides.





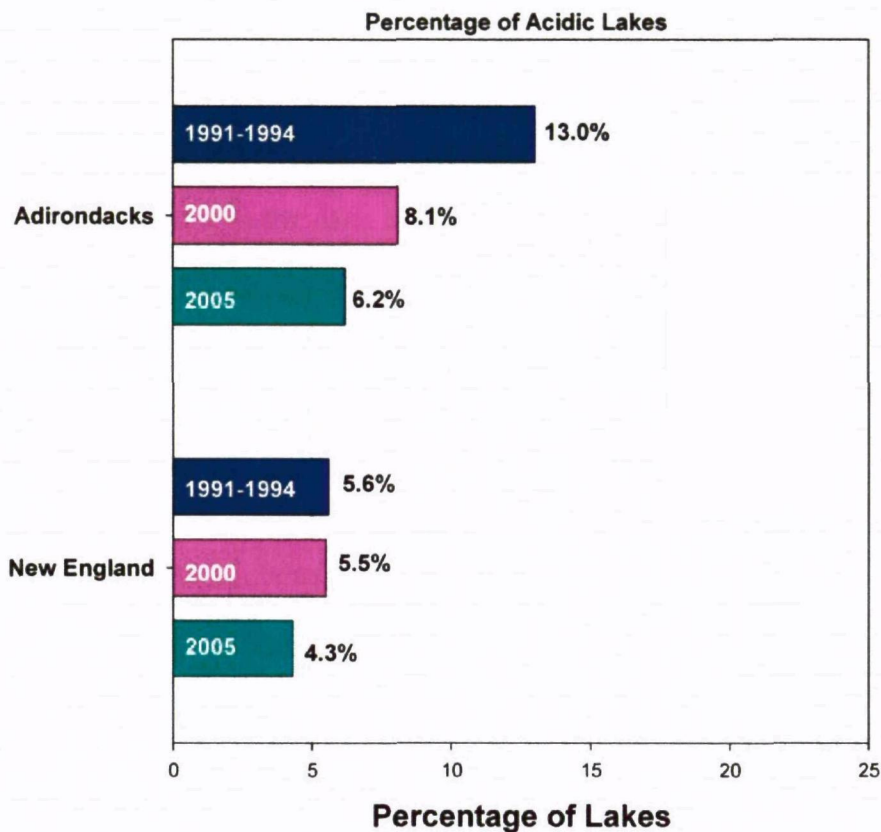


Figure 37. Change in percentage of lakes that are chronically acidic in the Adirondack Mountains and New England.

## Sediment Core Analysis of Change

A different approach was used in the third examination of change. The NLA incorporated paleolimnological analyses, a technique that uses lake sediment cores to obtain insights about past conditions. NLA analysts looked at thin slices of cores and identified the diatom silica casings. The community of diatoms present in each slice gives clues to the chemical and physical conditions in the lake when that layer was deposited. Researchers developed models relating the diatom community to lake chemistry characteristics such as total phosphorus and to lake physical characteristics such as clarity. Using these relationships, the diatoms in deeper layers of the sediment can be identified and the chemical conditions present at that point in time can be inferred from the model. This technique was used very effectively during studies of acidification in lakes during

the 1980s. Individual states and other organizations have also used sediment cores in this manner on more localized/regional scales to improve our understanding of what lakes were like in the past.

EPA piloted this technique for application at a national scale which provides a means of examining temporal change in a subset of all lakes included in the NLA across the lower 48 states. In the field, the top layer of the sediment core was collected along with a layer deep in the core. Because of the expense, the deep section of the core was not dated to confirm its age. Instead, NLA researchers used independent techniques, their own expertise, and that of regional experts to determine whether the cores were sufficiently deep for NLA purposes. This approach is a less reliable, but less costly means of estimating the age of the cores.

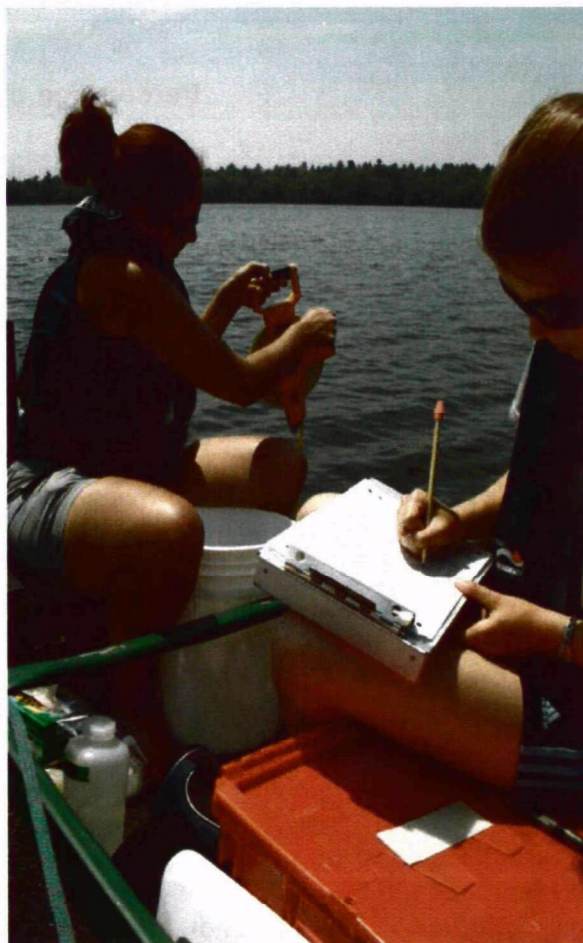
The bottom layer of the sediment cores was not collected for man-made lakes because it was presumed sediment cores in these more recent lakes would not represent a pre-industrial condition. Three hundred ninety-two lakes, representing 34% of the target population are in this category and therefore were not evaluated. Of the remaining natural lakes, 334 lakes, representing about 22% of the target population, were not evaluated because the core length was insufficient. That left 426 lakes, representing 55% of the target population, where estimates of change were possible. While results from this approach are presented below, further analyses will be necessary to determine if sediment core dating should be included in future lake surveys. Issues for consideration include evaluating:

- Whether the approach used is sufficiently robust to identify cores reaching pre-industrial times across the country;
- Whether the assessment of change in a relatively small subset of lakes merits the effort expended in the context of a national survey; and
- Whether alternative coring and/or dating approaches should be considered for future iterations of the NLA.

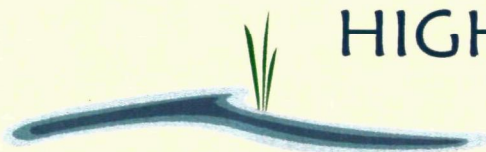
Even though the percentage of target population is less than optimum, some information can be gleaned from the data. Results from the cores selected based on the approach described above showed that an estimated 17% of lakes in the lower 48 states showed no significant change in inferred total phosphorus between the bottom of the core and the top of the core. A decrease in total phosphorus was estimated to have occurred in 12% of the lakes while almost 7% of lakes were estimated to have experienced an

increase in total phosphorus. The pattern in changes for total nitrogen differs somewhat. Nationally, the percentage of lakes showing no change between the top and bottom of the core is less than 5%. Sixteen percent of the lakes showed an increase in total nitrogen while 18% showed a decrease in total nitrogen.

These results from the NLA comparison between the top and bottom of the sediment cores suggests that many lakes may have lower total phosphorus and total nitrogen levels now than they once did. This is unexpected for many (but not all) of the lower 48 states. Without dating the cores, more information and analysis are needed in explaining these results.





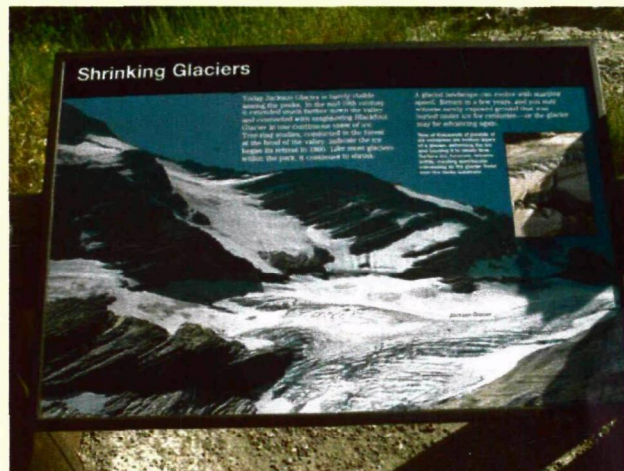


# HIGHLIGHT

## Climate Impacts on Lakes

### Warmer Temperatures and Lake Condition

The preponderance of information indicates that the planet is warming and significant changes in climate are expected around the globe. The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) unequivocally attributes the climate change to human activities that have increased greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. The United States alone saw an increase of 1° (F) over the last century. Most of the warming has occurred in the last three decades and the largest observed warming across the country has taken place in the winter months. In southern areas, surface water temperatures are surpassing those of air temperatures, while in the north, there is ample evidence of earlier ice-out dates. For lakes, these changes will impact reservoirs and drinking water sources, hydroelectric power facilities, irrigation regimes, shipping and navigation, and recreational opportunities. From an ecosystem standpoint, warmer lakes will result in changes in water depth, thermal regime, nutrient loading, retention time, mixing and oxygen availability, and suspended sediments – all of which will alter habitat suitability and lake productivity.



### Changes in the Upper Midwest — The Great Lakes

While scientists generally agree that the nation will get slightly wetter over the next century, precipitation trends at a regional level are uncertain. In many areas, however increased rainfall could be offset by increased evaporation, both in terms of soil moisture and surface water. The Great Lakes, which hold 18% of the world's fresh surface water, are being watched carefully. Many agree that warming trends throughout the region will lead to a climate more comparable to the Deep South thus making the lakes themselves smaller and muddier. Since 1988, temperature in Lake Erie has risen 1° (F) and while predictions vary, some researchers forecast that by 2070, lake level will fall about 34 inches and surface area will shrink 15%. This scenario would leave 2,200 square miles of new land exposed. Lower water levels and less ice cover will lead to more sediment delivery, and therefore more algae and potentially more waterborne diseases. Excessive algal blooms can affect aquatic life and harm animals and humans. Climate changes will also affect fish populations and zooplankton communities due to the disruptions in lake dynamics such as the timing and severity of ice-cover, winter-kill and spring/fall turn-over.

### Changes in the Southwest – Lake Tahoe and Lake Mead

Persistent drought conditions; increased extreme rainfall events; more wildfires; and heightened flooding, runoff and soil erosion are all expected to afflict the already arid southwest. Since 1988, the average surface water temperature of Lake Tahoe has increased by 1° (F). Other signs of persistent warming are decreased snowfall, later snowfall, and earlier snowmelt. In Tahoe City, Calif. the percentage of precipitation falling as snow has dropped from 52% in 1910 to 35% in 2007 and since 1961, peak





snowmelt throughout the lake region has shifted earlier by two and a half weeks. In *Tahoe: State of the Lake Report 2008*, researchers reported that algal growth, considered an indicator of warming's acceleration, has increased rapidly with concentrations now five times what they were in 1959. Levels of nitrogen and phosphorus deposited from the Angora forest fire (also considered a climate indicator) also were 2-7 times greater than normal.

Fluctuations in precipitation and snowpack have critical impacts on life in the desert. In Nevada, the water level in Lake Mead is steadily dropping and with it the hydroelectric production capacity by Hoover Dam. Studies cited by the National Conference of State Legislatures and Center for Integrative Environmental Research (2008) indicate that there is a 10% chance that Lake Mead could dry up by 2021 and a 50% chance it will be gone by 2050. Lake Mead provides drinking water for over 2 million people and generates electricity for over 1.3 million. Water-based recreation brings in more than \$1 billion to the area's economy. Major changes in annual precipitation and snowpack are proving difficult for reservoir managers who must balance winter flooding with maximum capture and storage for summer water needs — all within the context of overall declining water levels.



#### What the Experts Say

How a changing climate will impact the country's lakes is far from understood and not easy to grasp. The Climate Change Science Program, in its 2008 report, underscores that most observed changes in water quality across the continental U.S. are likely attributable to causes other than climate change and are instead primarily due to changes in pollutant loadings. Notwithstanding, there is general agreement with the IPCC (2007) conclusion that higher water temperatures, increased precipitation intensity and longer periods of low levels are likely to exacerbate many forms of water pollution, with impacts on ecosystem integrity, and water system reliability and operating costs. Both groups agree that a mix of mitigation and adaptation will be necessary to address the impacts.





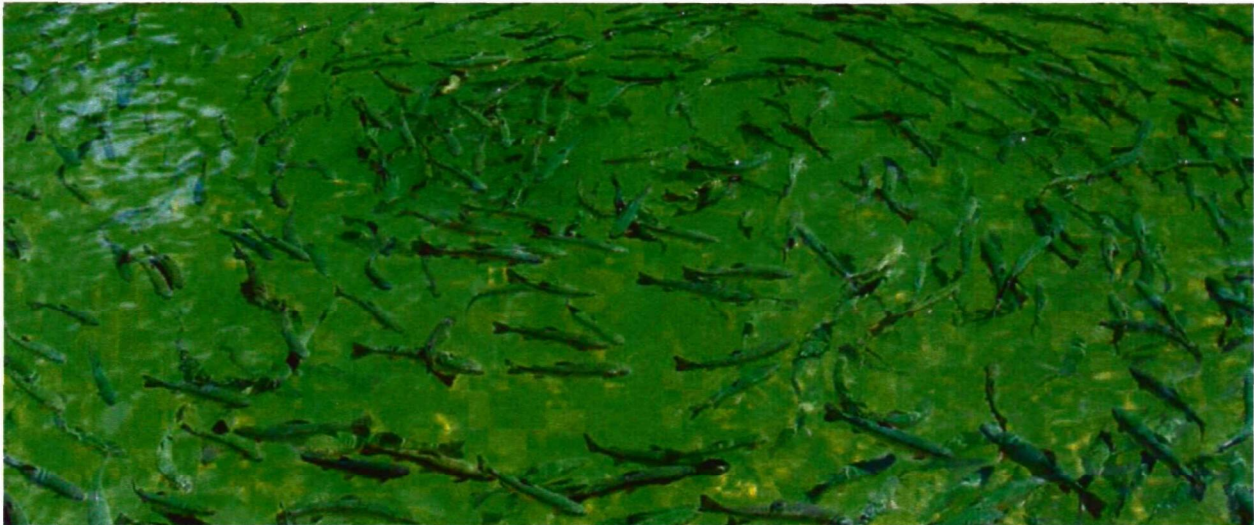
## CHAPTER 8. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR LAKE MANAGERS



### *IN THIS CHAPTER*

- ▶ Overall Findings and Conclusions
- ▶ Implications for Lake Managers





## Chapter 8

# Conclusions and Implications for Resource Managers

## Overall Findings and Conclusions

The NLA offers a unique opportunity to frame discussions and planning strategies based on environmental outcomes and across jurisdictional lines. It serves as a first step in the evaluation of the collective successes of management efforts to protect, preserve, or restore water quality. Attributable risk analyses can serve as a useful tool to help prioritize individual stressors. As EPA and its partners repeat the survey, the NLA will be able to track changes in water quality over time for lakes as a whole rather than just for a few individuals, thus advance our understanding of important regional and national patterns in water quality, and speak to the cumulative effectiveness of our national water program.

Taken together, the results of the NLA provide a broad range of information necessary to understand the condition of our nation's lakes and some of the key stressors likely to be affecting them. The results are especially important because they establish a national baseline for future monitoring efforts which can be used to track statistically-valid trends in lake condition. These stressors to lake systems are now placed in context of their relative importance for restoring and maintaining lake integrity.

### *Condition of the Nation's Lakes*

The results of the survey provide information relating to the fundamental question of "what is the condition of the nation's lakes?" The NLA reports on condition in three important ways. Biological indicators are especially useful in evaluating national condition because they integrate stress of combined problems over time. The NLA shows that 56% of the nation's lakes are in good condition, 21% are in fair condition, and 24% are in poor condition based on a measure of planktonic O/E taxa loss. Recreational suitability based on cyanobacteria (blue-green algae that can produce toxins that pose threats to human health) levels are



in the low risk category in 72% of lakes. Finally, trophic status results based on chlorophyll-*a* concentrations find that 20% of lakes are hypereutrophic while 80% are in categories that exhibit lower levels of nutrient enrichment.

Ecoregional assessments reveal broad-scale patterns in lake condition across state lines and across the country. Again using biological integrity as the primary characteristic of lake health, the Northern Appalachian Plateau, the Upper Midwest and the Western Mountains ecoregions have the highest proportion of lakes in good condition – over half of the lakes in these regions are classified as good.

While it is too early in the survey program to determine if lake condition is improving, NLA analysts were able to examine changes in one set of lakes. When comparing these results to a subset of lakes sampled of more than thirty years ago, it is encouraging to see that phosphorus concentrations decreased in 50% of the NES lakes and remained unchanged in 24% of the lakes. In essence this means that phosphorus level in nearly two-thirds of these lakes remained the same or even improved despite growth of the U.S. population.

### *Major Physical and Chemical Stressors to Biological Quality*

The NLA results show that of the indicators measured in the study, degraded lakeshore habitat around the lake is the most significant stressor to poor biological integrity across the country. Using this as the primary habitat indicator, just under half of the country's lakes (45%) are in good condition. The NLA results also show that lakes in poor condition for habitat are 3 times more likely to be in poor biological condition. Another indicator of habitat examined was evidence

of human activities. From the standpoint of human disturbances along lakeshores, just one-third (35%) of the country's lakes are in good condition. NLA results also show that the proportion of lakes with shoreline disturbance and associated habitat alterations does not show any significant ecoregion variability. In addition to exhibiting good biological conditions, about half of the lakes in the Northern Appalachians, the Upper Midwest and the Western Mountains ecoregions, plus the Temperate Plains ecoregion are in good habitat condition relative to other ecoregions across the country.



Nutrients in the form of phosphorus and nitrogen are the second most important stressor to lake biological health. Fifty-eight percent of lakes are in good condition relative to total phosphorus levels and 54% are in good condition relative to total nitrogen. Lakes in poor condition for either of these stressors are twice as likely to be in poor biological condition. Yet, unlike habitat condition, nutrient levels vary widely across the country. The Northern Appalachians ecoregion has the highest percentage of lakes in good condition relative to total phosphorus (TP) and total nitrogen (TN) (79% for TP and 88% for TN) while the Temperate Plains (38% for TP and 27% for TN) and the Northern Plains (22% for TP and 9% for TN) ecoregions have the lowest.



## Implications for Lake Managers

While survey results fill key informational gaps in regional and national monitoring programs by generating estimates of the condition of water resources, evaluating the prevalence of key stressors, and documenting trends in the population waters over time, they do not address all management concerns at all scales. For example, the surveys do not address causal factors or sources of stress. For water resource managers and city planners, any effort to reduce stresses and improve water quality entails confronting the source(s) of the stress (such as energy generation, agricultural production, or suburban development) and working together toward implementing viable but often difficult solutions.

### *Address Major Lake Stressors*

State lake management programs increasingly report that development pressures on lakes are steadily growing. The NLA findings show that, local, state, and national initiatives should center on shoreline habitats, particularly vegetative cover, and nutrient loads to protect the integrity of lakes.

The findings of the four physical habitat indicators show that poor habitat condition imparts a significant stress on lakes and could suggest the need for stronger management of lakeshore development at the all jurisdictional levels. Of the four, degradation of lakeshore habitat cover is the most important stressor of lakes and the attributable risk analysis suggests that eliminating the effects of poor lakeshore habitat cover could improve the biological condition in 40% of lakes. Development and disturbance along lakeshores (such as tree removal and residential construction) impacts the integrity of lakeshore and shallow water habitats, affecting terrestrial and aquatic biota alike.

These NLA results support the continuing need for national, state, and local efforts to ameliorate the impacts of human activities in and around lakes to protect the lake ecosystem. EPA's Low Impact Development (LID) program is one national-scale initiative to address lakeshore development pressures.

Nutrients have been a longstanding stressor of waterbodies in this country. Nationally, over 40% of the lakes exhibit moderate or high levels of nitrogen or phosphorus concentrations. In addition, regional hotspots are evident - in the Temperate and Northern Plains nearly all lakes have high levels of nutrients. The NLA findings emphasize the need for continuing implementation of Federal-State partnership programs to control point and non-point sources of nutrient pollution. This type of information can be used to support and enhance collaboration between jurisdictional authorities and the use of programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and Conservation Reserve and Enhancement Programs managed by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Clean Water Act Section 319 Program and National Point Sources Discharge Elimination System under the Clean Water Act.

### *Track Status and Trends Information*

Lake managers should consider the national trend information as well as the ecoregional data in evaluating site specific information in a broader context. Conducted on a five-year basis, subsequent lake survey results will help water resource managers to assess temporal differences in the data and perform trends analyses. Future surveys will also help EPA and its partners to evaluate national and ecoregional stressors to these ecosystems, track changes, and explore the relative importance of each in restoring or maintaining waterbody health. Wide-area or



regional changes in stressors over time can potentially be linked to human factors such as land use changes (e.g., development) or natural causes (e.g., increased storm surges).

### *Implement Statewide Statistical Surveys*

Statistical survey designs provide water resource managers and the public with consistent, statistically-valid assessments of all waters in the area of interest (nationally, state-wide, etc.). Information provided by these surveys can help managers monitor the effectiveness of their lake restoration and pollution control activities as well as target

resources and additional monitoring where they are most needed. To date, 40 states are implementing statistical surveys (Figure 38). These states have been successful in leveraging their limited monitoring resources and have gained state-wide insights into their water resource quality. EPA encourages all states to implement state-wide statistical surveys.

States with statistical survey programs are already using the results to develop watershed-scale or site-specific protection or restoration projects. Virginia, for instance, has established an intensive water quality monitoring program incorporating statistical

## **Low Impact Development Protects Lake Quality**

Low impact development (LID) is a set of approaches and practices that are designed to reduce runoff of water and pollutants from the site at which they are generated. LID techniques manage water and water pollutants at the source through infiltration, evapotranspiration, and reuse of rainwater, preventing many pollutants from ever reaching nearby surface waters. LID practices include rain gardens, porous pavements, green roofs, infiltration planters, trees and tree boxes, and rainwater harvesting for non-potable uses such as toilet flushing and landscape irrigation. The primary goal of LID is to design each development site to protect, or restore, the natural hydrology of the site so that the overall integrity of the watershed is protected.

Development typically causes an imbalance in the natural hydrology of a watershed by replacing pervious surfaces (e.g., fields, forests, wetlands etc.) with impervious surfaces (e.g.) rooftops, parking lots, roads, etc.). This change in ground cover not only increases runoff because decreased infiltration, but reduces the potential for the removal of nonpoint source pollutants.

By engineering terrain, vegetation, and soil features, LID practices promote infiltration of runoff close to its source and help prevent sediment, nutrients, and toxic loads from being transported to nearby surface waters. Once runoff is infiltrated into soils, plants and microbes can naturally filter and break down many pollutants and restrict movement of others.

Implementing LID practices in watersheds will contribute to groundwater recharge, improve water quality, reduce flooding, preserve habitat, and protect lake quality. In addition, LID practices increase land value, the aesthetics and recreational opportunities, and public/private collaborative partnerships while reducing stormwater management costs. For more information visit: <http://www.epa.gov/owow/nps/lid>.



## Use of Probability Surveys as a Component of State Monitoring Program

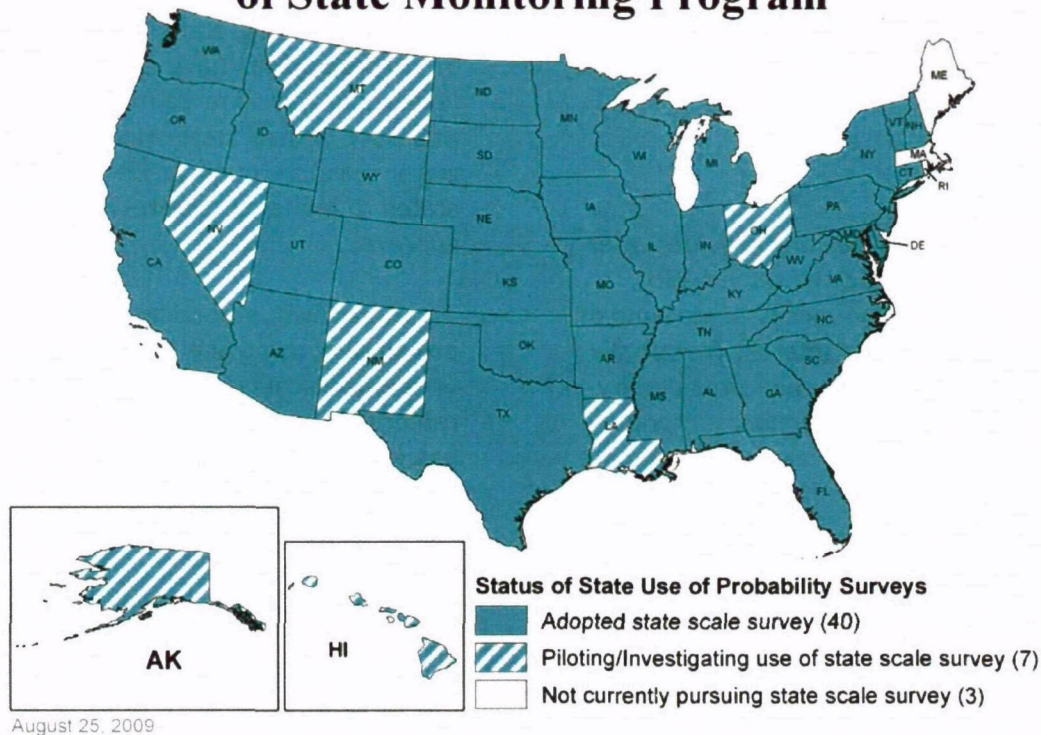


Figure 38. States with state-scale statistical surveys

sampling methods. South Carolina's monitoring program includes a statistically-based component to complement its targeted monitoring activities. Each year a new statewide set of statistical random sites is selected for each waterbody type, *i.e.*, streams, lakes/reservoirs, and estuaries. The State of Florida also implements an annual probabilistic monitoring program. Their program will be an enhancement of its 2000 Status Monitoring Network — a five-year rotating-basin, statistical design sampling of six water resources, including small lakes (1-10 hectares) and large lakes (>10 hectares). Florida is currently in the fifth year of the Network and will report its findings in 2010. States with probabilistic survey programs have found that state-wide survey data provide more information and more useful information than other types of monitoring programs.

State-wide surveys can be leveraged with the national survey and the information can be used in conjunction with other existing state monitoring programs to get a better understanding of the state's waters. In the same way that a lake association might relate the conditions it measures in a particular lake to other lakes, state/tribal managers can relate the conditions of lakes statewide to relevant ecoregional or national conditions. For example, the State of Vermont compared its lake's trophic status to the lakes in the Northern Appalachian ecoregion and nationwide (Figure 39). This assessment shows that lakes in Vermont are more oligotrophic than lakes at the NLA ecoregional or national scale. Lake managers in states with a statistical survey network can use information such as this to target conditions to which lakes should be managed.



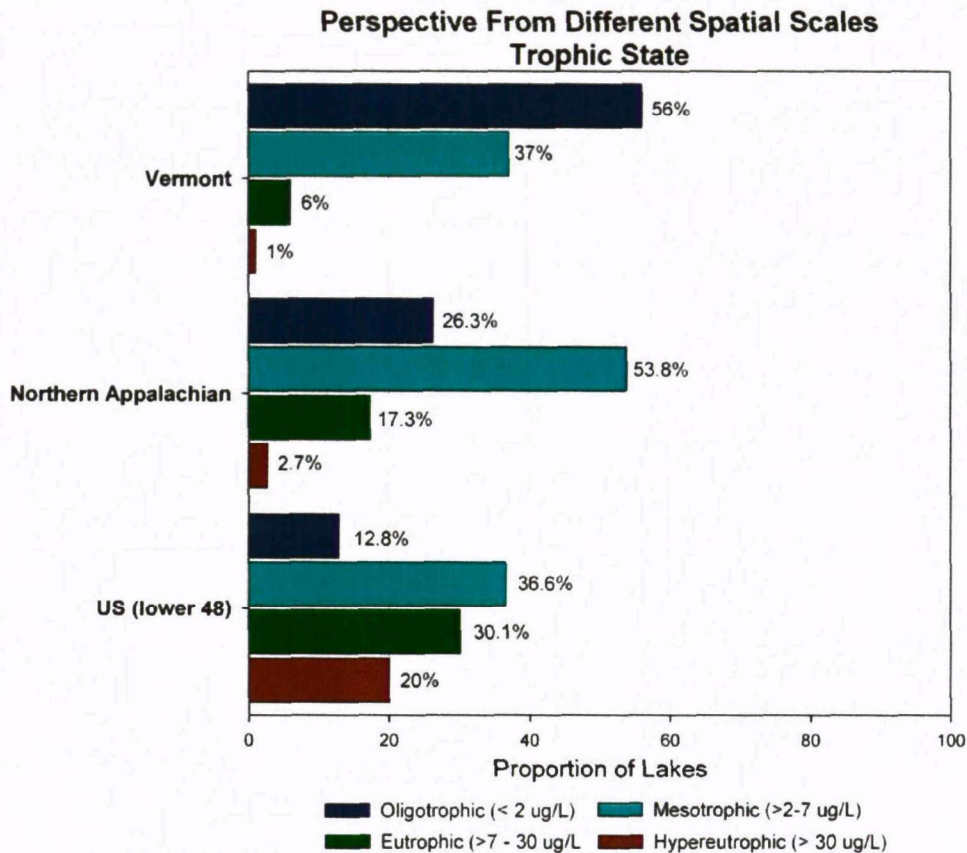


Figure 39. Comparison of lakes by trophic state for Vermont (VT), the Northern Appalachian Ecoregion (NAP), and the Nation (U.S. 48), based on chlorophyll-*a*.

### *Incorporate New and Innovative Approaches*

EPA is encouraging states, tribes, and others to utilize NLA data and methods for their own customized purposes. The NLA provides lake managers with new tools and techniques to adopt into existing programs. Managers are encouraged to consider the host of new assessment indicators and methods that are applicable within assessment programs of any scale. For example, the quantitative assessment of physical habitat at the land-water interface is an area of intensifying focus within the lakes community. The NLA physical habitat assessment method provides a ready approach that has already been implemented by field crews across the lower 48 states and Alaska. The resulting data is readily reduced to four components of habitat integrity that relate directly

to ecological integrity in lakes. For lake assessment programs lacking a physical habitat assessment component, the NLA method provides a low-cost and information-rich enhancement.

The incorporation of recreational indicators within lake assessment programs can also yield useful information to lake managers. Public awareness of cyanobacteria and related toxins is increasing, fueled in part by an increasing number of beach closures and related media reports. In the NLA, while only a small proportion of lakes exhibited moderate or high-risk concentrations of microcystin, the proportions of lakes with concentrations of chlorophyll-*a* or cyanobacteria cells associated with the development of elevated microcystin was considerably greater. Routine monitoring of chlorophyll-*a*, cyanobacterial cell counts, and/



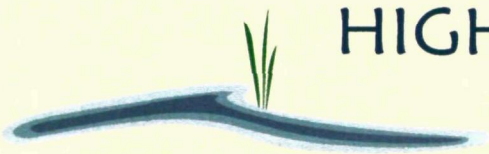
or microcystin can be implemented using a tiered approach tailored to the likelihood of microcystin occurrence. Many states are now adopting such programs, resulting in greater protection of human health in instances where cyanobacteria blooms may limit swimming use.

### *Work Beyond Jurisdictional Boundaries*

Survey data on a national scale allows for aggregation of data and comparability of the results across several ecoregional levels. Within each of these ecoregions, states often share common problems and stressors to shared watersheds. The NLA offers a unique opportunity for adjacent states to work together, establish coalitions, and put into place collaborative actions that cross state boundaries. As a starting point, EPA and its state partners are working together to develop approaches to monitoring that will allow comparisons on a state-wide basis and across state boundaries as well. EPA and the states are committed to finding mutually-beneficial and scientifically-sound ways to integrate and exchange data from multiple sources, as well as options to improve both sample collection and analytical methods.







# HIGHLIGHT

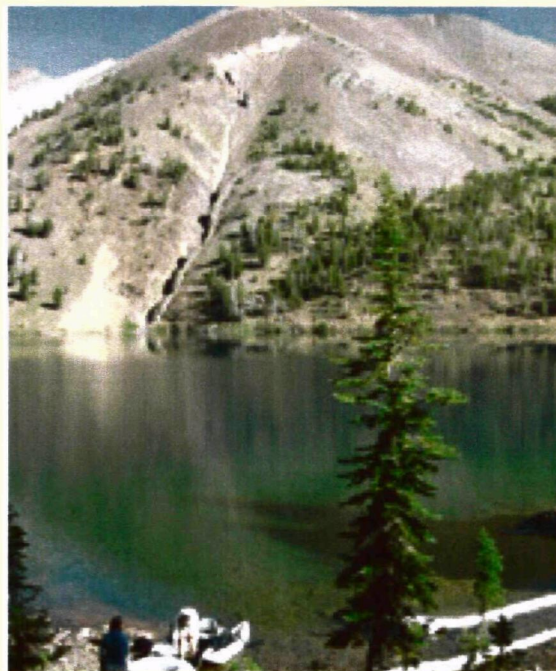
## State, Tribal, and Regional Lake Surveys: Examples From Across the Country

### State-wide Lake Assessments

**Oklahoma:** Oklahoma was one of several states that chose to add to the number of nationally selected lake sites within its boundaries to achieve a state-wide assessment. Oklahoma is looking into using National Lakes Assessment (NLA) survey data for further development of nutrient and biological criteria, incorporating new parameters into its established monitoring program, and nesting a probability based survey into its fixed station rotation.

**Michigan:** Twenty-nine Michigan lakes were randomly selected as part of the NLA. To allow for a state-scale assessment, the state added 21 additional randomly-chosen lakes. Michigan's surveyed lakes ranged from an unnamed 10-acre lake in Clare County to 13,000-acre Gogebic Lake, in Gogebic County. The state will analyze its lake data set for an evaluation of the condition of Michigan's inland lakes based on the national survey assessment tools.

**Oregon:** Oregon sampled 32 lakes across the state as part of the NLA. In Oregon, the results from the 2007 NLA will help answer two key questions about the quality of lakes, ponds and reservoirs: What percent of Oregon's lakes are in good, fair or poor condition for key indicators of nutrient status, ecological health and recreation? What is the relative importance of key lake "stress factors" such as nutrients and pathogens? The random design took field crews to a wide variety of sites. Elevation at the target lakes ranged from 30 feet to 7,850 feet. Lake depths ranged from 1 meter to 128 meters (Waldo Lake); maximum sampling depth, however, was 50 meters. The most difficult lake to reach was Ice Lake in the Eagle Cap Wilderness, which required the use of an outfitter and horses for the eight-mile and 3,300-foot elevation gain journey.



Ice Lake in the Eagle Cap Wilderness  
(taken from <http://www.deq.state.or.us/lab/wqm/docs/08-LAB-009.pdf>)

### Enhancing Lake Monitoring for the Lac du Flambeau Tribe, Wisconsin

The Lac du Flambeau Tribe is using the NLA study to enhance its own water program. The ability to develop protective site-specific water quality criteria and assess lake health is limited when available data covers only a small geographic area such as the Lac du Flambeau Reservation. Tribal participation in the NLA enabled the Tribe to compare reservation lake data to national and regional lake health. The Tribe used the NLA protocols for physical habitat, water chemistry, and vertical water profiles on an additional 11 lakes within the reservation. These data are being entered into EPA's Water Quality Exchange (WQX) using an excel template to ensure data uniformity for comparison. The Tribe will develop lake report





cards for the general public, managers, and decision makers assessing the health of reservation lakes as compared to national and regional lake health. The Tribe will also be able to evaluate development of criteria using these data.

#### Assessing Prairie Potholes: A Collaborative Effort.

The Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) crosses the north central U.S. and Canada and includes nearly 8,000 prairie pothole lakes. Prairie pothole lakes are intrinsically shallow and defined as natural lakes with where 80% or more of the lake is less than 15 feet deep. PPR lakes are part of a major waterfowl flyway and are a valuable regional and national resource. In order to more fully understand this unique ecosystem, North Dakota, Iowa, Minnesota, South Dakota, Montana, USGS, and EPA undertook an assessment of these lakes. Analysts have found that nutrient and chlorophyll-a levels in PPR lakes are quite high as compared to the nation's lakes. A combination of high nutrient levels, elevated algae growth, low transparency, presence of roughfish, and broad, wind-swept basins serve to limit rooted plant growth. Maintaining rooted plant growth is important for prairie pothole health. More detailed information on the results of the Prairie Pothole survey will be provided in the NLA supplemental report.



Photo courtesy of Wes Weissenburger





## CHAPTER 9.

# NEXT STEPS FOR THE NATIONAL SURVEYS



### *IN THIS CHAPTER*

- ▶ Supplemental Reports
- ▶ Tools and Other Analytical Support
- ▶ Future National Assessments





## Chapter 9

# Next Steps for the National Surveys

EPA is committed to continually enhancing the National Aquatic Resource surveys in order to improve the quality and quantity of information we need to understand the condition of the aquatic environment and how it is changing over time. As technologies advance, future surveys and collaborations can also lead to new indicators, new monitoring approaches, and new water resource management programs and policies.

With the publication of this report, the lakes survey moves into a design/planning phase in preparation for the next survey in 2012. This phase will incorporate lessons learned from the first lakes survey, other

national surveys, and state, tribal and local experiences. Additionally, EPA anticipates that states and other partners will continue to utilize data from the first lakes survey and issue supplemental reports based on their findings.

During 2010, EPA and its state and tribal partners will take stock of the survey and begin planning for 2012. Issues for discussion may include changes to the design, field methods, equipment, laboratory methods, and/or analyses procedures. Other items include improving reference site selection, refining regionally representative reference sites, and adding more reference sites to the survey. Consideration will be given not only to how alternate approaches will improve future data, but how we can ensure comparability to the initial baseline.

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Lakes	Design	Field	Lab and Data Analysis	Report	Design and Planning		Field



## Supplemental Reports

The NLA included data collection for several indicators for which analysis could not be completed in time for this report. These included benthic macroinvertebrates, sediment mercury, and enterococcus. Analysts are currently developing macroinvertebrate IBIs and O/E models to add to our understanding of biological integrity of lakes. Sediment mercury samples are still in the data analysis phase, as is the enterococcus dataset. EPA plans to produce an addendum to this report with the macroinvertebrate, sediment mercury, and enterococcus findings.

In the next few years, EPA plans to continue additional analyses of the survey data to develop tools and strategies that will provide a better understanding of lakes and water resources in general. One important undertaking will be to conduct an in-depth analysis of the relationship between lake condition, stressors, and management actions such as point and nonpoint controls and other restoration activities. EPA plans to publish its progress and findings in interim lake survey reports.

## Tools and Other Analytical Support

The next two years will also provide a unique opportunity for states to tailor their own statewide program to complement the national program. Extensive discussion during the research and design phase will focus on ways to leverage and integrate national and state-scale surveys. This approach will improve the efficiency and value investment in monitoring aimed at understanding the condition of the nation's water resources. One EPA near-term project will be to work with the states to develop tools that can be used to re-create the survey for state-wide assessments and for

customized purposes. EPA is committed to providing technical support to assist states, tribes and other partners in using these tools. Such an "assessment tool kit" might include IBI or O/E model development, habitat data analysis techniques, decision-support tools, and web-based trainings session.

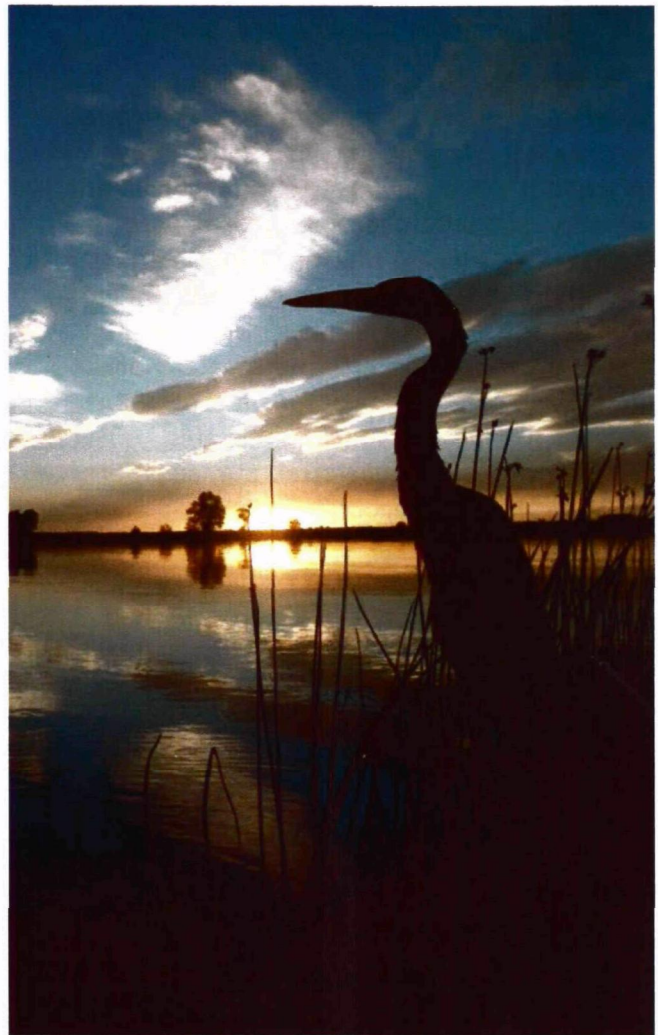
## Future National Assessments

EPA and its state, tribal and federal partners expect to continue to produce national assessments on a yearly cycle. Rivers and streams sampling was completed in 2008 and 2009, with a report due out in 2011. A national coastal assessment report will be published in 2012 based on field sampling 2010. Wetlands will be surveyed in 2011, followed by national reporting in 2013. In 2012, field sampling for lakes will occur again and the assessment report that follows in 2014 will evaluate changes in biological condition and key stressors. The surveys will then continue with changes and trends becoming a greater focus for each resource type.

The continued utility of these national surveys and their assessment reports depends on continued consistency in design, as well as field, lab and assessment methods from assessment to assessment. However, the surveys should also provide flexibility that allows the science of monitoring to improve over time. Maintaining consistency while allowing flexibility and growth will continue to be one of the challenges that will be faced in the coming years.



This national lakes survey would not have been possible without the involvement of hundreds of scientists working for state, tribal, and federal agencies and universities across the nation. Future National Aquatic Resource Surveys will continue to rely on this close collaboration, open exchange of information, and the dedication, energy, and hard work of its participants. EPA will continue to work to help its partners translate the expertise they gained through these national surveys to studies of their own waters. It also will work to ensure that this valuable and substantial baseline of information be widely used to evaluate the success of its efforts to protect and restore the quality of the Nation's waters.





## Acronyms

ANC	Acid Neutralizing Capacity
CPL	Coastal Plains
CWA	Clean Water Act
DO	Dissolved Oxygen
DOC	Dissolved Organic Carbon
EMAP	Environmental Monitoring and Assessment Program
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
GIS	Geographic Information System
IBI	Index of Biological Integrity
ITIS	Integrated Taxonomic Information System
LDCI	Lake Diatom Condition Index
NAP	Northern Appalachians
NARS	National Aquatic Resource Surveys
NES	National Eutrophication Study
NHD	National Hydrography Dataset
NLA	National Lakes Assessment
NLCD	National Land Cover Dataset
NPL	Northern Plains
O/E	Observed/Expected
ORD	Office of Research and Development, EPA
OW	Office of Water, EPA
PPR	Prairie Pothole Region
QA/QC	Quality Assurance/Quality Control
QAPP	Quality Assurance Project Plan
qPCR	Quantitative Polymerase Chain Reaction
REMAP	Regional Environmental Monitoring and Assessment Program
SAP	Southern Appalachians
SPL	Southern Plains
TIME/LTM	Temporally Integrated Monitoring of Ecosystem/Long Term Monitoring
TMDL	Total Maximum Daily Load
TPL	Temperate Plains
TN	Total Nitrogen
TP	Total Phosphorus
UMW	Upper Midwest
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture
USGS	U.S. Geological Survey
WMT	Western Mountains
WQX	EPA's Water Quality Exchange
WWTP	Wastewater Treatment Plant
XER	Xeric



## Glossary of Terms

**Acid Neutralizing Capacity (ANC):** A lake's ability to adapt to, *i.e.* neutralize, increases in acidity due to acidic deposition from anthropogenic sources (automobile exhausts, fossil fuels) and natural geologic sources.

**Attributable risk:** Magnitude or significance of a stressor. Is determined by combining the relative extent of a stressor (prevalence) and the relative risk of the stressor (severity).

**Benthic macroinvertebrates:** Benthic meaning "bottom-dwelling". Aquatic larval or adult insects, crayfish, worms and mollusks. These small creatures live on the lake bottom attached to rocks, vegetation, logs and sticks, or burrow into the sediment.

**Biological assemblage:** Key group or community of plant or animal being studied to learn more about the biological condition of water resources.

**Biological integrity:** State of being capable of supporting and maintaining a balanced community of organisms having a species composition, diversity, and functional organization.

**Chlorophyll-a:** A type of plant pigment present in all types of algae sometimes in direct proportion to the biomass of algae. A chemical indicator used to assess trophic condition.

**Complexity:** Used to describe the diversity and intricacy of an ecosystem. A complex habitat is one that has a wide range of different niches for optimum growth and reproduction for both plants and animals.

**Condition:** State or status of a particular indicator. For example, the biological condition of a lake is the status of a biological assemblage, such as diatoms. Often measured against a reference value or threshold.

**Ecoregions:** Ecological regions that are similar in climate, vegetation, soil type, and geology; water resources within a particular ecoregion have similar natural characteristics and similar responses to stressors.

**Epilimnion:** The uppermost, warmest, well-mixed layer of a lake during summertime.

**Euphotic zone:** The uppermost layer of the lake defined as the depth at which light penetrates.

**Eutrophic:** See Trophic state.



**Eutrophication:** The process of increased productivity of a lake or reservoir as it ages. Often this process is greatly accelerated by human influences and is termed cultural eutrophication.

**Hypereutrophic:** See Trophic state.

**Hypolimnion:** The lower, cooler layer of lake during the summer.

**Lakes Diatom Condition Index (LDCI):** The sum of individual measures of a diatom assemblage, such as number and composition of taxa present, diversity, morphology, and other characteristics of the organisms.

**Limnological:** Of or pertaining to the study of fresh waters.

**Littoral zone:** The water's edge. Shallow water extending from the shoreline lakeward to the greatest depth occupied by rooted plants.

**Macrophyte:** Literally meaning "large plant." An aquatic plant that can grow emergent, submergent or floating.

**Mesotrophic:** See Trophic state.

**National Hydrography Dataset:** Comprehensive set of digital spatial data that contains information on surface water features across the U.S.

**Nutrients:** In the context of the NLA, substances such as nitrogen and phosphorus that are essential to life but in excess can overstimulate the growth of algae and other plants in aquatic environments. Excess nutrient can come from agricultural and urban runoff, leaking septic systems, sewage discharges and similar sources.

**O/E (Observed/Expected) Ratio of Taxa Loss:** A comparison of the number of taxa that are observed (O) at a site relative to the number of taxa expected (E) to exist for a site of similar nature. The taxa expected at individual sites are based on models developed from data collected at reference sites.

**Oligotrophic:** See Trophic state.

**Pelagic zone:** The open area of a lake, from the edge of the littoral zone to the center of the lake.

**Primary productivity:** The production of organic compounds from atmospheric or aquatic carbon dioxide, principally through the process of photosynthesis. All life on earth is directly or indirectly reliant on primary production. In aquatic ecosystems, the organisms responsible for primary production are the phytoplankton, and form the base of the food chain.



**Probability-based design:** A type of random sampling technique in which every site in the population has a known probability of being selected for sampling. Results from the sampled sites can be used to represent the population as a whole.

**Profundal zone:** The deepest part of the lake located below the range of effective light penetration.

**Reference condition:** The least-disturbed condition available in an ecological region, determined based on specific criteria, and used as the benchmark for comparison with the surveyed sample sites in the region.

**Regionally-specific reference:** A subset of the reference condition based on reference lake sites of similar type and geography. For ecoregional assessments, the lakes are only compared to the particular reference lakes that are similar for that area.

**Relative extent:** The relative prevalence of a specified condition (such as poor) for a stressor or biological indicator. A stressor with a high relative extent means that it is relatively widespread when compared to other stressors.

**Relative risk:** The severity of the stressor. Like attributable risk and relative extent of the risk, this term is used to characterize and quantify the relative importance of the stressor. Stressors with low relative extent and high relative risk are called "hot spots".

**Riparian zone:** The banks or shoreline of a lake or waterbody.

**Riparian or Shoreline disturbance:** A measure of the evidence of human activities alongside lakes, such as roadways, dams, docks, marinas, crops, etc.

**Riparian vegetative cover:** Vegetation alongside lakeshore. Intact riparian vegetative cover reduces pollution runoff, prevents streambank erosion, and provide shade, food, and habitat for fish and other aquatic organisms.

**Secchi transparency:** A measure of the clarity of water obtained by lowering a black and white, or all white, disk (Secchi disk) into the water until it is no longer visible. Measured in feet or meters.

**Stressors:** Factors that adversely affect, and therefore degrade, aquatic ecosystems. Stressors may be chemical (e.g., excess nutrient, pesticides, metals), physical (e.g., pH, turbidity, habitat), or biological (e.g., invasive species, algal bloom).

***Stressor-response:*** Change in biological condition due to the presence of one or more stressors.

***Taxa:*** Taxonomic grouping of living organisms, such as family, genus or species, used for identification and classification purposes. Biologists describe and organize organisms into taxa in order to better identify and understand them.

***Threshold:*** The quantitative limit or boundary. For example, an assessment threshold is the particular percentage of the reference condition or cut-off point at which a condition is considered good, fair or poor.

***Trophic state:*** Meaning “nourishment.” Used to describe the level of productivity of a lake.

***Oligotrophic:*** A nutrient poor lake. Describes a lake of low biological productivity and high transparency or clarity.

***Mesotrophic:*** A lake that is moderately productive.

***Eutrophic:*** A well-nourished lake, very productive and supports a balanced and diverse array of organisms. Usually low transparency due to high algae and chlorophyll-*a* content.

***Hypereutrophic:*** Characterized by an excess of nutrients. These lakes usually support algal blooms, vegetative overgrowth, and low biodiversity.

***Watershed:*** A drainage area or basin in which all land and water areas drain or flow toward a central repository such as a lake, river or the ocean.



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