
Analysis of Current Aquatic Plant Data

Aquatic plants are an important element in every healthy lake. Changes in lake ecosystems are often first seen in the lake's plant community. Whether these changes are positive, like variable water levels or negative, like increased shoreland development or the introduction of an exotic species, the plant community will respond. Plant communities respond in a variety of ways; there may be a loss of one or more species, certain life forms, such as emergents or floating-leaf communities may disappear from certain areas of the lake, or there may be a shift in plant dominance between species. With periodic monitoring and proper analysis, these changes are relatively easy to detect and provide very useful information for management decisions.

As described in more detail in the methods section, multiple aquatic plant surveys were completed on The Cloverland Project Lakes; the first looked strictly for the exotic plant, curly-leaf pondweed, while the others that followed assessed both native and non-native species. Combined, these surveys produce a great deal of information about the aquatic vegetation of the lake. These data are analyzed and presented in numerous ways; each is discussed in more detail below.

Primer on Data Analysis & Data Interpretation

Species List

The species list is simply a list of all of the species that were found within the lake, both exotic and native. The list also contains the life-form of each plant found, its scientific name, and its coefficient of conservatism. The latter is discussed in more detail below. Changes in this list over time, whether it is differences in total species present, gains and losses of individual species, or changes in life-forms that are present, can be an early indicator of changes in the health of the lake ecosystem.

Frequency of Occurrence

Frequency of occurrence describes how often a certain species is found within a lake. Obviously, all of the plants cannot be counted in a lake, so samples are collected from pre-determined areas. In the case of The Cloverland Project Lakes, plant samples were collected from plots laid out on a grid that covered the entire lake. Using the data collected from these plots, an estimate of occurrence of each plant species can be determined. In this section, relative frequency of occurrence is used to describe how often each species occurred in the plots that contained vegetation. These values are presented in percentages and if all of the values were added up, they would equal 100%. For example, if water lily had a relative frequency of 0.1 and we described that value as a percentage, it would mean that water lily made up 10% of the population.

In the end, this analysis indicates the species that dominate the plant community within the lake. Shifts in dominant plants over time may indicate disturbances in the ecosystem. For instance, low water levels over several years may increase the occurrence of emergent species while decreasing the occurrence of floating-leaf species. Introductions of invasive exotic species may result in major shifts as they crowd out native plants within the system.

