

Everyone's in a Watershed

Rachel Carson understood the connection between people and their environment. She drew a picture showing the input of chemicals in one end of the chain and the environmental repercussions at the other end. Wildlife, fish, plants and animals are all connected to each other in the “web of life.” The actions you take in our own backyards can affect environments far away.

One example of how we are all connected to living and non-living organisms is through watersheds. When rain falls onto the land, it soaks into the ground or runs off into small channels or streams. These small streams then flow into bigger rivers or lakes. Big rivers eventually flow into large waterways and ultimately, the oceans. The land that the water flows from is called a watershed.

A watershed is a drainage basin formed by the geographic features in a landscape. The slope of the land, mountain formations, terrain and other landscape features all affect how precipitation collects and drains into some type of larger water body or sinks into the earth to become ground water. Like fingers on a hand, all smaller waterways eventually connect into larger water bodies.

Since a watershed can be big or small, include farms, forests and cities, the actions each person makes on a daily basis can affect the entire watershed. Humans have dramatically changed the landscape – building housing developments, converting wetlands into farm fields and developing large industrial operations. The boom in human activities on the landscape has changed how water flows on the landscape, and the types of materials it picks up on its journey into larger watersheds.

As rain washes over the land, it picks up oil, grease, fertilizers, pesticides, trash and dirt and carries these pollutants into our rivers and wetlands. These same contaminants can affect water quality for fish and safe drinking water for humans.

Activity

Everyone is part of a watershed. And everyone’s individual activities can affect the larger watershed.

What watershed are you a part of? Do you know where the water that goes down your drain or runs off your street might flow into a local creek or stream?

- Step 1. Draw a map that shows how water from your house might run into a small creek or stream.
- Step 2. Look at a topographic map to find out how that local creek or stream flows into a larger river or lake.
- Step 3. Go to the EPA’s Watersheds webpage to locate your watershed <http://www.epa.gov/surf/> Simply put in your zip code or click on the map to find out what watershed you are a part of.

Step 4. Answer these questions about the watershed you live in.

- How big is the watershed?
- What communities are also in your watershed?
- Who discharges into the water?
- Are there any hazardous waste sites in your watershed? If so, how many?
- What are the factors impairing the watershed's health and good water quality?
- What types of activities are people doing to monitor water quality?
- What are some examples of things you can do in your backyard to reduce the runoff into your watershed?