

Watershed is a term we seem to hear frequently these days. But exactly what is a watershed?

A watershed is an area of land that drains into a specific lake or river. (If you think in terms of contours or land elevation, it helps make more sense.) From an aerial view, watersheds have the appearance of a large tree with branches extending across the landscape.

The largest of principal streams of the watershed is the tree's trunk, while the larger branches are the primary streams and the smaller branches are secondary streams -- all feeding into each other as they make the journey into the larger main stream of the watershed.

As water molecules fall onto the surface of the earth they flow downhill. While moving downhill they join with other water molecules to create a trickle. The trickle soon becomes a stream and the streams join together to form a river. Eventually the draining water finds itself to a lake or the ocean where it is stored for an undetermined amount of time.

Watersheds come in all shapes and sizes. Some encompass millions of square miles; others are just a few acres. Just as creeks drain into rivers, small watersheds nearly always are part of a larger watershed.

For example, Ohio contains 44 "principal" watersheds, but all of them drain to either Lake Erie or the Ohio River.

Actually the northern third of Ohio drains to Lake Erie, while the southern two-thirds drains to the Ohio River. Watersheds are just nature's way of dividing up the landscape.

Watersheds cross county, state and even international borders. Another term for watersheds is a drainage basin. Other countries use other names: Australians call them catchments, for example.

The watershed where you live is a dynamic and unique place.

It is an elaborate mixture of natural resources: soil, water, plants and animals. Watersheds are continually evolving and changing.

Yet, everyday activities can impact these valuable resources and ultimately affect your town's water quality, well being and economic livelihood.

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