

## **Watersheds: Where We All Live**

*By Heather MacLean*

There has been recent debate in southeastern Nova Scotia regarding potential residential property development and the conservation of watersheds in the proposed building areas. For concerned citizens, it is fundamental to understand the nature of watersheds and their function within the environment in order to make an informed decision on the growing conflict.

Basically, everyone lives in a watershed. A watershed, also called a catchment basin, is an area of land that drains precipitation through a river system or group of river systems.

Watersheds are comprised of streams, lakes, rivers and wetlands that empty into oceans and form transportation waterways. One watershed may be made up of many streams and rivers. There are two main forms of watersheds: closed watersheds empty into an inland body of water while open watersheds drain to the ocean.



*Appearing like veins on the Earth's surface,  
an aerial view reveals how the rivers  
of a watershed connect with each other.  
Courtesy of Nature Works.*

Water is the lifeblood of the environment and it is essential to the survival of all living things - plants, animals and humans. Watersheds are home to a multitude of wildlife, including: trout, bass, perch, frogs, salamanders, birds, small animals, waterfowl and numerous types of vegetation. They also provide drinking water for humans and are used recreationally.

Watersheds are fragile ecosystems that sustain life of all things, including humans. When one section of a watershed is exposed to pollution of any kind, it not only threatens the exposed area, but in turn affects the entire watershed. Pollutants such as oil, paint, pet waste, debris, sediment, fertilizers and pesticides dumped directly into watersheds or washed by rain into gutters and storm drains have hazardous consequences. Ultimately, the contaminated water becomes part of the aquatic habitat and the toxins begin their damage on the living organisms.

According to Environment Canada, the preservation of watersheds is important for the health and integrity of our ecosystems and the communities that reside within them. Understanding the intricacies associated with the delicate nature of watersheds benefits both their wildlife inhabitants and humans alike. Watch for an upcoming Coastlines article describing the consequences and effects of watershed pollution.

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*[Coastlines is a public education project of the [Ecology Action Centre](#) and is supported by the Nova Scotia Habitat Conservation Fund and the Henry P. Kendall Foundation. This article is reprinted with the permission of the Ecology Action Centre, Halifax, NS, and with the assistance of Jennifer Stevens, Project Coordinator, Mushamush River Restoration Project, Bluenose Coastal Action Foundation.]*