

Reconciliation in the Watershed

Taking a Watershed Approach

This resource is designed to help you engage in KAIROS' Reconciliation in the Watershed program: to become more knowledgeable about your local watershed and the issues related to its protection on a path towards right relations with people and the Earth.

What is a Watershed?

A watershed is an **ecosystem** or area of land that collects precipitation and drains it through a network of streams and rivers into a common body of water. The word is used interchangeably with drainage basin, basin, or catchment area.

Watersheds can be as small as an area surrounding a creek or large enough to encompass all the land that drains water into an ocean. Canada has five oceanic watersheds – all freshwater in Canada eventually flows into either the Arctic Ocean, the Atlantic Ocean, the Gulf of Mexico, Hudson's Bay, or the Pacific Ocean. Within each of these watersheds, there are 594 smaller watersheds.

Your home basin of relations is your lifeboat.

- Brock Dolman

The watershed can also be interpreted as a **basin of relationships**, where humans, animals, plants, and all other life are interconnected and rely on the same water and resources. Humans are just one species in a watershed and our survival is dependent on the health and protection of all the other species in the watershed.

Activity #1

- Explore Canadian Geographic's [interactive map](#) of Canada's watersheds and learn which watershed you live in.
- Explore [this map of Indigenous territories](#) by nativeland.ca and identify the treaty and/or traditional territory where you live.

Understanding Boundaries

Despite our deep connection to the watershed in which we live, it does not form much of our identity. For example, many of us would not introduce ourselves as being from a particular watershed. Our identities are more often shaped by political boundaries than by the water and land that sustains us.

A political map of continental North America will often use bright colours to highlight the political divisions - the provinces, territories, and states in Canada, the United States and Mexico. These divisions or borders were politically determined by colonial powers. They have been imposed on the natural landscape and are not connected to the natural flow of water across the land. In some cases, political boundaries have been drawn right down the middle of rivers or lakes, separating communities that are supported by the same body of water. These maps bear little resemblance to the lands and watersheds that support our lives.

In contrast, a watershed map of continental North America shows six large, variegated shapes which follow the contours of the landscape — coasts, mountain ranges, tundra, arctic, prairie, and desert. Through these shapes flow rivers and streams that pause in small ponds and huge lakes before pouring into the oceans that surround the continent. The shapes on this map may be unfamiliar to many of us but are just as important as a political map in helping us understand where we live.

A map of Indigenous territories in North America provides us with another way of seeing and understanding the land and waters. The boundaries are not as tidy as the shapes on political maps – there are hundreds of different territories and many have boundaries that overlap. It suggests that while there may have been a history of dispute, there is also a history of treaty, sharing, and co-existence.

Maps are a great resource for learning about the world and where we live. They help shape our identity with the land. However, many of the maps that we use today are colonial artifacts and represent a limited way of seeing the world. Maps tend to simplify the complexities and difficult history of defining territories and nations.

Activity #2

Explore the maps in the links below and consider the different ways that Turtle Island/North America has been mapped and how it is understood today:

- [Political Divisions of Canada](#)
- [Watersheds of North America](#)
- [Bioregions of North America](#)
- [Indigenous Place Names in Canada](#)

Watershed Approach

We have been taught to see the Earth as commodified, territorialized, nationally bounded spaces. In fact, it exists as a whole space joined together by water, dirt, sky, animal, plant, and microbe.

- Willie James Jennings

As we experience impacts of environmental degradation and climate change like drought, flooding, extreme weather, and more, considering Brock Dolman's words, "Your home basin of relations is your lifeboat," can be instructive.

When we place these impacts in the context of our local watersheds, we see how they impact everything from habitat, to the food we can grow, to our very livelihoods. Taking this type of "watershed approach" is what Dolman and many others are advocating to address climate change. Building an understanding of our local watershed or developing "watershed consciousness" is critical for our resilience to climate change. The watershed approach emphasizes the importance of watershed boundaries and the interconnectedness of all living things in our decision-making. The watershed approach considers interconnected ecological, social, economic, and cultural

values that must be balanced to ensure the wellbeing of communities and ecosystems across the watershed.

Taking a watershed approach is one step we can take to nurture right relations with the Earth and all living things, including humans, whether they be settler, Indigenous or newcomer that live downstream from us.

Building Relationship

If people feel a relational connection to the watershed in which they live, it is easier to act in an embodied way upon their responsibilities.

- Denise Nadeau

Below we offer a few suggestions on how to nurture a relational connection to your local watershed. These actions can be done individually or in community with others.

Toe Dip

Unplug and spend some time in your local watershed as you are able – take a hike, sit on a beach or shoreline in a moment of contemplation, go for a swim or a paddle.

Wade In

Participate in a local event in your watershed such as a public meeting or town hall, festival, watershed clean-up, treaty day or pow wow, workshop or other learning event.

Deep Dive

Learn about the issues impacting your watershed from your local conservation authority, watershed board, or Indigenous community. Contact government representatives to demand action on these issues.

For more information, please contact:

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