



# Introduction



*These are two riparian areas at different locations on the same stream.*

Our eyes tell us one looks different from the other. Often we perceive there is a difference, but it may not be clear what is missing from one picture. We may struggle to convey our impressions of the scene to someone else because we lack the words to describe what we see. A riparian area may be green and that may disguise some problems or distract us from noticing some of the missing pieces. It would help us to be able to recognize the missing pieces and describe them to others. That's what riparian health is about, being able to recognize the critical pieces of a riparian area and to measure those pieces. We can then determine if the system is in good condition and functioning as it should. If the system isn't functioning, an understanding of what pieces are missing, or impaired, may help our management efforts, to restore the riparian area to a healthier state.

*What do you see?*

As you begin to train your eyes, you might notice that the riparian area on the left is missing young trees and shrubs and other deep-rooted plants. On the right these are present and glue the streambank together. That's a good start to an understanding of riparian health.



# What is Riparian Health?

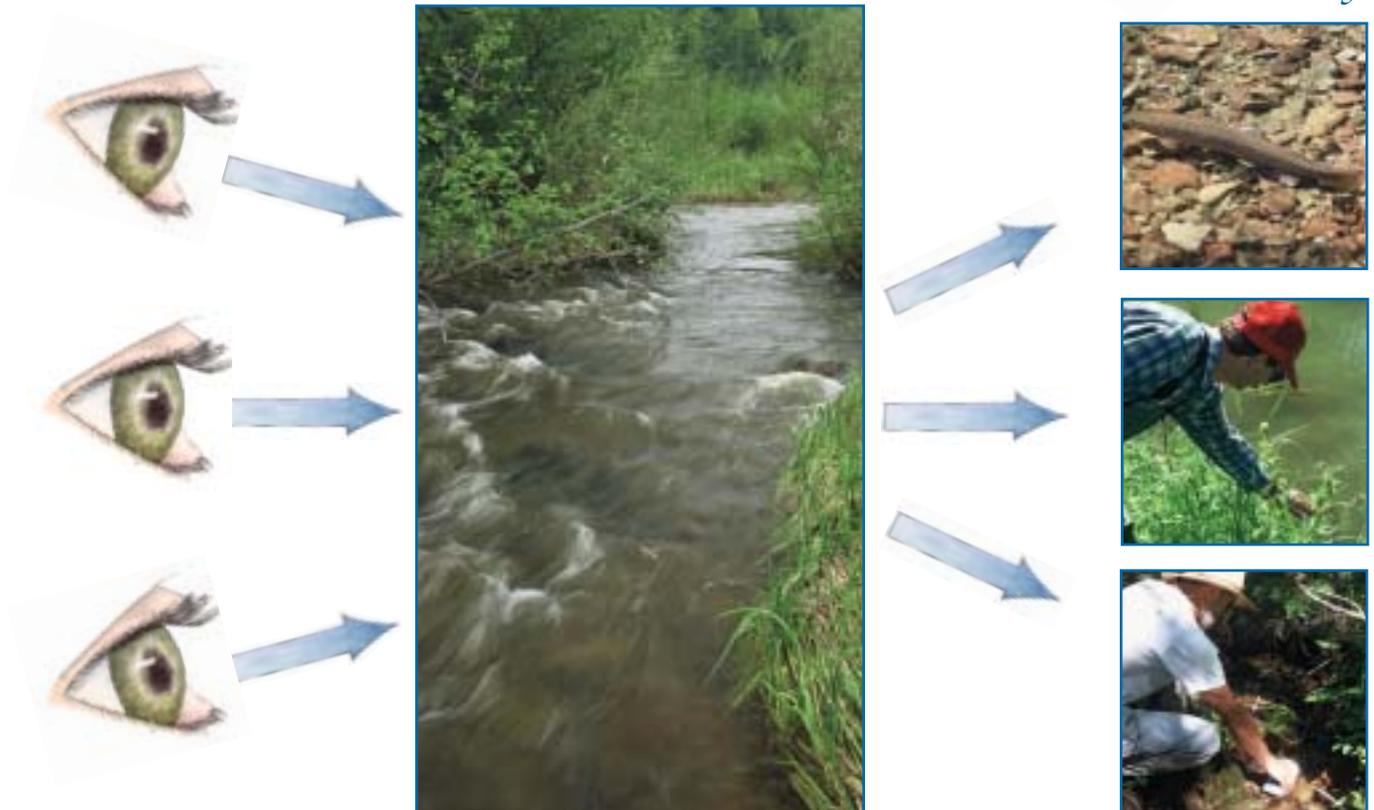
. . . and why do we need to measure it?

The word “health” conveys an impression of something in properly functioning condition - things working well. If health is applied to us, it relates to the ability of our bodies to perform certain functions within a measured set of standards. Our bodies undertake functions like respiration, circulation, digestion, filtration, cell repair, movement and many more. If these functions are occurring, within some standards, we consider ourselves healthy. In a similar way, landscapes, including riparian areas, perform certain functions. “Riparian health” means the ability of a reach of stream, a lakeshore, a wetland or a watershed (composed of many different riparian areas), to perform a number of key ecological functions. We’ll describe all of these functions in “What do riparian areas do?”. Some examples of these functions include maintenance of biodiversity (building habitat), creation of primary productivity (forage, shelter) and water quality improvement (filtering and buffering water).



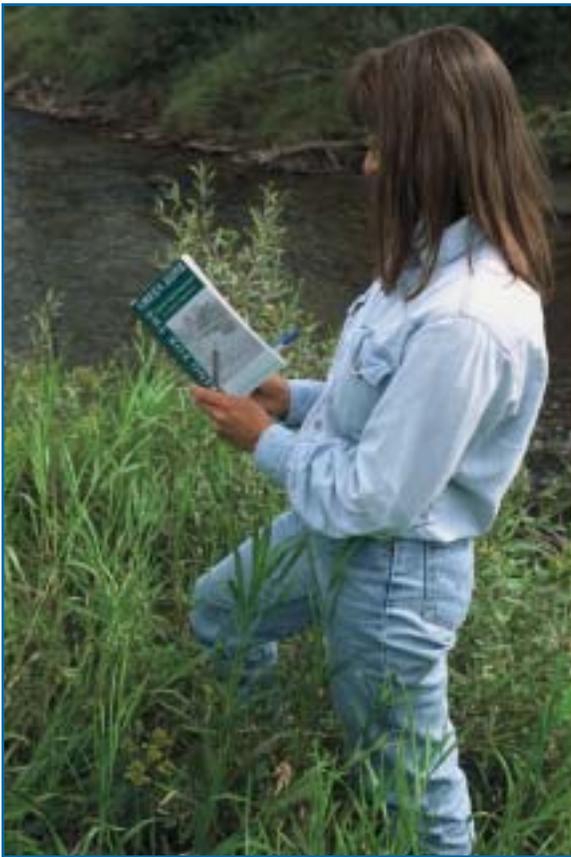
## Why do we need to measure riparian health?

*Because we don't all  
“see” the same thing!*



When we look at a riparian area, what we see and how we interpret our observations is often based on our backgrounds, experiences and perceptions. Even though we may be standing on the same streambank or lakeshore, we don't often “see” all of the same things, or the total picture. Because of our own unique focus we interpret the scene differently and sometimes argue with others over their perception of the riparian picture versus our own.

Riparian health evaluations allow us all to “tune our eyes”, to calibrate our observations with others, begin to appreciate the key pieces of the riparian landscape and assess what we see. These are ecological “measuring sticks” that provide some structure to our observations and allow us to determine the condition (or health) of our riparian areas.



*We need to use riparian health evaluations to build a common language so we can communicate better with one another, maybe reduce the arguments and move toward fixing what is broken in riparian areas and maintaining what is healthy. Understanding each other is a critical step towards moving down that road together.*



*If you have a riparian area, please listen.*