



The Bigger Picture

Thinking Like a Watershed

We can do many things on our own property to fix an ailing streambank or piece of lakeshore. It's important we do what we can as individuals but maintaining or restoring a watershed has to be an integrated collection of individual efforts. Our individual efforts can sometimes be less than effective, especially in the face of the cumulative effects of all upstream activities. Riparian health on your reach of the watershed is affected by what your neighbours do, and what activities occur, sometimes far from your place in the watershed. Watershed level work seems overwhelming because of the scale. However, there are ways to make watershed scale work manageable. The first step is to recognize that we can manage cooperatively what we can't individually. That is an old, powerful concept called "community". All of us belong to some community, usually at a municipal district or county level; it could be a small watershed group on one short stream or on a small lake. At those levels, every community boundary includes a larger portion of a watershed than that of an individual property owner. Add two or three communities together and most of a watershed will be found in those boundaries.



Alberta is divided into many watersheds. At the big end of the scale there are nine distinct drainages; one flows south to the Gulf of Mexico, three flow east to Hudson's Bay and five flow north to the Arctic Ocean. Each of these drainage basins accumulate water from smaller ones. A **watershed** is the collecting basin for water received as rain or snowmelt. It can be the sum of many streams, channels, drainages, wetlands, ponds and lakes. Sometimes the pathway that water takes is on the surface, in the form of rivers, streams and lakes. The pathway can also be subsurface movement of water. That can be harder to track but still connects pieces together to form a watershed.

All of us are part of a watershed and are connected to one another.

Mapping the watershed and getting to know your neighbours is the beginning of making the task manageable. Now is the time for some riparian awareness, helping people understand what riparian areas are, how they function, their value and the options for managing and caring for them.

Riparian health evaluation can help communities appreciate the current condition of riparian areas in their care and create a pathway for management changes. These evaluations link people in a watershed together to work on a common goal of improving or maintaining riparian health. Many communities have created a map using riparian health, water quality or land use information. The map helps to answer the question "where are we today?". This step can be a way to order all of the issues and create a priority for managing them. It is a signal to others that your community wants to move forward to resolve problems and restore health; it might be a way for you to get some help.

"Riparian health opened my eyes to stuff I hadn't thought about, like too many boat docks and beaches"

"This assessment helped me see what riparian health is now, gave me a feel for problems and got me thinking about what I could do"

"I like the idea of looking at the bigger picture. I can't do it all on my own place"