Why do I need my watershed?

We all live in a watershed. The term watershed simply describes the area in which all water runs into the same river or stream that exits into the ocean. So if you take a map and draw lines along the height of land, it will show how the streams and rivers flow and converge and finally reach the ocean, all flowing downhill from those heights of land.

There is an international consensus that water resources must be managed within the context of a watershed. The judge in the 2002 enquiry into the Walkerton water contamination strongly recommended that "watershed-based, locally organized source protection planning was….the first line of defense in a multi-barrier approach to drinking water safety."

Other areas have realized the value of their watersheds and taken direct action to protect them. Victoria recently announced a $60-million purchase of 8,791 hectares from Timber West which will add to the already existing 10,000 ha area around Sooke Lake. Nils Jensen, Chair of the Regional Water Supply Commission thought this was the best gift the residents could give themselves as it will "ensure we have a safe and secure water supply well past 2050." (Times Colonist, Dec. 22-07) Chelsea, Quebec, New York City and the area north of Toronto, are only a few regions protecting their watersheds to various levels, in order to protect their water.

When we talk about protecting the watershed it is about much more than drinking water, it means we have to preserve the biodiversity and natural systems that keep it all going. It is this approach that will protect the source of our water, and the many other ecosystem services we receive. Will Marsh, Landscape Architect and watershed management expert at UBC, points out that not all areas of a watershed are the same – that some areas can take a lot of use and others can not take any use. He suggests we "build a common knowledge about our watersheds and determine the carrying capacity of the land" and then based on that information plan for our futures.

Currently in this region, there is no coordinated approach to caring for our watersheds. As a result, we have many issues needing to be dealt with throughout our area. For example, development in some areas has changed the direction and/or amount of the flow of water. There are also many different users withdrawing water on a first-come first-serve basis. The users upstream often get the water first, but many of our residents get their water further downstream. When we reach the carrying capacity of our water sources, who will have water and who will not?

In this mid-island region we have many watersheds – about 50 in the Regional District of Nanaimo. Some have watershed plans in place, some are underway. Many have no plan. The Englishman River Watershed Recovery Plan is one example of how implementation of a "watershed-based, locally organized" plan has taken what was once BC's most endangered river, and begun the healing process. A plan was also drafted for the French Creek watershed and implementation begun. A similar process was initiated on the Little Qualicum River and awaits Regional District support.

In this region, we have the ability to make similar decisions to Victoria's. If we understand how much water we actually have to work with, determine the carrying capacity of, and protect our watersheds, we have a much better chance of guaranteeing our children, and their children, that their wells don't run dry.

In a future column we will look at what it means to protect the biodiversity and some models others have used to examine their watersheds.

Water Limited explores what we know and don't know about our water supply. It is funded by the Georgia Basin Living Rivers Program and Mid Vancouver Island Habitat Enhancement Society (MVIHES). Articles are written by Michele Deakin. MVIHES coordinates the Englishman River Watershed Recovery Plan, and conducts education, restoration and monitoring projects throughout the mid island area. MVIHES also work to support healthy watersheds and shorelines, and continuity of our biodiversity as a way to contribute to protection and conservation of salmon habitat.

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