

WHAT IS A WATERSHED?

by Cherie Schadler

When you hear the word "**watershed**", you might think that it sounds like a shed that contains water. However, the kind of "**shed**" we will be considering has a different meaning. Suppose you have a cat or a dog for a pet. When they lose their fur, you say that they are "shedding". That's because the fur is falling away from your pet. It is the same way we think of water shedding or draining away from the **ridges** (high places of earth) to the **valleys** (low places). Even though you might live in an area where the land appears to be very flat, all land has ridges and valleys. The rainwater will shed or drain from even the smallest ridges to the smallest valleys.

A watershed is an area of land where **precipitation** sheds (or drains) from the ridges to a common body of water in the valley, which would be a stream, creek, river, or even a gulf or ocean. When **gravity** pulls water to the earth in the form of precipitation, (rain, snow, sleet, or hail), the precipitation does not stay in one place. Gravity pulls water down to the lowest place it can go.

Imagine standing at your bathroom sink. When you spill water on the ridges or top edges of your sink, where does the water go? Gravity pulls the water droplets down the drain. In the same way, imagine the land around your home or school on a rainy day. The land also has ridges and valleys. On a rainy day, the water will run downhill from your school to the storm drain or ditch, just as the water in your sink went down the drain. The stormwater will flow from your school's ditch, to a local stream or creek, and then to a river, which will eventually drain all the way down to a gulf or ocean.

Wherever you live or travel to, you are in a watershed. Your home or school is located in a small watershed, which is located inside of a larger one in your town or county. This larger watershed will eventually drain all the water to a gulf or ocean. This is why it is important to keep the water free from pollutants. Clean water depends upon your actions, for whoever lives upstream affects the water quality for those who live downstream.