

Protecting Our Watersheds for a Better Future

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Our rivers, streams, lakes and wetlands can only sustain us if we remain committed to caring for them. Jeff Smith writes about our connection to water sources here in Wisconsin.

BRUNSWICK, WI - Since humans have inhabited the Great Lakes region, waterways have been an integral part of travel, trade, farming and culture. Our shallow lakes supplied First Nations people with the wild rice that played an essential role in their culture and diet. Rivers provided a travel route for diplomacy and trade among cultures, allowing for the transportation of fur, timber and trade goods. Streams and wetlands provided homes to an amazing variety of plants and wildlife.

This month, the River Falls Preservation Committee is hosting a traveling exhibit from the Wisconsin Historical Society. The exhibit, entitled “Great Lakes Small Streams: How Water Shapes Wisconsin”, is geared towards adults and secondary school students, and will be housed in various locations until October 29th (see below for details).

Wisconsin boasts plentiful groundwater and a great expanse of surface water, from the lakes

Michigan and Superior to the Mississippi river and the network of rivers, streams, wetlands and lakes in between. The U.S. Geological Service estimates fifteen percent of Wisconsin is covered by groundwater, the fourth highest by area in the United States.



We cannot take this resource for granted. Our rivers, streams, lakes and wetlands can only sustain us if we remain committed to caring for them.

Climate change has taken its toll nationwide, as we see in headlines daily. As drought conditions ravage the American West, I have gained a renewed appreciation for all our water continues to do for us in Wisconsin. Not only does water hydrate us, it also sustains wildlife, fosters our recreation economy, generates energy and waters our crops and livestock.



Wisconsin has historically been a leader in pioneering conservation practices. In the early 1930s, the Civilian Conservation Corps built an erosion control demonstration in the Coon Creek Watershed that proved to be wildly successful and served as an example nationwide. Conservationists used measures such as terracing to shore up land and reduce the soil erosion that was obstructing the area's rivers and streams.

Early land surveyors in Wisconsin mapped around five million acres of wetland statewide. The development of Wisconsin's agricultural economy spurred settlers to drain much of these wetlands, driving wildlife from their habitat and opening land up to rapid erosion. Since that time, local water conservation departments as well as private groups work hard to restore these habitats, essential to the survival of so many of our native species.

Our water sustains a broad variety of wildlife throughout the state. The Wisconsin Wetlands Association estimates 75 percent of Wisconsin's wildlife depend on wetlands at some point in their lives, and 30 percent of Wisconsin's rare, endangered and threatened species depend on wetlands for survival.

Not only do healthy rivers provide opportunities for recreation, they also play an important role in regulating ecosystems. This week, I'll be touring some of our local trout streams. Local conservation groups continue to do an amazing job restoring habitats, benefiting not only trout but whole ecosystems.

Water has been a big part of Wisconsin's renewable energy efforts. According to the Department of Natural Resources, Wisconsin has over 120 hydroelectric dams. Hydropower was Wisconsin's first renewable energy resource, stretching all the way back to 1882, when the world's first hydroelectric power plant was built on the Fox River in Appleton.



For all these reasons and more, it is essential to Wisconsin's future prosperity that we retain our strong connection to our water and all it provides to us. I encourage you to get outside this fall and appreciate how blessed we are with an abundance of water.

The exhibit will be on display in the City Hall Atrium during business hours through Sept. 16th and at the River Falls Bacon Bash from 10-4 on Sept. 17th

, also in the City Hall Atrium. Resources for teachers and more information on other locations/times available here:

<https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Event/EV8679>

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