ENVIRONMENTAL
Fact Sheet

NEW HAMPSHIRE DEPARTMENT OF Environmental Services

29 Hazen Drive, Concord, New Hampshire 03301 • (603) 271-3503 • www.des.nh.gov

WD-WMB-19 2006

# Why Watersheds Are Important to Protect

## What is a Watershed?

A watershed can be defined as an area of land that drains down slope until it reaches a common point. "Watershed" is synonymous with other terms you may have heard such as "drainage basin" and "catchment area." Perhaps a simpler way of defining a watershed is by saying that it is an area of land where all of the water that falls in it ends up in the same place. All precipitation that falls within a watershed, but is not used by existing vegetation, will ultimately seek the lowest points. These low points are bodies of water such as rivers, lakes, and finally the ocean. This means that every stream, brook, tributary, and river that we see will eventually reach a larger body of water within its associated watershed. Even groundwater that we cannot see moves towards a common low point. One way to picture it is as a giant funnel that catches and directs all of the water that falls into it towards the bottom. On a topographical map, a watershed can be determined by connecting all of the points of highest elevation around a lake.

## Who lives in watersheds?

Everyone lives in a watershed! No matter where we live we will always be part of a watershed. Major watersheds span across county, state and national boundaries. Therefore, a resident of New Hampshire can affect a lake in Massachusetts, Maine or Vermont and vice versa. It doesn't matter if the lake is in your front yard or miles away. Pollution anywhere within the watershed has the potential to affect all waterbodies located downstream from it.

## How significant are watersheds?

Watersheds are *extremely* important. Watersheds provide many of us with our drinking water supply, plus recreational opportunities and aesthetic beauty. Unfortunately, the replacement of vegetation by impervious surfaces like roads, parking lots and rooftops has a negative impact on watersheds. This increases the velocity and amount of runoff flowing into surface waters and causes erosion, turbidity and degraded wildlife habitats. Not only that, but this runoff carries pollutants such as oil, bacteria, nutrients, sediment and metals into surface waters along with it. Forested areas play a very important role in the health of a watershed. The plant cover and leaf litter absorb moisture and help maintain soil structure, while root masses keep soil permeable and stable so moisture can move into it for storage. This is more desirable, because it allows water to be filtered and released slowly into the stream system rather than rapidly running overland.

## Want help locating the watershed that you call home?

An easy way to locate your watershed is via the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's website at cfpub.epa.gov/surf/locate/index.cfm, or at the U.S. Geological Survey website at water.usgs.gov/wsc.