

What Is A Watershed?

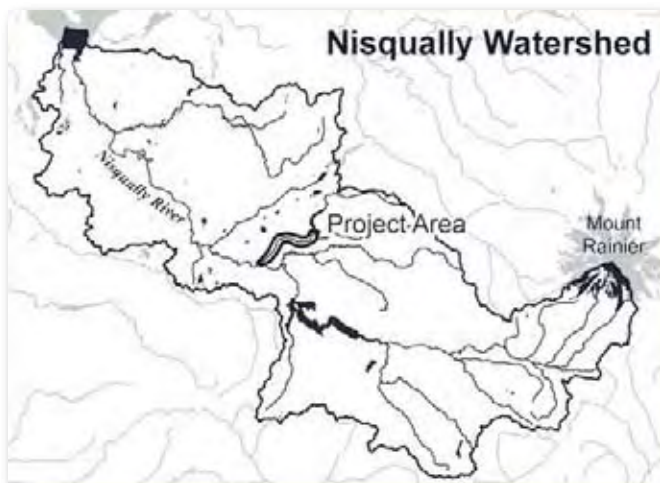
“A river is remarkably like an elm-tree, and it requires but little imagination to picture it standing upright, with all of its lakes hanging upon its spreading branches, the topmost eighty miles in height.”

From “The Mountain Lakes of California”
by John Muir, Scribner’s New York, 1878

On clear days, it is possible to sit on the dock at the Nisqually Reach Nature Center on Puget Sound and gaze at the massive, glacier-clad slopes of Mount Rainier. An active imagination can take the viewer up to the mountain summit, 14,410 feet above where they currently sit, to where the river begins. Then, you can look out over the mudflats and salt marsh of the Nisqually Delta to where the river meets the sound.

In between the mountain top and the Delta, the Nisqually River watershed is a rich and varied environment. This watershed hosts a diverse range of plant and animal communities. From the mountain to the sea, it is the river that links these natural communities.

Just as a house has floors, walls and a roof, so too does a watershed. Its walls are the sides of valleys and



The lithograph above shows Mount Rainier as viewed from Steilacoom. The artist, John Mix Stanley, based this image on a sketch by Dr. Cooper c. 1854.

Washington State Historical Society Collections.

mountains. Its floor is the bottomlands with streams, river and lakes. The roof is the ceiling of clouds.

Most houses have plumbing. Watersheds do, too. They gather precipitation (rain and snow) and funnel it toward the river. Small rivulets merge with others and become streams before they enter the river. Ultimately, the Nisqually River drains over 700 square miles of land, nearly a half million acres, before returning the water it has gathered to Puget Sound and the Pacific Ocean.

-An adaptation of
“Watersheds: A Natural Unit”

by the Nisqually River Education Project

To the left is a map of the Nisqually watershed, showing Mount Rainier and the Nisqually River. Courtesy Nisqually River Council.