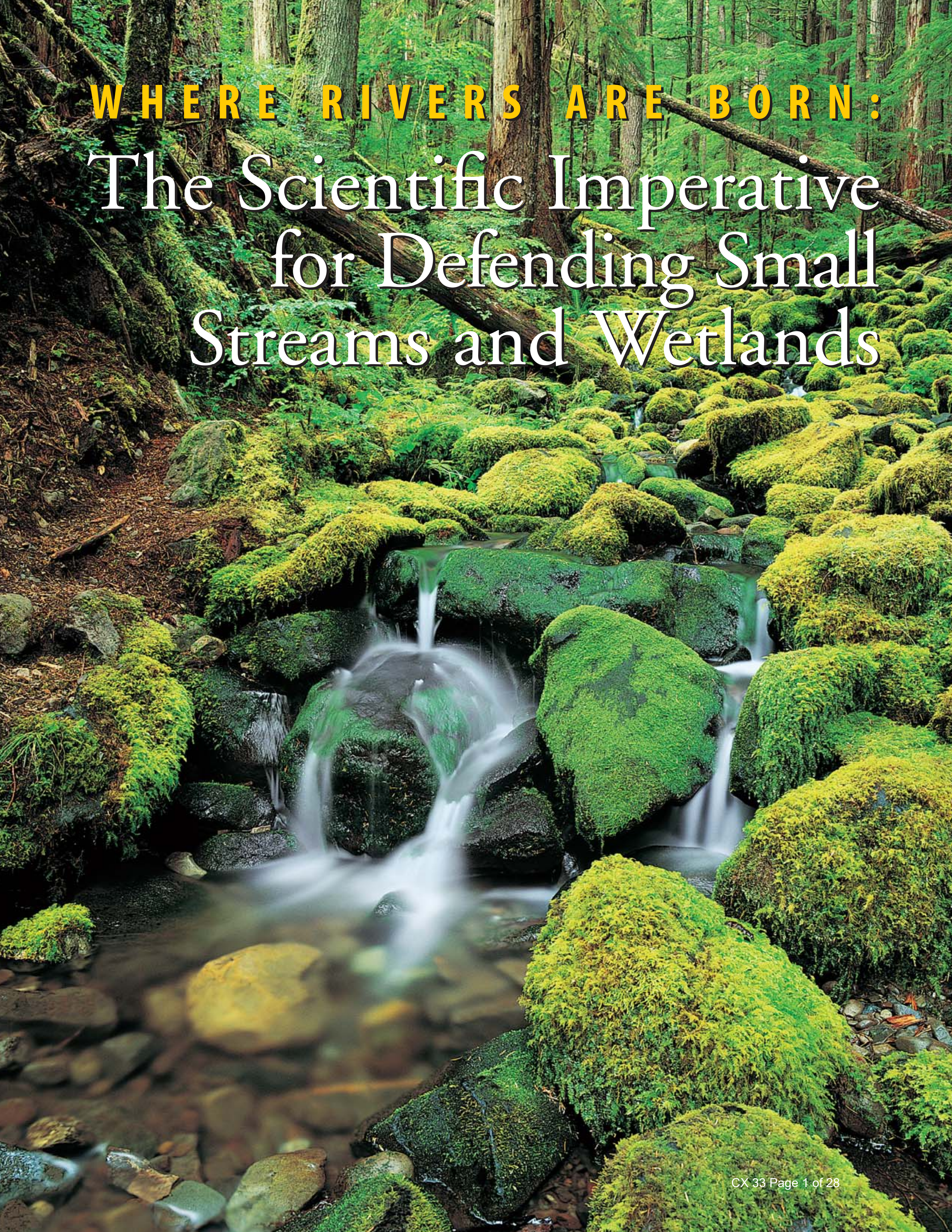
WHERE RIVERS ARE BORN:

The Scientific Imperative for Defending Small Streams and Wetlands



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our nation's network of rivers, lakes, and streams originates from a myriad of small streams and wetlands, many so small they do not appear on any map. Yet these headwater streams and wetlands exert critical influences on the character and quality of downstream waters. The natural processes that occur in such headwater systems benefit humans by mitigating flooding, maintaining water quality and quantity, recycling nutrients, and providing habitat for plants and animals. This paper summarizes the scientific basis for understanding that the health and productivity of rivers and lakes depends upon intact small streams and wetlands. Since the initial publication of this document in 2003, scientific support for the importance of small streams and wetlands has only increased. Both new research findings and special issues of peer reviewed scientific journals have further established the connections between headwater streams and wetlands and downstream ecosystems. Selected references are provided at the end of the document.

Historically, federal agencies, in their regulations, have interpreted the protections of the Clean Water Act to broadly cover waters of the United States, including many small streams and wetlands. Despite this, many of these ecosystems have been destroyed by agriculture, mining, development, and other human activities. Since 2001, court rulings and administrative actions have called into question the extent to which small streams and wetlands remain under the protection of the Clean Water Act. Federal agencies, Congress, and the Supreme Court have all weighed in on this issue. Most recently, the Supreme Court issued a confusing and fractured opinion that leaves small streams and wetlands vulnerable to pollution and destruction.

We know from local/regional studies that small, or headwater, streams make up at least 80 percent of the nation's stream network. However, scientists' abilities to extend these local and regional studies to provide a national perspective are hindered by the absence of a comprehensive database that catalogs the full extent of streams in the United States. The topographic maps most commonly used to trace stream networks do not show most of the nation's headwater streams and wetlands. Thus, such maps do not provide detailed enough information to serve as a basis for stream protection and management.

Scientists often refer to the benefits humans receive from the natural functioning of ecosystems as ecosystem services. The special physical and biological characteristics of intact small streams and wetlands provide natural flood control, recharge groundwater, trap sediments and pollution from fertilizers, recycle nutrients, create and maintain biological diversity, and sustain the biological productivity of downstream rivers, lakes, and estuaries. These ecosystem services are provided by

seasonal as well as perennial streams and wetlands. Even when such systems have no visible overland connections to the stream network, small streams and wetlands are usually linked to the larger network through groundwater.

Small streams and wetlands offer an enormous array of habitats for plant, animal, and microbial life. Such small freshwater systems provide shelter, food, protection from predators, spawning sites and nursery areas, and travel corridors through the landscape. Many species depend on small streams and wetlands at some point in their life history. A recent literature review documents the significant contribution of headwater streams to biodiversity of entire river networks, showing that small headwater streams that do not appear on most maps support over 290 taxa, some of which are unique to headwaters. As an example, headwater streams are vital for maintaining many of America's fish species, including trout and salmon. Both perennial and seasonal streams and wetlands provide valuable habitat. Headwater streams and wetlands also provide a rich resource base that contributes to the productivity of both local food webs and those farther downstream. However, the unique and diverse biota of headwater systems is increasingly imperiled. Human-induced changes to such waters, including filling streams and wetlands, water pollution, and the introduction of exotic species can diminish the biological diversity of such small freshwater systems, thereby also affecting downstream rivers and streams.

Because small streams and wetlands are the source of the nation's fresh waters, changes that degrade these headwater systems affect streams, lakes, and rivers downstream. Land-use changes in the vicinity of small streams and wetlands can impair the natural functions of such headwater systems. Changes in surrounding vegetation, development that paves and hardens soil surfaces, and the total elimination of some small streams reduces the amount of rainwater, runoff, and snowmelt the stream network can absorb before flooding. The increased volume of water in small streams scours stream channels, changing them in a way that promotes further flooding. Such altered channels have bigger and more frequent floods. The altered channels are also less effective at recharging groundwater, trapping sediment, and recycling nutrients. As a result, downstream lakes and rivers have poorer water quality, less reliable water flows, and less diverse aquatic life. Algal blooms and fish kills can become more common, causing problems for commercial and sport fisheries. Recreational uses may be compromised. In addition, the excess sediment can be costly, requiring additional dredging to clear navigational channels and harbors and increasing water filtration costs for municipalities and industry.

The natural processes that occur in small streams and wetlands provide Americans with a host of benefits, including flood control, adequate high-quality water, and habitat for a variety of plants and animals. Scientific research shows that healthy headwater systems are critical to the healthy functioning of downstream streams, rivers, lakes, and estuaries. To provide the ecosystem services that sustain the health of our nation's waters, the hydrological, geological, and biological characteristics of small streams and wetlands require protection.

Introduction

Our nation's rivers, from the Shenandoah to the Sacramento, owe their very existence to the seemingly insignificant rivulets and seeps that scientists call headwater streams. Although 19th century explorers often searched for the headwaters of rivers, the birthplace of most rivers cannot be pinpointed. The origins of rivers are many anonymous tiny rills that can be straddled by a 10-year-old child, and no one trickle can reasonably be said to be "the" start of that river. Rather, rivers arise from a network of streamlets and wetlands whose waters join together above and below ground as they flow downstream. As other tributaries join them, creeks grow larger, eventually earning the title "river." The character of any river is shaped by the quality and type of the numerous tributaries that flow into it. Each of the tributaries is, in turn, the creation of the upstream waters that joined to form it.

The ultimate sources of a river often appear insignificant. They could be a drizzle of snowmelt that runs down a mountainside crease, a small spring-fed pond, or a depression in the ground that fills with water after every rain and overflows into the creek below. Such water sources, which scientists refer to as headwater streams and wetlands, are often unnamed and rarely appear on maps. Yet the health of these small streams and wetlands is critical to the health of the entire river network. The rivers and lakes downstream from degraded headwater streams and wetlands may have less consistent flow, nuisance algal growth, more frequent and/or higher floods, poorer water quality, and less diverse flora and fauna.

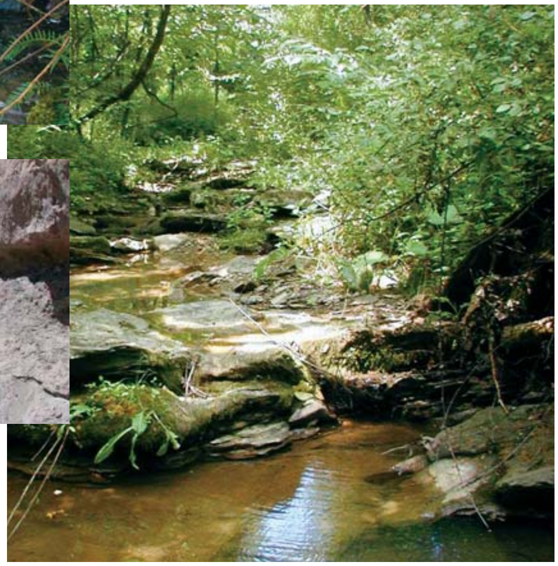
Historically, federal agencies, in their regulations, have interpreted the protections of the Clean Water Act to cover all the waters of the United States, including small streams and wetlands. More recently, federal agencies and the courts have examined whether such streams and wetlands merit protection. In January, 2003, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers announced an "advance notice of proposed rulemaking" to solicit public comments on whether and how to exclude "isolated," intrastate, and non-navigable waters from the scope of the Clean Water Act. Many small streams and wetlands, including headwater streams, could fall into one or more of those categories. While the proposed rulemaking was withdrawn, the agencies meanwhile instructed their field staff not to enforce the law to protect such waters, sometimes requiring case-by-case approval from agency headquarters before enforcing the Act. The result of this policy guidance is that thousands of our nation's waters have been denied protections under the Clean Water Act.

More recently, the Supreme Court issued a splintered decision in two cases (*Rapanos* and *Carabell*) about the scope of the Clean Water Act that leaves small streams and wetlands vulnerable to further loss of protections. Although there is no majority support for diminishing the Clean Water Act's application to wetlands and streams, the Court's ruling creates additional uncertainty as to which waters remain protected. The ruling places a burden on the EPA and the Corps of Engineers to show that upstream waters have a "significant nexus" to downstream waters. The "case-by-case" analysis required creates extra layers of work to prove what we already know scientifically: water flows downstream and bodies of water are integrally connected with each other. There is great concern that this decision will lead to more confusion and legal challenges and a loss of protection for many of our nation's waters.

Small streams and wetlands provide crucial linkages between aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems and also between upstream watersheds and tributaries and the downstream rivers and lakes. Since the initial publication of this document in 2003, scientific research has continued to bolster the significance of these connections. Based on the most recent research, this paper summarizes the scientific basis of understanding how small streams and wetlands mitigate flooding, maintain water quality and quantity, recycle nutrients, create habitat for plants and animals, and provide other benefits.

"The River itself has no beginning or end. In its beginning, it is not yet the River; in its end, it is no longer the River. What we call the headwaters is only a selection from among the innumerable sources which flow together to compose it. At what point in its course does the Mississippi become what the Mississippi means?"

–T.S. Eliot



Top: Lake Joy Creek is an intermittent zero- and first-order tributary stream to the Snoqualmie River in the Puget Sound area of Washington. Photo courtesy of Washington Trout

Center: A primary headwater stream in arid Cienega Creek Preserve, Pima County. Photo courtesy of Arizona Game and Fish Division

Right: A primary headwater stream in Athens County, Ohio. Photo courtesy of Ohio EPA

Bottom: Diagram of stream orders within a stream system. Image created by Sierra Club, based on EPA graphic.

Human Beings Depend on Functioning Headwater Stream Systems

Human civilizations and economies are ultimately based on the products and processes of the natural world. While frequently hidden from view, some of the processes integral to the functioning of ecosystems - such as the purification of water and the processing of waste - are crucial to human well-being. Scientists often refer to the benefits humans receive from the functioning of natural ecosystems as *ecosystem services.*

The natural processes that occur in intact headwater streams and wetlands affect the quantity and quality of water and the timing of water availability in rivers, lakes, estuaries, and groundwater. For example, the upper reaches of stream networks are important for storing water, recharging groundwater, and reducing the intensity and frequency of floods. Stream and wetland ecosystems also process natural and human sources of nutrients, such as those found in leaves that fall into streams and those that may flow into creeks from agricultural fields. Some of this processing turns the nutrients into more biologically useful forms. Other aspects of the processing stores nutrients, thereby allowing their slow and steady release and preventing the kind of short-term glut of nutrients that can cause algal blooms in downstream rivers or lakes.

The Extent of U.S. Headwater Streams is Underestimated

For many people, *headwater stream* brings to mind a small, clear, icy-cold, heavily-shaded stream that tumbles down a steep, boulder-filled channel. Indeed, there are thousands of miles of such shaded, mountainous headwater streams in the United States. But the term "headwater" encompasses many other types of small streams. Headwaters can

TYPES OF STREAMS

Any one river typically has several different types of sources: perennial streams that flow year-round; *intermittent* streams that flow several months during the year, such as streams that come from snowmelt; and *ephemeral* streams that flow at the surface only periodically, usually in response to a specific rainstorm. All these types of streams can be the *headwaters* of a river.

One way scientists classify streams is the *stream order* system, which assigns streams a number depending upon their location in the network's branching pattern. The term *zero-order stream* refers to swales: hollows that lack distinct stream banks but still serve as important conduits of water, sediment, nutrients, and other materials during rainstorms and snowmelt. Such zero-order streams are integral parts of stream networks. *First-order streams* are the smallest distinct channels. The rivulet of water that flows from a hillside spring and forms a channel is a *first-order stream. Second-order streams* are formed when two first-order channels combine, *third-order streams* are formed by the combination of two second-order streams, and so on.

The term *headwaters* refers to the smallest streams in the network. Scientists often use the term headwaters to refer to zero-, first-, and second-order streams. Easily half of the total length of the channels in a stream network can be first-order streams. Such small headwater streams can join a river system at any point along the network. So, a fourth-order stream resulting from the upstream merger of many first-, second-, and third-order streams may flow through a forest and be joined by another first-order stream that meanders out of a nearby marshy meadow.

Sometimes resource managers define a stream based on the size of its watershed, the land area that drains into the stream. For example, Ohio's EPA defines headwater streams as those that drain an area 20 square miles or smaller. Such a definition includes first-, second-, and often third-order streams. Other managers suggest that headwater systems can be defined as those having watersheds of less than one square kilometer, a definition that would generally include only first- and second-order streams. For the purposes of this paper, we consider zero-, first-, and second-order streams as headwaters.

be intermittent streams that flow briefly when snow melts or after rain, but shrink in dry times to become individual pools filled with water. Desert headwater streams can arise from a spring and run above ground only a few hundred yards before disappearing into the sand. Other spring-fed headwaters contain clear water with steady temperature and flow. Yet other headwaters originate in marshy meadows filled with sluggish tea-colored water.

No comprehensive study has been conducted to catalog the full extent of streams in the United States. However, on the basis of available maps, scientists have estimated that these smallest streams, called first- and second-order streams, represent about three-quarters of the total length of stream and river channels in the United States. The actual proportion may be much higher because this estimate is based on the stream networks shown on the current U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) topographic maps, which do not show all headwater streams. The absence of a comprehensive survey of U.S. streams hinders our ability to estimate the nationwide importance of these systems; it also indicates our need to better understand them.

Studies including field surveys of stream channel networks have found far more headwater streams than are indicated on USGS topographic maps. For example, an on-the-ground survey of streams in the Chattooga River watershed in the southern Appalachian Mountains found thousands of streams not shown on USGS topographic maps. Approximately one-fifth or less of the actual stream network was shown on the USGS map. The missing streams were the smaller ones - the headwaters and other small streams and wetlands. Similar discrepancies have been found at the state level. For example, Ohio's Environmental Protection Agency found that the state's primary headwater streams, although generally absent from USGS topographic maps, comprise more than 80 percent of the total length of the state's streams. Even when small streams are on the map, they are sometimes misclassified: a large number of Ohio streams shown as intermittent on topographic maps are actually perennial.

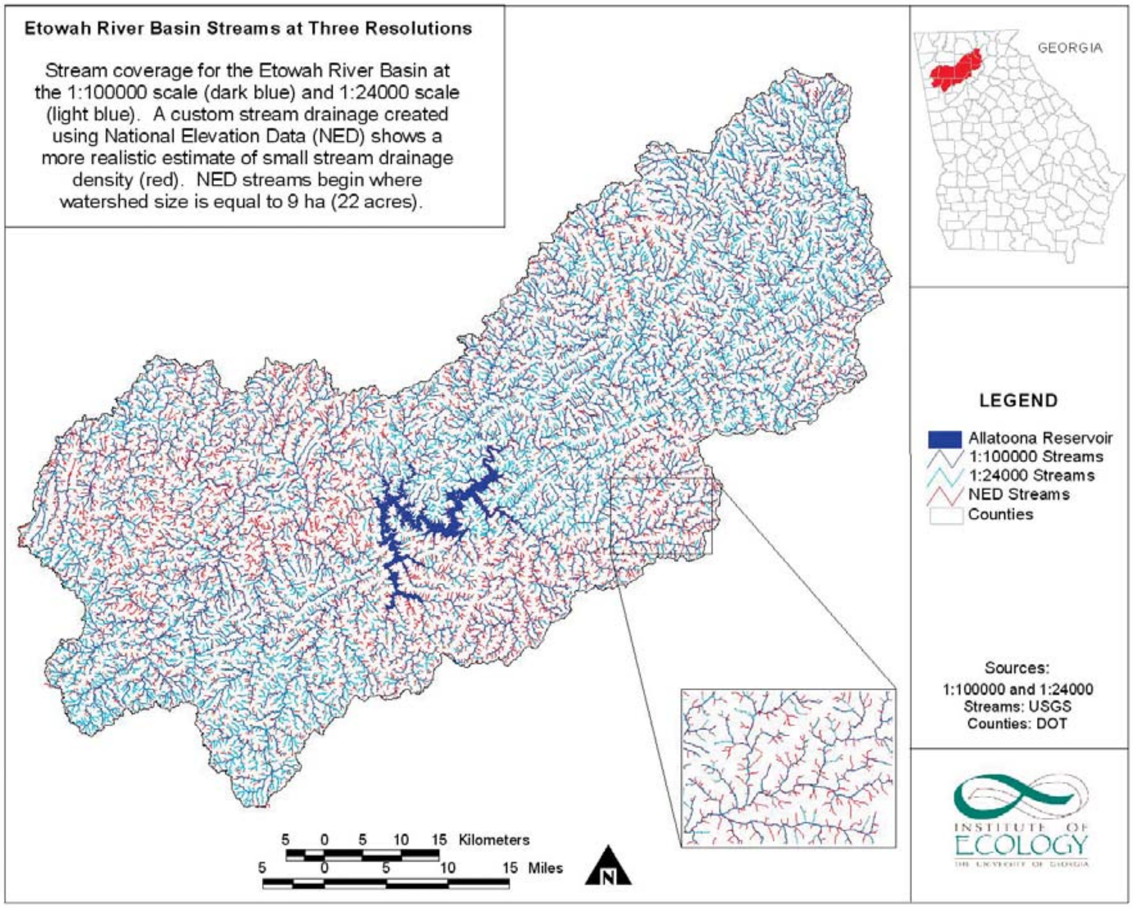
Intact stream networks contain streams that flow year-round and others that flow only part of the time. Compared with the humid-region examples above, stream and river networks in arid regions have a higher proportion of channels that flow intermittently. For example, in Arizona, most of the stream networks - 96 percent by length - are classified as ephemeral or intermittent.

Thus, regional calculations on the extent of small streams grounded in solid evidence show these streams to be underestimated by existing inventories and maps. But actual measurements are not available for the whole nation. Moreover, the topographic maps commonly used as catalogues of stream networks are not detailed enough to serve as a basis for stream management and protection. The very foundation of our nation's great rivers is a vast network of unknown, unnamed, and underappreciated headwater streams.

Top: Sycamore Creek in Arizona, an arid stream during a dry period. Photo Courtesy of Nancy Grimm

Center: Sycamore Creek (the same stream) after a winter storm. Photo Courtesy of Nancy Grimm

Existing tools for cataloging U.S. waters generally omit a large proportion of the headwaters. In this illustration of Georgia's Etowah River Basin, National Elevation Data details, in red, the approximately 40 percent and 60 percent of headwaters not captured by standard cataloging methods. Diagram courtesy of B.J. Freeman, University of Georgia.



Small Streams Provide Greatest Connection Between Water and Land

Within any intact stream and river network, headwater streams make up most of the total channel length. Therefore, such small streams offer the greatest opportunity for exchange between the water and the terrestrial environment. Small streams link land and water in several ways. As a stream flows, it links upstream and downstream portions of the network. In addition, water flows out of and into a channel during events such as floods and runoff from rainstorms. Floodwaters and runoff carry various materials, ranging from insects and bits of soil to downed trees, between land and a channel. Much exchange between land and water occurs in the transition zone along edges of stream channels, called the *riparian zone*.

Water and land also meet in saturated sediments beneath and beside a river channel, a region which scientists call the *hyporheic zone*. Stream water flows within the stream channel and the hyporheic zone. It is in this zone, where stream water makes its most intimate contact with the channel bed and banks that much of a stream's cleansing action and nutrient processing occurs. This zone is also where groundwater and surface water come into contact.

Ecological processes that occur in hyporheic zones have strong effects on stream water quality. Rivers with extensive hyporheic zones retain and process nutrients efficiently, which has a positive effect on water quality and on the ecology of the riparian zone. Scientific research is illuminating the importance of maintaining connectivity between the channel, hyporheic, and riparian components of river ecosystems. When human actions, such as encasing streams in pipes, sever those connections, the result is poorer water quality and degraded fish habitat downstream.

Wetlands Have Hidden Connections to Streams

Like headwater streams, wetlands are also key components of the nation's network of rivers and streams. Many wetlands, such as marshes that border lakes or streams, have obvious connections to surface waters. Other wetlands, however, seem cut off from stream networks - but that appearance is deceiving. Recent research further documents that even wetlands that are referred to as "isolated" are not isolated at all, but have both hydrologic and biologic linkages to regional aquatic systems, and thus are referred to as "geographically isolated" and remain significantly related.

Wetlands are almost always linked to stream networks and other wetlands through groundwater. The hydrologic linkage depends upon the rate at which groundwater moves; water seeping into a gravel aquifer can travel miles in a year, but water seeping into silt or clay may travel only several feet in a year. There are strong biological connections also; many aquatic and semi-aquatic animals, ranging in size from aquatic insects to raccoons, routinely move between land-locked wetlands, streamside wetlands, and stream channels. Animals often use different parts of the aquatic environment at different points in their life cycle, so groundwater connections and food webs link many wetlands to larger waterways. Maintenance of biological diversity in wetlands is dependent on both the terrestrial periphery of the wetland and the corridors that connect geographically isolated wetlands. A recent survey found that 274 at-risk plant and animal species are supported by geographically isolated wetlands.

Evaluating these "hidden" connections that exist between wetlands and regional aquatic ecosystems requires an assessment of groundwater travel time, frequency with which wetlands are connected to surface waters, and home ranges of species that require both wetlands and surface waters.

A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service study of wetlands in 72 areas within the United States found that wetlands without obvious surface connections to waterways are generally small in area, but numerous. All such wetlands are depressions in the ground that hold water, whether from rainwater, snowmelt, or groundwater welling up to the surface. Each region of the United States has unique types of depressional wetlands. Ephemeral wetlands called vernal pools occur in California and the Northeast; the prairie potholes beloved by ducks and other waterfowl dot the Upper Midwest; and Carolina bays, cypress ponds, and grass-sedge marshes occur in the Southeast.

Top: A vernal pool in Massachusett's Ipswich River Basin during the dry phase in summer. Photo courtesy of Vernal Pool Association

Bottom: The same Ipswich River Basin vernal pool inundated by fall precipitation. Photo courtesy of Vernal Pool Association

Small Streams and Wetlands Provide Beneficial Ecosystem Services

A headwater stream channel near Toledo, OH relocated to accommodate development. Photo courtesy of Marshal A. Moser

Natural processes that occur in small streams and wetlands provide humans with a host of benefits, including flood control, maintenance of water quantity and quality, and habitat for a variety of plants and animals. For headwater streams and wetlands to provide ecosystem services that sustain the health of our nation's waters, the hydrological, geological, and biological components of stream networks must be intact.

Small Streams and Wetlands Provide Natural Flood Control

Floods are a natural part of every river. In times past, waters of the Mississippi River routinely overtopped its banks. Floodwaters carried the sediment and nutrients that made the Mississippi Delta's soil particularly suitable for agriculture. But floods can also destroy farms, houses, roads, and bridges.

When small streams and wetlands are in their natural state, they absorb significant amounts of rainwater, runoff, and snowmelt before flooding. However, when a landscape is altered, such as by a landslide or large forest fire or a housing development, the runoff can exceed the absorption capacity of small streams. Moreover, the power of additional water coursing through a channel can change the channel itself. Humans often alter both landscape and stream channels in ways that result in larger and more frequent floods downstream.

A key feature of streams and rivers is their shape. Unlike a concrete drainage ditch, a natural streambed does not present a smooth surface for water flow. Natural streambeds are rough and bumpy in ways that slow the passage of water. Particularly in small narrow streams, friction produced by a stream's gravel bed, rocks, and dams of leaf litter and twigs slows water as it moves downstream. Slower moving water is more likely to seep into a stream's natural water storage system-its bed and banks-and to recharge groundwater. Slower moving water also has less power to erode stream banks and carry sediment and debris downstream.

In watersheds that are not carefully protected against impacts of land development, stream channels often become enlarged and incised from increased runoff. Changed channels send water downstream more quickly, resulting in more flooding. For example, after forests and prairies in Wisconsin watersheds were converted to agricultural fields, the size of floods increased. This change in land use had altered two parts of the river systems' equation: the amount of runoff and shape of the stream channel. Cultivation destroyed the soil's natural air spaces that came from worm burrows and plant roots. The resulting collapse of the soil caused more rainfall to run off into streams instead of soaking into the ground. Additional surface runoff then altered the stream channels, thereby increasing their capacity to carry large volumes of water quickly downstream. These larger volumes flow downstream at much higher velocity, rather than soaking into the streambed.

Urbanization has similar effects; paving previously-vegetated areas leads to greater storm runoff, which changes urban stream channels and ultimately sends water more quickly downstream. Covering the land with impermeable surfaces, such as roofs, roads, and parking lots, can increase by several times the amount of runoff from a rainstorm. If land uses change near headwater streams, effects are felt throughout the stream network. In an urban setting, runoff is channeled into storm sewers, which then rapidly discharge large volumes of water into nearby streams. The additional water causes the stream to pick up speed, because deeper water has less friction with the streambed. The faster the water moves, the less it can soak into the streambed and banks. Faster water also erodes channel banks and beds, changing the shape of a channel. The effect is magnified downstream, because larger rivers receive water from tens, sometimes hundreds, of small headwater basins. When such changes are made near headwater streams, downstream portions of the stream network experience bigger and more frequent flooding.

As regions become more urbanized, humans intentionally alter many natural stream channels by replacing them with storm sewers and other artificial conduits. When larger, smoother conduits are substituted for narrow, rough-bottomed natural stream channels, flood frequency increases downstream. For example, three decades of growth in storm sewers and paved surfaces around Watts Branch Creek, Maryland more than tripled the number of floods and increased average annual flood size by 23 percent.

"Alteration of small streams and wetlands disrupts the quantity and availability of water in a stream and river system."

Small Streams and Wetlands Maintain Water Supplies

Headwater systems play a crucial role in ensuring a continual flow of water to downstream freshwater ecosystems, and USGS models show that headwater streams in the northeastern U.S. contribute 55 percent of mean annual water volume to fourth- and higher-order streams and rivers. Water in streams and rivers comes from several sources: water held in the soil, runoff from precipitation, and groundwater. Water moves between the soil, streams and groundwater. Wetlands, even those without any obvious surface connection to streams, are also involved in such exchanges by storing and slowly releasing water into streams and groundwater, where it later resurfaces at springs. Because of these interactions, groundwater can contribute a significant portion of surface flow in streams and rivers; conversely, surface waters can also recharge groundwater. If connections between soil, water, surface waters, and groundwater are disrupted, streams, rivers, and wells can run dry. Two-thirds of Americans obtain their drinking water from a water system that uses surface water. The remaining one-third of the population relies on groundwater sources. The quality and amount of water in both of these sources respond to changes in headwater streams.

USGS estimates that, on average, 40 to 50 percent of water in streams and larger rivers comes from groundwater. In drier regions or during dry seasons, as much as 95 percent of a stream's flow may come from groundwater. Thus, the recharge process that occurs in unaltered headwater streams and wetlands both moderates downstream flooding in times of high water and maintains stream flow during dry seasons.

Headwater streams and wetlands have a particularly important role to play in recharge. These smallest upstream components of a river network have the largest surface area of soil in contact with available water, thereby providing the greatest opportunity for recharge of groundwater. Moreover, water level in headwater streams is often higher than the water table, allowing water to flow through the channel bed and banks into soil and groundwater. Such situations occur when water levels are high, such as during spring snowmelt or rainy seasons. During dry times, the situation in some reaches of the stream network, particularly those downstream, may reverse, with water flowing from the soil and groundwater through the channel banks and bed into the stream. This exchange of water from the soil and groundwater into the stream maintains stream flow. However, if land-use changes increase the amount of precipitation that runs off into a stream rather than soaking into the ground, the recharge process gets short-circuited. This increased volume of stream water flows rapidly downstream rather than infiltrating into soil and groundwater. The consequence is less overall groundwater recharge, which often results in less water in streams during drier seasons.

Therefore, alteration of small streams and wetlands disrupts the quantity and availability of water in a stream and river system. Protecting headwater streams and wetlands is important for maintaining water levels needed to support everything from fish to recreational boating to commercial ship traffic.

Small Streams and Wetlands Trap Excess Sediment

Headwater systems retain sediment. Like the flow of water, movement of sediment occurs throughout a river network. Thus, how a watershed is managed and what kinds of land uses occur there have substantial impact on the amount of sediment delivered to larger rivers downstream. Increased sediment raises water purification costs for municipal and industrial users, requires extensive dredging to maintain navigational channels, and degrades aquatic habitats. Intact headwater streams and wetlands can modulate the amount of sediment transported to downstream ecosystems.

Runoff from rain, snowmelt, and receding floodwaters can wash soil, leaves, and twigs into streams, where the various materials get broken up into smaller particles or settle out. If natural vegetation and soil cover are disturbed by events and activities such as fires, farming, or construction, runoff increases, washing more materials into streams. At the same time, the increased velocity and volume of water in a stream cause erosion within the streambed and banks themselves, contributing additional sediment to the stream system. Moreover, the faster, fuller stream can carry more and larger chunks of sediment further downstream.

"INTACT HEADWATER STREAMS AND WETLANDS CAN MODULATE THE AMOUNT OF SEDIMENT TRANSPORTED TO DOWNSTREAM ECOSYSTEMS."

One study found that land disturbances such as urban construction can, at minimum, double the amount of sediment entering headwater streams from a watershed. A Pennsylvania study showed how, as a 160-acre headwater watershed became more urbanized, channel erosion of a quarter-mile stretch of stream generated 50,000 additional cubic feet of sediment in one year-enough to fill 25 moderate-sized living rooms. In a non-urban watershed of the same size, it would take five years to generate the same amount of sediment. Such studies demonstrate that landscape changes such as urbanization or agriculture, particularly without careful protection of headwater streams and their riparian zones, may cause many times more sediment to travel downstream.

Excess Sediment in Downstream Ecosystems Costs Money

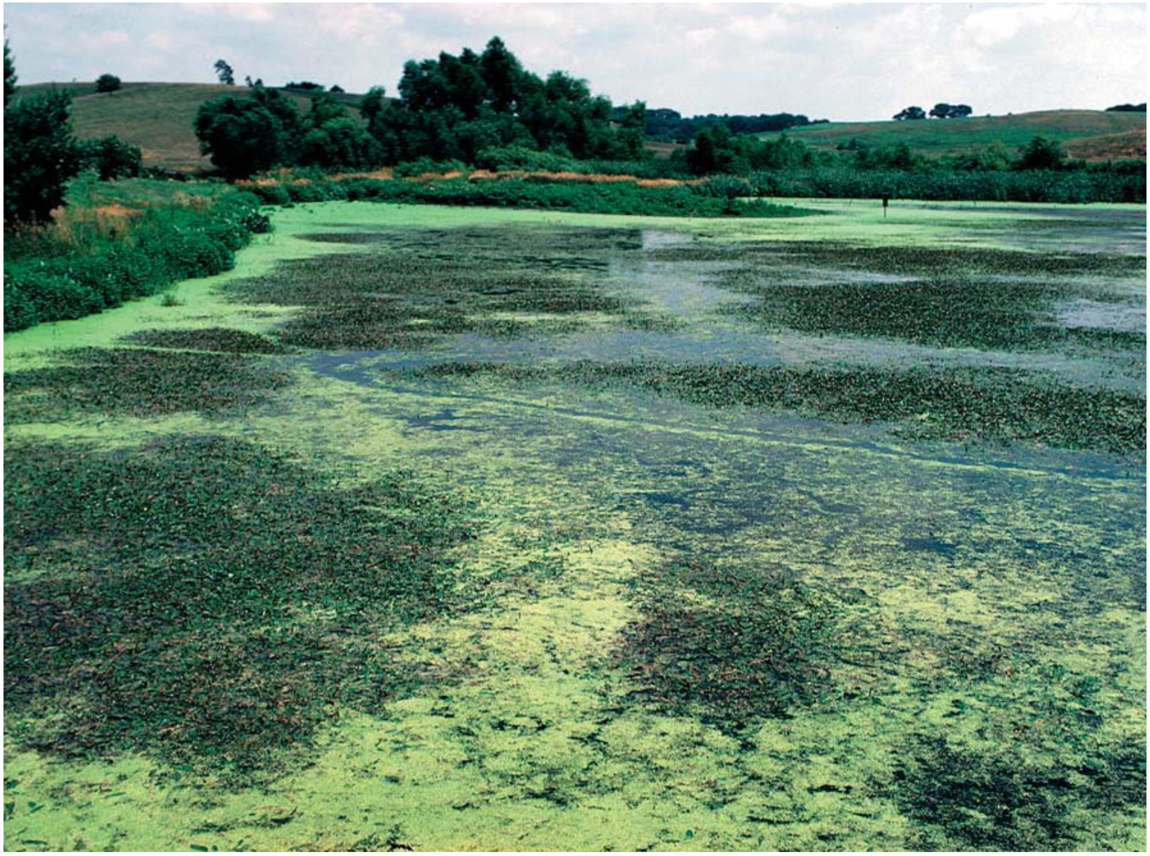
Keeping excess sediment out of downstream rivers and lakes is one ecosystem service intact small streams and wetlands provide. Once sediment moves further downstream, it becomes an expensive problem. Too much sediment can fill up reservoirs and navigation channels, damage commercial and sport fisheries, eliminate recreation spots, harm aquatic habitats and their associated plants and animals, and increase water filtration costs.

Additional sediment damages aquatic ecosystems. Sediment suspended in the water makes it murkier; as a result, underwater plants no longer receive enough light to grow. Fish that depend on visual signals to mate may be less likely to spawn in murky water, thereby reducing fish populations. High levels of sediment suspended in water can even cause fish kills. Even as it settles to the bottom, sediment continues to cause problems because it fills the holes between gravel and stones that some animals call home, smothers small organisms that form the basis of many food webs, and can also smother fish eggs.

Getting rid of sediment is expensive. For example, keeping Baltimore Harbor navigable costs $10 to $11.5 million annually to dredge and dispose of sediment the Patapsco River deposits in the harbor.

Small Streams and Wetlands Retain Sediment

Headwater streams and wetlands typically trap and retain much of the sediment that washes into them. The faster the water travels, the larger the particles it can carry. So, natural obstructions in small streams-rocks, downed logs, or even just a bumpy stream bottom-slow water and cause sediment to settle out of the water column. Wetlands, whether or not they have a surface connection to a nearby stream, are often areas where runoff slows and stops,



Stream networks filter and process everything from leaves and dead insects to runoff from agricultural fields and animal pastures. Without such processing, algal blooms can ruin living conditions for fish and the quality of drinking water. Here, algae overtakes a lake in Iowa. Photo courtesy of Lynn Betts, USDA NRCS

dropping any debris the water may be carrying. Because headwater streams represent 75 percent or more of total stream length in a stream network, such streams and their associated wetlands retain a substantial amount of sediment, preventing it from flowing into larger rivers downstream.

Even ephemeral streams can retain significant amounts of sediment. Such small headwater streams expand and contract in response to heavy rains. During expansion, a stream flows over what was a dry or damp streambed. Most of the water at the leading edge of a growing stream, called the "trickle front," soaks into the streambed and does not carry sediment downstream. In a small watershed near Corvallis, Oregon, researchers found that 60 to 80 percent of sediment generated from forest roads traveled less than 250 feet downstream before settling out in stream pools. Headwater streams can store sediment for long periods of time: research in Oregon's Rock Creek basin found that headwater streams could retain sediment for 114 years.

Natural Cleansing Ability of Small Streams and Wetlands Protects Water Quality

Materials that wash into streams include everything from soil, leaves, and dead insects to runoff from agricultural fields and animal pastures. One of the key ecosystem services that stream networks provide is the filtering and processing of such materials. Healthy aquatic ecosystems can transform natural materials like animal dung and chemicals such as fertilizers into less harmful substances. Small streams and their associated wetlands play a key role in both storing and modifying potential pollutants, ranging from chemical fertilizers to rotting salmon carcasses, in ways that maintain downstream water quality.

Excess Nutrients Cause Problems in Rivers and Lakes

Inorganic nitrogen and phosphorus, the main chemicals in agricultural fertilizers, are essential nutrients not just for plants, but for all living organisms. However, in excess or in the wrong proportions, these chemicals can harm natural systems and humans.

In freshwater ecosystems, eutrophication, the enriching of waters by excess nitrogen and phosphorus, reduces water quality in streams, lakes, estuaries, and other downstream waterbodies. One obvious result is the excessive growth of algae. More algae clouds previously clear streams, such as those favored by trout. In addition to reducing visibility, algal blooms reduce the amount of oxygen dissolved in the water, sometimes to a degree that causes fish kills. Fish are not the only organisms harmed: some of the algae species that grow in eutrophic waters generate tastes and odors or are toxic, a clear problem for stream systems that supply drinking water for municipalities. In addition, increased nitrogen can injure people and animals. Excess nitrogen in the form called nitrate in drinking water has been linked to "blue baby disease" (methemoglobinemia) in infants and also has toxic effects on livestock.

Headwater Streams Transform and Store Excess Nutrients

Headwater streams and associated wetlands both retain and transform excess nutrients, thereby preventing them from traveling downstream. Physical, chemical, and biological processes in headwater streams interact to provide this ecosystem service.

"If headwater streams and wetlands are degraded or filled, more fertilizer applied to farm fields or lawns reaches larger downstream rivers."

Compared with larger streams and rivers, small streams, especially shallow ones, have more water in physical contact with a stream channel, and thus nutrient particles are removed from the water column more quickly in small streams than in larger ones. New research on headwater streams has demonstrated that nitrate removed by headwater streams accounts for half of total nitrate removal in entire river basins. Removal of nitrate by headwater streams has reduced nitrogen export from watersheds in New England. The nutrients that are not removed in headwater streams travel far downstream because uptake processes are less efficient in larger systems. Similarly, a study of headwater streams in the Southern Appalachian Mountains found that both phosphorus and the nitrogen-containing compound ammonium traveled less than 65 feet downstream before being removed from the water

In headwater streams and wetlands, more water is in direct contact with the streambed, where most processing takes place. Bacteria, fungi and other microorganisms living on the bottom of a stream consume inorganic nitrogen and phosphorus and convert them into less harmful, more biologically beneficial compounds. A mathematical model based on research in 14 headwater streams throughout the U.S. shows that 64 percent of inorganic nitrogen entering a small stream is retained or transformed within 1,000 yards. The rest of the nitrogen is exported downstream, and models suggest that 40% of the nitrogen in waters downstream originated in headwaters.

Channel shape also plays a role in transforming excess nutrients. Studies in Pennsylvania have shown that when the forest surrounding headwaters is replaced by meadows or lawns, increased sunlight promotes growth of grasses along stream banks. The grasses trap sediments, create sod, and narrow the stream channel to one-third of the original width. Such narrowing reduces the amount of streambed available for microorganisms that process nutrients. As a result, nitrogen and phosphorus travel downstream five to ten times farther, increasing risks of eutrophication.

Streams do not have to flow year-round to make significant contributions to water quality. Fertilizers and other pollutants enter stream systems during storms and other times of high runoff, the same times that ephemeral and intermittent streams are most likely to have water and process nutrients. Federal, state and local programs spend considerable sums of money to reduce non-point source inputs of nutrients because they are a major threat to water quality. One principal federal program, the EPA's 319 cost-share program, awarded more than $1.3 billion between 1990 and 2001 to states and territories for projects to control non-point pollution. Failure to maintain nutrient removal capacity of ephemeral and intermittent streams and wetlands would undermine these efforts.

Wetlands also remove nutrients from surface waters. Several studies of riparian wetlands have found that those associated with the smallest streams to be most effective in removing nutrients from surface waters. For example, headwater wetlands comprise 45 percent of all wetlands able to improve water quality in four Vermont watersheds. Another study found that wetlands associated with first-order streams are responsible for 90 percent of wetland phosphorus removal in eight northeastern watersheds. Such studies demonstrate that riparian wetlands, especially those associated with small streams, protect water quality.

Even wetlands that are considered "isolated" are not isolated from a water quality perspective. Recent research has provided additional evidence of rapid removal of nitrate in small, headwater wetlands and concluded that headwater wetlands offer significant water quality benefits. Scientists have detailed the ecological functions and geographical distribution of "isolated" wetlands with an emphasis on their linkages with other aquatic ecosystems. Authors document that these wetlands are not truly isolated and use the term "geographically isolated wetlands" to describe wetlands that are surrounded by terrestrial habitat, but have both hydrologic and biologic linkages to regional aquatic systems that provide clean water benefits downstream.

As land is developed, headwater streams are often filled or channeled into pipes or paved waterways, resulting in fewer and shorter streams. For example, as the Rock Creek watershed in Maryland was urbanized, more than half of the stream channel network was eliminated. In even more dramatic fashion, mining operations in the mountains of central Appalachia have removed mountain tops and filled valleys, wiping out entire headwater stream networks. From 1986 to 1998, more than 900 miles of streams in central Appalachia were buried, more than half of them in West Virginia.

If headwater streams and wetlands are degraded or filled, more fertilizer applied to farm fields or lawns reaches larger downstream rivers. These larger rivers process excess nutrients from fertilizer much more slowly than smaller streams. Losing the nutrient retention capacity of headwater streams would cause downstream waterbodies to contain higher concentrations of nitrogen and phosphorus. A likely consequence of additional nutrients would be the contamination and eutrophication of downstream rivers, lakes, estuaries, and such waters as the Gulf of Mexico.

"The ability of headwater streams to transform organic matter into more usable forms helps maintain healthy downstream ecosystems."

Natural Recycling in Headwater Systems Sustains Downstream Ecosystems

Recycling organic carbon contained in the bodies of dead plants and animals is a crucial ecosystem service. Ecological processes that transform inorganic carbon into organic carbon and recycle organic carbon are the basis for every food web on the planet. In freshwater ecosystems, much of the recycling happens in small streams and wetlands, where microorganisms transform everything from leaf litter and downed logs to dead salamanders into food for other organisms in the aquatic food web, including mayflies, frogs, and salmon.

Like nitrogen and phosphorus, carbon is essential to life but can be harmful to freshwater ecosystems if it is present in excess or in the wrong chemical form. If all organic material received by headwater streams and wetlands went directly downstream, the glut of decomposing material could deplete oxygen in downstream rivers, thereby damaging and even killing fish and other aquatic life. The ability of headwater streams to transform organic matter into more usable forms helps maintain healthy downstream ecosystems.

Headwater Stream Systems Store and Transform Excess Organic Matter

Intact headwater systems both store and process organic matter in ways that modulate the release of carbon to downstream lakes and rivers. Headwater systems receive large amounts of organic matter, which can be retained and transformed into more palatable forms through decomposition processes. This organic matter is anything of biological origin that falls into, washes into, or dies in a stream. Plant parts, such as leaves, twigs, stems, and larger bits of woody debris are the most common of these items. Another source of organic material is dead stream organisms, such as bits of dead algae and bacteria or bodies of insects and even larger animals. Waste products of plants and animals also add organic carbon to water. Water leaches dissolved organic carbon from organic materials in a stream and watershed like tea from a tea bag.

Much of the organic matter that enters headwater systems remains there instead of continuing downstream. One reason is that the material often enters headwater streams as large pieces, such as leaves and woody debris that are not easily carried downstream. In addition, debris dams that accumulate in headwater streams block the passage of materials. One study found four times more organic matter on the bottoms of headwater streams in forested watersheds than on the bottoms of larger streams.

Another reason material stays in headwater streams is that food webs in small streams and wetlands process organic matter efficiently. Several studies have found that headwater streams are far more efficient at transforming organic matter than larger streams. For example, one study showed that, for a given length of stream, a headwater stream had an eight-fold higher processing efficiency than a fourth-order channel downstream. Microorganisms in headwater stream systems use material such as leaf litter and other decomposing material for food and, in turn, become food for other organisms. For example, fungi that grow on leaf litter become nutritious food for invertebrates that make their homes on the bottom of a stream, including mayflies, stoneflies and caddis flies. These animals provide food for larger animals, including birds such as fly-catchers and fish such as trout.

"Headwater streams are probably the most varied of all running-water habitats."

Headwater Systems Supply Food for Downstream Ecosystems

The organic carbon released by headwater streams provides key food resources for downstream ecosystems. Headwater ecosystems control the form, quality and timing of carbon supply downstream. Although organic matter often enters headwaters in large amounts, such as when leaves fall in autumn or storm runoff carries debris into the stream, those leaves and debris are processed more slowly. As a result, carbon is supplied to downstream food webs more evenly over a longer period of time. Forms of carbon delivered range from dissolved organic carbon that feeds microorganisms to the drifting insects such as mayflies and midges that make ideal fish food. Such insects are the preferred food of fish such as trout, char, and salmon. One study estimated that fishless headwater streams in Alaska export enough drifting insects and other invertebrates to support approximately half of the fish production in downstream waters.

Processed organic matter from headwater streams fuels aquatic food webs from the smallest streams to the ocean. Only about half of all first-order streams drain into second-order streams; the other half feed directly into larger streams or directly into estuaries and oceans, thus delivering their carbon directly to these larger ecosystems. The health and productivity of downstream ecosystems depends on processed organic carbon—ranging from dissolved organic carbon to particles of fungus, and leaf litter to mayflies and stoneflies-delivered by upstream headwater systems.

Headwater Streams Maintain Biological Diversity

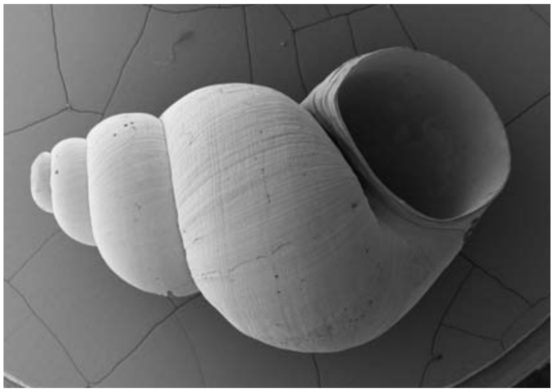
Headwater Habitats are Diverse

Headwater streams are probably the most varied of all running-water habitats; they range from icy-cold brooks tumbling down steep, boulder-filled channels to outflows from desert springs that trickle along a wash for a short distance before disappearing into the sand. As such, headwater systems offer an enormous array of habitats for plant, animal and microbial life.

This variation is due to regional differences in climate, geology, land use, and biology. For example, streams in limestone or sandy regions have very steady flow regimes compared with those located in impermeable shale or clay soils. Plants or animals found only in certain regions can also lend a distinctive character to headwater streams. Regionally important riparian plants, such as alder and tamarisk, exercise a strong influence on headwater streams. Headwater streams in regions with beavers are vastly different from those in regions without beavers.

Environmental conditions change throughout a stream network. In wet regions, streams grow larger and have wider channels, deeper pools for shelter, and more permanent flow as they move downstream. In arid regions and even humid regions during dry periods, headwater streams may become smaller downstream as water evaporates or soaks into a streambed. Because marked changes in environmental conditions can occur over very short distances, conditions required by a headwater species may exist for as little as 100 yards of stream. Consequently, local populations of a species may extend over just a short distance, particularly in spring-fed headwaters with sharp changes in environmental conditions along the length of a stream.

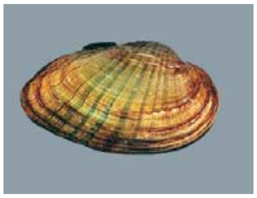
With this variety of influences, headwater streams present a rich mosaic of habitats, each with its own characteristic community of plants, animals, and microorganisms.



Headwater Systems Support a Diverse Array of Animals and Plants

Although there has never been a complete inventory of the inhabitants in even a single headwater stream, much less surveys across many types of headwaters, a recent review of existing literature highlights the significant biological connections between headwater streams and downstream ecosystems. The review found that small headwater streams that do not appear on most maps can support over 290 taxa, some of which are unique to headwaters, thus emphasizing the significant contribution of small streams to biodiversity of entire river networks.

Below: The venustaconcha ellipsiformis, a pearl mussel associated with Midwestern headwaters, is threatened with extinction. Photo courtesy of Kevin Cummings, Illinois Natural History Survey



Top left: A hydrobiid snail [Pyrgulopsis robusta] found in the headwaters of the Snake River in Wyoming. Photo courtesy of Dr. Robert Hershler

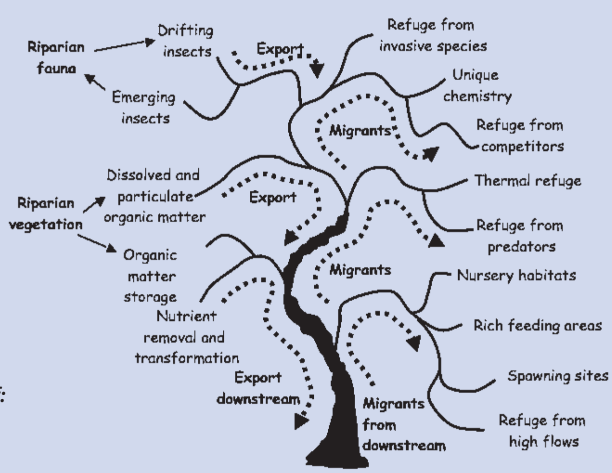
Center: Caddis flies and other aquatic insects spend their larval stage in streams, feeding on the algae, vegetation and decaying plant matter. The Brachycentris, a caddis fly found in headwater streams of eastern North America, constructs a protective case out of twigs, leaves and other debris. Photo courtesy of David H. Funk

Bottom: American dippers rely on headwater streams for sustenance, walking along stream bottoms and feeding on insect larvae and crustaceans among the rocks of the streambed. This American dipper was photographed at Tanner's Flat, just east of Salt Lake City. Photo courtesy of Pomera M. France

A water shrew (Sorex palustris) in the waters of Oregon's Mt. Hood. Photo courtesy of RB Forbes, Mammal Images Library

A coho salmon migrating up a spring-fed tributary of the Snowqualmie River watershed in Washington's Puget Sound region. Many anadromous fish species spawn in headwater streams that are so small as to be omitted from standard USGS topographical maps. Photo courtesy of Washington Trout.

The species in a typical headwater stream include bacteria, fungi, algae, higher plants, invertebrates, fish, amphibians, birds, and mammals. Headwater streams are rich feeding grounds. Large amounts of leaves and other organic matter that fall or blow into streams, the retention of organic matter in a channel or debris dams, and the high rates of plant and algal growth in unshaded headwaters all supply food sources for animals such as caddis flies, snails, and crustaceans. These animals become food for predators such as fish, salamanders, crayfish, birds, and mammals, which, in turn, become prey for larger animals, including herons, raccoons, and otters. Many widespread species also use headwaters for spawning sites, nursery areas, feeding areas, and travel corridors. Thus, headwater habitats are important to species like otters, flycatchers, and trout, even though these species are not restricted to headwaters. The rich resource base that headwaters provide causes the biotic diversity of headwater streams to contribute to the productivity of both local food webs and those farther downstream.



This figure illustrates the many benefits headwater streams provide to organisms living in downstream ecosystems and the connections between headwater streams and other ecosystems. Illustration courtesy of: Judy Meyer, University of Georgia.

Diversity of headwater systems results in diverse headwater plants and animals. Many of these species are headwater specialists and are most abundant in or restricted to headwaters. For example, water shrews live along small, cool streams, feed on aquatic invertebrates, and spend their entire lives connected to headwater streams. Because different headwaters harbor different species, the number of headwater-dependent species across North America is far greater than the number of species in any one headwater.

Headwater specialists often have small geographic ranges. These species, many of which are imperiled, include: species of minnows, darters, and topminnows in southeastern springs and brooks; aquatic snails in spring-fed headwaters in the Great Basin, the Southeast, Florida, and the Pacific Northwest; crayfish in small streams from Illinois and Oklahoma to Florida; and salamanders and tailed frogs in small streams, springs, and seeps in the Southeast and Pacific Northwest. Two factors contribute to specialists' small ranges: their limited ability to move between headwaters and high diversity of headwater habitats. Unlike mobile animals, such as mammals and birds, fully aquatic animals like fish and most mollusks cannot move from one headwater stream to another. As a result, local evolution may produce different species in adjacent headwater systems. Moreover, environmental conditions often differ greatly between adjacent headwater streams and even within the course of a single stream. For example, in a spring-fed headwater stream in western Pennsylvania, one species of caddis fly inhabits headwaters starting at the spring and going downstream about 200 yards. A different species of caddis fly inhabits the stream after that point.

Animals may use headwater streams for all or part of their lives. Although many fish species live exclusively in headwater systems, others use headwaters only for key parts of their life cycle. For permanent residents and seasonal migrants, headwater streams offer refuge from high flows, extreme temperatures, predators, competitors, and exotic species. Recent research in Oregon has demonstrated that a significant proportion of coho salmon reproduction occurs in intermittent headwater streams, and young salmon use these small streams as refuge during high flow conditions. In other parts of the country, trispot darters, brook trout and rainbow trout spawn in small streams. Young cutthroat trout use shelter formed by streams' debris dams but move onto larger portions of a stream network as they mature. Intermittent streams can offer special protection for young fish, because the small pools that remain in such streams often lack predators. Still other fish species use headwater streams as seasonal feeding areas. These and other fish life cycles clearly demonstrate the linkage between the smallest streams on the landscape, large rivers, and the ocean.

Both permanent and intermittent streams provide valuable habitat for microorganisms, plants, and animals. Generally, biodiversity is higher in permanent streams than in intermittent streams, but intermittent streams often provide habitat for different species. Some species that occur in both types of streams may be more abundant in predator-free intermittent streams. For example, because of the lack of large predatory fish, salamanders and crayfish are sometimes more abundant in fishless intermittent streams rather than those with permanent flow. In contrast, for animals such as brook trout that require steady water temperatures and constant water flow, perennial streams provide better habitat.

A westslope cutthroat trout from Deep Creek, a headwater of the Kettle River. Cutthroat trout spawn in headwaters where the young trout seek shelter amid piles of debris, moving on to larger waters for their adult lives. Photo courtesy of Bill McMillan, Washington Trout

Linkages between Headwater and Streamside Ecosystems Boost Biological Diversity

The movement of plants and animals between headwater and streamside ecosystems boosts biodiversity in both areas. Headwater streams are tightly linked to adjacent riparian ecosystems, the zones along a stream bank. Riparian ecosystems have high species diversity, particularly in arid environments where the stream provides a unique microclimate. Typical riparian vegetation depends upon moist streamside soils. Some plants must have "wet feet," meaning their roots have to stretch into portions of soil that are saturated with water. Seeds of some riparian plants, such as those of cottonwood trees found along rivers in the Southwest, require periodic floods to germinate and take root.

Another link between stream and land is often provided by insects, such as mayflies, that emerge from streams and provide a vital food resource for animals, including birds, spiders, lizards, and bats. For example, insect-eating birds living by a prairie stream in Kansas consume as much as 87 percent of the adult aquatic

Canelo Hills ladies' tresses [Sprianthes delitescens] in a southwestern freshwater marsh known as a cienega. The cienegas of Arizona and New Mexico and Mexico, are the exclusive habitat for this member of the orchid family. Photo courtesy of Jim Rorabaugh, USFWS

insects that emerged from the stream each day. Such exchanges between land and water help maintain animal populations across landscapes. In many landscapes, the network of headwater streams is so dense that it offers a nearly continuous system of interconnected habitat for the movement of mobile species that rely on streams and riparian areas.

The Cleistes, a member of the orchid family, is found in pocosin wetlands of North Carolina. Photo courtesy of Vince Bellis

Biological Diversity of Headwater Systems is Threatened by Habitat Destruction

Because of their small size and intimate connections with surrounding landscape, headwaters and their inhabitants are easily influenced by human activities in watersheds and riparian zones. Changes to riparian vegetation or hydrology, water pollution, or the introduction of exotic species can have profound effects on biota living in headwaters.

Specialized headwater species can be particularly sensitive to habitat destruction because of their small geographic ranges, sometimes as small as a single headwater stream or spring. Thus, human activities have driven some headwater specialists, like the whiteline topminnow, to extinction, and imperiled many others. Furthermore, as the natural disjunction of headwater systems is increased by human activities such as pollution, impoundment, and destruction of riparian vegetation, more populations of headwater specialists may be extirpated.

Many headwater species, including fish, snails, crayfish, insects and salamanders, are now in danger of extinction as a result of human actions. A few dozen headwater species are already listed under the U.S. Endangered Species Act; hundreds of others are rare enough to be considered for listing. Given the diversity and sensitivity of headwater biota, it seems likely that continued degradation of headwater habitats will put more species at risk of extinction.

Wetlands Make Key Contributions to Biological Diversity

The presence of wetlands adds another aspect of habitat diversity to headwater systems and therefore increases the variety of species a headwater system may support. Most headwater wetlands are depressions in the ground that hold water permanently or seasonally, and scientists usually distinguish between ephemeral and perennial wetlands Wetlands provide critical habitat for a variety of plants and animals. Recent research found that a total of 274 at-risk plants and animals are supported by geographically isolated wetlands. Of those, more than one-third were restricted to these wetlands.

One type of ephemeral wetland found in both California and the Northeast is known as a vernal pool because it generally fills with water in the spring. In California, blooming flowers ring the edges and fill depressions of such pools. Of the 450 species, subspecies, or varieties of plants found in California's vernal pools, 44 are vernal pool specialists. Several such plants are already on the Endangered Species list. If California's vernal pool habitats were completely destroyed, at least 44 species would disappear. Although vernal pool animals are less well known, there appear to be at least as many specialized animals as plants. New species of specialists such as fairy shrimp and clam shrimp continue to be discovered.

Pitcher plants, such as this white top (Sarracenia leucophylla), pictured top left; and sundews, such as this Drosera brevifolia, pictured bottom right; are among the carnivorous plants found in the Carolina Bay wetlands of the Southeastern U.S. Photo courtesy of David Scott/SREL

Other ephemeral wetlands also make significant contributions to biodiversity. A study of wetlands in the Southeast including cypress-gum swamps, cypress savannas, and grass-sedge marshes, found that plants from one wetland are often very different from those in others nearby. Such differences in nearby habitats increase overall biodiversity in a region. In some cases, differences

Biodiversity in ephemeral wetlands

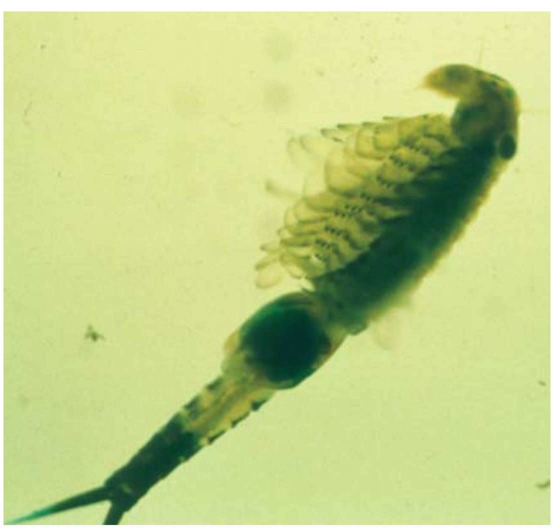
Some species of plants and animals prefer or require ephemeral wetlands. Certain zooplankton, amphibians, and aquatic plants need the wet phase of an ephemeral wetland to complete all or part of their life cycles. Other species that rely on ephemeral wetlands wait out the aquatic phase, flourishing only when pools shrink or disappear. For example, although adult spotted salamanders are generally terrestrial, during the springtime they trek to vernal pools to breed and reproduce. So-called amphibious plants, including button celery, meadowfoam, wooly marbles and many others do the opposite; although they live in water, they cannot reproduce until water levels drop. Some plants and crustaceans most strongly identified with ephemeral wetlands worldwide, including quillworts, fairy shrimp, and tadpole shrimp, are ancient groups that probably originated at least 140 million years ago. The disappearance of ephemeral wetlands would mean the loss of these highly specialized and ancient groups of plants and animals.

Pitcher plants, such as this white top (Sarracenia leucophylla), pictured top left; and sundews, such as this Drosera brevifolia, pictured bottom right; are among the carnivorous plants found in the Carolina Bay wetlands of the Southeastern U.S. Photo courtesy of David Scott/SREL

Although spotted salamanders are generally terrestrial animals, they only breed and reproduce in vernal pools. Photo courtesy of Vernal Pool Association

in periods of wetting and drying appear to be important for the persistence of many species. Different wetting and drying patterns explain some differences between Gromme Marsh and Stedman Marsh, two prairie pothole wetlands in Wisconsin. Although the two marshes are only about 450 yards apart, they have different species of dragonflies; also, Stedman Marsh has damselflies and caddis flies that Gromme Marsh lacks.

Amphibians are key parts of the food web in small wetlands. Some wetlands are hot spots for amphibian biodiversity; twenty-seven amphibian species, one of the highest numbers of amphibian species known from such a small area, inhabited a 1.2-acre ephemeral wetland in South Carolina. Other small wetlands in the region have been found to have similar numbers of amphibian species, demonstrating how small wetlands are especially important for maintaining the regional biodiversity of amphibians. Larger, more permanent wetlands may be less diverse because they may also be home to predators-such as crayfish and dragonfly larvae-that eat amphibian larvae.



A female fairy shrimp from the Ipswich River Basin in Massachusetts. Fairy shrimp spend their entire life cycles in vernal pools. Photo courtesy of Vernal Pool Association

Biodiversity in fens (a type of perennial wetland)

Plant biodiversity peaks in fens, unique perennial wetlands that occur where groundwater flows to the surface. Fens also provide clean water that supports downstream ecosystems; outflows from such wetlands are critical to the formation of the cold, low-nutrient streams that are ideal for trout. Although fens are rarely inundated, water seeps continuously into root zones.

Similar to other wetlands, the small land area covered by fens belies the high biodiversity found within them. For example, in northeastern Iowa, fens contain 18 percent of the state's plant species but cover only 0.01 percent of the land surface. Fens are probably the wetlands with the greatest numbers of plant species. Because groundwater that comes to the surface is typically low in available nutrients, fen plants are often dwarfed and the total mass of vegetation is typically low. As a result, no one species can become dominant and exclude other species.

In the Upper Midwest, more than 1,169 species of plants have been identified in fens, with more than half needing wet conditions. Fens also have a high proportion of plant species known to occur primarily in pristine sites. Often, such species are listed as rare, threatened or endangered. Of 320 vascular plant species found within fens in northeastern Iowa, 44 percent are considered rare. Fens themselves are imperiled: 160 fens that one researcher sampled in northeastern Iowa were all that remained from 2,333 historic fens.

Because diversity in fens stems from low nutrient availability, overfertilization can harm fens and, in turn, downstream ecosystems. Examining one fen in New York, researchers found the lowest diversity of plants where nitrogen and phosphorus inflows were greatest. Both nutrients came from agricultural activities: phosphorus was entering the fen primarily through surface water flows, while the nitrogen-containing compound nitrate was flowing with the groundwater. Thus, a loss of plant diversity in fens is a clear indication they are receiving excess nutrients, such as can occur when fertilizer runs off a field or urban lawn or water carries animal waste from farmyards. Allowing excess nutrients to enter fens can also damage downstream trout streams because trout prefer cold, low-nutrient streams. Therefore, the low-nutrient conditions of fens require protection from nutrient contamination.

A wood frog (Rana sylvatica) in an autumnal vernal pool in central Pennsylvania. Photo courtesy of Gene Wingert

Fens are unique perennial wetlands that occur where groundwater flows to the surface. Plant biodiversity peaks in fens: Among the 320 vascular plant species found in northeastern Iowa fens, 44% are considered rare. However, fens themselves are imperiled. Pictured is a fen wetland in Illinois. Photo courtesy of Steve Byers, Bluff Spring Fen Nature Preserve

Conclusion

Headwater streams and wetlands abound on the American landscape, providing key linkages between stream networks and surrounding land. Although often unnamed, unrecorded, and underappreciated, small headwater streams and wetlands-including those that are dry for parts of the year-are an integral part of our nation's river networks. Small wetlands, even those without visible surface connections, are joined to stream systems by groundwater, subsurface flows of water, and periodic surface flows. Current databases and maps do not adequately reflect the extent of headwater streams and associated wetlands. The resulting underestimate of the occurrence of such ecosystems hampers our ability to protect the key roles headwater systems play in maintaining quality of surface waters and diversity of life.

"THE PHYSICAL, CHEMICAL, AND BIOTIC INTEGRITY OF OUR NATION'S WATERS IS SUSTAINED BY SERVICES PROVIDED BY WETLANDS AND HEADWATER STREAMS."

Essential ecosystem services provided by headwater systems include attenuating floods, maintaining water supplies, preventing siltation of downstream streams and rivers, maintaining water quality, and supporting biodiversity. These small ecosystems also provide a steady supply of food resources to downstream ecosystems by recycling organic matter.

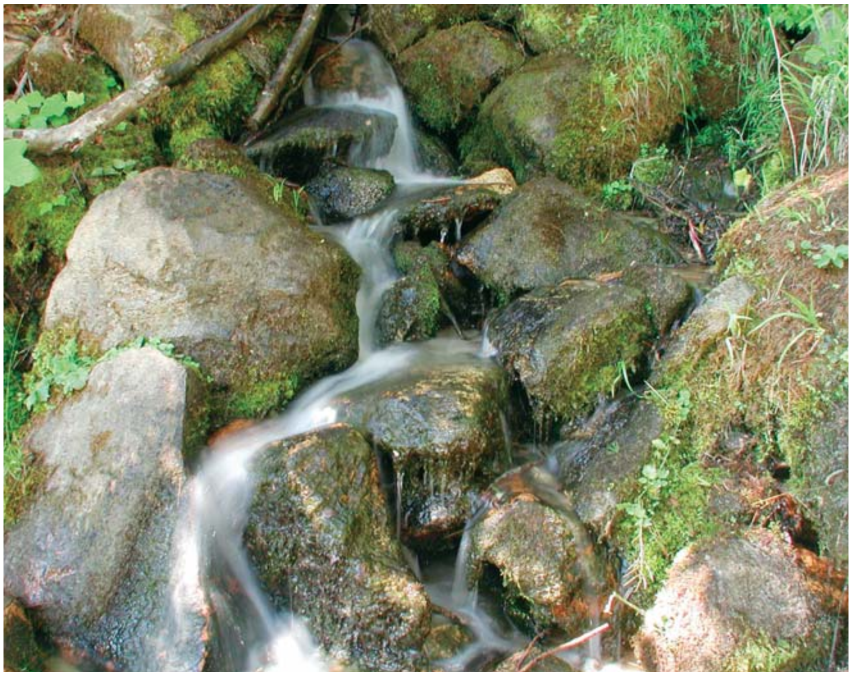
Small streams and wetlands provide a rich diversity of habitats that supports unique, diverse, and increasingly endangered plants and animals. Headwater systems, used by many animal species at different stages in their life history, provide shelter, food, protection from predators, spawning sites and nursery areas, and travel corridors between terrestrial and aquatic habitats.

Since the 1970s, the federal Clean Water Act has played a key role in protecting streams and wetlands from destruction and pollution. We have made progress toward cleaner water, in part because the law has historically recognized the need to protect all waters of the United States. The health of downstream waters depends on continuing protection for even seemingly geographically-isolated wetlands and small streams that flow only part of the year.

These small streams and wetlands are being degraded and even eliminated by ongoing human activities. Among the earliest and most visible indicators of degradation is the loss of plant diversity in headwater wetlands. The physical, chemical, and biotic integrity of our nation's waters is sustained by services provided by wetlands and headwater streams.

Today's scientists understand the importance of small streams and wetlands even better than they did when Congress passed the Clean Water Act. If we are to continue to make progress toward clean water goals, we must continue to protect these small but crucial waters. The goal of protecting water quality, plant and animal habitat, navigable waterways, and other downstream resources is not achievable without careful protection of headwater stream systems.

Photo courtesy of Raymond Eubanks.



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http://www.nwrc.usgs.gov/

http://www.cwp.org/pubs_download.htm

http://www.epa.gov/OWOW/NPS/urbanize/report.html

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