

Chautauqua Watershed Notes
From the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy
For August 9, 2009

We're All Connected
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For the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy



Properties with plenty of natural vegetation help slow the flow of water for a healthier environment for all of us.

A man asked me recently, "What is the most invasive species in the area?" He listened carefully to all the replies about exotic plants, ash borers and such and then said, "You know what? I think people are the most invasive species, and I am one of them." That comment made me think about my place in space and take a close look at how we impact the world we live in.

I am writing this article on my front porch on a humid summer night. I can see up and down the street how each household has blocked off their space from the others. This house has a fence, that one a hedgerow; another has tall evergreens surrounding their yard. We look at our yards as, well, OURS. We own the land. We own the buildings. We can do what we want. If we think about others when we think about our yard, it's most likely because it is time to mow the lawn or sneak some zucchini over to the neighbors. Rarely do we think about how our land affects our neighbors' land or the land down the hill, but everything we do can affect others.

One of the biggest things we do on our land is to get rid of water, typically by getting it off of our land and onto someone else's as quickly as possible. This means ditches and swales and pipes. Most property owners try to get the water to the ditch, drain or road as quickly as possible. We've been doing this for so long that it seems silly to even point it out, but there are some big reasons to take a look at this.

First, if this water is being rushed off the land it has to go somewhere. As it all flows quicker and quicker downhill, streams are filling up with water faster and causing flooding on the flat areas at the bottom of the hill. Those neighborhoods are where we typically try to deal with flooding, but the real cause may be upstream.

Second, as water flows off the land faster it never gets a chance to sink in. Water runs off the surface and goes away instead of sinking in and filling up the groundwater supply. I have been to houses in past years where lowered groundwater means no bathing. If you don't see a reason to help the water sink into your land, do it for others who want to take a hot shower in their own home.

Many lawns are so packed down that no water sinks in to them at all. I can remember watching the water flow off the land in a rainstorm as a kid. There would be a sheet of water running down the hill around my parents' house that was sometimes an inch or more deep. Take a look at your yard in the next storm. Does the water all flow away, or does it sink in?

I'm lucky. My water pretty much sinks into my yard and goes away. There are some things you can do to help keep the water on your land and not a problem for others. Install a rain barrel next to your house to catch the rainwater so

it can be used in gardens when it is not raining. Put in driveways, sidewalks and patios that allow the water to soak in instead of flowing off and flooding other areas. There are local companies that install "permeable pavement", a fancy term for pavement or asphalt that allows the water to sink through it instead of flowing off to a ditch. I once watched a man dump a bucket of water on an asphalt parking lot that disappeared and left nothing but a wet spot behind. Bricks and other paving stones can be spaced with a small gap to allow the water to flow through it. Once the water is in the ground, it can keep sinking in and recharge the groundwater, allowing others to shower and drink while preventing the water from causing flooding.

How much water could possibly flow off your yard and driveway? Go outside and take a look during the next big storm. Look at how the street fills with water or the gutters create a small stream. Imagine all the houses up and down the street dumping all that water off their bit of earth. We may own our land, but what we do with it affects everyone around us. The man who said humans are the most invasive species may be right, but since we are all here we have to learn to live together.

Everyone is connected by invisible ropes of land and water and food and family and friends and probably more things than I can list. Our property ends at our property line, but most things don't care. Dandelions cross the line with ease, as do water, deer, cats, and a million other things. What happens on our patch of land affects all of those around us. Watch how the water flows and where it goes. See if there is a way to slow it down and sink it in. Mostly, pay attention. We may be able to help the water move the right way without too much effort.

The Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy is a local, private not-for-profit organization supported primarily by membership donations and grants from private foundations. Its mission is to preserve and enhance the water quality, scenic beauty and ecological health of the lakes, streams and watersheds of the Chautauqua region. It is the only locally based not-for-profit organization actively conserving important habitats, scenic sites and watershed lands in the county. It takes a preventive approach to address lake algae and plant problems. For a list of upcoming events go to chautauquawatershed.org. or call 716-664-2166.