

Meeting the Watershed

Exploring our connection

Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Watershed Fact Sheet

The Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Watershed is a vast and ecologically diverse region that encompasses the interconnected network of rivers, lakes, and wetlands within the drainage basins of the five Great Lakes (Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie, and Ontario) and the St. Lawrence River. Stretching across the northeastern part of North America, this Watershed is of great significance to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

Water volume and geography

- The Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Watershed is the largest freshwater ecosystem in the world.
- It covers an area of approximately 246,000 square kilometres.
- The combined water volume of the Great Lakes is more than 22,000 cubic kilometres, which is one fifth of all the planet's freshwater supply.
- Lake Superior, the largest and deepest of the Great Lakes, contains about 10 per cent of the world's fresh surface water by volume.

Indigenous connections

- The Watershed holds a deep connection and significance to hundreds of Indigenous Nations.
- These Indigenous Nations, including the Ho-Chunk, Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee and others, have long-standing relationships and traditional territories within the Watershed.
- Indigenous Peoples have lived sustainably with the lands and waters for thousands of years, nurturing a profound understanding of the ecosystem's delicate balance.

Human settlements and industry

- The Watershed is home to a diverse range of cities, towns, and communities, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, with an estimated population of more than 40 million people.
- Major urban centres, such as Toronto, Montreal, Chicago, and Detroit, are located within the Watershed.
- The region has a rich history of industry, including manufacturing, shipping, agriculture, and tourism, which have shaped the economy and influenced the landscape.

Environmental concerns and conservation

- The Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Watershed faces numerous environmental threats, including pollution, habitat degradation and conversion, invasive species, and climate change.
- Efforts are being made by governments, Indigenous Nations, organizations, and individuals to address these issues and promote sustainable practices.
- Conservation initiatives aim to protect the biodiversity and ecological integrity of the Watershed for future generations.

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Marine life and biodiversity

- The Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River support a diverse array of plant and animal species.
- Various fish species, including lake trout, walleye, salmon, and yellow perch, inhabit the lakes and rivers.
- Wetlands within the Watershed provide critical habitat for waterfowl, migratory birds, amphibians, and other wildlife.
- The St. Lawrence River estuary is an important feeding and breeding ground for marine mammals, such as beluga whales.

Recreational opportunities

- The Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Watershed offers abundant recreational opportunities for boating, fishing, swimming, hiking, birdwatching, skiing and more.
- National and provincial parks, conservation areas, and wildlife reserves within the Watershed provide spaces for outdoor activities and nature appreciation.
- Indigenous-led tourism allows visitors to experience the rich cultural heritage and traditional practices of Indigenous Peoples.

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Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Watershed Introduction

Greetings,

I am the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Watershed, and I extend a warm welcome to you. Nestled in the heart of Turtle Island, I encompass a vast and awe-inspiring expanse of land and water. As you embark on this journey through my diverse landscapes, allow me to introduce myself and share my story.

Long before any political boundaries were formed, my lands and waters were cared for by the Original Peoples, each with their own rich heritage and deep-rooted connections to the lands and waters. The Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Huron-Wendat, Potawatomi, Innu and many others have shaped my history, carrying forward their traditions and stewardship practices for countless generations. Their presence within me is a testament to the enduring spirit and resilience of Indigenous cultures.

I am a majestic and interconnected network of lands and waters that spans across the traditional territories of over 200 Indigenous Nations and communities — and the provinces of Ontario and Quebec in Canada, as well as the states of New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota in the United States. With my expansive reach, I am home to more than 40 million people, who rely on my abundant resources and cherish the natural beauty I provide.

Throughout my vast territory, you will encounter breathtaking wonders that have captivated the imaginations of people for centuries. From the Great Lakes — Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie, and Ontario — to the St. Lawrence River that flows to the Atlantic ocean, I boast fresh waters that sustain a remarkable array of flora and fauna. My forests, wetlands, and coastal regions provide sanctuary to countless species, showcasing the intricate web of life that relies on my nurturing embrace.

Join me and explore the wonders of my watershed, where land and water unite, shaping a vibrant ecosystem that inspires and sustains. Together, we will delve into the stories of those who call me home, understand the challenges I face, and appreciate the urgent need to protect and preserve the treasures I hold.

