

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 one of the largest freshwater ecosystems in the world.
- It covers approximately 246,000 km².
- The combined volume of the Great Lakes exceeds 22,000 km³, representing about one-fifth of the planet's fresh surface water.
- Lake Superior, the largest Great Lake by surface area, contains around 10% of the world's fresh surface water by volume.

Indigenous connections

- The Watershed holds a deep connection and significance to many 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.

Population and industry

- The Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Watershed is home to at least 40 million people, with some estimates placing the population closer to 60 million.
- It contains a mix of Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities spread across both Canada and the United States. Major cities in the watershed include Toronto, Montreal, Chicago, and Detroit.
- The Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Seaway is a major shipping route, carrying over 200 million tonnes of cargo each year.
- Manufacturing, shipping, agriculture, and tourism have all played key roles in shaping the region's economy and landscape.
- Fertile farmland supports crops such as corn, soybeans, and fruit.
- The watershed is also a major tourism destination, attracting visitors to its cultural sites, natural wonders, and recreational opportunities.

Environmental concerns and conservation

- The Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Watershed faces pollution, habitat loss, invasive species, and climate change.
- Governments, NGOs, and cross-border agreements are supporting habitat restoration, pollution control, invasive species management, and ecosystem monitoring.
- Indigenous Nations are leading co-management, monitoring, and species protection initiatives, blending Traditional Ecological Knowledge with Western science to safeguard the watershed.

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Marine life and biodiversity

- The Great Lakes–St. Lawrence Watershed supports a rich diversity of plants and animals, including fish, birds, mammals, amphibians, and invertebrates.
- The lakes and rivers are home to native and introduced species such as lake trout, walleye, Chinook and Coho salmon, yellow perch, and sturgeon.
- Wetlands provide essential habitat for waterfowl, migratory birds, amphibians, reptiles, and other wildlife, supporting breeding, nesting, and migration.
- The St. Lawrence River widens into the St. Lawrence Estuary as it approaches the Gulf of St. Lawrence near Quebec, where freshwater from the river mixes with saltwater from the Atlantic. This area—roughly from Quebec City to the Gulf—is considered an estuary and is a key feeding and breeding area for marine mammals, including the endangered St. Lawrence beluga whale, as well as for migratory fish and other aquatic species.

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.