



## Sean O'Connor: I Am a Citizen of the....Anacostia River?

By My Wonderful World Intern on November 18, 2010 9:28 AM | [1 Comment](#) | [No TrackBacks](#)

Sean is the project coordinator of educational maps for National Geographic Education. When he's not creating maps or advising his colleagues on mapping issues, he enjoys researching history, canoeing and kayaking, and exploring the world around him. Besides his work at National Geographic, Sean helps run a non-profit focused on educational development in the West African nation of Liberia. Sean challenges blog readers to find Liberia on a map and take a moment to learn about its fascinating history.



Photo: The Anacostia River starts in Maryland and runs through Washington, DC before emptying into the Potomac River and eventually into the Chesapeake Bay.

I am an Anacostian. I am a member of the Anacostian community with more than a half million other people. Our community is in Potomac county. Potomac county is within the greater Chesapeake nation.

Translation: I live in the Anacostia watershed in Washington, DC. The Anacostia watershed includes parts of Washington, DC and two counties in adjacent Maryland, Prince George's and Montgomery. The Anacostia River drains into the Potomac River, as do many other watersheds. The Potomac River is a major tributary of the Chesapeake Bay, the largest estuary in the United States.

We think of our citizenship at many different scales, at different times. We are citizens of a town or a city. Of a state, province, or territory. And of a nation. And we are all global citizens, our actions affecting everyone, everywhere.

I propose putting a different spin on our concept of citizenship and extending this to our watershed. What is your watershed citizenship and why should you care? Just as we have the ability to affect our government through our vote in a democracy, so too do we have the ability to affect our watershed, sometimes through our votes, but more directly through our individual actions.

To think about your space and your personal geography in terms of a watershed is certainly alternative, but I doubt it would be at all difficult to get any one reader of this blog to disagree that it is important to value our water bodies and take actions to protect the health of our streams and rivers. When you really sit down with most people - whether they be farmers, businessmen, nurses, or school children - and talk to them about their value systems



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regarding freshwater and our treatment of it, I wager that the results will be overwhelmingly positive. People do not like to see our rivers, streams, and water supplies degraded. Yet our collective wishes for the good health of our freshwater systems don't always translate to positive results. Where is the disconnect?

What's that stream that runs under the bridge you drive over on your way home from work? Where does it lead to? Where does it come from? Where does that storm drain lead to that collects rainwater, oil residues, and trash on the corner of your block? The problem is, a lot of people don't know. They live lives intimately connected to our water systems, yet they can't name the stream that runs under Route 1 just before the 7-11.

When you are disconnected from your local freshwater geography, it is hard to find reason to invest in the health and well-being of local waterways. That's why during Geography Awareness Week 2010 I offer you five ways to get connected with your freshwater geography and revive your watershed citizenship:

- 1) Use the EPA Surf Your Watershed [<http://cfpub.epa.gov/surf/locate/index.cfm>] feature, enter your zip code, and pull up some information on your local watershed.
- 2) Get interactive with maps. Use your favorite mapping tools on the web - like Google Earth or Bing Maps - and dig into your local river systems. We so often use features like Google Maps to look up driving directions and overlook the river network that is included in the base layer of the map. Try tracing the stream or river closest to your house from its source to its end.
- 3) REALLY get into maps. USGS topo maps offer detailed views of river and stream networks. You can download and order by mail prints of these maps from the USGS website [<http://www.usgs.gov/pubprod/>]. Try printing a map out, laminating it, and using erasable markers to trace your watershed and the stream networks within it.
- 4) Join your watershed associations. Watersheds around the United States are set up to involve watershed citizens in the protection and preservation of local waterways. Does your watershed have a citizens association protecting it? The EPA Surf Your Watershed feature lists some of these organizations. Or, you can do a quick search online. If your watershed does not have one, consider starting one.
- 5) Get outside. Investigate your local watershed with your eyes, ears, and waterproof boots (try bringing your camera phone with GPS along, too). The best way to connect with your local watershed is to explore it yourself.

The Anacostia River has seen some tough times and still continues to face problems with the influx of trash and toxins into the river. But as Anacostians, we're lucky enough to have a vibrant Anacostia Watershed Society [<http://www.anacostiaws.org/explore>] and classroom programs like the Living Classrooms [<http://livingclassroomsdc.org/about.html>] program that get kids out onto the river. There is no better way to get a young citizen to invest in their watershed than by getting them out on the local waterways.

And as of January 1, 2010, local grocery stores in Washington, DC are required to charge 5 cents for disposable bags in an effort to keep plastic out of local rivers and landfills. Proceeds from the "bag tax" go toward Anacostia conservation programs. And it's working, with 66% fewer plastic bags being pulled from the Anacostia River this year in a watershed cleanup event. [source: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704575304575296243891721972.html>].

I am a proud citizen of the Anacostia watershed. What about you?

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