

Raritan Basin Watershed Management Project

Fact Sheet #2

THE IMPORTANCE OF RIPARIAN AREAS

What are Riparian Areas?

Riparian areas are ecosystems adjacent to a river or waterway that, in an undisturbed state, provide habitat for wildlife and help improve water quality. Riparian areas are usually transitional zones between wetland and upland areas and are generally comprised of grasses, shrubs, trees, or a mix of vegetation types that exist within a variety of landscapes (e.g., natural, agricultural, forested, suburban, and urban).

Riparian areas vary in width, shape, and character and are exceptionally rich in a wide variety of plants and animals. Natural riparian areas also perform a broad range of functions with respect to stream health, wildlife habitat, and the economic and social values of many people.

Why Are Riparian Areas Important?

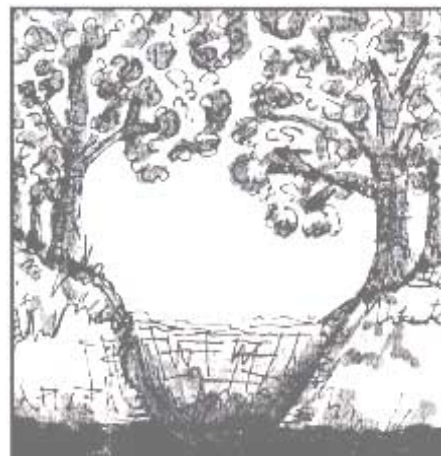
Streamside riparian areas improve the quality of water resources by removing harmful pollutants in storm water runoff. Natural riparian areas help preserve land areas along streams, rivers and other water bodies that are frequently unsuitable for other land use applications.

Riparian areas provide a number of ecological benefits to aquatic ecosystems including, but not limited to:

- Maintaining habitat for fish and other aquatic organisms by moderating water temperatures and increasing the amount of available oxygen in the water
- Storing flood waters, thereby decreasing damage to property
- Stabilizing streambanks and reducing channel erosion

- Offering recreational and educational opportunities
- Providing habitat for terrestrial wildlife species
- Improving the aesthetics of stream corridors (which can increase property values)
- Providing open space along stream corridors
- Trapping/removing sediment from runoff
- Trapping/removing phosphorus, nitrogen, and other nutrients from runoff that can accelerate eutrophication (a natural process by which water bodies fill in with soil and decaying plant material)
- Trapping/removing other contaminants from runoff, such as pesticides
- Replenishing ground water resources.

For the reasons listed above, it is important that we help preserve these natural land areas in order to protect valuable habitat for wildlife and people, as well as to maintain and improve existing water quality.



Naturally vegetated riparian areas filter pollutants, sediment and other particles out of surface and ground water runoff prior to its discharge into stream channels.

What Can You Do To Help?

Management measures taken to help protect riparian areas include the acquisition of open space areas, the development of land use ordinances, and following sound development practices. The adoption of land use ordinances by local governments not only helps protect riparian areas, but also enhances the quality of life in local communities.

Additional steps that can be taken by local government, farmers, landowners and residents to help protect riparian areas include:

- Limiting activities near the water's edge to prevent removal or trampling of streamside vegetation
- Cleaning trash from riparian areas and streams
- Avoiding building or storing of materials on streambanks
- Implementing streambank restoration projects
- Preventing livestock from grazing along the water's edge -- damaging plants and creating areas of exposed soils can lead to erosion
- Developing and implementing storm water management and riparian area ordinances at the community level
- Avoiding the "hardening" of streambanks with concrete, bulkheads and rip-rap
- Avoiding the mowing of lawns to the edge of the streambank

For More Information.....

The Raritan Basin Watershed Management Project is a partnership of government, non-profit and private organizations working together to improve the water resources of the Raritan River. To learn more about the Raritan Basin Watershed Management Project or for additional information on how to protect and enhance riparian areas in your community, contact the New Jersey Water Supply Authority, Watershed Protection Programs Unit, at (732) 356-9344 or visit our website at www.raritanbasin.org. Also, you may contact the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's (NJDEP) Raritan Region staff at (609) 633-7020 or visit the NJDEP Division of Watershed Management website at www.state.nj.us/dep/watershedmgt/.