



Loss, Healing, and Connections in our Watershed

2019 Hike for Hospice/Battle River Watershed Day

Hi! My name is Sarah Skinner, and I'm the Watershed Planning Coordinator with the Battle River Watershed Alliance. My work centres around watershed education and stewardship – helping to increase understanding of land and water in this watershed that we call home, and working with people from across the region to take action to protect or improve the health of our watershed.

So what exactly is a watershed? One of my favourite definitions is from John Wesley Powell, who described a watershed as “that area of land, a bounded hydrologic system, within which all living things are inextricably linked by their common water course and where, as humans settled, simple logic demanded that they become part of a community.” This is a key theme I wanted to focus on today – our connections to this community of which we are a part, within this watershed that we all have in common. The Battle River watershed is that entire region where water will flow towards the Battle River – our common water source.

A tagline that we often use at the Battle River Watershed Alliance is that we are all about “connecting people to place for action”. This goal is rooted in our belief that connection to this place is the foundation for building our understanding of this place, our relationship with this place, and a sense of care and concern for what happens to this place. There's another quote that I love, from a man named Baba Dioum, which speaks to this idea. He said, “In the end, we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught.” The BRWA's work, then, is in large part about recognizing the connections people already have with places across the watershed, and also providing opportunities for people to get to know this place better, in all its nuances, diversity, and beauty. There are so many beautiful nooks and crannies – true gems of our natural and cultural heritage – across this whole watershed. It's incredibly meaningful to bring people together to come to know and love these places, and hopefully, to begin to take action to care for these places and make sure that their health and integrity is maintained or improved into the future.

When you come to know and love a place, there is also a greater potential to experience distress or loss when you see that place degraded or damaged. A new term has actually arisen, called “solastalgia”, to describe this sense of grief or distress in witnessing environmental changes (especially involving degradation or harm to the natural world).

Just one example of how I've experienced this in my life is that where I'm from, in Turtleford, SK, there's a beautiful nature trail behind town that is home to an incredible diversity of native grasses, berry bushes, trees, and wildlife, and home to the most vibrant community of crocuses

every spring. A few years ago, the Town of Turtleford was developing a new street on the edge of town, and ended up cutting out half of a hill along the nature trail so they could use the soil to level the ground where the new street would be. This was felt as an immense loss to many people who knew and loved the nature trail – the destruction of a whole hillside that had been home to native grasses, crocuses, and so many Saskatoon bushes that were highly prized and enjoyed by the community. While this may seem like a small loss (or no loss at all) to some, people like myself felt that loss deeply, recognizing the natural beauty and ecological integrity that had been destroyed, and also recognizing that it was symptomatic of the many other ways, and often at much larger scales, that we are causing damage to the ecological integrity of our home, through our actions in and around land, air and water across the prairies, Canada, and around the world.

Looking closer to home, the health of land, water and the diversity of life in the Battle River watershed has suffered from degradation in many ways. I don't have time to talk about this in detail, but the health of the Battle River, and our watershed as a whole, is suffering in many ways. But all is not lost! There is hope in the many incredible acts of stewardship – both large and small – that people are taking across the watershed to care for this place, restoring the health of places that have been degraded and protecting places that are still in a healthy state. Nature also brings signs of resilience and healing in the face of degradation and loss. While that hillside behind Turtleford will never be the same, it has healed – slowly but surely, in whatever ways it can – from that loss. While the scars may never be gone completely, wounds do heal. Nature teaches lessons of incredible adaptation and resilience, bouncing back and finding new balances amid ever-shifting sands of environmental change. And it's significant to recognize that we are part of nature – part of this resilient community – not separate from it. These lessons of resilience and healing are for us, too.

And this watershed community is a loving and supportive one, providing comfort and consolation for those who seek it out. This community involves people, of course, but also the much broader community of land, water, plants, wildlife, soil, air. Many studies have shown the numerous benefits people experience from time spent in nature, and from feeling a sense of connection to the natural world. Nature connections have been shown to support our health and happiness, both in terms of our physical health – having a positive effect on things like high blood pressure, diabetes, respiratory illnesses, and cardiovascular disease, as well as our mental wellbeing – improving our vitality and mood; reducing stress, anxiety and mental fatigue; and restoring our attention capacity, mindfulness, and sense of the meaningfulness of life.

So in closing, I think building connections and a relationship with this beautiful watershed we call home can serve as a reminder of the broader community of which we are a part – a community that shares with us in the many seasons and cycles of life, death, and life again; a community that reminds us that strength and resilience can arise out of loss and hardship; that we have a role to play in repairing damages that have been caused and protecting healthy, intact places that remain; and that there is always beauty to be found, celebrated, and enjoyed.