

**Engendering a sense of watershed identity:  
case studies of tools and techniques**

**FINAL REPORT**

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This TIE Fellowship project culminated in a master's thesis entitled "Constructing Identity: the role of the watershed organization in bringing meaning to the watershed." This fellowship supported an investigation of the foundations and applications of a relatively new idea in watershed management. The concept of "watershed identity" has not been explicitly developed in the academic literature. However, theories of sense of place, place attachment, and place identity are well established across a wide range of disciplines from geography to sociology, and provided a strong position from which to derive a definition for "watershed identity." The outcome of this fellowship project was to offer a working definition of and conceptual framework for watershed identity drawing on these preexisting threads, and to articulate a role for watershed organizations in the construction, interpretation, and communication of watershed identity to the citizens of a watershed. The following paragraph summarizes the main research findings:

Watershed identity is an elusive concept that is used to describe people's attachment to and sense of a particular kind of place—namely, a watershed. Watershed identity draws together

ideas developed in a wide range of disciplines from psychology to human geography. A limited though growing body of research indicates that these ideas—place attachment, sense of place, and by extension, watershed identity—are useful conceptions that may help to explain people's awareness of a watershed and their willingness to change personal behaviors to promote a watershed's environmental integrity. Complex environmental problems exacerbated by human development are impacting watersheds throughout the United States. Watersheds and their advocates—watershed organizations—can benefit from this increased awareness in a variety of ways; when citizens understand and feel a special connection to a place, they may be better positioned to act in ways that improve that place, through volunteering, voting, or simply making more informed choices in their day-to-day lives. In the research, a theoretical framework drawn from research into people-place connections was crafted to define watershed identity. Four theoretical propositions were employed to describe the watershed organization's roles in the development of watershed identity. Two case studies of watershed organizations in the greater Boston area were then analyzed to test these propositions. The analysis indicated that watershed organizations play several important roles in constructing and mediating watershed identity, including defining the watershed's physical space, constructing and communicating the watershed's symbolic identity, fostering opportunities for individuals to develop functional relationships with the watershed, and connecting individuals who care about the watershed together under common purpose.

The case studies for this research involved the Mystic River Watershed Association and the Charles River Watershed Association. Although the location of these focus watershed organizations was convenient, it was not chosen by default; these watersheds exhibited an ideal set of characteristics to study in contrast to one another, and were generally representative of

watershed organizations around the country. Other watersheds from around the country were considered for investigation, but ultimately proved redundant and were not developed into full case studies. In the course of the case study research, seven formal interviews were conducted and numerous informal interviews and conversations occurred to help clarify and refine the watershed identity framework and its applications.

In addition to the publication of the thesis, this research was presented to the Tufts community and the Mystic Watershed community in several forums, including Tufts Environmental Research Day (04/18/06), Water: Systems, Science, and Society Friday Seminar Series (04/21/06), and the Mystic Watershed Forum (04/28/06). Portions of the thesis are currently being adapted for submission to a professional journal, for possible peer review publication.

**Final Budget**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Amount</b>
Preliminary Research	\$1,500.00
Case Study Research	\$2,000.00
Writing	\$1,850.00
Travel	\$250.00
Printing and Copying	\$200.00
Books and Materials	\$200.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$6,000.00</b>