

Watershed Movements: Analysis

The unique focus of Watershed Movements was to investigate how and why people connect with certain aspects of the natural landscape (such as water), and how these connections contribute to their well-being, using narrative and movement to illuminate these connections. The project set out to demonstrate that individuals could become more aware of their well-being through narrative storytelling about rivers, as well as engaging in embodied movement in group settings to call attention to the embodied nature of connections to water and to each other.

Participants spoke frequently about the meaningfulness of the embodied elements of the intervention, and how these elements fostered a sense of connection between themselves and the river, as well as to others. These experiences appeared to support a more personal and socially oriented dimension of well-being, complementing a growing awareness of the river itself. However, noticeable differences emerged when analyzed through a lens of spatial differentiation, or the urban/rural disparity of the watersheds observed.

During analysis, three dominant themes emerged. First, individuals from the study generally expressed a connection to the river, though individuals from the Genesee and Raquette watersheds described these connections quite distinctly. Second, in reflecting on their relationship to their respective watershed, there was a distinct geographic (urban/rural) discrepancy in those that expressed an individualistic versus an interconnected orientation. Finally, this individualistic versus interconnected orientation also seemed to be a good predictor in how individuals expressed a duty of care for the watershed, with the former expressing a more direct responsibility and the latter expressing a more complex, networked responsibility.

Connection to the river – Individuals from different watersheds expressed their connection to the river in different terms, especially regarding where they fit in this equation. Prior to the intervention, Genesee residents spoke in a sort of vague and generic way about their relationship to the river, or to water. There was often an acknowledgment that residents *should* feel connected to the river given their proximity to it, but when asked to articulate this connection, it seemed that the descriptions were mostly superficial and did not demonstrate exceptionally deep thought or insights on the topic, and especially not a particularly embodied connection. Additionally, a number of individuals described the Genesee as a sort of accessory to the city, rather than an entity on its own, a fact that may have created further cognitive distance for some individuals.

Following the intervention, participants from the Genesee seemed to have adopted a more robust vocabulary and approach for describing their relationship to the river, as well as how this relationship impacted their well-being. It is worth noting here that this was unique to the Genesee case, as there was much less discrepancy in pre and post-intervention descriptions for residents of the Raquette, as those respondents had a more robust vocabulary for this connection from the beginning.

For Raquette participants, engagement with the intervention often served as a gentle reminder rather than a revelation, reinforcing practices of attentiveness and appreciation that appeared to already be woven into their daily experience of the river. Many expressed that the activities prompted them to pause with greater intentionality, acknowledging a relationship that felt natural and ongoing. By contrast, Genesee participants were more likely to describe a newly heightened awareness, crediting the interventions with drawing their attention to aspects of the river they had previously overlooked. This distinction highlights a baseline difference in connection to place, where rural residents entered the study with a more embedded and continuous sense of river relationship, whereas urban residents tended to experience the river as peripheral until intentionally engaged.

Raquette residents started with a higher baseline for describing their connection to the river than Genesee residents. They were more likely also to express sentiments like gratitude for the river, and to personify the river in ways that evoked feelings of kinship to a greater extent than Genesee residents. For the Raquette residents, there seemed to be little change from how they described this connection before the intervention was performed to after the intervention. As will be noted elsewhere, the location of the Raquette intervention being indoors is worth marking as an asterisk under methodology, as this differed from the outdoor setting of the Genesee intervention.

For participants along the Genesee, growth in their connection to the river appeared to be influenced by observing others engage with it. Several individuals suggested that seeing peers interact with the river made them more likely to reflect on their own relationship to it. This pattern indicates that, in the Genesee context, the development of a river connection relied more on social modeling than on established personal routines, which contrasts with the more embedded and self-sustaining forms of connection observed among Raquette residents.

Raquette participants, on the other hand, often described their shifts in perception as occurring through an awareness of the group, noting that they experienced their own relationship to the river in part through the reflections of others. This pattern suggests that, in the Raquette context, the intervention encouraged a socially mediated form of connection, where participants' engagement with the river was intertwined with their

attention to collective perception and shared experience. The key difference to note is that Genesee participants became more aware of their own relationship to the watershed through the observation of others, while Raquette participants became more aware of a networked relationship within the watershed by connecting with the experiences of others.

Individualism versus Interconnectedness – Building further on the first theme, an apparent recurring theme was the way in which participants seemed to express their experiences with the watershed in ways that illuminated an individualistic versus interconnected orientation to the natural environment. Residents of the Genesee focused on an *individualistic* orientation to the river, especially prior to the intervention, describing their personal relationships to the river rather than describing these relationships as existing within a networked system, such as an ecosystem. This was consistent with how Genesee respondents also described their own well-being, which was in a very limited, personal way that did not account as much for the influence of environmental conditions or where these individuals may have fit within a larger system.

On the other hand, Raquette residents once again started from a higher baseline of expressing feelings of interconnectedness (or perhaps kinship) with the river, themes which did not come up for Genesee residents even *following* the intervention. As a result, Raquette residents did not report feeling much differently in regards to an individualistic or interconnected orientation to the river; Raquette residents started the project from an interconnected vantage and also concluded there. However, several Raquette individuals described becoming more aware of the perspectives of others, indicating that the activity fostered a form of social reflection alongside environmental awareness. It is important to note that much of the Raquette data was likely shaped by the indoor setting of the intervention, which may have limited direct sensory engagement with the river and contributed to the more conceptual framing of connection.

Following the intervention, participants from the Genesee were more likely to speak to the *shared* experiences they had with other respondents, as well as making statements that exemplified an empathetic orientation following the stories they listened to from these other respondents. In other words, following the intervention, residents of the Genesee appeared to express that they were sharing in a more communalistic exercise and that this had perhaps shifted the ways that they conceptualized their personal relationship with the river to being more multi-directional and interpersonal. Interestingly, Genesee respondents *still* maintained an orientation of personal growth following these insights, recognizing their interconnectedness with the river and other participants, but simultaneously feeling that

these things were contributing to benefitting their own *personal* well-being. In other words, there was a recognition that they were participating together, yet still separate.

Residents along the Raquette River consistently framed their relationship to the water in a way that emphasized collective well-being and ecological interdependence, often linking the health of the river to the vitality of wildlife, their community, and human health more broadly. In contrast, Genesee participants more frequently described the river in individualized terms, focusing on its immediate impact on their own physical or emotional state rather than situating themselves within a larger network of ecological or social relationships. This contrast reflects a broader pattern of collectivism in rural Raquette narratives versus individualism in the urban Genesee context, suggesting that rural residents are more inclined to view the river as a shared, living entity that sustains multiple forms of life, whereas urban residents tend to frame the river as a personal amenity or backdrop for their own well-being.

Care for the River – Finally, these other factors influenced the ways in which participants expressed care for their respective watersheds and rivers. Residents of the Genesee were more likely to describe their relationship to the river in a more utilitarian way than to describe emotional connections; particularly, Genesee residents were more likely to describe the river as capable of providing some benefit *to* them, rather than conceptualizing this relationship as a bi-directional flow of resources or care. This trend was apparent through the pre-intervention stage and did not seem to dissipate much following the intervention, though respondents did seem to acknowledge that they were capable of caring for the river through stewardship activities in the future.

Raquette residents, on the other hand, throughout the experience expressed more of a *duty of care* for the river that was reciprocal in nature. These respondents were more likely to express sentiments of being cared for *by* the river and feeling obliged to perform their duties of care to the river in return. What was described by Raquette residents more closely resembled a reciprocal relationship, particularly with a close family member, than a natural fixture from which they were deriving benefit. Again, this was the difference between a uni-directional relationship, as exemplified by Genesee residents, and a multi-directional relationship, as exemplified by Raquette residents.

When asked about threats to the rivers, Genesee respondents frequently foregrounded human-generated pollution, such as trash, chemical runoff, and other visible indicators of environmental degradation. Their framing of concern often reflected a human-centric perspective, in which the river's health was conceived primarily in terms of contamination

that might indirectly affect people. By contrast, Raquette participants were more likely to highlight ecological processes, such as the maintenance of aquatic connectivity and the uninterrupted movement of fish and wildlife, signaling a broader, systems-oriented form of care. This divergence speaks to a slightly more nuanced difference in each group's care for the river, in which urban residents tend to view river health through the lens of human impact and safety, whereas rural residents often situate their concern within the river's larger ecological network.

Conclusion

Taken together, these findings illustrate how narrative and embodied practices can deepen human–environment relationships while revealing how spatial context and baseline orientation shape these connections from the outset. For Genesee residents, the intervention often shifted a more peripheral or utilitarian view of the river toward greater awareness, richer vocabulary, and a nascent sense of reciprocity, aided by shared experiences and social modeling. For Raquette residents, whose connection to the river was already rooted in attentiveness and interdependence, the activities largely affirmed and subtly expanded existing perspectives through collective reflection. These patterns suggest that urban contexts may benefit from interventions that bridge initial cognitive and emotional distance, while rural contexts may be better served by approaches that sustain embedded relationships. Across both settings, narrative and movement emerged as valuable tools for fostering environmental stewardship and strengthening community–watershed bonds.