

ISSUE NINETEEN : FALL 2021
OPEN RIVERS :
RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

SHIFT



<http://openrivers.umn.edu>

An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking water, place & community
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

ISSN 2471-190X

The cover image of Santa Monica Pier is by Omar Prestwich.

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Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community is produced by the [University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing Services](https://www.lib.umn.edu/publishing/) and the [University of Minnesota Institute for Advanced Study](https://www.umn.edu/advanced-study/).

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ISSN 2471-190X

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TEACHING AND PRACTICE

WATER? I'VE GOT A STORY ABOUT THAT

By Angie Hong

Beneath the clear brown water the mussel paused, resting softly on the sand. Behind it, a long arcing trail unfurled. Puff. The mussel exhaled, sending a small burst of water out of its body, and in doing so, it traveled one centimeter further across the river bottom. Rest, exhale, repeat. The water lapped gently against the sandbar and a heron glided across the water to perch on a snag. Rest, exhale, repeat. Overhead, the sun slid slowly down the sky and into the horizon. Hour by hour, the ribbon grew longer as the mussel in the river slowly, ever so slowly, traced its circles in the sand.

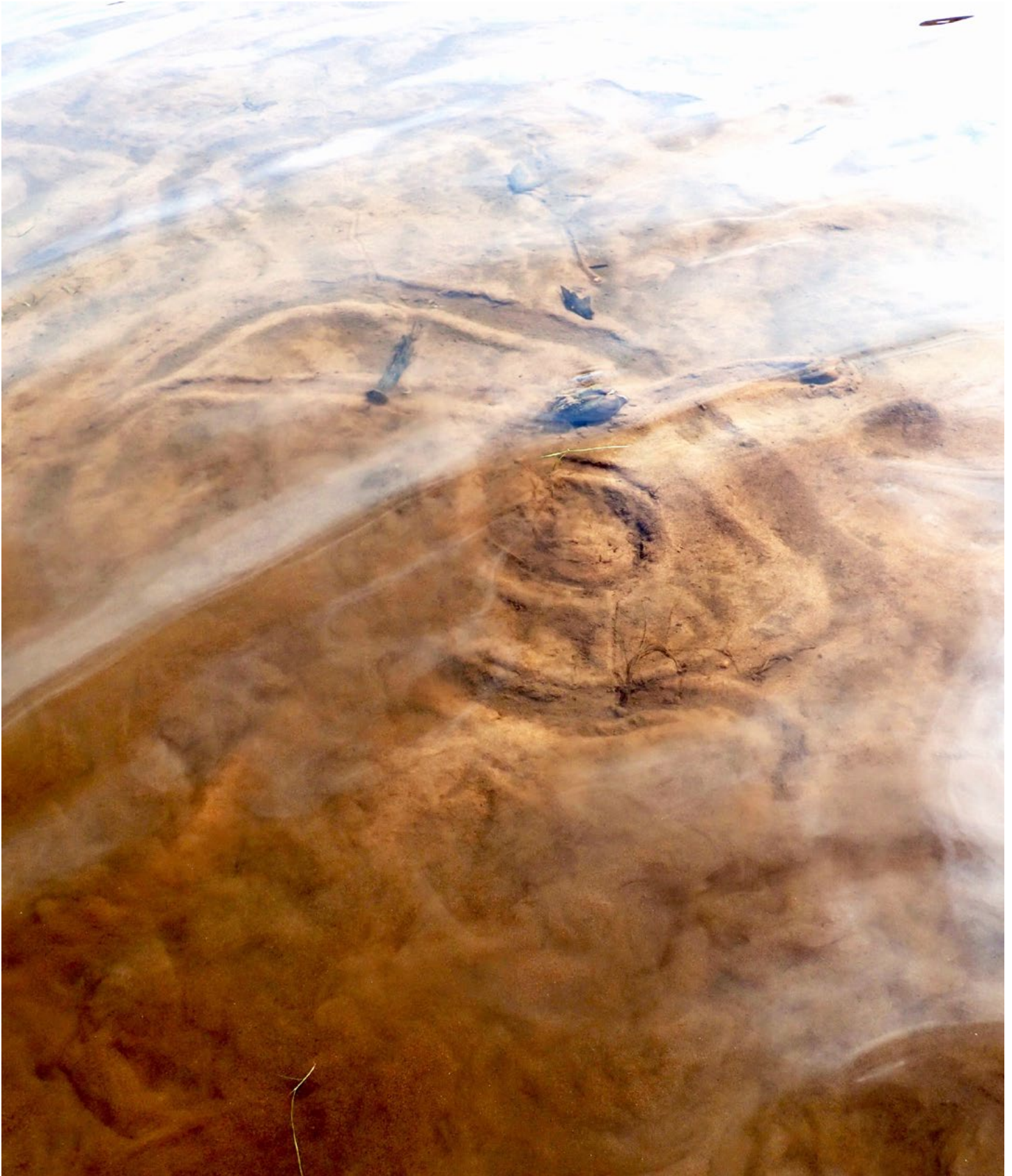
Tracing Lazy Circles in the Sand, Aug. 14, 2017

The first time someone suggested that I write a weekly newspaper column about water, I smiled, nodded, and mentally filed the suggestion away in the corner of my mind where I store mindless chatter and bad ideas. How much could there possibly be to say about water, and who would want to read about such a mundane topic?

A few months later, after having been persuaded otherwise, I sent my first few articles off to the Stillwater Gazette and other local papers. Did you know that you live in a watershed? Did you know that dog poop carries *E. Coli*? (Ho hum, I'm already yawning.)



St. Croix River in Stillwater, Minnesota, autumn 2020. Image courtesy of Angie Hong.



Native mussels in the St. Croix River in Minnesota create curving trails in the sand. Image courtesy of Angie Hong.

After a couple of weeks, however, I began to find my groove. I wrote about gardening, riding my bike, local volunteers, and recently completed watershed projects. The more I wrote, the more the words flowed, and I began to realize that water really does connect everything and everyone.

This year marks my fifteenth year coordinating the East Metro Water Resource Education Program and my fifteenth year writing weekly news columns about water—that's roughly 780 articles about anything and everything related to water, for anyone keeping track.

A multi-pronged approach to water education

When the East Metro Water Resource Education Program (EMWREP) was formed in 2006, the founding partners had three main goals: (1) educate the public and raise awareness about local water issues; (2) share resources to get the most value out of limited funding; and (3) improve collaboration between governmental entities in

Washington County, Minnesota. The program launched with 6 local government partners and has since grown to 25, including Washington County, Washington Conservation District, all 8 watershed management organizations in the county, and 14 cities and townships.



Neighbors in Lake Elmo, Minnesota gather at an EMWREP-sponsored community event to learn about aquatic invasive species and landscaping practices to protect local lakes. Image courtesy of CleanWaterMN.org.

EMWREP uses a multi-pronged approach to water education that includes information and awareness-raising for the general public; guidance and motivation to help landowners complete clean water projects on their land; professional training for businesses, contractors, and municipal staff; and workshops for local

decision-makers such as city councils, county commissioners, and watershed board members. Weekly newspaper columns are just one of many education strategies we employ, but they serve as a consistent connection that helps to amplify our educational messages and reach new people around the county.

More than one way to tell the same story

“Before I had grandchildren,” says Nor Olson, “all of my pictures were of our prairie.” We are standing in her kitchen, and Olson has just finished giving me a tour of her property, located in Stillwater Township just north of Silver Creek. When the Olson’s bought their home a few years back, the land included an old farm field gone to weeds, as well as a rather large area of lawn surrounding the house. Having previous experience with prairies that she knew and loved, including 50 acres of land elsewhere

in the township, Olson decided to bring the prairie to her new house as well. Now their home sits nestled between woods, a wetland and a few acres of prairie – a microcosm of the habitats found in the St. Croix Valley.

[Looking for Low-Maintenance on a Large Scale, July 24, 2012](#)

The best advice that I can offer to environmental professionals, volunteers, and advocates is to continue looking for new ways to connect with



*Nor Olson stands in a restored prairie on her property in Stillwater Township, Minnesota.
Image courtesy of CleanWaterMN.org.*

the public. The vast majority of Minnesotans care deeply about the health of our lakes, rivers, and drinking water, but people connect with water and nature in different ways.

Over the course of a year, my weekly news column usually includes a variety of different story types:

1. **Informative:** Information about local topics of concern, such as stormwater pollution, lake water quality, and groundwater contamination
2. **How-To:** Guidance on household best practices, including gardening, lawn care, and invasive species management
3. **Success stories:** Individuals taking action to protect water, and partner-led projects
4. **Promotions:** Info about stewardship programs and upcoming events

5. **Nature recreation:** Stories that highlight local destinations and outdoor activities
6. **“Deep thoughts”:** Contemplations on our spiritual and emotional connections with nature

In addition to thinking of creative ways to package our water stewardship messages, we’ve expanded our virtual communications to adapt to the changing media landscape. Four of our local newspapers have gone out of business in the past five years, leaving an information gap in the most populated portions of our county. Meanwhile, social media platforms have surged in popularity. Publishing my weekly newspaper column on a WordPress blog site (www.eastmetrowater.org) makes it easy to include multimedia components, such as photos and video, and share the content via [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#), and email.



*Moonrise over a snow covered field at William O'Brien State Park in Minnesota.
Image courtesy of Angie Hong.*

I no longer think of a newspaper article as a stand-alone outreach tool. Rather, these articles are part of a comprehensive education package that might also include an in-person workshop, direct mailing to high priority landowners, a

short video on [TikTok](#), and a series of posts on Facebook and [Instagram](#).

[See video on native plantings on Tiktok.](#)

Being brave enough to share myself

My job is to teach people how to keep water clean, and at times, that feels like a minor concern in the jumble of all that is happening. And yet, it occurs to me also that one reason we work so hard to protect

our water and natural resources is to ensure that they are there to douse the flames when the world begins to smolder.

[Finding Joy in the Snow, Jan. 15, 2021](#)



Native mussel in the St. Croix River. The river supports 41 species of freshwater mussel, including several endangered species. Image courtesy of Angie Hong.

When I meet local residents, they often tell me that they feel like they already know me after reading my column for years. Though it can sometimes feel scary to share pieces of myself in a publication going out to so many strangers, I know that these personal stories also help me to connect with people who might not otherwise be interested in working with local government or reading about environmental issues.

As I look back at articles I've written over the years, it is as though my column is a personal journal, interspersed with links to cost-share grants and upcoming workshops. Among these tips and tales, there are stories that make me laugh, and others that make me cry. They track

the changing seasons from one year to the next and mark our progress as local partners continue working to protect and restore lakes and streams throughout the county.

The mussel's journey is both slow and long. As the curving path in the sand grows steadily longer, years turn into decades, and sometimes even a century. Answering machines give way to cellphones, and typewriters to computers. Past the river bluff, a prairie becomes a farm becomes a subdivision. Still the mussel carries on, carving circles in the sand. Rest, exhale, repeat.

[Tracing Lazy Circles in the Sand, Aug. 14, 2017](#)

Recommended Citation

Hong, Angie. 2021. "Water? I've Got a Story About That." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 19. <https://editions.lib.umn.edu/openrivers/article/water-ive-got-a-story-about-that>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.8255>

About the Author

Angie Hong is the coordinator for Minnesota's East Metro Water Resource Education Program, a local government partnership with 25 members that is hosted by the Washington Conservation District. She holds a M.S. degree in natural resources science and management with an emphasis on environmental education (University of Minnesota Twin Cities) and a B.S. in zoology (University of Wisconsin-Madison). Prior to this position, she worked as a naturalist in the Twin Cities area. In her free time, she enjoys singing, competing in triathlons, and exploring the prairies, woods, and waterways of the St. Croix Valley. Follow her on TikTok [@mnnature_awesome](#) or read her tips and tales about keeping water clean at www.eastmetrowater.org