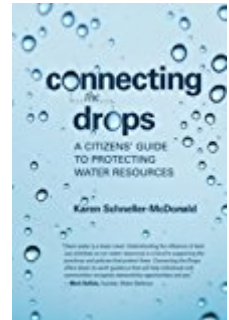


Karen Schneller-McDonald. *Connecting the Drops: A Citizens' Guide to Protecting Water Resources.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015. 288 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-5017-0028-6.



Reviewed by Nathan S. McConnell

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Commissioned by Jonathan Wlasiuk (Lyman Briggs College, Michigan State University)

Fittingly for this reviewer, Karen Schneller-McDonald begins her work with a quote from Norman Maclean's *A River Runs through It* (1976). There is no better way into a Missoulian's heart. As a citizen, fisherman, father, legislator, and consumer of water, I am particularly vulnerable to Schneller-McDonald's call to action. This work is at once educational, instructive, and passionate--particularly useful for citizens who care about the one thing we cannot live without: water.

Schneller-McDonald organizes the book into three main sections, which this review addresses in turn. First, she begins by describing the subject in a way that sets up what follows. Headwaters, which is described as "the initial source of water for all river systems," naturally comes first (p. 34). Schneller-McDonald tackles the basics of water's role in natural resource systems. In order to have a meaningful impact on the actions they take, citizens must first have an understanding of what they are fighting for. Water is a key player in systems ranging from ecosystems to watersheds to weather cycles. Schneller-McDonald lays out the

basics, describing water's constant movement from falling onto the land, seeping into the ground, and flowing across the earth's surface, finally landing in a lake or pond. Water also cycles through plants and animals, returning to the air and filtering into the soil. Nothing is left untouched by water. It turns out this is a good thing: Schneller-McDonald sets out all the benefits that water--and its movement--provides. Such movement regulates disease and pests, while protecting from natural calamities and even pollinating crops (which has enormous economic benefits). Schneller-McDonald next describes watersheds and their importance. The interconnectivity of water, whether on the surface or underground, is undeniably fascinating. Water interacts with soil, vegetation, storm drains, and much more, and each time water crosses a different composition, it changes. Knowledge of how these systems work is central to the book's focus: minimizing the impact and restoring the damage that humans have done to water systems. Throughout part 1, Schneller-

McDonald helpfully includes maps and figures that depict water systems in their various forms.

Part 2 gets into the specifics of human land use and its impact on water. To have a substantive, positive impact on water policy, it takes more than simply saying “development affects water.” What does it take? Here Schneller-McDonald builds on the momentum created in the previous section. Challenging the current paradigm that requires regulations, Schneller-McDonald asks us to go beyond the things covered by rules and procedures. She pulls the lens out so that we consider how even relatively small acts (a small clearcut, a subdivision development) have large impacts. The encouragement to participate and to voice concerns comes with cautionary tales and guidance. Schneller-McDonald discusses all sorts of scenarios in which human actions affect water, from the beginning of a development project to ongoing uses after the project is completed. Understanding situations that degrade water is important, but it is also necessary to comprehend what degradation actually means. Such a task is not easy for the non-scientific among us. Schneller-McDonald leads us by the hand through the chemical thicket, and when she is done, the reader has a solid understanding of water pollution’s basic science. Why is this important? There are a lot of vested interests that have impacts on water, and sometimes these entities try to confuse the public at large with either too much or not enough scientific data. Schneller-McDonald arms us with ample resources to address any such subversion. Schneller-McDonald points to a number of energy-extraction projects to underscore the importance of citizen knowledge. We all know about the Deepwater Horizon disaster. We also know about more localized calamities. But do we truly understand what impact those incidents will have on our watersheds in the next month? Next year? Next decade? Schneller urges us to take a comprehensive--dare I say holistic--perspective on humanity’s persistent land use.

The book’s final act is the payoff. Here is where Schneller-McDonald shines. All the pointers on what to look for and what technical jargon means spring into use, as Schneller-McDonald ties together citizen knowledge with citizen action. We understand how to weigh in on the government’s call for comment on a particular project. Schneller-McDonald guides us on how to take our comprehensive viewpoint and put it into regulatory comment or the crafting of a conservation plan. Voicing an opinion that is contrary to an entrenched interest or point of view is not easy, and being on constant guard for misinformation and red herrings can create burnout. The answer is not to throw up our collective hands and go back to our comfortable echo chambers. The answer is to persist: ask questions; get the facts; give voice to your perspective. And when the going gets rough and you need a break, get outside. Go for a hike. Get some fresh air. Schneller-McDonald ends her book on a high note. Recalling Robert Kennedy’s tiny ripple of hope, she reminds us that individual actions can lead to lasting change. In this climate of political uncertainty, there is much to be gained from action. *Connecting the Drops* is the starting point for alleviating our anxiety through positive action.

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