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Mapping out new watershed connections

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Map image courtesy of Canadian Geographic

Geography, according to American professor Dr. Charles Gritzner, can be defined by three simple questions: "What is where?", "Why there?" and "Why care?"

Gritzner's definition - which speaks to location, ecological features and socio-cultural contexts - underlies OPEN Water, a collaborative initiative led by [Canadian Geographic Education](#), a program of the Royal Canadian Geographic Society.

The multi-year, multi-aspect project's title is an acronym that stands for Observe, Participate, Experience and Network. Last year, organizers brought together students from Opaskwayak Cree Nation, Brandon and Minot, North Dakota for two days of water testing and digital data-gathering in and around the Assiniboine River.

Supplementing this hands-on citizen science is a new map for use in classrooms. Funded by a [grant](#) from LWF, the map was released this February in three formats: poster-sized print, digital (to enable continued data-collection, analysis and sharing), and a large-scale "tiled" version available through Canadian Geographic Education's [website](#) for free downloading and classroom assembly.

Connie Wyatt Anderson is the chair of Canadian Geographic Education, and has been involved with curriculum development in Manitoba for years. An award-winning high-school geography teacher from The Pas, Wyatt Anderson says the goal was to get students living within Lake Winnipeg's watershed to go outside and "do" geography as a way of connecting to each other and to the water that flows across the landscape.

"How can kids care about something, be active in something, if they don't know about it?" she says. "Our goal is for kids to know that their backyard is bigger than what they can see. That they're all a citizen of this watershed - together."

An international project, other key OPEN Water partners on the project include the North Dakota Geographic Alliance and the Minnesota Alliance for Geographic Education.

"We want to showcase that we're all in this together," Wyatt Anderson says. "We are defined by our geography, not our politics."

OPEN Water is arming students with information they can use to take action - a goal that harkens back to Gritzner's definition of geography.

"To me, the 'Why care?' is what makes your kids geographic citizens." Wyatt Anderson says. "Being a citizen - whether you're a citizen of Manitoba, of Canada, of North Dakota - is knowing, caring and doing. That's the approach we took."

Want more? Click [here](#) to read Canadian Geographic's story on OPEN Water and the Lake Winnipeg watershed map, featuring an interview with LWF executive director Alexis Kanu.

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