

# NAHI

## *Downstream*

An Indigenous Perspective on  
the Future of Southeastern  
Pennsylvania's Watersheds



# EMBRACING GANSHOWAHANNA

## *Falling or Roaring Waters*

Water is the first medicine— the foundation for all life. Water is our first home, our teacher, our relative, our responsibility. Indigenous people have been leading the charge as water protectors since time immemorial. The course charted by colonization and industry has sacrificed the health of our water and our communities to our insatiable need to build wealth, reshape the land to our purposes, expand industry, and exploit the land and water that sustain us.

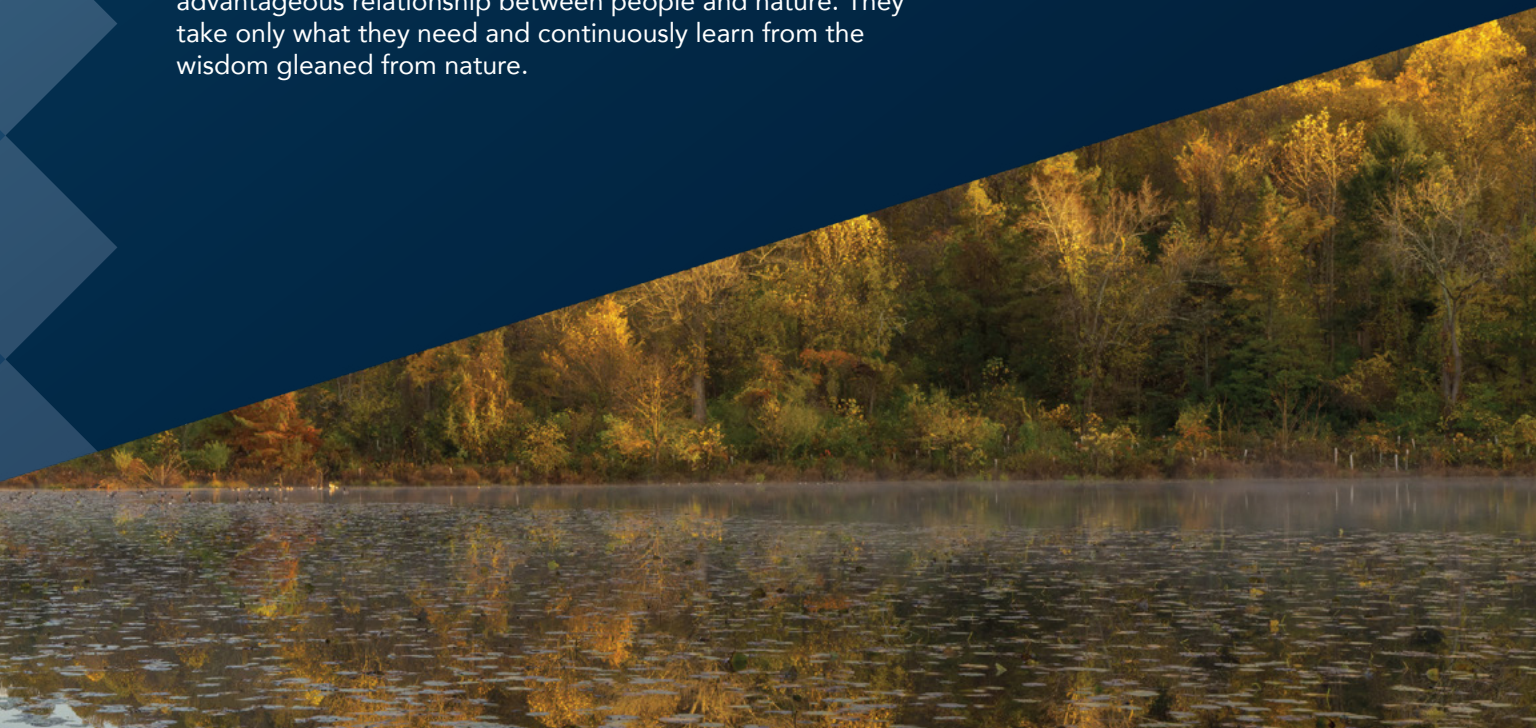
The Indigenous peoples of southeastern Pennsylvania, including the Lenape, recognize the sacredness of water — through ceremony, language, and everyday treatment of their surroundings. They call the Delaware River, Lenapewihittuk, or The Largest River in This Part of the Country. The Lenape historically depended upon a major tributary to the Delaware River, the Schuylkill River, or Ganshowahanna, meaning Falling or Roaring Waters. They lived, hunted, and fished along the shorelines of these rivers — their survival and way of life dependent on the health of the rivers where they made their homes.

Indigenous peoples care for and respect the land and water as relatives and their responsibility. They pass on skills to their communities important on both shore and water, ensuring each generation understands their inherent relationship with the water that provides for all their needs.

On land and in water, the goal is not to master or control their domain, but rather to support a reciprocal and mutually advantageous relationship between people and nature. They take only what they need and continuously learn from the wisdom gleaned from nature.

### LENAPE MEANS *true or original people*

IN THE LENAPE LANGUAGE, WHICH IS AN EASTERN ALGONQUIAN LANGUAGE SPOKEN IN EASTERN PENNSYLVANIA, SOUTHEASTERN NEW YORK, ALL OF NEW JERSEY, AND NORTHERN DELAWARE.



# Original People of THE SCHUYLKILL RIVER WATERSHED

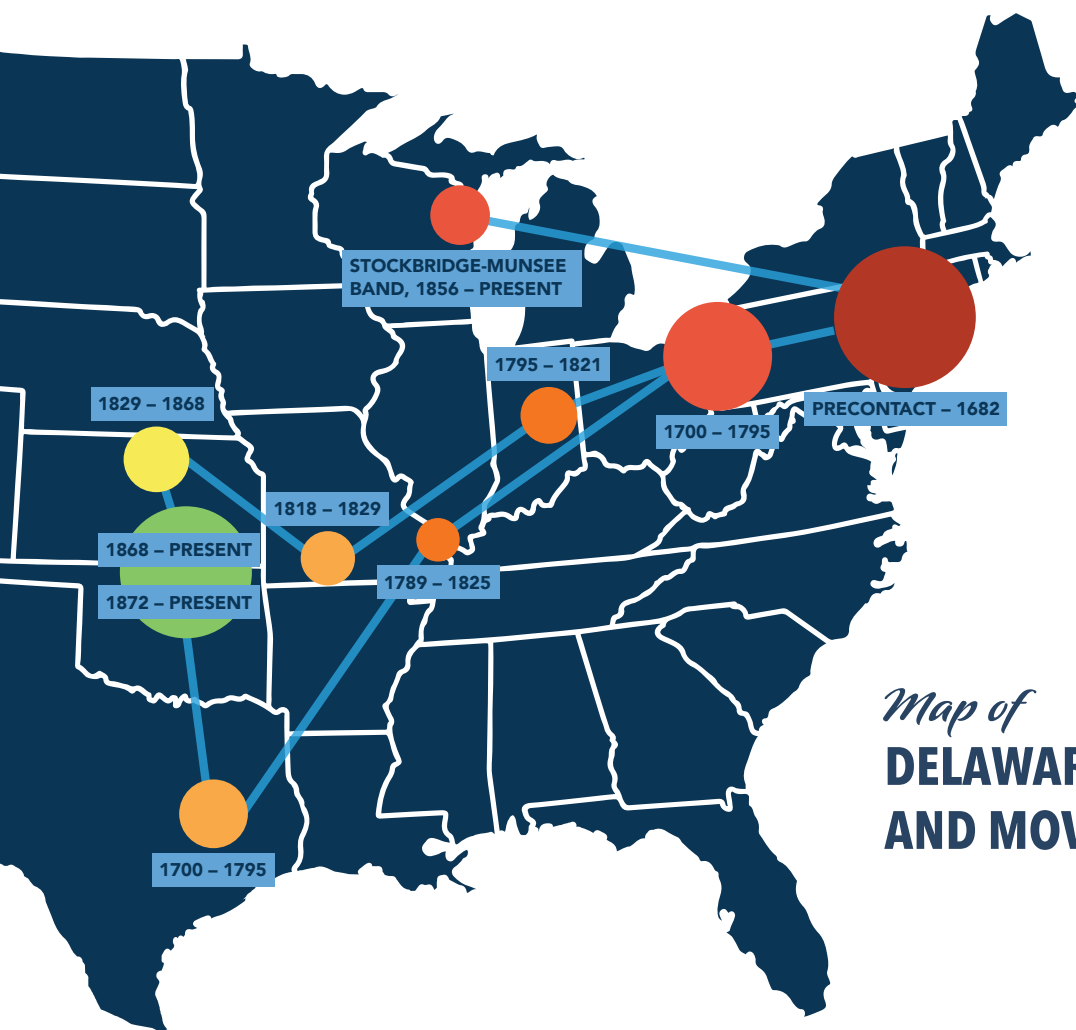
Originally from the northeastern part of North America, the Lenape (or Delaware people) were forcibly removed from Lenapehoking, or Lenape homelands, in what is now Delaware, New Jersey, eastern Pennsylvania, and the Hudson River Valley. Disbursement and colonialism forced them to leave behind the watersheds they lived in harmony with and thrived alongside for more than 10,000 years.

European colonials referred to the Lenape as the Delaware for their location and connection to the Delaware River, named in honor of Sir Thomas West (Lord De La Warr), the first governor of the English colony at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1610. The Lenape relationship with the settlers was defined by violence, forced relocation, and broken promises.

The descendants of William Penn, the Quaker responsible for the founding of the province of Pennsylvania, tricked the Lenape into believing an agreement from the 1680s gave the colonists land rights to a significant stretch of eastern Pennsylvania and part of New Jersey. As a result, the Lenape were coerced into honoring a forged treaty in 1737 known as the Walking Purchase, and ultimately ceded an area of more than 1.2 million acres around the Delaware River, about the size of Rhode Island.

The Lenape fought for and defended themselves through many wars and unjust dealings with the U.S. government in the 18th and 19th centuries. However, legislation such as the Indian Removal Act of 1830 led to the relocation and establishment of Delaware nations in Oklahoma, Wisconsin, and Ontario, Canada, far from their ancestral homelands.

Despite this tumultuous history, many Lenape people and their descendants continue to live and thrive in their homelands in the Mid-Atlantic region. Their cultural connection as caretakers of the rivers and larger watersheds calls many Native people to local advocacy and environmental stewardship.



*Map of*  
**DELAWARE TERRITORY  
AND MOVEMENT**

# PUTTING WATER TO WORK

## *A Shift Away from Indigenous Perspectives*

The first dams were constructed in the U.S. in the mid-1600s, after Europeans immigrated to the East Coast. Pennsylvania alone has more than 3,300 dams that were built for a variety of uses, including mill power, irrigation, water supply, navigation, recreation, and other purposes. These structures shifted the relationship of people to water from one of reciprocity to one of control.

The Industrial Revolution of the 1800s brought an abundance of manufacturing, production, mining, and infrastructure development to southeastern Pennsylvania. In this region, many dams were built to serve the milling industry, from timber and paper to grain and wool production. The millworks contributed an enormous amount of industrial runoff into the area's watershed, in addition to coal waste from mining operations.

Built between 1816 and 1828, the pools, dams, and canals that comprised the Schuylkill Navigation system eased navigation along the waterways for more than 100 miles for industry. By the time the Schuylkill Navigation system was no longer used in the 1930s, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers estimated that more than 38 million tons of coal waste was left behind in the river. The Schuylkill River Desilting Project began in 1945 and efforts to improve water quality and mitigate the long-term impacts of industry on the river continue today.

### DID YOU KNOW?



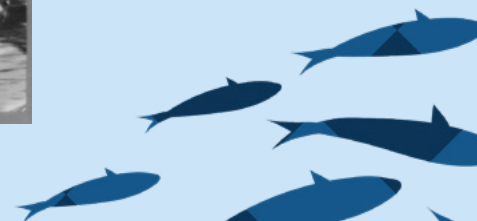
**THE UNITED STATES HAS MORE THAN 500,000 KNOWN DAMS.**

Credit: DinosoftLabs - Flaticon.com



Atlantic Refining Company's Plant, Schuylkill River  
View below Passyunk Avenue Bridge, looking North.  
March 12, 1917; Negative No. 226 A

Atlantic Refining Company's plant, Schuylkill River, view below Passyunk Avenue Bridge, looking North, March 12, 1917



# HEALING THROUGH *Restoration* AND *Reconnection*

Indigenous populations, including the Lenape and other tribes of Pennsylvania, are the ones who best know the land and water of their homelands. Their forced removal from these homelands leaves a gap in knowledge needed now to fight climate change and reduce humanity's harmful impacts on the earth.

Dams change the area's ecology, creating lakes where there were none and reducing the habitats of essential species of plants and animals in local ecosystems. Recognizing humanity as a part of creation, one piece of a much larger whole, will help inform long-term goals for the betterment of the watershed and all creatures, plants, and other beings. This philosophy is essential as we consider how to adapt to our continuously changing climate.

Indigenous communities are often some of the first to acknowledge signs of a changing climate due to their acute attention to nature around them— from shifting patterns in migration of fish and birds to changing storm intensities and frequencies to the influence of rising water on the land.

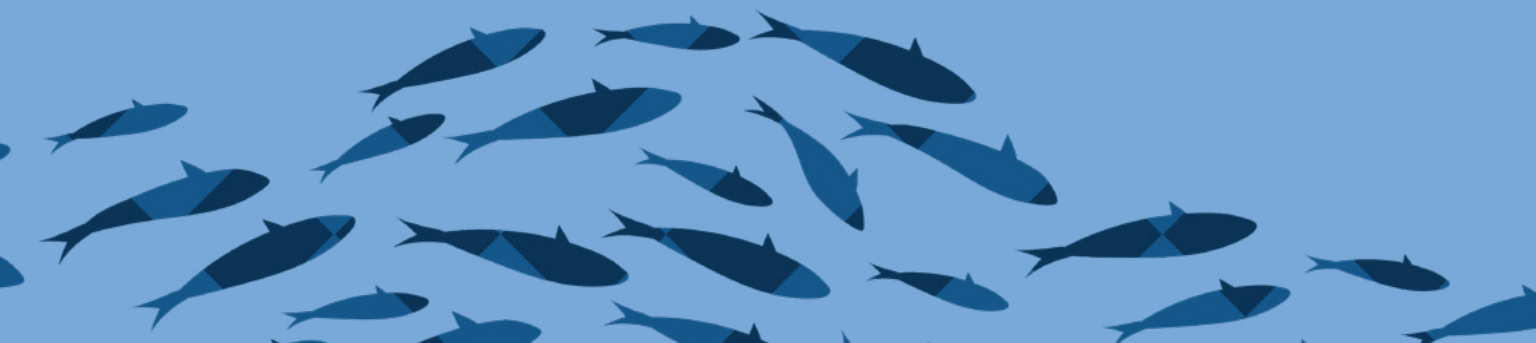
Scientists are starting to work more collaboratively with Indigenous people to incorporate Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) into theories and research on environmental systems. TEK is dynamic knowledge that adapts to changing conditions over time. Acute observations made by people who are in tune with the land and water can help restoration practitioners plan appropriate measures to restore habitats for the benefit of people and nature.

As a result of restoration efforts, more than 375 dams have been removed in Pennsylvania alone since the early 1900s. Fish and other aquatic creatures have been able to access spawning and growing habitat that was previously blocked by concrete and timber walls. Practitioners are working to restore habitat access for migratory fish populations of American shad, hickory shad, alewife, and blueback herring— historically abundant species in this region and important to Indigenous populations in the past. Further, trees are being planted to bring nature back to the shores of rivers and provide a rest from intense summer heat.

Ultimately, we all play a role in healing our relationship with our rivers and providing our communities with a healthy environment in which to thrive. We can learn from Indigenous cultures about how to treat nature— more as family, with respect, admiration, and appreciation, and less as something to be manipulated and controlled.



Deconstruction of the Van Reed Paper Mill Dam in Reading, PA, was completed in 2022. The project reconnected the river corridor for fish and wildlife and restored native vegetation along the riverbank, among many other benefits. Credit: Kleinschmidt Associates



# THE STORY OF *Turtle Island*

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*The Lenape's connection to water is seen in their origin story, which refers to North America as Turtle Island. According to tradition, the story goes...*

After a Great Flood, there was only water. The turtle volunteered to let the spirit being called Nanapush build the new world upon his back as he floated in the water.

Nanapush asked the animals to collect mud from the bottom of the water to build new land upon. The beaver first tried, and the loon tried, too, but both sacrificed themselves in their attempt. The water was simply too deep.

Then, the small muskrat, knowing the danger it faced, decided it was willing to try. He was able to bring back a small amount of mud for the turtle's back before he perished from the effort. Then Nanapush blessed the muskrat.

Nanapush started to form the land on the turtle's back from the earth the muskrat returned. The turtle began to grow and kept growing until its edges were out of sight from one another and a vast land was created.



*Day Until Night on Turtle Island. Acrylic on canvas. Artist: Barry Lee (Munsee), Pottstown, PA*



A non-profit promoting the visibility of Native Americans in Berks County and beyond, improving social outcomes for their communities through education, leadership, and activism. [www.widoktadwen.org](http://www.widoktadwen.org)



A non-profit championing a national effort to protect and restore all rivers, from remote mountain streams to urban waterways. Healthy rivers provide people and nature with clean, abundant water and natural habitat. For 50 years, American Rivers staff, supporters, and partners have shared a common belief: Life Depends on Rivers. [www.americanrivers.org](http://www.americanrivers.org)



A non-profit serving the Berks County community since 1974, focusing on land preservation, water protection, trail management, community gardens, educational programs, student outreach and community partnerships to improve environmental conservation in southeastern Pennsylvania. [www.berksnature.com](http://www.berksnature.com)