

How socially and culturally diverse Minnesotans value water

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Understanding how different communities value water and prioritize its protection is critical to effective policy and governance.

University of Minnesota research recently [published](#) in *Society & Natural Resources* explores how socially and culturally diverse Minnesotans value water. While some values are universal—safe drinking water, for example—other values and priorities vary by sociocultural identities.

"Minnesotans don't all experience water in the same ways—we have different water relationships depending on where we live, our cultural worldviews, our life experiences and the hardships we face," said lead author Mae Davenport, a professor in the Department of Forest Resources and director of the Center for Changing Landscapes.

"Unfortunately, because of historical and institutional injustices that still affect people today, culturally diverse and non-dominant racialized groups have been underrepresented in positions of power and underserved by decisions that affect human-water relationships."

Through two studies, a statewide mail survey of Minnesota residents and an onsite survey of Twin Cities community members at cultural events, the research team observed how variables like gender, race, ethnicity and home ownership are associated with different water priorities. The researchers partnered with [community leaders](#) to make the methods more inclusive and representative of diverse water relationships.

They found:

- Safe and clean drinking water was the most important water value in both studies, across all gender, race and ethnic identities.
- Culturally diverse respondents identifying as Asian, American Indian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Middle Eastern or North African, or Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander placed higher importance than white-only identifying respondents on many water values, including water for cultural and [religious practices](#), for watering vegetable gardens, for

- recreation opportunities, and fishing for preferred species.
- Female-identifying respondents placed higher importance on average across water values than male-identifying respondents in the statewide survey.
- The inclusive onsite survey methodology led to an increase from culturally diverse (75%) and female-identifying perspectives (56%), compared to the traditional mail survey (97% white, 66% male-identifying).

"What we have learned through this research will support more inclusive and community-centered water dialogue, science, policy development and investments for all Minnesotans," said Davenport. "I believe we all will benefit from learning more about the deep and meaningful connections people have with water in Mni Sóta Maḵoḱe, the Dakota name for what is now called Minnesota, meaning 'where waters reflect the clouds.' And, water will benefit too as we share in our knowledge and caretaking practices."

These findings suggest that more inclusive and holistic water science, policy and management is needed. Approaches that acknowledge and support the diversity of water values and relationships should be incorporated into water programs, policies and investments. Additionally, science requires more inclusive research and engagement methodologies to explore and uplift different voices and narratives around water.

The research team is building upon this work in partnership with the Metropolitan Council by surveying Twin Cities residents about their water values and experiences, particularly residents of color, renters and younger residents.

More information: Mae A. Davenport et al, Social and Cultural Values and Representation Justice: Implications for Water, *Society &*

Natural Resources (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/08941920.2023.2278147](https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2023.2278147)

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