

By: Jody A. Thompson, Environmental Extension Associate
Alabama Sea Grant/Auburn Marine Center

There are bugs in our creeks! And no, I'm not talking about mosquitoes. Our creeks are filled with an entire world of bugs, populated by damselflies, mayflies, hellgrammites, and many others, which serve an important role in the aquatic ecosystem.

These bugs are also known as aquatic macroinvertebrates, since they live in water, have no backbone and can be seen without the aid of a microscope. Aquatic macroinvertebrates are an important part of the food chain in creeks and streams, as a food source for larger animals, such as fish.

You can tell a lot about a stream by the macroinvertebrates that you find there. Certain bugs are very sensitive to pollution, while others are very pollution tolerant. Therefore, macroinvertebrates can indicate the relative health of a given stream.

Aquatic macroinvertebrates are an easy indicator of water quality for another reason: where fish can move away from polluted areas, invertebrates cannot move long distances. For this reason, the aquatic macroinvertebrate populations change over time. A very healthy stream may have many varieties of pollution sensitive species, where as a polluted stream may have only a few pollution tolerant species. Water quality monitors can also easily collect them in order to perform a bioassessment of the stream: collecting aquatic macroinvertebrates to determine the health of the waterbody.

Are you interested in knowing more about the aquatic macroinvertebrates in a local creek or river? The Alabama Water Watch program based at Auburn University trains volunteers to perform bioassessments on local waterways. For more information on Alabama Water Watch, contact the program office toll-free at 1- 888-844-4785 or visit their website: www.alabamawaterwatch.org.