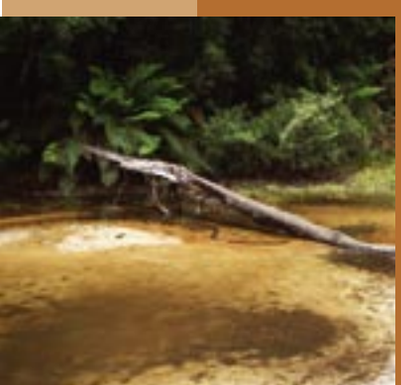
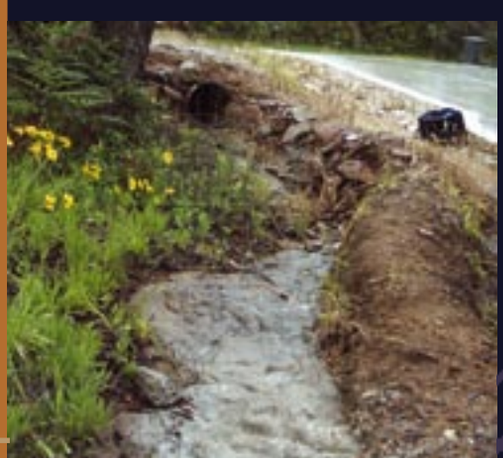
Blue Mountains City Council ENVIRONMENTAL FACT SHEET No 3

DRINKING WATER FROM STREAMS in the Blue Mountains

Do you ever drink water from streams when you have been out walking through the bush? The water always looks so clean and pure – but is it?

Even the water flowing through the most pristine areas can contain impurities, the source of which can be many kilometres away – or just around the bend. Some of these impurities can be relatively harmless (especially at low concentrations), but many can make the water unpalatable or even unsafe to drink.





As a general rule: do not drink water from streams that flow from developed areas or an identified source of pollution (eg. toilet areas).

DRINKING WATER FROM STREAMS

in the Blue Mountains

How risky is it?

The health risks associated with drinking water from streams can vary significantly. This will depend on the potential for contamination from a wide variety of sources – many of which are beyond the direct control of Council.

Just because you might not have become ill after drinking from a stream once, doesn't mean you won't become ill if you drink from it again!

What sort of impurities?

As water flows in streams, sits in lakes, and filters through layers of soil and rock in the ground, it dissolves or absorbs the substances that it touches. Other substances end up in streams through direct discharges from industries (eg. sewage treatment plants), runoff from developed areas (both urban and rural), the fall out of air pollution, or even animals living nearby. Some of the impurities that can be found in water from the above sources include dissolved minerals, organic/inorganic chemicals, heavy metals and micro-organisms.

Two of the worst, and probably best known, impurities are the micro-organisms Giardia and Cryptosporidium. These are carried in human and animal waste and their effects can be quite severe, and sometime even life threatening.

If you are going to drink water from streams there are various things you can do to reduce the risk:

- boil any water before you drink it for at least 1 minute (preferably 3-5 minutes).
- Another method involves the use of portable water filters. The effectiveness of these in removing impurities will vary dramatically. You should choose your product very carefully.

You can also help reduce the risk to others by looking after our waters.

- **In the bush, make sure you are at least 50m from the nearest stream when you go to the toilet – and bury your faeces at least 20cm under the ground. Don't pour oils, solvents, chemicals, or detergents down stormwater drains.**
- **Collect your dog's droppings when you take it for a walk.**
- **Report oil and chemical spills to the EPA's Pollution Line 131 555.**
- **Wash your car on the grass.**

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