A watershed is an area of land where all the water that flows off of it drains down to the same place. This includes both surface water and groundwater, which is water that seeps underground. This map portrays the six continental-scale watersheds which are defined by how water flows off the continent into three different oceans, Hudson Bay, and the Gulf of Mexico. The Great Basin is called a closed basin because rivers and streams fill low-lying areas between the mountains where the water collects to form lakes and then evaporates into the atmosphere. Evaporating water leaves behind minerals, which means that Great Basin lakes are saltier than the oceans.

The smaller inset map shows how the continental-scale watershed boundaries can be divided into smaller units within California. Water is managed and conserved within each unit.