



Women and Water Stewardship Special Session
February 15, 2022
11:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. ET

DRAFT SUMMARY REPORT

1. Welcome/Opening Ceremony

Ms. Cara Currie-Hall, session facilitator, welcomed the participants to the Women and Water Stewardship Special Session. An opening prayer was provided by Knowledge Keeper Roberta Oshkabewisens and a welcome song was provided by Spirit Wolf. Sally Gaikezheyongai provided a water ceremony. Ms. Currie-Hall provided an overview of the agenda.

2. Setting the Context – Dr. Kerry Black

Dr. Kerry Black provided the context of this session. She mentioned how this discussion came out of several years of engagement on how to better engage with First Nations women on water management, and the role of women as water keepers. She talked about how it was important to raise the importance of the role of women in the conversation of water, and how women at the community level could be more involved in that discussion to be able to share different perspectives. Dr. Black urged the attendees to use this session to look to engage in meaningful discussion. She mentioned that during the pandemic the role and importance of water was heightened, and access to clean water for First Nations continued to be a struggle. Dr. Black stated the recent settlement of a class action lawsuit which renewed the Assembly of First Nations commitment to resolving long-standing water issues, since First Nations were the rightful stewards of this natural resource.

Dr. Black shared that this session would be an opportunity to share perspectives, and a space to share voices for change that First Nations wanted at a community level. She expressed that not all problems would be tackled during this session, but the priority should be long-term solutions and renewed legislation. The focus for everyone should be on repealing the *Safe Drinking Water for First Nations Act* and that the Assembly of First Nations continued to engage on that legislation. Dr. Black closed stating this was an opportunity for better legislation and a chance for First Nations women to had a strong position in that dialogue.

3. Shared Perspective First Nations Women and Water Stewardship Panel

Knowledge Keeper Flora Northwest, Alberta

Knowledge Keeper Flora Northwest welcomed everyone to Treaty 6 territory in Maskwacis, Alberta. She acknowledged that it was a great day to honour Mother Earth. She mentioned that human beings were most special on Mother Earth and that water was sacred and had a spirit. Without a woman, there would be no life; 65% of their bodies were fluid and were necessary for their organs to thrive. She talked about how her great-grandmother taught them to respect women. Knowledge Keeper Northwest talked about how in the winters, her ancestors survived on clean snow for clean drinking water and cleaning. How when she looked at Mother Earth, there was water everywhere and that for the trees, plants and animals to survive they needed clean water.

She mentioned the beautiful waterfalls coming down from the mountains and flowing into the lakes and that they did not see that anymore, how the sloughs used to be clean. Her mother used that water to wash clothes, it was used to swim since the spring by the river was the best water and compared it to the blood vein of Mother Earth and that all of this had disappeared. Human beings survived with wildlife such as moose, elk, deer and the rabbits and how they used to eat all of these and that now the Knowledge Keepers could not do that anymore since the animals were contaminated. Knowledge Keeper Northwest stated that the oil companies had changed everything and that they could no longer had many of the traditional foods since they had been contaminated. She talked about how, as Cree people of Canada, it would be up to them to lead the way. Under the Treaty 6 agreement, the ancestors said they could plough six (6) inches into Mother Earth and that was it and was part of the signed agreement. Oil companies came and started digging for oil and other minerals, it disrupted the eco-system and contaminated the water, causing boil water advisories in many communities. She mentioned not being able to drink water in her own house for many years due to the contamination of the water. She said that there was a problem in the water affecting the trees and the birds and that she had seen many changes to Mother Earth.

Ms. Northwest said that in the last 70 years the oil companies had done a lot of damage but identified another issue with the coal mines near the mountains and how this should not be happening. She mentioned how she had seen the changes; the floods and the wildfires and when it rained it came right down and did not stop and starts to flood. She explained how there were communities that had to leave and evacuate due to these fires and floods and how this affected not only people but affected the animals also. She stated how as a child she saw the beauty of how clean the water was and how today it was not there anymore. She stated how children were not swimming in the rivers anymore; communities nurtured their children and they had to do the same thing with Mother Earth.

Knowledge Keeper Northwest stated how Mother Earth had been overheated and times had changed and how there needed to be an effort to teach children the importance of water. She spoke about looking to the future when thinking of water and what changes had to happen; everyone must be thinking of the children that were yet to be born and how there must be changes today to protect the water for them or they will suffer because of choices that were made in present day.

She stated reminded them of Article 25 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This stated the First Nation right to protecting their water, coastal seas and other resources and the ability to uphold their responsibilities to these resources and be able to uphold them for future generations. She mentioned how Grand Chief Wilton Littlechild did a lot of work at the United Nations on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. She closed with how their must continue to teach to the children about water.

Dawna Hope, First Nation of Nacho Nyak Dun

Ms. Dawna Hope came from a long line of matriarchs from Nacho Nyak Dun. She had a Diploma in renewable resource management and a B.SC and was working towards a degree in Indigenous Governance. Water was her passion as she was currently the water specialist for her own First Nation and currently working on a water strategy for her community. Since 2019, she had been working on figuring out water budgets for smaller communities and helping with current land claim negotiations with the Federal government for her community. She stated the many concerns about the impact of climate change in her community. She said that they had drier summers, more flooding and unpredictable weather along with extreme weather events. She stated noticing the difference in wildlife patterns and how they had changed as well with climate change. She stated how her community continues to struggle with the impact of mining, oil and gas, agriculture, tourism, population growth and had seen a recent decline in moose, caribou and the salmon populations in their community.

She stated how traditional knowledge supports were in decline and how there was a disconnect from traditional ways; they were starting to get the old ways back and were trying to document stories from their Knowledge Keepers.

Ms. Hope mentioned that there had been a rapid decline in the fish population due to climate change as well as industry contamination. She said that their biggest concern was getting better information on fish and hunting counts. She mentioned how Knowledge Keepers were becoming more ill and that it was becoming more evident that industries were starting to impact water. She stated how these waters were medicinal waters for their Knowledge Keepers and how they had had to put up signs and educate their youth and Knowledge Keepers on the importance of water. She highlighted that the community must make sure to set up data monitors to be able to see the changes over time. She closed with reminding the delegates that the more First Nations people talk together there was more to connect everyone and that everyone needed water; without it all that remained was dust.

Chairwomen Janet Alkire, Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Nation

Chairwomen Alkire was unable to participate in the panel discussion and sends her regrets.

Ogimaa Kwe (Chief) Linda Debassige, M'Chigeeng First Nation

Ogimaa Kwe (Chief) Linda Debassige of M'Chigeeng First Nation stated that her role as Ogimaa Kwe started with water, as she was raised surrounded by water and taught to respect the water. She talked about how it was her grandmother who reminded her that water gave life and it took it away also therefore they had the right and responsibility to take care of the water. To be successful in this goal, she

said, meant that this was something that could not be done alone and that everyone across Turtle Island needed to work together.

She mentioned that she worked with United States counterparts and served on the Great Lakes Water Commission. She encouraged young women to work in these types of jobs. She highlighted that water could not be thought about as its own entity, it must be connected to the air, nutrients from the land, fire which created spirit in the womb. She stated how during her pregnancy she was unable to eat the fish from the Great Lakes because it was contaminated. When they talked about water, they must connect it with other environmental elements.

Ogimaa Kwe Debassige stated that the water was the lifeblood of Mother Earth and that it was gifted to First Nation people. It was First Nations people's responsibility, and prior to colonization, everything was healthy and now it had been replaced by money and that drove decision making now. She mentioned that the federal government in the past had failed in their fiduciary responsibility and had instead worked to eradicate First Nations peoples. Yet, Ogimaa Kwe Debassige emphasized, that they were still here today.

In her community, in the past a historical fishing centre, where a corporation came in and wanted to build an aquaculture operation but Chief and Council were lied to. She mentioned that the corporation wanted to bring in additional resources and bring in jobs. She mentioned working with Whitefish River First Nation and engaged other settlers around the bay near their community. She was able to get a lot of information, asked questions and during an open house with the Ministry of Natural Resources; she was able to ask if it was a consultation. The questions were not answered and they were able to stop the development of an aquaculture project with the help of the Knowledge Keepers and the youth who stood with the leadership on this issue.

Ogimaa Kwe Debassige mentioned that after gaining her diploma in civil engineering she then worked with Northern communities on drinking water issues that they face. She stated how the assimilation of First Nations people was still happening but there was now a movement that First Nations people were starting to stand up. When it came to water in today's context, young First Nations people had to learn to go back to the First Nation's rights around water. She highlighted that First Nations people must continue respecting their ancestors, honour their legacy, and carve out space to address legacy impacts. She stated funding systems designed for water must be connected to First Nations culture and traditions and that all legislation going forward should contain a piece that addresses legacy of First Nations people and to make sure that young women had a place in the technical field. She stated how the government was always looking to divide and conquer with First Nation communities and that when negotiating deals First Nations must take a broader look because when working with the government the "carrot was always followed by a stick".

Ogimaa Kwe Debassige stated that women continued to operate and push through patriarchal structures; First Nations young women were often oppressed in a settler society male-dominant role. She stated how women were usually scared to talk to Chief and Council. She highlighted that First Nations women must take that responsibility and make sure that their voices were heard through a respectful and peaceful way. Their goal should be to go to Chief and Council with a solution.

Grand Chief Wilton Littlechild, Maskwacis First Nation

Grand Chief Littlechild started by stating that he wanted to confess that he did not know too much about water; he only knew when it was not frozen, it was time to go swim and when it was frozen, it was time to play hockey. He stated that, in his language, water was the giver of life, and that spirituality must come back to leadership and that women must take a more prominent role. He mentioned that they could build on the strengths of their people and create unity among First Nations people.

He stated how, in Maskwacis First Nation, they looked at water management, they looked at aspects of quality and quantity not just the spiritual side. How they were looking at 10-, 20- and 50-year timeframes not just present day and that in current legislation they still had not heard of the treaty right to water.

In 2012, Maskwacis brought its case to the United Nations in 2012 and it was there that water was accepted as a right and this was further exemplified and described in Article 25 of the United Nation Declaration on the Right of Indigenous People; water was sacred and had a spirit.

Grand Chief Littlechild mentioned that the treaty right to water was raised a few times at the United Nations. The first time in December 2021 and then again in January 2022. They were trying to advance reconciliation at the international level. Article 25 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, Section 35 and 52 of the Constitution were all linked to discussion on figuring out a long-term solution and to be more complete and include the perspective of Indigenous peoples.

4. Breakout Session

Small groups were asked to discuss the following questions.

- What is the role of women in protecting, valuing, and stewarding water?
- What are the biggest challenges you are facing in protecting and stewarding water?
- What was missing from our current approach?

The following points were noted in the small groups, in now particular priority order.

What was the role of women in protecting, valuing, and stewarding water?

- Participants mentioned that western concept to land/water ownership versus the Indigenous view of the sacredness of water. Indigenous people could not view water from just an economic viewpoint.
- A Knowledge Keeper mentioned that women were taught by the Knowledge Keepers and the youth needed to be taught too. Women were gifted with by the Creator as life givers- for 9 months. Water was released in a sacred way, at child birth and woman were the life givers. They had to teach men their role with water and women to take care of water.
- A participant stressed the importance of ensuring that they water that carried in their own body was healthy and that for they knew the value of water.
- They needed healthy people to work in the field if they were looking to achieve positive outcome as they needed to had a healthy and clear mind.
- Highlighted two operators, Ms. Marnie Francis and Ms. Rowena Four Horns, who were mentoring new operators and giving back to their communities.
- Women were caregivers of water and community, and that clean water was a fundamental human right.

- Women bring stability when talking about water and how water was a building block of communities.
- Water Unity and how in the future there could be water commissions created at the Assembly of First Nations and should have representatives appointed by the province and territories. The role of women in governance traditionally and as representatives now was stressed as critical.
- It was noted that any water meeting should start in prayer and ceremony.
- It was understood that there would be a joint working group being developed to work with Indigenous Services Canada and that this could be an opportunity to be able to have a voice from women. They could use the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and treaties they could ensure that women were included in this opportunity.

What Are The Biggest Challenges You Are Facing In Protecting And Stewarding Water?

- Encouraging women to take on the roles in water governance and operations. Women as stewards needed to be about governing and leading.
- The broad impact of the lack of good water on communities was noted. The issue of the inability to build safe and affordable housing leads to overcrowding and mental health issues. It was important that the smaller communities that need additional support had it when going up against the bigger industries.
- It was noted that effects of climate change was a challenge in terms of water.
- Educating the community to view the water as important and the need to protect and conserve it; they need to see it as more than just a consumable product. They talked about teaching this in school in partnership with watershed groups.
- They were the protectors of the water but there were very few of them working in providing water for their communities. Watershed protection should be a key piece for the water commission and that when Indigenous Services Canada was granting money for new water facilities that they should account for asset management and training for their operators. They also needed to take a hard look at wages paid to operators and making sure they adjust the wage parity for First Nation operators as they were very underpaid.
- It was mentioned that even in many communities, funding continued to be a hurdle as they were unable to build more houses as the current water treatment facility cannot handle more. It was noted that funding had never been able to keep up with the population growth of First Nations people.
- Technicians were running these water plants on very tight budgets. A key theme was having the ability to close the infrastructure gap in First Nation communities which were created by policy and program delivery.
- It was noted that Legislation both provincially and federally don't reflect indigenous values.
- Government gives licenses but there was no consultation and then permits get approved. The impacts end up dealt with at a later date.
- Self Determination was tied to funding agreements; these were restrictive and they needed to be renegotiated. This system did not acknowledge First Nations as original people; respecting their people was important.

What Was Missing From Our Current Approach?

- It was noted that Indigenous Services Canada would support more funding for operations and management but highlighted that that was only one part of the problem. In New Zealand and in

Bolivia, bodies of water had been given rights and the Assembly of First Nations was looking at that idea.

- A recommendation from the panel was to have a holistic approach and to have an all-female Water Commission. There needed to be a strategic plan which included the ultimate goals and the objectives on how to achieve that. It was highlighted that it should be nation-to-nation and respectful negotiations.
- Water protection was crucial. Mining had a strong impact on water and how the rivers, such as the Yukon River, was not protected. There was a discussion on the ability to create legislation that would protect the water. It was noted that it was not the fault of the First Nations that the surrounding waters were unsafe to drink, industry pays a lot of money to provincial and federal government and that they should share that money to support water access.
- The tables should include the responsible individual on files, not only leadership. The people who manage the files should be at the table; the Chief and council should bring experts.

5. Plenary Sharing Session

Ms. Currie-Hall reopening the plenary session talking about how she had noticed a shift in traditional leadership roles and that women were being elected to this role. A participant from Kahnawake talked about how since Sky Deer's election as Grand Chief there had been more women working in the filtration plant. He was noticing that women were beginning to oversee the environment.

It was highlighted that woman generally put off individual needs for the collective good. She also highlighted that the provincial and federal legislation offered no protection of Indigenous right to water.

It was also noted by a participant that the government did not take any responsibility for the migration of animals. He highlighted how the government hands out licensing for mining without consulting with First Nations and they were told after the fact. He talked about looking into the creation of a national water treaty which would focus on water but as well include language, laws, and responsibilities of the community.

Another participant recommended that the Assembly of First Nation create a curriculum for school that had an interest in teaching water issues at an early age and that the revitalization of languages should be through water. She highlighted that one of the biggest challenges that First Nations faced was the contamination of water; the lakes were contaminated, no fish in the water and they were unable to swim. British Columbia had a ground-breaking legal recourse where the Blueberry River won their case against a mining company and the company were forced to restore the river.

Another participant highlighted the importance of this session and that in order to move forward they must ensure that women at the forefront. She highlighted the importance of an all-female water commission.

The importance of the water ceremony was noted; the ceremony should take place at the beginning of each session to show that they care for their water. They had to put aside differences with the people they were working with and move ahead with the goal of working together as caretakers of water. It was emphasized that they must be a strong and positive voice moving forward.

Ms. Currie-Hall talked about seeing a shift that was taking place with women occupying more leadership roles. The example she used was that the President of the National Congress of American Indians was a woman. Also, their current Governor General was Indigenous and female. The United States Secretary of the Interior was also a First Nations woman. She stated how they need to approach life and water differently and take a more holistic approach and how they must engage the youth and encourage them to be creative when it came to water.

It was also mentioned that they must bring in the youth from kindergarten to Grade 12. She stated how in her own community she used to be able to swim and fish and now it was unsafe and the water too murky. This participant continued stating that the way to support First Nations women in their role as water stewards started with unity and finding their voice again.

Another participant stated the importance to stay persistent in making sure women could be better supported in becoming water stewards. She noticed that more women were joining but they must stay persistent and stay focused. She stated the best way to advance the initiative to becoming water stewards was use other ideas and how they were all part of different levels in the process and that there were varying levels of problems at each level.

A participant recommended that they create an intertribal water treaty and make a water medicine bundle and use these tools to innovate on the practices that their ancestors left them. She highlighted the importance of working with the youth as they would feel the responsibility of climate change and the loss of the medicine plants. She mentioned that the Assembly of First Nations Women's Council could create a women's water stewardship circle to guide the work.

Knowledge Keeper Roberta stated how they need to continue to do this work and that ceremony must continue every season. She highlighted also that she put together serpent water bundles and needed a grandfather to be able to take them but so far no one wants to do that.

It was also noted that an important aspect was having the space that they could be together.

A participant noted that he had retired from the federal government last year and how it had been a learning process since becoming a Chief. He stated promoting Autumn Peltier and how the Assembly of First Nations should get her to talk to schools about the importance of water.

6. Closing Remarks/Closing Prayer

Ms. Currie-Hall introduced Ngit'stil Norbert, Graphic Artist, who provided an overview of her graphic art work which represented their discussions.

Ms. Currie-Hall thanked them all for sharing their time and perspective and invited Knowledge Keeper Oshkabewisens to close the session with a prayer. Following her prayer, Spirit Wolf provided a closing song.

Appendix A – Session Agenda

Through shared voices and experiences, we invite participants to share their perspectives on “What was the role of women in protecting, valuing, and stewarding water?” What experiences can you share, and how can we move forward together?

- 10:45 a.m. Participant Log in
- 11:00 a.m. Welcome/Land Acknowledgement: Cara Currie-Hall, Session Facilitator
- 11:05 a.m. Opening Song by Bear Nation
Opening Prayer by Knowledge Keeper Roberta Oshkabewisens
Water Ceremony by Sally Gaikezheyongai
- 11:30 a.m. Setting the Context - Dr. Kerry Black
- 11:45 a.m. Shared Perspective First Nation Women and Water Stewardship Panel
- Knowledge Keeper Flora Northwest, Alberta
 - Dawna Hope, First Nation of Nacho Nyak Dun
 - Chairwoman Janet Alkire, Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Nation
 - Chief Linda Debassige, M’Chigeeng First Nation
- 12:45 p.m. Transition to Breakout sessions
- 1:00 p.m. **Breakout Session**
This small group session will foster small discussions, sharing perspectives and experiences around key topics:
- What was the role of women in protecting, valuing, and stewarding water?
 - What are the biggest challenges you are facing in protecting and stewarding water?
 - What was missing from our current approach?
- 2:00 p.m. Wellness Break (Music by Mary Bryton Nahwegahbow)
- 2:15 p.m. **Plenary Sharing Session**
This Plenary Session will bring back the participants to plenary to discuss the following questions:
- What was needed to support First Nations women in their role as water stewards?
 - How can the role of women be better supported in Water Stewardship?
 - How can a National First Nations Women Water Stewardship initiative help advance water stewardship?
- 3:30 p.m. Overview of the Session - Ngit’stil Norbert, Graphic Artist
- 3:40 p.m. Closing Remarks/Session Highlights: Cara Currie-Hall, Session Facilitator
- 3:55 p.m. Closing prayer by Knowledge Keeper Roberta Oshkabewisens
Closing Song by Bear Nation
- 4:00 p.m. Session adjourned

