



Native Women's  
Association of Canada



L'Association des  
femmes autochtones  
du Canada

# Drivers of Change in Fish and Fish Habitats

Synthesis Report.

May 2025

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## Executive Summary

The protection of fish and fish habitats in Canada has become increasingly important as climate change and environmental degradation place growing pressure on these vital ecosystems. These ecological shifts are having a particularly severe impact on Indigenous communities, whose cultural practices, food systems, and spiritual traditions are deeply connected to aquatic environments. Among those most affected, and least heard, are Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, transgender, and gender-diverse (WG2STGD+) peoples, whose unique roles as Knowledge Keepers and environmental stewards are often overlooked in policy and regulatory decision-making. Recognizing these longstanding gaps, it is essential that federal institutions like the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) engage meaningfully with Indigenous WG2STGD+ communities in shaping policies that affect their lands and waters.

Modernizing the regulations that protect fish and fish habitats can lead to stronger environmental governance, restoring lost protections, and setting a foundation of meaningful inclusion of Indigenous communities.

This report summarizes the findings from three waves of engagement sessions led by NWAC between 2021 and 2025, on the DFO's proposed changes to fish and fish habitat protections under the *Fisheries Act*. The sessions were conducted in partnership with the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) and gathered critical insights and feedback to inform the ongoing protection and management of fish and fish habitats in Canada. The insights from these three waves of research show how Indigenous WG2STGD+ peoples' knowledge strengthens efforts to sustain fish habitats for future generations, and why centering their voices is critical to lasting conservation success.

## Objectives

In efforts to govern with openness, transparency, and respect for reconciliation, the Fish and Fish Habitat Protection Program (FFHPP) under the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) launched a multi-wave engagement with Indigenous peoples, partners, and key stakeholders to include their important perspectives in the development and

implementation of the new provisions under the modernized *Fisheries Act*. This extensive engagement process consisted of numerous sessions with diverse partners and stakeholders.

The objectives of this report are to:

- Document and synthesize the key themes, concerns and recommendations shared across three waves of engagement sessions;
- Highlight the unique perspectives of Indigenous WG2STGD+ peoples regarding the protection of fish and fish habitats; and
- Support the revision of the modernized *Fisheries Act* in ways that better reflect Indigenous Knowledge systems, rights, and values.

Including Indigenous voices, particularly the perspectives and priorities of Indigenous WG2STGD+ peoples, is essential to ensuring that traditional knowledge and environmental stewardship practices inform effective and inclusive aquatic habitat protections.

## Approach

The DFO conducted a broad and extensive national engagement to inform and support the modernization of the *Fisheries Act*. This multi-year initiative involved multiple engagement sessions meant to gather diverse perspectives on how to strengthen the protection and management of fish and fish habitats across Canada. Within this broader process, the DFO collaborated with the NWAC to carry out three waves of engagement focused specifically on the voices and experiences of Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, transgender, and gender-diverse (WG2STGD+) peoples. These three waves were conducted as follows:

**Wave 1 (2020–2021):** Over 100 sessions across Canada, including six dedicated roundtables with NWAC on gender-based issues and Indigenous participation in regulatory development.

**Wave 2 (2021–2023):** Included eight DFO sessions with NWAC, three NWAC-hosted roundtables, 18 in-depth interviews, and an online survey answered by 267 Indigenous

women. Discussions focused on cumulative effects, habitat restoration priorities, species at risk, and treaty rights.

**Wave 3 (2023–2024):** Comprised three roundtables hosted by NWAC to review guiding principles related to habitat banking, offsetting, and multi-species conservation approaches.

## Key Takeaways

As climate change and human development continue to impact fish populations, the need for inclusive, respectful, and effective governance is more urgent than ever. Indigenous participants called for action that moves beyond consultation and toward long-term, respectful relationships, where Indigenous peoples are active partners in protecting the ecosystems which they have stewarded for generations. Across all three waves of engagement, Indigenous participants emphasized the need for clear communication, early and continuous engagement, and meaningful integration of Indigenous Knowledge. They called for greater leadership opportunities, better monitoring and accountability, and a focus on preventing environmental damage rather than relying on mitigation. Upholding Indigenous and treaty rights remains a top priority, and policies must be implemented effectively to create real change. Moving forward, strengthening trust, transparency, and collaboration will be key to achieving successful, long-term partnerships that protect fish populations and support the health and resilience of fish habitats.

**Mandate the meaningful integration of Indigenous Knowledge at every phase of project planning, implementation, and evaluation of projects related to fish and fish habitats.** Protecting fish and fish habitats is complex and requires a long-term outlook. Indigenous Knowledge is essential for long-term protection of complex ecosystems, and

early engagement of Indigenous peoples is key for allowing Western Science<sup>1</sup> and Indigenous Knowledge to work in tandem.

**Build long-term partnerships with Indigenous communities beginning with project inception through to monitoring and follow-up activities.** Implementation of guiding principles and protections requires Indigenous partnership. Building long-term relationships with Indigenous peoples and their communities and providing them with the decision-making power to influence conservation and habitat protection outcomes are important for successfully implementing long-term protections.

**Earn trust through transparent and respectful communication.** Clear, accessible, and transparent communication is essential for building and maintaining trust with Indigenous communities. Consistent updates on activities affecting fish and fish habitats on their lands are critical for demonstrating accountability, supporting informed decision-making, and upholding Indigenous rights and responsibilities.

**Respect Indigenous relationships to land and water in conservation efforts.** Recognizing and respecting Indigenous communities' unique cultural values, practices, and relationships with the land and water is essential. This understanding ensures that the protection of fish and fish habitats is implemented in ways that align with Indigenous knowledge and worldviews.

**Prioritize inclusive engagement across diverse Indigenous communities when making decisions about regulations in the protection of fish and fish habitats. Recognizing the diversity within Indigenous communities is essential for true inclusion.**

<sup>1</sup>Western science is a system of knowledge that emphasizes empirical observation, experimentation, and logical reasoning. It relies on the scientific method to develop testable hypotheses and theories, aiming for objectivity and replicability in understanding the natural world. Source: Chalmers, A. F. “What is this thing called science?”. *Hackett Publishing*, 1999. [https://archive.org/search.php?query=external%20science%20philosophy%20chalmers%201999&from\\_results\\_page=1&sort=score%20desc&start=0&end=10&view=books](https://archive.org/search.php?query=external%20science%20philosophy%20chalmers%201999&from_results_page=1&sort=score%20desc&start=0&end=10&view=books)

Performing broader outreach with more communities and more inclusive engagements with everyone from Elders to youth will help avoid pan-Indigeneity.

Engagements revealed that protecting fish and fish habitats in the face of climate change demands long-term, inclusive, and rights-based approaches. Indigenous leadership, Knowledge, and partnership must be central to decision-making at every stage to ensure resilient ecosystems, uphold treaty obligations, and build lasting trust.

## Background

The impacts of climate change and environmental degradation caused by human activity are increasingly threatening fish and fish habitats. These threats disproportionately impact Indigenous communities, whose identities, culture, and spiritual practices are closely tied to these ecosystems. Indigenous voices in Canada, particularly Indigenous WG2STGD+ peoples, are raising concerns about the loss of fish populations, reduced water quality, reduced fish health, and more. The broader implications for the health, resilience, and Traditional Knowledge systems of Indigenous communities were also discussed often. It is critical to examine how existing regulations for governing and protecting fish and fish habitats support or fall short in addressing the complex and evolving challenges facing Indigenous communities in Canada.

## Existing Regulations

The *Fisheries Act* (the Act) plays a critical role in managing impacts on fish and fish habitat, such as habitat alterations, invasive species, climate change and other factors. The Act regulates fisheries, promotes the conservation and protection of fish and fish habitat, and oversees economic activities within Canadian waters. The Act also establishes a decision-making framework that considers factors such as the contribution of affected habitats to fisheries productivity, mitigation measures, cumulative effects, and Indigenous Knowledge. Closely connected to the *Fisheries Act* is the *Species at Risk Act*, which provides legal protection for wildlife species at risk and the habitats they depend on. Together, these

Acts form the legislative foundation for the protection and conservation of aquatic ecosystems in Canada.

Within the DFO, the Fish and Fish Habitat Protection Program (FFHPP) leads the department's work related to fish and fish habitat protection. The FFHPP is responsible for overseeing compliance with regulatory requirements, supporting Indigenous reconciliation and engagement efforts, promoting stewardship activities, providing grants, participating in integrated ecosystem planning, and collecting and reporting data on the state of fish and fish habitats across Canada. The FFHPP also plays a key role in supporting contaminated sites through assessments, risk management, and remediation planning. Through collaboration with Indigenous partners, industry, and other stakeholders, the program seeks to modernize regulatory processes, identify sensitive areas, and guide mitigation and restoration initiatives.

## Modernizing Fish & Fish Habitat Protections in Canada

In 2018, the Government of Canada started taking action to modernize its *Fisheries Act* with the aim of increasing protections to support the sustainability of Canada's aquatic resources for future generations. In the same year, the Government proposed amendments to restore lost protections and incorporate modern safeguards into the *Fisheries Act*. The following year, Bill C-68, an Act to amend the *Fisheries Act*, became law in 2019. The amendments reinforced the protection of fish and fish habitat by:

- Focusing on transparency and clarity in decision-making;
- Strengthening the role of Indigenous peoples in fish and fish habitat management;
- Prohibiting activities that harmfully alter, disrupt, or destroy fish habitats;
- Prohibiting actions (excluding fishing) that result in fish mortality;
- Ensuring fish passage and managing obstructions; and
- Requiring mandatory notices for unauthorized harm to fish and/or fish habitats.



As part of the modernization process, DFO initiated engagement with Indigenous peoples to ensure their perspectives and priorities are reflected in decision-making.

## Incorporating Indigenous Rights and Values

Indigenous communities depend on fish and fish habitats for essential needs such as food, livelihood, recreation, spirituality, and the preservation of cultural traditions. In order to respect the treaty rights of Indigenous peoples, it is imperative to include Indigenous communities in decision-making processes related to their lands and resources. Historically, Indigenous peoples have been excluded from these decision-making processes, resulting in policies that often overlook or undermine their rights, knowledge systems, and cultural connections to the land. Indigenous peoples have inherent and treaty rights related to fish and fish habitats, including the right to traditional and customary governance of lands, waters, and resources (including fisheries). Given the complex and often contentious history between lawmakers and Indigenous peoples in Canada, it is crucial to ensure ongoing meaningful engagement to prevent any violation of rights by the legislative bodies.

## Prioritizing Indigenous WG2STGD+ Voices

Indigenous WG2STGD+ peoples are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change due to many factors,<sup>2</sup> including gender-based violence, marginalization, and exclusion from policy-making and decision-making processes. Additionally, climate change exacerbates health disparities for Indigenous WG2STGD+ peoples, contributing to increased food insecurity, waterborne diseases, and mental health challenges. Indigenous WG2STGD+ peoples are significantly underrepresented in climate change decision-making, which results in the loss or neglect of valuable Indigenous Knowledge regarding climate impacts.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Datta, R. et al. "Decolonizing meanings climate crisis and land-based adaptations: From Indigenous women's perspectives in Western Canada." *Women's Studies International Forum* (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2024.102913>

<sup>3</sup> Williams, L. et al. "Women and Climate Change: Impacts and Action in Canada—Feminist, Indigenous, and Intersectional Perspectives", 2018. [https://www.criaw-icref.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Women-and-Climate-Change\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.criaw-icref.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Women-and-Climate-Change_FINAL.pdf)

This gap in representation prevents Indigenous Knowledge from influencing climate change mitigation and adaptation policies despite the fact that Indigenous WG2STGD+ peoples are among the most affected by these changes.<sup>4</sup>

These challenges are not the result of recent actions but stem from long-standing, historical injustices and systematic inequality.<sup>5</sup> In the past, Indigenous lands have borne the brunt of environmental degradation driven by government policies and decisions.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, during Canada's constitutional negotiations, Indigenous women were excluded or grouped with men rather than being recognized as a distinct group with unique needs and priorities.<sup>7</sup> The combination of environmental damage to Indigenous lands and the failure to address the specific needs of Indigenous WG2STGD+ peoples only intensifies the adverse impacts of climate change on these communities. While addressing these injustices and systematic issues will take time, including Indigenous WG2STGD+ in those discussions and decision-making processes is essential to ensuring that future problems are not compounded by the failure to resolve past inequities.

Indigenous WG2STGD+peoples play vital roles and hold many responsibilities in their communities as environmental stewards. They help to protect and maintain a connection with the land, water, and resources and ensure a healthy environment exists for future generations. These responsibilities include serving as local Traditional Ecological Knowledge teachers, promoting coexistence with nature, and acting as water protectors.<sup>8</sup>

Another significant example of this is the role of Water Carriers in Anishinaabe culture, a responsibility traditionally held by women and girls. Climate change is degrading water quality across Canada, limiting the ability of these WG2STGD+ individuals to fulfill

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<sup>4</sup> Williams et al., "Women and Climate Change," (2018).

<sup>5</sup> Gricius, G. and Martel, A., "Integrating Indigenous Women's Traditional Knowledge for Climate Change in Canada." *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 20, no.3 (2024): 377-387, <https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801241241816>

<sup>6</sup> Clogg, J., et al. "Indigenous Legal Traditions and the Future of Environmental Governance in Canada." *Journal of Environmental Law and Practice*, 2016. [https://www.wcel.org/sites/default/files/publications/2016\\_indigenouslegaltraditions\\_environmentalgovernance\\_jelp.pdf](https://www.wcel.org/sites/default/files/publications/2016_indigenouslegaltraditions_environmentalgovernance_jelp.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Starblanket, G. "Complex Accountabilities: Deconstructing 'the Community' and Engaging Indigenous Feminist Research Methods." *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 42, no. 4 (2018). <http://dx.doi.org/10.17953/aicrj.42.4.starblanket>.

<sup>8</sup> Whyte, K. "Indigenous Women, Climate Change Impacts and Collective Action." *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 29, no. 3 (2014): 599–616. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2319080>.

their cultural duties to protect water and its species. Without the inclusion of this specific group in consultations regarding land and water management, there is a risk of losing invaluable knowledge passed down through generations,<sup>9</sup> which has been essential to environmental stewardship.<sup>10</sup> Protecting the cultural values, traditional practices, and spiritual connections that Indigenous WG2STGD+ peoples have with fish and fish habitats is crucial, as fish play a central role in their way of life.<sup>11</sup>

*“Listen to Indigenous women. With fish and fish habitat, within a lot of traditional cultures, the fish habitat is related to the stewardship of plants that are nearby, and so much of that knowledge is held by women within our societies.”* – Wave 2 In-Depth Interview Participant

*“We have our areas where we know the fish should be because they have been there forever; we know where to set our nets and where to go to set out lines. We know the seasons and patterns of the fish. But with climate change, that is all changing because fish are moving to different spots. It hinders us in our ability to harvest traditionally in the areas that we know.”* – Wave 2 In-Depth Interview Participant

## Methodology

The DFO held a series of engagement sessions seeking feedback on the development and implementation of the new provisions under the modernized *Fisheries Act*. The primary focus of these meetings was to listen to Indigenous participants’ lived experiences, views, and concerns. The three waves of engagement were carried out using various participation methods. Each wave is summarized below, outlining who was involved, how they participated, and the key topics discussed.

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<sup>9</sup> Schuster, R. et al. “Vertebrate Biodiversity on Indigenous-Managed Lands in Australia, Brazil, and Canada Equals That in Protected Areas.” *Environmental Science and Policy* 101 (2019): 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2019.07.002>.

<sup>10</sup> Whyte, “Climate Change Impacts and Collective Action”. (2014)

<sup>11</sup> Clogg et al., “Indigenous Legal Traditions”. (2016)

## Wave 1 Engagement (2020 – 2021)

Wave 1 was an extensive engagement that included 12 national virtual engagement sessions, 44 regional virtual multi-interest engagement sessions, and 52 virtual engagement sessions with Indigenous peoples. DFO engaged nearly 500 Indigenous peoples, provinces, territories, and stakeholders with interests in the conservation and protection of fish and fish habitat. The primary focus of these meetings was to listen to participants' lived experiences, views, and concerns. Within this broad initiative were dedicated engagement sessions conducted in partnership with the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC). During this wave, NWAC hosted six focused roundtable discussions on Indigenous gender-based issues in relation to the Fish and Fish Habitat Protection Program (FFHPP):

- **Roundtable 1** (14 participants): Focused on Indigenous gender-based issues in fish and fish habitat protection and conservation, with specific attention to the roles of men, women, and WG2STGD+ peoples in both Indigenous and commercial fisheries. Participants emphasized the vital role of Elders in guiding traditional Indigenous fishing and environmental conservation, noting their deep knowledge and lived experience on the land and water. Elders advocate for the inclusion of cultural and spiritual practices in these activities.
- **Roundtable 2** (14 participants): Explored consultation and engagement practices in FFHPP decision-making processes. Attendees emphasized the need for the Government of Canada to recognize Indigenous governance and include Indigenous women in decision-making around fish and fish habitat protection. They identified racism and a lack of respect for Indigenous rights as key barriers, calling for greater understanding and respect to fully support Indigenous women's roles as rights protectors and environmental stewards.
- **Roundtable 3** (7 participants): Generated ideas and sought input to support the development of a guidance document for engaging and consulting Indigenous women and gender diverse persons in regulation-making and policy development under the FFHPP.

- **Roundtable 4** (12 participants): Participants expressed interest in learning more about FFHPP and recommended that the DFO engage Indigenous communities using tailored, community-specific methods such as websites, newsletters, and local radio. They emphasized the importance of including Indigenous women, gender-diverse, and Two-Spirit individuals in consultations, highlighting the need for culturally respectful engagement and concern over specific issues.
- **Roundtable 5** (14 participants): Attendees expressed a strong desire to be informed and involved in the design and implementation of the FFHPP. They highlighted the importance of involving women, particularly elders and grandmothers, and stressed that engagement must go beyond them (just Band Council members).
- **Roundtable 6** (17 participants): Few participants were familiar with the FFHPP. Concerns were raised about conflicts between traditional and commercial fishers, the unequal impact of fish habitat issues on Indigenous women and gender-diverse peoples, and the lack of recognition and accountability regarding the use of Indigenous Knowledge by a few government organizations.

## Wave 2 of Engagement (2021 – 2023)

During the second wave of engagement, DFO held 11 national virtual multi-interest engagement sessions, five national virtual engagement sessions with Indigenous peoples, 39 regional multi-interest engagement sessions, and 26 regional engagement sessions with Indigenous peoples.

NWAC participated in eight engagement sessions hosted by the DFO; four Indigenous-only sessions and four general sessions. Additionally, NWAC organized three roundtables, conducted 18 one-on-one interviews, and hosted a survey that was answered by 267 Indigenous women:

- **Eight Engagement Sessions**
  - *Sessions 1 and 6 (May 25 and June 16, 2022: Position Statement for the Consideration of Cumulative Effects on Fish and Fish Habitat in the Support of Decision-Making Under the Fisheries Act;*

- *Sessions 2 and 5 (May 26 and June 14, 2022):* Framework to Identify Fish Habitat Restoration Priorities;
- *Sessions 3 and 4 (June 2 and 7, 2022):* Framework on Aquatic Species at Risk Conservation;
- *Sessions 7 and 8 (June 22 and 23, 2022):* Prescribed Works and Waters Regulation.
- **Roundtables 1 – 3:** Focused on Identifying Fish Habitat Restoration Priorities.
  - Roundtable 1 (15 Participants): The session emphasized the vital role fish and fish habitats play in food security, cultural and spiritual fulfillment, economic livelihood, and environmental stewardship for Indigenous WG2STGD+ peoples. Participants identified the need for restoration, the removal of pollutants, and policy reforms as essential. Climate change, industrial infrastructure, and land use changes were seen as major threats, causing reduced fish populations, water quality degradation, and loss of cultural practices. Participants called for restoration to be guided by Indigenous Knowledge, continuous engagement with Indigenous communities, and inclusive, systemic policy reforms that uphold treaty rights and environmental justice.
  - Roundtable 2 (7 Participants): During this roundtable, Indigenous participants emphasized the intergenerational value of fishing, not only as a food source but as a means of passing down cultural practices, language, and Traditional Ecological Knowledge to children and grandchildren. Activities such as net fishing, fish skin tanning, and crafting with fish scales were cited as both cultural expressions and opportunities for Indigenous empowerment. Participants expressed concern about pollution and unsafe fishing conditions in urban areas, which prevent women from maintaining these connections. They highlighted the spiritual relationship with water and the emotional impact of losing access to clean and abundant waterways. Several

participants emphasized the need to prioritize food security, cultural revitalization, and Indigenous-led policy reform. The feedback stressed that any restoration framework must center Indigenous women's voices and uphold treaty rights through continuous engagement and culturally grounded approaches.

- Roundtable 3 (11 Participants): This roundtable focused on the factors that participants consider most important for selecting fish and fish habitat restoration priorities, and suggestions for information that should be used to identify these priorities. Participants emphasized the importance of preserving the values that Indigenous people associate with fish and fish habitats—particularly in relation to food security and cultural practices. There was strong concern about the extensive and often avoidable impacts of projects, such as dams and bridges, on these communities. Participants identified the need to mitigate these impacts through adaptive approaches, including enhanced environmental education, habitat remediation, and the integration of cultural teachings. Education also emerged as a critical tool for supporting restoration initiatives in ways that respect and uphold Indigenous treaty rights, helping to prevent infringement and ensure culturally appropriate engagement.
- **One-on-one virtual interviews with Indigenous W2STGD+ peoples** (18 interviews): The interviews focused on understanding the benefits of fish and fish habitats, observed environmental changes, impacts of land use, and views on restoration in relation to Indigenous rights.
- **Online survey** (267 participants): Focused on themes of preserving the values Indigenous WG2STGD+ peoples derive from fish and fish habitats; Identifying climate and non-climate impacts on those values; Fish habitat restoration priorities and land use change across landscape scales; and Fish habitat restoration priorities and Indigenous treaty rights.

## Wave 3 of Engagement (2023 – 2024)

Wave 3 consisted of a series of roundtables led by NWAC that sought feedback on various guiding principles.

- **Roundtable 1** (24 participants): Focused on feedback on the eight Guiding Principles for Habitat Banking and Habitat Offsetting.
- **Roundtable 2** (13 participants): Focused on feedback on the eight Guiding Principles for Habitat Banking and Habitat Offsetting.
  - Participants from both Roundtable 1 and Roundtable 2 agreed that engagement with Indigenous communities needs to happen early and be ongoing, that communication needs to be clear and transparent, implementation is more important than just principles, Indigenous knowledge must be valued and respected, and that prevention needs to be a priority over mitigation practices.
- **Roundtable 3** (23 participants): Focused on feedback on the five Principles<sup>12</sup> and Best Practices for a Multi-Species Approach and Improved Conservation Outcomes for Aquatic Species<sup>13</sup>.
  - Overall, participants supported the five new guiding principles from the DFO. Comments included the need to acknowledge Indigenous peoples as leaders in conservation efforts, there needs to be community-based approaches for Indigenous leadership, and that there needs to be engagement of a variety of Indigenous voices.

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<sup>12</sup> The five guiding principles proposed by DFO discussed were Implement multi-species approaches to improve conservation outcomes; Respect Aboriginal and Treaty Rights; Incorporate Indigenous perspectives and enhance opportunities for Indigenous leadership; Form strong partnerships in conservation; Strengthened knowledge base for decision making; and Adaptive management.

<sup>13</sup> Native Women's Association of Canada, Developing a Framework for Aquatic Species at Risk Conservation: A multi-species approach, NWAC, (2023). <https://nwac.ca/assets-documents/Developing-a-framework-for-aquatic-species-at-risk-conservation-Final-Report-Nov-21-2023.pdf>



**This report provides a synthesis of feedback from all three waves, focusing on the views and experiences of Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, transgender and gender diverse peoples.**

## Summary of Engagement Insights

This report synthesizes the concerns and recommendations from NWAC's engagement related to the DFO's proposed changes under the provisions for fish and fish habitat protection in the *Fisheries Act* of Canada. The report centres the voices and experiences of Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, transgender, and gender diverse (WG2STGD+) peoples because of their unique perspectives and the importance of ensuring their voices help shape inclusive and responsive solutions. Each subsection identifies an important theme present throughout the three waves of engagement (between 2020 and 2024), along with insights and direct quotes from participants.

### **1. Mandate the meaningful integration of Indigenous Knowledge at every phase of project planning, implementation, and evaluation.**

Protecting fish and fish habitats is complex and requires a long-term outlook. Indigenous Knowledge is essential for long-term protection of complex ecosystems, and early engagement of Indigenous peoples is key for allowing Western Science and Indigenous Knowledge to work in tandem.

In all sessions, participants consistently emphasized that protecting fish habitats is a long-term, complex effort and advocated for Indigenous Knowledge to be included when developing and implementing policy, regulations, and other instruments and tools. They do not believe that Western science alone is sufficient for achieving sustainable and healthy fisheries.

*“Western Science tends to try to harness Mother Nature, instead of working with her.” – Wave 2 Roundtable Participant*

Indigenous participants emphasized the importance of incorporating Indigenous Knowledge when establishing baseline conditions to assess potential cumulative impacts on fish habitats. They expressed concern that Western science alone may not adequately capture cumulative effects on the natural environment in the holistic way that Indigenous Knowledge does. Participants also indicated that Ecologically Significant Areas (ESAs) should be classified using a whole world view, instead of being based solely on ecological

considerations, enabling the consideration of places and species that are of cultural importance to Indigenous peoples. Participants stressed the importance of allowing for Two-Eyed Seeing, where traditional Indigenous Knowledge can work in tandem with Western science.

*“Start by looking at it through an Indigenous lens. That will make a huge difference.” – Wave 2 Roundtable Participant*

Including Indigenous Knowledge requires early engagement with Indigenous communities. Throughout the conversations, participants reiterated the importance of engaging meaningfully with Indigenous communities from the very beginning of a project. Meaningful engagement means not just consulting Indigenous peoples but listening, valuing and applying the Indigenous perspectives gathered. It is essential to move beyond simply collecting Indigenous feedback and to meaningfully embed Indigenous Knowledge and traditions. This includes, for example, respecting seasonal calendars and incorporating traditional teachings into the development and implementation processes. This type of engagement is believed to set the foundation for projects and create the space for including Indigenous Knowledge and beginning the relationship-building process at the start.

*“In terms of community engagement, ...[there should be]...First Nations involvement, not just consultation. Have our traditional knowledge keepers and Elders assess the area as well....” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

*“A meeting with the Elder’s council of the area, even if not on registered First Nation land. They understand the area for a long time and understand the way the earth moves and creatures interact.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

*“Local Elders should be hired for their knowledge and show companies how it was before technology, etc. took over.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant.*

*“...communication and community engagement before projects being approved and groundbreaking starts...” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant.*

*“Engage Indigenous communities from the beginning, have long-term plans and funding in place and include long-term capacity development plans.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant.*

*“Regarding processes, proponents should include an advisory board of community members of various backgrounds which includes, youth, Elders, council members, Knowledge Keepers, and community members with the environmental background to be fully informed of past, present and future health of the water environment.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

*“Using that Two-Eyed Seeing is so important in our research. Our Elders and Knowledge Holders hold more weight to me than scientists who come into our communities. Our people have lived off the land and hold a closer connection to the land and have seen the impacts and changes throughout the years.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

*“... It would be so nice if we could find a way for these studies could be done using both Indigenous Knowledge and Western knowledge as well.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

Some participants acknowledged the history of suppressing Indigenous voices, acknowledging the bias towards Western science, and the need to ensure the cultural context is not forgotten in these types of decisions.

*“The one piece that really grabs my attention in this principle is the cultural value. Consultation in this province is not the best it can be. Historically, a lot of things have been pulled out of the North so most of the regulatory agencies or people that are working with permitting or any government bodies are now located in Prince Albert or South of Prince Albert. Everything was moved to the southern parts of the province which has created a huge disconnect with what is happening up here and with people, the cultural importance. There is a huge mistrust, especially with provincial governments... I think that the cultural value piece is something that is sometimes missed. There is so much focus on the Western science model of determining if something is rare, important, or exceptional and not necessarily putting an emphasis on Indigenous and land user knowledge. That is a very useful part of learning about the areas.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

One participant spoke to personal experiences, witnessing the positive outcomes when Indigenous Knowledge and Western Science are applied in tandem, reinforcing the importance and potential for positive outcomes when Indigenous Knowledge is applied.

*“I worked on a project where a traditional ecological knowledge assessment was done in tandem with an archeological assessment to create Chinook spawning grounds along the Penticton River channel... The traditional ecological knowledge assessment and the technical report worked well and complemented each*

*other...The whole project changed because of those assessments. It turned out successful. I cannot reiterate enough how important those are.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

Indigenous participants expressed concern over decision-makers having too narrow a view on protection initiatives, overlooking broader ecological impacts and long-term impacts. They believe initiatives should take an ecosystem approach, considering multiple projects, species, and cumulative effects in decisions. They worried that DFO’s general approach of reviewing projects on a site-by-site basis does not allow for all factors to be considered, which could understate the risks to fish and fish habitats. Furthermore, there is an overarching perspective that prevention is better than restoration or offsetting.

*“I would like to see this principle lean more towards “leave it better than how you found it” as opposed to counter-balancing. I am on the side of better than like-for-like...” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant.*

*“An ounce of prevention is much more worthy than the restoration itself...” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

*“What I am trying to understand when we are talking about offsetting, the process of how we are going to fully understand the activities and the impacts to make sure we do not create a bigger monster than what we had.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

## **2. Build long-term partnerships with Indigenous communities, beginning with project inception and continuing through monitoring and follow-up activities.**

Implementation of guiding principles and protections requires Indigenous partnership. Building long-term relationships with Indigenous people and providing them with the decision-making power to influence conservation and habitat protection outcomes are key for successfully implementing long-term protections.

While many of the guiding principles were positively received in theory, participants expressed concern about the gaps between policy and implementation. They highlighted the need for robust monitoring, follow-up, and clear, enforceable standards to avoid loopholes and ensure offsetting measures are effective over time. It is important to recognize that the implementation of these rules and protections often occurs in areas important to Indigenous peoples. As a result, Indigenous WG2STGD+ peoples want to know whether these efforts are having the intended outcomes; one-time engagements or notifications are

not enough. Following up, reporting on key indicators, and sharing progress are essential to demonstrate to Indigenous communities that accountability is an integral part of the process.

*“It can’t be one-time. Notification is not meaningful consultation. The Indigenous voice and history need to be represented. There has to be a mechanism to ensure meaningful Indigenous engagement on an on-going basis.” – Wave 2 Roundtable Participant*

*“Should there be a point, or somehow highlight that the offset is working? There are areas that have had some work done, but it has not done anything. It has just been left. They did this thing, and it is five years later, and no one has ever been back to make sure that it has been productive...Where is the follow-up in the outcome?” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

*“I am seeing that industries and companies are trying to be a bit more proactive on engagement. For it to be self-sustaining and long-lasting, we need follow-up. We need a relationship because there is so much information that could be shared if there was a stronger relationship. You might not have an offset abandoned because it is forgotten about. I think a big piece is the importance of engagement and of relationship with local land users and Indigenous people.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

*“When it comes to implementation, we definitely need accountability at a community and individual level... especially for First Nations moving towards land code. It will take a long time, but we need our own people in all our own communities taking accountability and making good choices in terms of affecting our environment. We also need many people to help enforce these principles for those who won't take accountability. Which will have to come from a community/individual level.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

To be included in the process and implementation, participants want to move beyond consultation toward co-governance and shared decision-making. Including Indigenous WG2STGD+ peoples as active partners in these types of initiatives would help ease concerns about the application and implementation of guidelines in practice. The implementation of new rules and regulations for protecting fish and fish habitats should be rooted in accountability and demonstrate how Indigenous feedback directly influences outcomes. There are several ways that Indigenous communities want to be included as active participants in fish and fish habitat protections.

**Monitoring & Co-Governance:** Participants expressed curiosity and concern over how efforts would be monitored and tracked. Many participants advocated that FFHPP should partner with Indigenous communities to help monitor projects. They expressed interest in participating in training programs so that Indigenous community members can support monitoring. Involving Indigenous peoples in the monitoring of these projects was seen as a way to ease concerns about the FFHPP's capacity and capability to carry out multi-species approaches.

*"One area that requires more clarity and extensive discussion is alternative governance arrangements for potential ESAs. Other federal, provincial, and territorial government departments have opened up nation-to-nation conversations about existing and future protected area development with Indigenous Nations and/or communities [...]. In your commitment to reconciliation, we trust that our feedback will be incorporated into the ESA Framework." – Wave 2 Roundtable Participant*

**Decision-Making & Project Approval:** Indigenous peoples have expressed interest in partnership agreements that include decision-making. Many expressed a desire to have a greater level of involvement in project review activities related to fish and fish habitats, such as the review and approval of individual projects and monitoring to ensure that prescribed measures were effective and fish habitat was being protected. In fact, ESAs were seen as a great opportunity for exploring new types of arrangements with Indigenous peoples. Some noted that fee-in-lieu would be an opportunity to fund Indigenous involvement in file review and monitoring, while others were concerned that it would be used to expedite project approvals.

**Information Sharing & Education:** Participants expressed that building and sustaining relationships with Indigenous communities requires building trust within the communities. Participants want to be kept informed on initiatives that impact their communities, signaling the long-term dedication to working authentically with Indigenous peoples' projects affecting fish and fish habitats.

*“When these corporations want Indigenous Knowledge, many people feel like it is just checking a box. They do the meeting and hear the words, but there is no follow-up.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

To build trust, Indigenous communities must be informed of the rules, regulations, and projects taking place in or near their lands. Providing timely updates, advance notice, and follow-ups demonstrates respect for their rights, interests, and connection to place. Indigenous communities want to be notified at the outset of a project and kept informed through regular updates as the project progresses. The question of what information is set to be stored and accessed through the FA Registry was at the top of many Indigenous participants' minds. Many advocated for detailed notifications of project information, requests for review forms, and compliance monitoring reports so that communities could be kept informed. Many requested notifications of non-regulatory decisions, such as letters of advice, codes of practices, and prescribed works, and water regulation projects be shared on the FA registry.

Participants also requested that relevant information about projects be made accessible within Indigenous communities. Assigning contacts and providing their contact information can help equip Indigenous organizations with the knowledge to keep projects moving forward. This is important as many participants believe offset projects and protection measures should be measured and assessed on an ongoing basis to ensure they are delivering the intended outcomes.

*“...present as well as contact information for the parties involved hopefully for accountability, especially when there is turnover in those organizations. This is an issue in my community. We have turnover with no overlap process, so the new staff are unaware of any progress or incomplete projects. There needs to be some type of contact with the prior knowledge and answers for enquiries.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant.*

There is also an openness to training and education for Indigenous youth to understand the social and cultural value of fish and fish habitats, as well as the risks.

*“Education at the community level and in the curriculum is important to learn from a young age. Sometimes fishing can become a competition of who gets more fish, but*



*there won't be a competition when there is no fish left. Our community needs some education.” – Wave 2 Roundtable Participant*

*“Go to the source with our communities, teach children to fish, more land-based teaching, at even have a woman event to teach women and children about fishing and land-based hunting. If all food store is closed, we would need to hunt for our own food again, most folks would not know how.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

### **3. Earn trust through transparent and respectful communication.**

Clear, accessible, and transparent communication is essential for building and maintaining trust with Indigenous communities. Consistent updates on activities affecting fish and fish habitats on their lands are critical for demonstrating accountability, supporting informed decision-making, and upholding Indigenous rights and responsibilities.

When advocating for greater transparency in the guidelines for fish and fish habitat protections, participants shared some best practices for communicating with Indigenous communities in ways that are accessible and respectful. Best practices emphasized the use of community-based language, clarity, and evidential support.

**Community-based language:** Participants are asking DFO to use plain language in the official documents to facilitate their understanding from Indigenous peoples. This is quite different from Community-based language approach. Community-based language means: *language acquisition through social interaction in a collaborative learning community*<sup>14</sup> Feedback underscored the importance of transparent, plain-language communication that reaches community members at all levels, including Indigenous youth and Elders. Participants asked for clarity on terminology, regulatory obligations, and evidence-based examples to foster trust and understanding.

*“We are kinesthetic learners...Indigenous people are being given these big words and these significant equations to confuse us. Because of this complex communication, we have historically lost our land, treaty rights, and ancestral heritage rights...Therefore, your wording has to be very practical, where it is not just basic, but it is very community-based, where someone ten years old will understand*

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<sup>14</sup> Little Lingua. “Community Based Language Learning Explained”. (2024). <https://littlelingua.com/blog/community-based-language-learning-explained/>

*what you mean to someone who is an Elder....We are community-based and want our children, adults, youth, and Elders to understand it.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

*“If your language is not English and your first language is ancestral, you will have difficulty comprehending what offsetting and trade-off means.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

**Clarity:** It is also important to balance simplicity and clarity. When reviewing the wording and phrasing in some of the materials during the engagement sessions, participants were quick to point out vague phrasing. They often commented on the need to strengthen and clarify wording in documents, as it is important to ensure that communications within Indigenous communities help answer questions rather than raising more. For example, in relation to a draft Position Statement written by the DFO to provide further clarity with respect to its approach for regulating works, undertakings and activities, other than fishing, likely to result in the death of fish, several participants raised concerns about the use of the phrase *‘to the extent practicable’*. This phrase raised questions as to whether it served as a modifier that could soften DFO’s approach to administering the fish and fish habitat protection provisions as they relate to managing death of fish. One participant asked the question, *“what does it mean to be practicable, and who will decide what is practicable?”* Another example is seen in Section 4.1 of the Position Statement, where participants suggested that changing phrasing like *“may choose to consider...”* to *“will consider...”* helps to strengthen the message and provide greater clarity. Overall, they believe guidelines should be extremely clear, leaving little room for interpretation and removing the potential for loopholes that will prevent other actors from taking shortcuts when following the new guidelines.

*“A big pet peeve is when there are loopholes [in the wording]. Such as, “begin to demonstrate” instead of “fully demonstrate”. In my experience, many individuals or organizations can be sneaky and say they completed what was asked of them because the policy requirements were not clear on full requirements which allowed them to cut corners with no accountability.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

**Evidential Support:** Participants also stressed the importance of providing evidentiary support because the information and claims that governments and external

organizations provide cannot be taken at face value. Providing evidence that projects are delivering the intended outcomes will help build trust and shows respect for Indigenous communities.

*“You have to have more concrete evidence than that because I am Indigenous.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

*“Most colonized people do not have the evidential support because they are not respected enough.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

*“I realize offsetting is a viable solution. However, because I was saying we are visual learners, when you are doing your presentation, give at least four examples because four is a ... medicine wheel, four types of numbers, four examples in the world where offsetting was utilized and the benefits to it and the structural costs and logistics. You need to have evidential support.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

#### **4. Respect Indigenous relationships to land and water in conservation efforts.**

Recognizing and respecting the unique cultural values, practices, and relationships that Indigenous communities have with the land and water is essential. This understanding ensures the protection of fish and fish habitats is implemented in ways that align with Indigenous laws and worldviews.

A key concern throughout the engagements was how the proposed policies, codes, guidelines, and principles would uphold Indigenous treaty rights. Indigenous peoples have deep connections and personal relationships with land and water. Fish and fish habitats are more than just a resource in many Indigenous communities – they are culturally and spiritually important. While participants are supportive of new guidelines and regulations for protecting fish and fish habitats, there are concerns about whether these guidelines would infringe on their rights.

*“For government policies to succeed for Indigenous people, there needs to be a lot more engagement with the Indigenous community and respect for Indigenous treaties and resources.” – Wave 2 Roundtable Participant.*

When discussing proposed Prescribed Works and Waters Regulations<sup>15</sup>, participants called for alignment with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples (UNDRIP) and assurance that their rights, self-determination, and traditional practices are respected throughout all project development and habitat protection stages.

Related to the Framework for Aquatic Species at Risk Conservation, participants emphasized the importance of socioeconomic and cultural considerations when considering the use of fish habitats. It was emphasized that Indigenous treaty rights must be explicitly identified and considered in developing multi-species approaches. Several participants mentioned the potential of multi-species approaches to provide benefits for species of significance to Indigenous peoples, both in terms of cultural significance and food security.

Discussing the guiding principles related to habitat offsetting and banking, there were some concerns over access to fish habitats and whether the implementation of new guidelines would affect existing rights to fish.

*“First Nations in Ontario are exempt from holding fishing licenses, to my understanding, with proof of providing their status cards, are they also exempt from doing any projects? This goes for all other provinces and territories.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

## **5. Prioritize inclusive engagement across diverse Indigenous communities when making decisions about regulations in the protection of fish and fish habitats.**

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<sup>15</sup> The proposed Prescribed Works and Water Regulations would provide a new tool for managing routine, low-risk projects in or near water with the potential to cause limited death of fish or the harmful alteration, disruption or destruction of fish habitat. This regulation could establish, or “prescribe”, classes of routine works that could proceed without FFHPP review, subject to mandatory fish and fish habitat protection conditions. The proposed PWWR is intended to support a shift in FFHPP efforts toward a more regulatory approach for managing potential impacts on fish and fish habitat.

Recognizing the diversity within Indigenous communities is essential for true inclusion. Performing broader outreach with more communities and more inclusive engagements with everyone from Elders to youth will help avoid pan-Indigeneity.

The sessions highlighted the diversity of perspectives among and within Indigenous communities. Participants cautioned against pan-Indigenous approaches and stressed the importance of distinction-based engagement that reflects each community's unique cultures, governance systems, and priorities. There are many distinct Indigenous communities across Canada, each with their own histories, cultures, and perspectives. Acknowledging and understanding this diversity is essential to respectful and effective engagement.

*"A coast-to-coast in-person meeting with representative from every Canadian First Nation and the agencies involved to do what we are doing today on a larger scale." – Wave 2 Roundtable Participant*

Participants also expressed the differing views and opinions within their communities, demonstrating the importance of gathering perspectives from all levels of the community, not just a few high-level representatives.

*"Not leaving it up to one individual, or Chief and council to make the choices. From experience in our community, consultations normally take place with one individual who doesn't come back to the community and consult with the rest of our community to hear everyone else's thoughts and concerns. So, community engagement and communication are a major concern of mine and getting input from our youth, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, fishermen/women and everyone in between." – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

*"Chief and council want it, and it is all about money. It is not about the fish and the community; the Elders do not want it. And so, when you do the community involvement, it is sometimes hard because it's like, oh, well, do you go to the chief? And do you get they are okay about it, but the community is not?" – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

*"I think these conversations should be broader and done in person by going into communities, rather than via Zoom as many of our Elders have "louder" voices as they have the knowledge of the lands as they do go out hunting and fishing as ways of survival." – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

Consistent with taking a community-based approach towards habitat protection, participants stressed the importance of Indigenous youth engagement. Participants view youth involvement as mutually beneficial for the community and the protection projects.

*“Programs to have youth and Elders work together. My band is hoping to create space for knowledge passing! A space where Elders can teach youth about Indigenous Knowledge and tradition.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

*“Empowering the youth to be water and environment advocates for their community can both uplift the youth and give them a role in the community, which has the benefit to the land but also to their self-worth, especially with mental health. The health of the land has an impact on mental and emotional health and well-being.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

*“Guardian programs have been a great resource for monitoring areas and also getting youth involved in these guardian programs.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

*“Summer programs, ongoing workshops, etc. are important to pass knowledge on to the youth as they are the next caretakers of the land. I was involved in a food sovereignty program with Elders and I learned a lot.” – Wave 3 Roundtable Participant*

## Conclusion

Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, transgender and gender diverse (WG2STGD+) peoples play vital roles in environmental stewardship rooted in their cultural teachings, responsibilities, and deep relationships with land and water. Across many Indigenous Nations, WG2STGD+ peoples are recognized as water protectors and Knowledge Keepers who carry responsibilities for protecting ecosystems, such as fish and fish habitats. Their leadership and perspectives are essential to understanding the relational, spiritual, and ecological dimensions of environmental protection.

Throughout the three waves of engagement, Indigenous WG2STGD+ peoples shared not only their concerns but also their knowledge, solutions, and a willingness to collaborate with various partners and stakeholders in fish and fish habitat protection. Their feedback underscored several core truths that must guide fish and fish habitat protection efforts moving forward.

Participants emphasized that sustainable and effective fish habitat protection must draw from both Indigenous and Western knowledge systems. Early engagement with Indigenous communities must include “Two-Eyed Seeing,” where Indigenous worldviews and Traditional Ecological Knowledge are treated as equal to Western scientific methods and fully embedded into planning, monitoring, and decision-making. Centering the voices of Indigenous women, who are often knowledge holders, water protectors and community leaders, ensures that protection efforts prioritize their lived experiences. Doing this will also lead to more holistic and culturally grounded outcomes, strengthen trust, and contribute to gender-informed approaches to reconciliation.

Indigenous peoples must be involved not only in consultation but also in implementation, with clear roles in co-governance, project approvals, monitoring, and enforcement. Participants called for stronger accountability and for policies to reflect Indigenous priorities from the outset. Successful implementation depends on long-term relationships, not one-time engagement. There needs to be clear, enforceable standards and long-term tracking of projects to ensure they are working. Indigenous communities need to be kept informed and involved throughout the full project lifecycle. This will ensure minimal gaps between policy promises and outcomes on the ground.

Participants highlighted the importance of providing evidence to support decisions and showing that protections are working. This includes sharing outcomes, explaining choices, and using community-based language that all members – from youth to Elders – can understand.

Serious concerns were raised about how the proposed changes may affect Indigenous rights. Fish and fish habitats are integral to Indigenous identities, cultures, spirituality, and food security. DFO must ensure all habitat protection measures align with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples (UNDRIP) and uphold the inherent and treaty rights of Indigenous peoples.

Participants emphasized that each Indigenous community is unique and must be treated as such. DFO must broaden its outreach and engage with diverse voices within each

community, including Elders, youth, women, and Knowledge Keepers. Avoiding pan-Indigenous approaches and ensuring distinction-based engagement will lead to more informed and inclusive policy outcomes.

Incorporating these key learnings depends on collaboration – building trust, showing respect, and fostering long-lasting relationships and partnerships with Indigenous communities. Participants have expressed not just their concerns, but also solutions, suggestions, and a willingness to learn and collaborate with various partners and stakeholders in fish and fish habitat protection. Their feedback shows that integrating Indigenous values and Traditional Ecological Knowledge into policy frameworks can enhance the resilience of fish and fish habitats and uphold the rights and cultural identities of Indigenous peoples, fostering a more sustainable and equitable future for both ecosystems and communities.



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