



WATER CARRIERS PHASE TWO:
BUILDING CAPACITY
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

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ORGANIZATIONAL SUMMARY:

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) is a national Indigenous organization representing political voices of Indigenous Women, Girls, Two-Spirit, Transgender, and Gender-Diverse+ (WG2STGD+) People in Canada, inclusive of First Nations—on and off reserve, status, non-status, and disenfranchised—Inuit, and Métis. Representing 12 Indigenous women's organizations, NWAC was founded on a collective goal to enhance, promote, and foster social, economic, cultural, and political well-beings of Indigenous women within their respective communities and Canadian societies.

For more than 44 years, NWAC has established strong and lasting governance structures, decision-making processes, financial policies and procedures, and networks to help achieve its overall mission and goals. Currently, NWAC engages in national and international advocacy aimed at legislative and policy reforms that promote equality for Indigenous WG2STGD+ People, including 2SLGBTQQIA+ people.

Through advocacy, policy, and legislative analysis, NWAC works to preserve Indigenous cultures by advancing the well-being of all Indigenous WG2STGD+ People, as well as their families and communities.

WATER AND INDIGENOUS CULTURE:

Water is of significance and cultural importance to Indigenous communities across Canada. Water is not only a source of income, transport, and food, it is also of cultural and spiritual importance (Turner, 2020). Indigenous communities recognize water as a, "Living being with its own spirit," (SSHRC, 2017). Traditional Knowledge also sees water through a holistic lens as all creatures and elements rely on water (SSHRC, 2017).

Indigenous culture engages with nature and environments through a holistic outlook, which involves nurturing and preserving natural elements. While Indigenous culture engages with a higher standard of relationship with water, Indigenous WG2STGD+ People are known to have an even deeper, and unique, connection to water. Like earth, women have the ability to nurture and provide life through womb and water, therefore have the closest connections with Mother Earth (Anderson, 2010). With this connection mainly Indigenous WG2STGD+ People take on the role of Water Carriers, as both protectors and sustainers of water.

Water Carriers are also Knowledge Keepers who are empowered with the responsibility to share Traditional Knowledge on water to younger generations, such that they can continue to protect the natural world through their spiritual relationships with it.





WATER RELATED CHALLENGES:

Water insecurity is widespread throughout Indigenous communities across Canada. For example, in November of 2022, there were 31 long term drinking water advisories in effect in over 27 communities (in Canada), all of which comprise of indigenous populations, on reserves or elsewhere. More than 28 Indigenous communities were also under short term drinking water advisories. There were more than 10 Do Not Consume (DNC) advisories established in five Canadian provinces (Government of Canada, 2022).

In Indigenous communities, water insecurity is also associated with adverse health problems and socioeconomic disparities, as limited access to drinking water results in consumption of bottled water and other sugar-sweetened beverages (Ratelle et al., 2022). Invariably, the group affect disproportionately due to these disparities are women and girls.

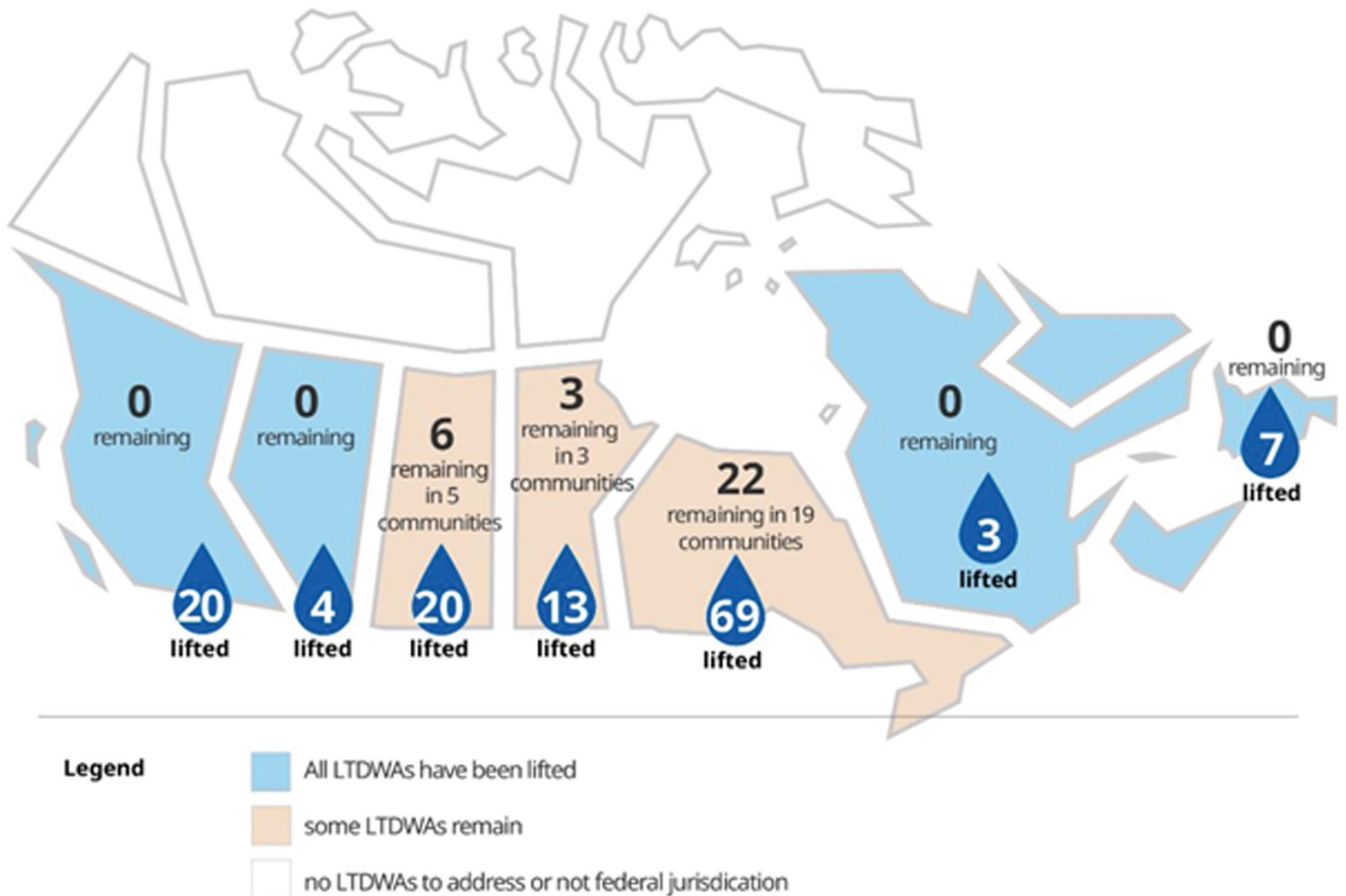


Figure 1: Displays Number Current and Lifter Long-Term Drinking Water Advisories (LTDWA) in Canada 2022 (Indigenous Services Canada, 2022).



Water insecurity can have disastrous impacts on the most vulnerable population in any community. WG2STGD+ People are often among this vulnerable group. Indigenous WG2STGD+ People, in both Traditional Roles and in roles as Water Carriers, are often the first to be affected by water related issues arising in the household, as they are the ones with primary contact to water (NWAC & ECCO, 2020).

Moreover, resources like food and shelter are disproportionately affected by climate change, and therefore can further contribute to household stresses (NWAC & ECCO, 2020). In addition, impacts like droughts and floods are usually seen as secondary stresses that predominantly affect water availability (NWAC & ECCO, 2020). Responding to concerns regarding water requires Indigenous WG2STGD+ People to have a seat at the table where decisions are made. However, despite being one of the most vulnerable groups to water insecurity, Indigenous WG2STGD+ People have been excluded from water governance for millennia.

WATER CARRIERS PHASE TWO: BUILDING CAPACITY:

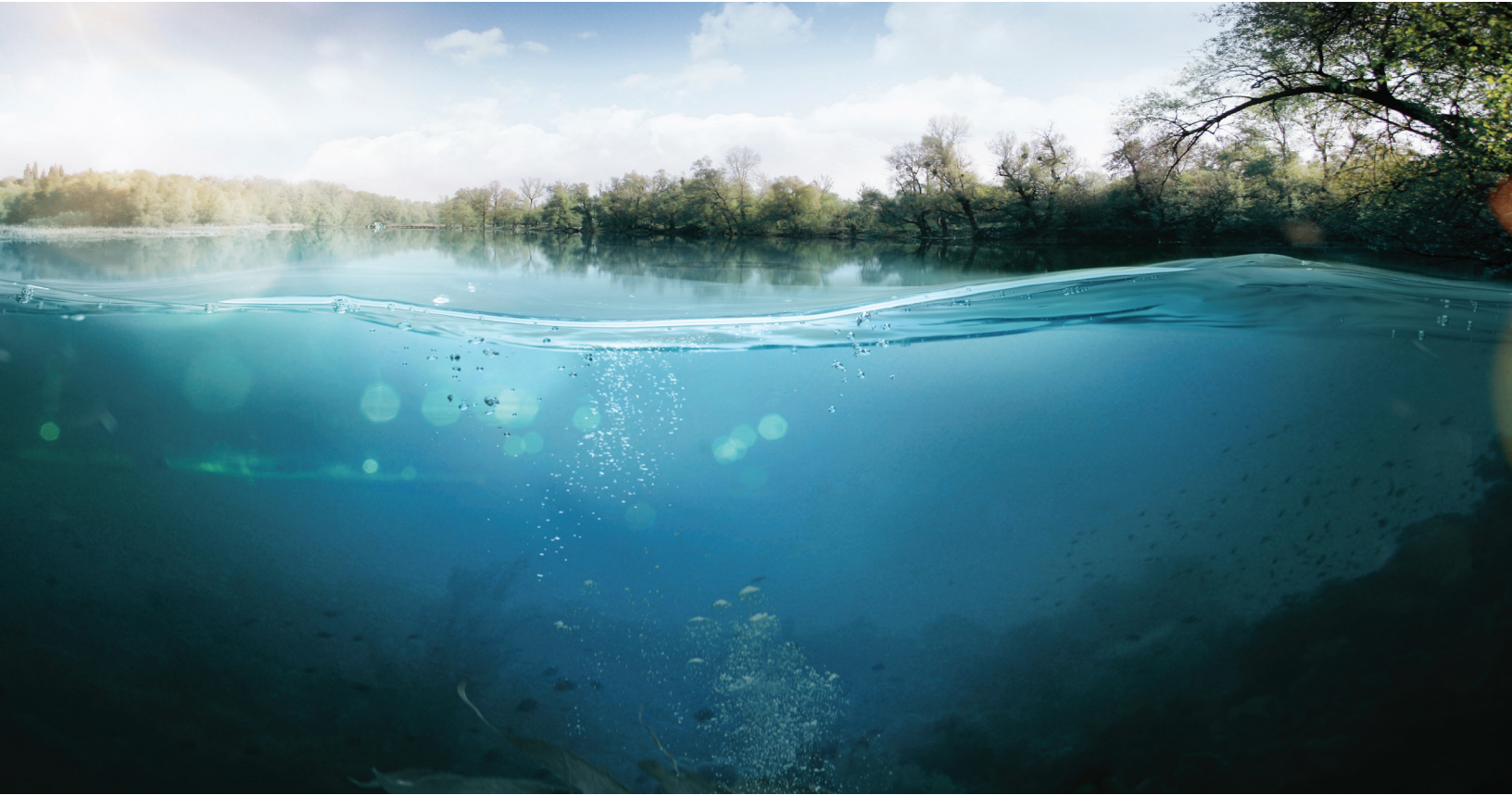
The Water Carriers Project is intended to empower voices of Indigenous WG2STGD+ People, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals, in discourses regarding water governance, especially their roles as rightful protectors of Indigenous rights to potable and navigable waters.

Phase One of the Water Carriers Project focused on obtaining Knowledge from Indigenous WG2STGD+ People and LGBQQIA+ individuals on the importance of water in Indigenous culture. Phase One also focused on what it means to be a water carrier and how water is viewed through an Indigenous lens. The results of this phase can be found at watercarriersnwac.ca. This report is related to the Phase Two of the Water Carriers Project.

More recently, as part of the Water Carriers Project: Phase Two, NWAC has been advancing voices of Indigenous WG2STGD+ People in water governance. Through engagement on management of water and the environment, the project brings together Indigenous WG2STGD+ People, Elders, and youth to discuss their roles as Water Carriers, and particularly on challenges related to water insecurity and impacts of climate change on waters in their communities.

PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT:

The purpose of Phase Two of the Water Carriers Project is to empower Indigenous WG2STGD+ and LGBQQIA+ People as protectors of water and to amplify their voices in their role as Water Carriers. To achieve this goal, the project involves two parts:



Part One focused on acquiring regional perspectives of Indigenous WG2STGD+ and LGBQQIA+ People on a) Roles as Water Carriers, b) Knowledge and experience related to access to clean and safe water, c) Knowledge of Traditional Water Teachings and Traditional Knowledge on water and environmental stewardship, d) Experiences with impacts of climate change with a particular focus on water, and e) Recommendations for conservation and protection of navigable waters and environment.

Part Two of the project focuses on developing and expanding the Water Carriers website to ensure voices and ideas of Indigenous WG2STGD+ and LGBQQIA+ People are connected to the larger Indigenous community.

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT:

This report summarizes perspectives gathered from the 13 Sharing Circles conducted, to obtain regional perspectives of Indigenous WG2STGD+ and LGBQQIA+ People on their roles as Water Carriers. Knowledge and experience relating to access to clean and safe water, their experiences of climate change at grassroots levels, and their recommendations for conservation and protection.



METHOD OF ENGAGEMENT:

Thirteen virtual sharing circles were conducted across the 13 provinces and territories of Canada. Sharing Circles are a Traditional form of group communication method used by Indigenous communities to share, and present, information and thoughts among their members (Devries, 2016). Sharing Circles were conducted between September 20 and November 1, 2022, and included an average of nine participants per session. The precise number of participants in each Sharing Circle, from each region, can be found below:

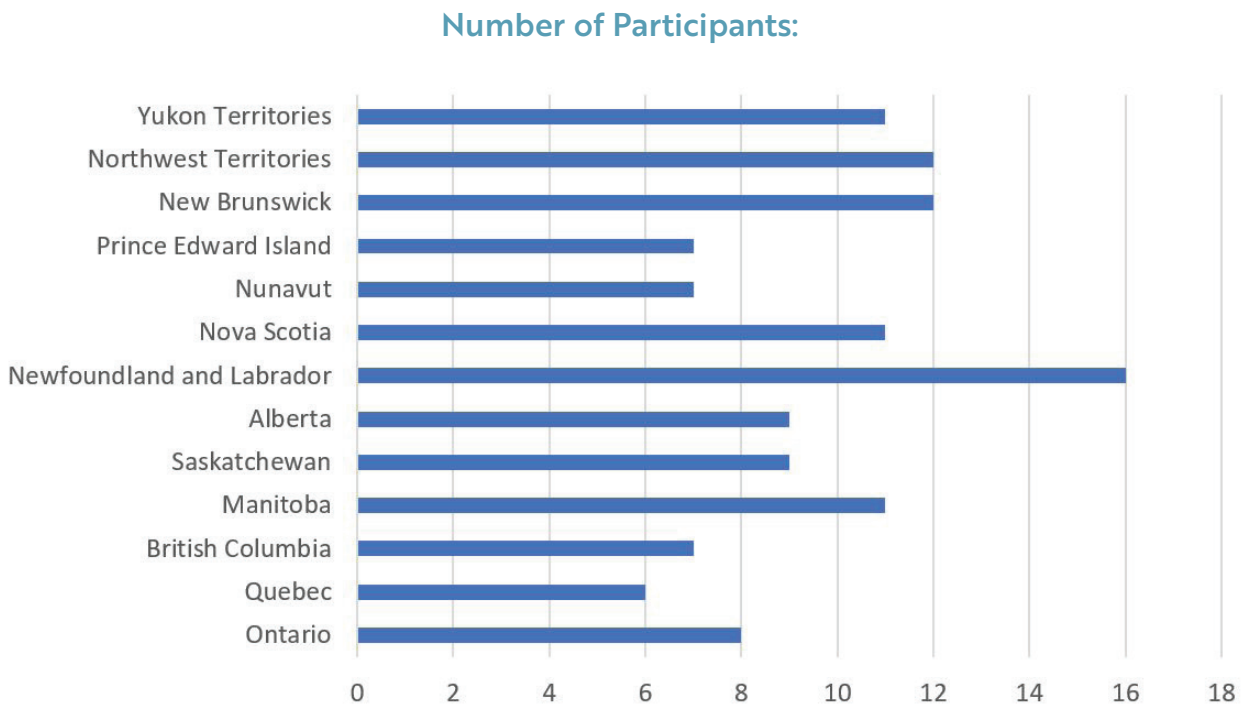


Figure 2: Number of Participants Attending Regional Circles.

Participant recruitment was undertaken with the support of representatives of Provincial Territorial Membership Associations (PTMA) and professionals at NWAC. Participants were recruited through posters and peer to peer connections. The study only recruited Indigenous Women (Native status and non-native status), Indigenous girls, and Indigenous Peoples identifying as part of the 2SLGBTQQIA+ community. Sharing Circles were led by a discussion guide with thematic areas and directing questions.



THEMATIC FOCUS:

Sharing Circles focused on obtaining information through organic conversations. The discussion guide was divided into themes with accompanying guiding questions. The themes include:

1. Perspectives on their roles as Water Carrier's and Traditional Water Teachings.
2. Knowledge on access to clean water.
3. Impacts of climate change.
4. Possible solutions and recommendations.

The following section presents a summary of discussions emerging from the Sharing Circle sessions.

1. Perspectives on roles of Water Carrier and Traditional Water Teachings:

a. Connections between Indigenous WG2STGD+ people, the earth and water:

Participants from all 13 regions shared similar feelings and perspectives on their role as Water Carrier. Participants noted connections between womenkind and the earth through its life-giving ability. They also emphasized duties as protectors and sustainers of water through Traditional Water Ceremonies and prayers.

b. Water Carriers as Keepers of Traditional Knowledge:

Water Carriers, being the Keepers of Knowledge on water, ensure the responsibility to disseminate knowledge to younger generations, was a theme frequently shared by participants in the Sharing Circles. Traditional Teachings on Water, and clarification on holistic and reciprocal relationships with water in Indigenous culture, were also discussed at length.

c. Water as Medicine, Therapy and Spiritual Calmness:

Participants shared how Traditional Knowledge teaches Indigenous Peoples to respect water and care for it, as it is interconnected to all life. Water, being an importance source of medicine, therapy, and spiritual calmness, was also a recurring theme presented through the Sharing Circles. Participants also shared their utilitarian relationship with water, emphasizing its role in their life.



d. Disconnect between water, culture and teachings:

While most participants understood what being a Water Carrier is, a few outliers were identified in the circles who, due to the disconnect with their Traditional homes and culture, were not deeply educated on the topic. Similar patterns were identified in conversations of Traditional Water Teachings, as many participants shared that they didn't know many Water Teachings and Ceremonies, as they didn't have Elders or Knowledge Keepers to learn from.

Knowledge shared on roles as Water Carriers and Traditional Water Teachings can be identified in the sharing's below:

“I'm not sure about teachings as I didn't have any Elders around me growing up.”

“For me, Water Carriers are the activists of our community. We are protesting for our water to be protected for future generations.”

“We were always taught that water is sacred; it can feed you, nourish you, cleanse you, and offer transportation. We were taught to take care of the favorite, and it will take care of you.”

“They [Water Carriers] are the Knowledge Keepers and protectors because water lines reach all across the land much like our veins and nervous system.”

2. Knowledge and access to clean water:

As identified earlier, water insecurity is a major concern for Indigenous WG2STGD+ People's health, and therefore, attaining current and past experiences to integrate in capacity building work helps develop sustainable mitigation practices.

a. Water insecurity and access:

The majority of participants in conversations on access to clean water shared that even though they have not been denied access to water, they have previously experienced or are currently experiencing issues with access to potable tap water¹. Participants shared

¹ Potable water is also known as water that is safe to be used as drinking water. From Gary R. Brenniman, "Potable Water," SpringerLink (Springer Netherlands, January 1, 1999), https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/1-4020-4494-1_265



that their community is currently having to rely on bottled or tanker water provided by their municipality for everyday uses.

b. Pollution of lakes, rivers, and wells:

Regarding pollution and contamination, the majority of the participants shared that the lakes, wells, and rivers they lived close to, and used for food and water, have experienced pollution over the years. A recurring theme among these conversations was the impact on Indigenous communities from infrastructural buildings (E.g., dams and landfills). Environmental injustice from water dumping, agricultural runoff and commercial oil spills were also some reasons for water insecurity identified by participants in their sharing circles. To understand some issues experienced by participants, refer to the below statements:

“One of the issues was losing access to our natural water sources; for example, earlier this summer, we were not allowed to use most of our water in the north due to contamination, and nothing is being done to mitigate those issues,” - when asked on being denied access to water.

“They should be fishing what is in the river for food supply instead of trying to pollute and poison the water for eradication.”

“The challenges are continued use, pollution, and access to the water. [Other challenges to communities in Newfoundland and Labrador include] Churchill Falls, mines, large scale fish plants, pulp and paper mills, and the increased recreational use of water.”

“Nowadays, they can’t get a handle on everything that gets into the water. It will be good on one end of the town, and not be good on the other end of the town because there is too much chlorine. I’m not drinking the water from the tap now, although years ago I would. I’ve seen a lot of changes here, and I won’t drink from the tap unless the water is boiled.”

3. Impacts of climate change and concerns for future of water and the environment:

Climate change can impact natural waterways, which are at times used by Indigenous communities as a primary source of food and income. Hence it is essential to identify



current issues and possible future concerns from Indigenous WG2STGD+ People regarding the impacts of climate change on drinking water and waterways.

a. Climate Change and Food Security:

During the Sharing Circle, a large majority of participants shared that climate change, and its subsequent impacts from hurricanes, rising water levels and droughts, are frequently affecting their communities economically and socio-culturally. A few participants said living close to water bodies meant they had seen, first hand, a decline in fish populations due to droughts and changes in water temperatures. On concerns for the future of water and the environment, all participants in Sharing Circles shared various issues and concerns.

b. Water quality and industrial Pollution:

Some major water quality concerns shared by participants include: 1) Pollution from infrastructure projects and oil spills, 2) Changes in fisheries' health due to monopoly of large fisheries (overfishing, drag fishing methods, invasive species), 3) Chlorine/chemical tasting drinking water, 4) Increased toxicity in navigable² waters due to chemical runoffs/ climate changes, 5) Pollution from old pulp and paper mills in water, and 5) Increased recreational use of water. Lack of education to younger children on the importance of water was also a concern shared by participants in the Sharing Circles.

c. Water governance and infrastructural projects:

Lack of inclusion and consultation in certain infrastructural projects was also noted as an issue experienced by the participants in their community. A few participants noted that internal governance structures in their communities (Elders/community representatives), prevented the inclusion of women's perspectives and input on water related projects. This information can be clearly seen in some of the statements shared below:



"[The biggest challenges are] industrialization, which has really contributed to water pollution, chemical emissions which lead to an increase in the ozone layer and cause changes in seasons, and drought which leads to a reduction in water."

2 Navigable water means body of water, including a canal or any water created or altered because of the construction of any work, that is used or where there is likelihood of it being used by vessels. Legislative Services Branch, "Consolidated Federal Laws of Canada, Canadian Navigable Waters Act," Canadian Navigable Waters Act, November 10, 2022, <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/n-22/FullText.html#:~:text=navigable%20water%20means%20a%20body,of%20transport%20or%20travel%20for>



“In my hometown, when the pulp and paper mill left over twenty years ago, the business declared bankruptcy, so they had no responsibility to clean up the contamination left behind. The province is left to fix it, but the expense is astronomical. Barrels of chemicals are buried along the river.”

“The biggest challenge I face in my community is the unsafe water. Some time back, we had an outbreak of a skin condition in the community, and after several tests, it was a result of the water we were using. I think the challenge is more man-made since it resulted from pollution.”

“I had an issue with climate change with the dropping water level, especially when time goes by. We do not have enough water supply, which we have had for a while now. We need people to help and come up with solutions.”

“We, First Nations, need to be consulted about the environment. My kids are from Onion Lake, and that lake no longer exists. The Chiefs allowed that, but the government would have done it anyway as they ignored them ... A lot of older men are running the show, and they are ignorant.”

4. Possible solutions and recommendations:

Understanding recommendations for governance and inclusion structures of Indigenous WG2STGD+ People at the grassroot level helps develop strategies and capacity building projects that target underlying issues of inequality. Hence, Sharing Circles also sought perspectives of participants on what should be done to increase the presence of Indigenous WG2STGD+ People in water governance.

a. Inclusion in water governance:

Frustration from lack of inclusion for Indigenous WG2STGD+ People, in their communities and governance structures, was a common feeling among participants. Participants shared common feelings that Indigenous WG2STGD+ People need to be included in governance of water more frequently. Participants also mentioned increasing the inclusion of Indigenous WG2STGD+ People in decision making on policies, specifically for projects affecting water. Some participants shared they are actively working with community members and government representatives on including Indigenous WG2STGD+ People in decision-making and consultation practices.



b. Education and water and environmental activism:

Various participants in their Sharing Circles noted a need for creating education structures or curriculums in schools focusing on teaching the importance of water and environmental activism, such that younger generations can make a difference in the future. Nonetheless, participants mentioned increasing distribution of teachings in their communities itself, as they had experienced a lack of Knowledge on their Traditional Ways due to lack of Knowledge Keepers and Elders.

c. Formation of Indigenous Women groups:

A unique solution to inequality identified by some participants across the Sharing Circles was the establishment of an Indigenous Women's group within each community across Canada. This concept was introduced by the participants in response to the issue of inequality faced by them within their community on issues of water. Some participants shared that at times, their voices are overridden by community leaders on decisions related to water.

d. Power, Decision-making and Leadership:

A frequent solution put forward in the Sharing Circles was the provision of decision-making power in Indigenous communities, relating to any developments near their communities and reserves. Participants shared a strong feeling of increasing leadership roles of Indigenous WG2STGD+ People in communities and governance agencies. Some perspectives and solutions mentioned have been identified below:

"I think we should be involved in decision-making on policies and have some input, also come up with ways to teach more people, like creating focus groups on how to use, protect, preserve, and all that surrounds the water."

"There should be a platform created for our women to have a place to create awareness and increase involvement in issues that are impacting our waters."

"I think involving every group in the community in policy-making, for example, the fishermen have their association, and since they interact directly with water, I'm sure they can help when formulating policies."

"I think a lot of ideas are standoffish. Any initiatives will go through the Elders"



first. They see everything through the lens of the trauma they went through. They should be considerate of new ideas. When you get an education and bring knowledge back to your community, you may be faced with resistance. There is favoritism within the communities. Elders are traumatized and need to let younger people talk.”

“I think that in order to be inclusive of our folks, there really needs to be active engagement on many levels. There needs to be group set up to discuss all topics, not just this particular topic. If you have a strong community group, or foundation of community gathering, it’s really important that that foundation is already there to communicate any relationships.”

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF WATER ADVOCACY IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES:

The Sharing Circle sessions reinforced not only the impacts that Indigenous WG2STGD+ People face on issues of water governance, but they also highlighted interconnectedness between inequality and quality of life. Indigenous WG2STGD+ People are some of the most vulnerable populations affected by issues of climate change, impacting both their physical beings and spiritual sense of identity. Lack of decision-making power can lead to impacts that last for generations.

The existing power dynamics within water governance points to an attempt to exclude Indigenous WG2STGD+ People as the rightful protectors and caretakers of water. The main takeaways from the Sharing Circle sessions point to an immediate need for increased involvement of Indigenous WG2STGD+ People in water governance. Inequalities in governance structures can be impactful on people at the grassroots level and it can be

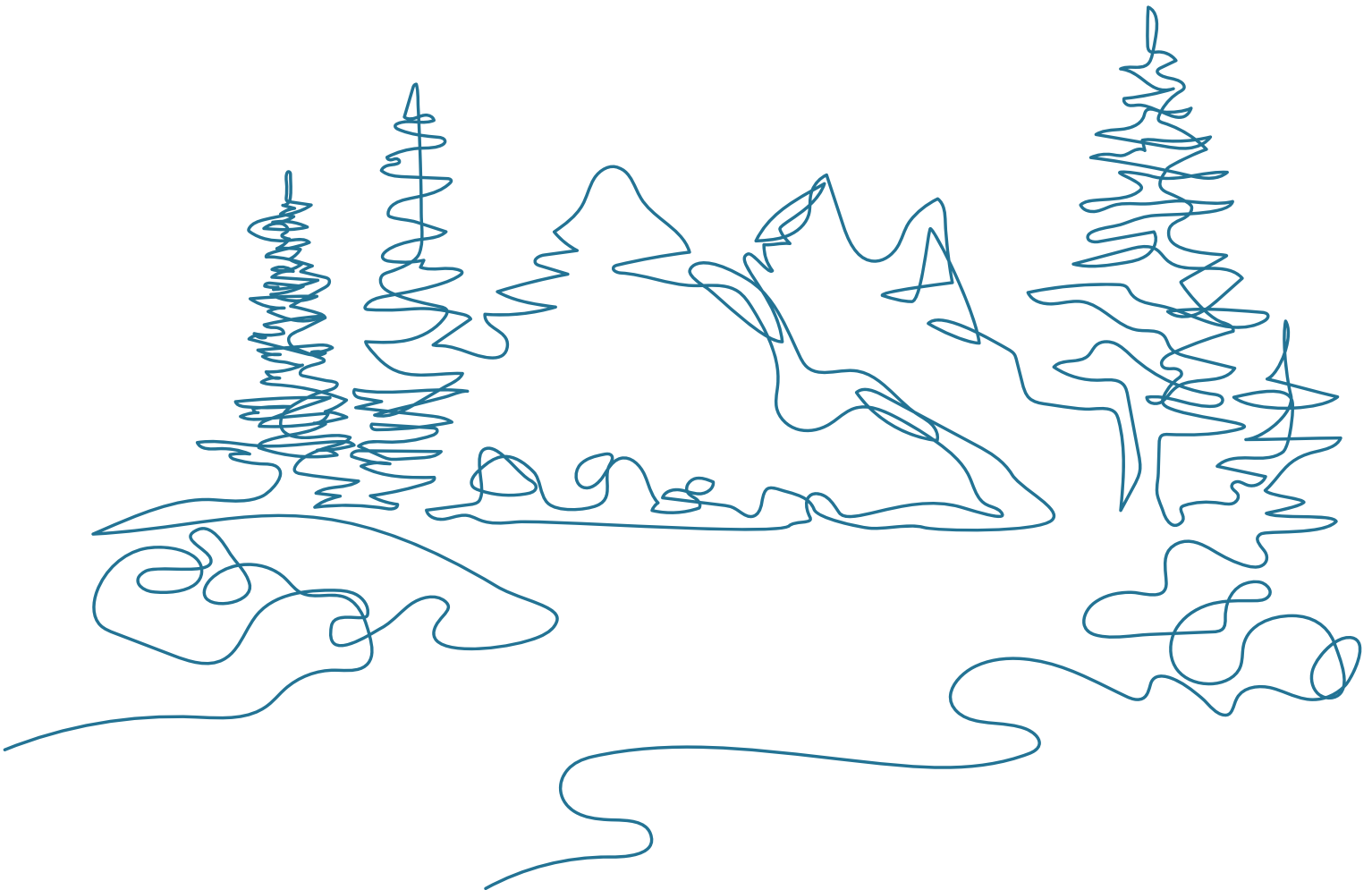




seen in discussions generated in the Sharing Circle. Eradicating inequalities requires time, and therefore a sustainable approach (structured for specific audience) for inclusion to last for generations to be developed.

Water Carriers are important in Indigenous communities, as they attain the required Knowledge to take care of water and maintain environmental sustainably. With a lack of their inclusion in water governance, important Traditional Knowledge can be lost. Lack of opportunities to voice their concern has caused many Indigenous communities to face environmental and water insecurity. Nonetheless, the overriding nature of the discourse surrounding Indigenous activism has caused voices of Indigenous WG2STGD+ People to suffer, as they are not taken seriously by governmental institutions.

It is important that governmental agencies understand the wants and needs of Indigenous WG2STGD+ People regarding water governance such that appropriate platforms can be established for future generations to contribute to decisions regarding water management.





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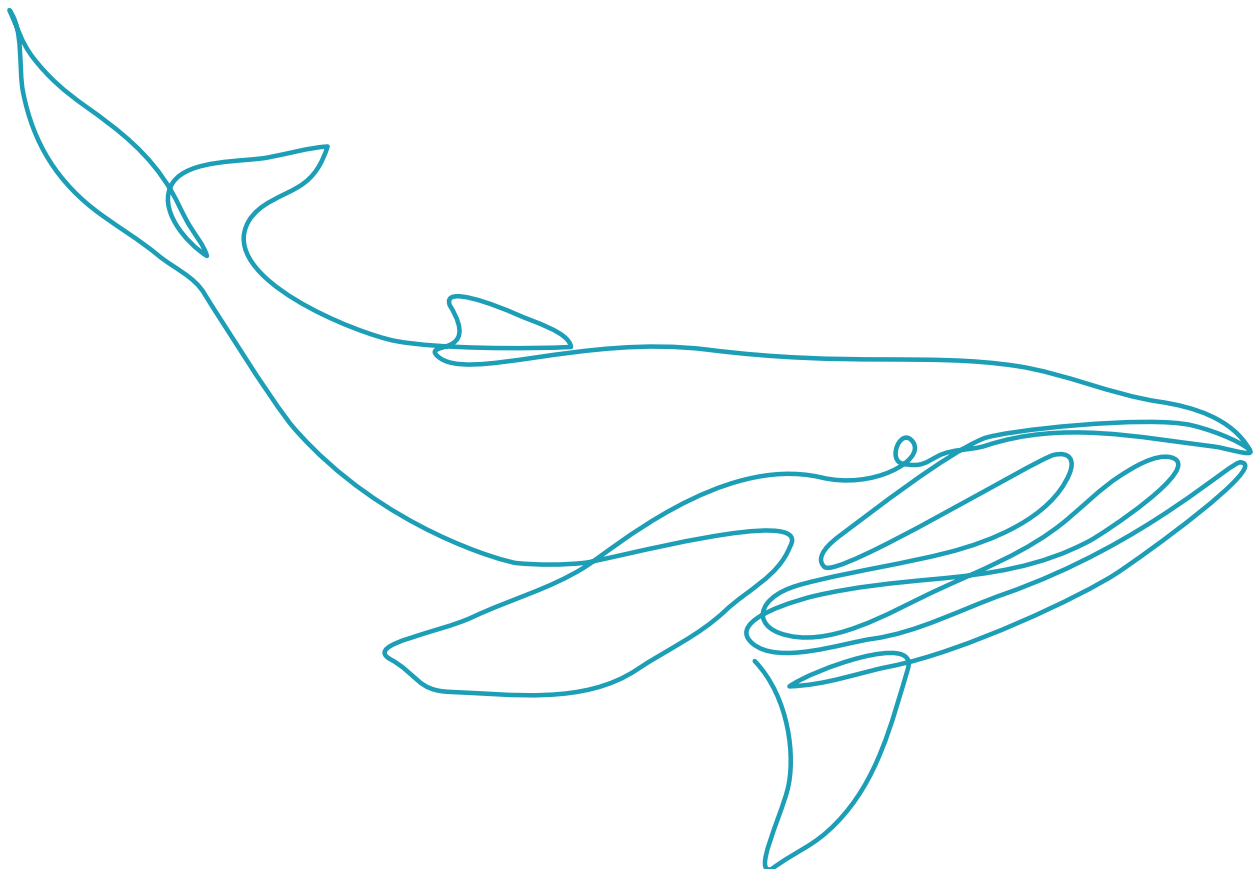


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