



## EMBRACING OUR CONNECTION TO THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Engagement with Indigenous Women and Gender-Diverse  
People in Manitoba on Environmental Conservation  
and Climate Change

SUMMARY REPORT

DECEMBER

2021

Native Women's Association of Canada

L'Association des femmes autochtones du Canada





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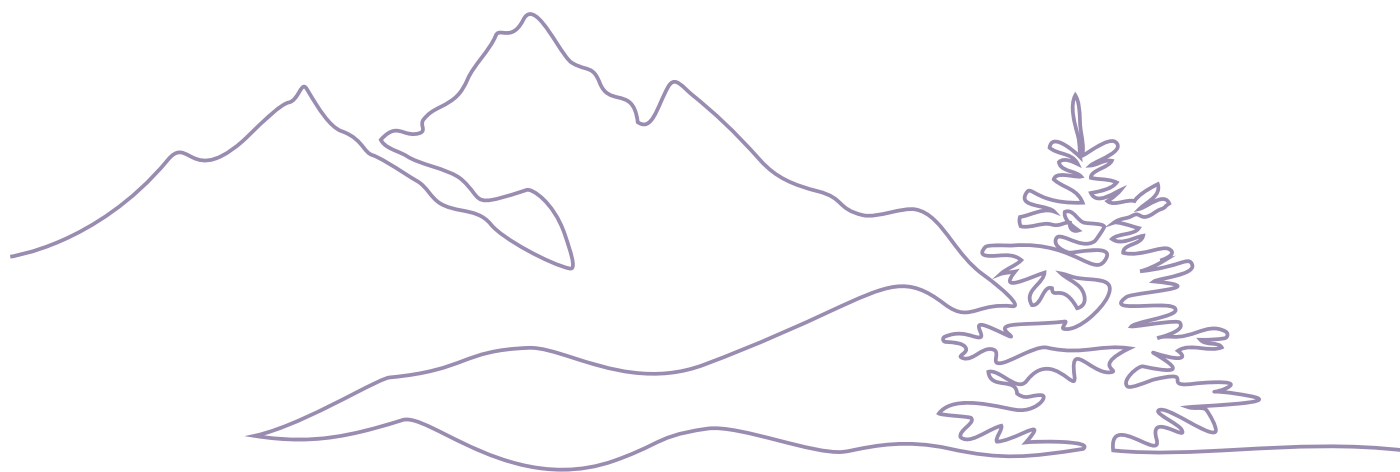
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# BACKGROUND

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In partnership with the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC), Manitoba Moon Voices Inc. (MMVI) coordinated three virtual circles with Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals from across Manitoba.<sup>1</sup> These engagement sessions were used to share Knowledge, stories, and best practices concerning environmental issues affecting Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals.

MMVI contracted Seven Feathers Consulting to coordinate and facilitate these circles. Facilitators for the sessions were Kathleen Bluesky and Angela Levasseur. The sessions were delivered over a period of two weeks on the following dates:

- Sunday, November 14, 2021, 2 to 4 p.m.
- Wednesday, November 17, 2021, 6 to 8 p.m.
- Sunday, November 21, 2021, 2 to 4 p.m.

Each participant received the following gifts as part of the process:

### WATER/LAND BUNDLE:

- Small card describing Water Prayers.
- Small card describing Land Acknowledgement.
- Copper cup with teaching card.
- Mini shell with sage, cedar, sweetgrass, and tobacco.
- Small cloth to use as a prayer altar.
- Candle and matches.

### ADVERSE EFFECTS OF HYDROELECTRIC PROJECTS IN NORTHERN MANITOBA

For over 55 years, Indigenous Peoples in Northern Manitoba<sup>2</sup> have suffered greatly due to negative impacts of hydroelectric dams and control structures.<sup>3</sup> Many Indigenous communities have gone without clean drinking water, and have suffered from high rates of cancer, diabetes, shigella, H Pylori, and many other health issues due to the effects of flooding. These communities also saw the end of thousands of years of self-sufficiency and the destruction of fishing, hunting, and trapping economies.

Moreover, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin, Nisichawayasihk, Misipawistik, Tataskweyak,

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<sup>1</sup> See Annex B for a list of participants and their demographic information.

<sup>2</sup> See Annex D for a map of First Nations Communities in Manitoba, and a map of hydroelectric projects.

<sup>3</sup> See Annex C for specific dams, control structures, and Indigenous communities affected.



Pimicikamak, Kischi Wáskáhikan, Makaso Sakahigan, and Kinosao Sipi Cree Nations<sup>4</sup> have endured incredible hardships. These have included abject poverty, high unemployment rates, disproportionate suicide rates, mass incarceration, domestic violence, widespread alcoholism, drug addiction, substance abuse, sexual abuse, sexual assaults, and despair, as a direct result of the devastation these dams and control structures have caused for their ancestral lands and waters.

One of the most devastating projects was the Churchill River Diversion at Missi Falls, near O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation, also known as South Indian Lake. Here, Cree were forced to relocate across the lake.

Manitoba Hydro raised the water levels as high as 3 metres, or 10 feet, causing mass destruction to environmental ecosystems. The resultant soil erosion caused widespread destruction to the land, and entire regions of boreal forest were fully submerged underwater. Their homes, lands, waters, a lucrative commercial fishing industry, and many ancestral graves were destroyed by the flooding. All this destruction was done in the name of progress, and without the consent of local Indigenous people.<sup>5</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

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Information and registration packages were distributed to over 30 Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals throughout Manitoba. These people were invited to participate in a series of online engagement sessions.

Participants were offered a nurturing and safe space to discuss their personal experiences concerning environmental issues in their respective territories. Participants were advised that their input would inform and promote meaningful dialogue on climate action, to lead to greater inclusion of Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals in decision-making for climate change mitigation and adaptation measures.

Each engagement session was held via Zoom, with the option of attending by video or through teleconference. Because connectivity is an issue in remote and isolated communities, it was anticipated that these options would ensure all participants' full participation.

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<sup>4</sup> See Annex C for Cree and English names of communities.

<sup>5</sup> Source: [www.creelegaleagle.com](http://www.creelegaleagle.com).

## Embracing Our Connection to the Natural Environment



A series of questions were developed (see Appendix A), and grouped into three separate themes:

- 1) Session #1: Defining the environmental issues from the perspective of Indigenous women and 2SLGBTQQAI+.
- 2) Session #2: Empowering Indigenous women and 2SLGBTQQAI+ to be crucial transmitters of Knowledge related to climate change, and active players in decision making.
- 3) Session #3: Finding solutions to address climate change.

Next, participants engaged in a moderated, open forum, on each of the scheduled, virtual circles. The following agenda format was utilized for each engagement session:

- Opening prayer.
- Introductions.
  - Facilitators.
  - MMVI Board members.
  - Participants.
- Participant engagement sessions via PowerPoint presentation.
- Group discussions.
- Next session invitation.
- Closing prayer.





### PREFACE: The Buffalo Teaching

Seven Feathers Consulting shared the buffalo teaching. The teaching is about the relationship between our traditional system of governance and the buffalo's livelihood systems. Historically, many societies were matriarchal and matrilineal, meaning that women were in the position of decision making and sat at the head of the clan systems.

This was similar to how the natural governance of buffalo happened. Settlers started to infiltrate a lot of our settlements and communities wanting to understand hunting and trapping to exploit those resources for the fur trade. They realized that the buffalo herd is led by the matriarch, the grandmother buffalo.

Settlers saw Cree and Anishinabek also followed the natural laws of the buffalo in being matriarchal societies. That was how they hunted the buffalo in masses: Focussing on the grandmother buffalo. By driving her off a cliff, all the other buffalo would follow because instinctively, it was their natural law to follow the grandmother.

As Cree people, when we went to negotiations we always went with our matriarchs; negotiations never occurred in the absence of a matriarch. That was how the settlers infiltrated negotiation systems and natural, Indigenous laws. Settlers started convincing men—the warriors—that they did not need their grandmothers, or any women, to be a part of the negotiations.

Thus, the men began to negotiate with the fur traders, minus their matriarchs. This was how many of the roles were displaced: It was done first with the natural environment, and then shifted to the energy of the people. In sum, this teaching explains the displacement of Indigenous concerns regarding our Traditional role in governance, and our connection to Mother Earth.





# KEY FINDINGS: STORIES, EXPERIENCES, AND WISDOM

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## SESSION #1:

Participants from the same community, or territory, can have completely different perspectives on the same environmental issue(s) due to their diverse generational positions. For instance, a relative in her 50s will have a different perspective on environmental issues from her niece who is in her 20s or 30s. On the other hand, an older relative, such as a mother, aunt, or grandmother, may have first-hand experience with an environmental issue. Whereas the daughter, niece, or granddaughter, may have experience based on the resultant effects of environmental issues, such as drought or flooding.

## QUESTION 1.1 - WHAT IS A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT?

Participants shared both their personal lived experiences and experiences by oral history on environments that were once pristine and are now adversely affected by pollution and/or climate change. For example: One participant shared her grandmother told her the Red River was once clean and drinkable. Although the earth on the bottom of the river was red, one could see through the river due to the clarity of the water. Also, Indigenous people were once able to walk on the backs of sturgeon to cross the river because they were so densely populated at one point in time.<sup>6</sup>

A healthy environment is healthy in a holistic sense, where all living beings are healthy: Plants, animals, and human beings. Our relatives enjoyed a healthy environment in the past where everything needed for survival was found in abundance: Clean water, medicinal plants, clean air, berries, fish, and wild game.

Many shared that water in their respective territories was once pure and drinkable, which is no longer the case. Several participants noted a shift from economic self-sufficiency (from resource-based industries such as commercial fishing and trapping) to a reliance on social assistance.

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<sup>6</sup> Please see Annex D for photograph of a sturgeon prior to the construction of the Jenpeg dam



## Embracing Our Connection to the Natural Environment



In communities where people traditionally practiced commercial fishing, for instance, there was an abundance of fish that allowed people to feed their families and sell surplus fish to support their families. Participants also shared that historically, traditional governance was not interfered with. This allowed Indigenous People to function as guardians of the land and water.

Moreover, a healthy environment is one where the sacred relationship between the land and Indigenous Peoples is honoured. It is where the transfer of intergenerational Knowledge between Elders and youth is acknowledged, honoured, and respected. This includes an understanding of how we take care of the land, plants, animals, and our medicines. This Knowledge must be carried forward for the next seven generations. Understanding the impacts of climate change on the environment and people is critical to understanding the linkages between environment and health.

One participant posed a critical question: "Can the earth renew herself? Can all of our relatives renew themselves? And, are they able to go through the cycles to renew and replenish themselves every year?" This was followed by some reflections on how Mother Earth began to heal herself amidst the global Covid-19 pandemic. Another participant shared the opinion that the global pandemic is directly correlated with climate change, illnesses, drought, and floods.

Moreover, the pandemic has shown us we need to stay close to home during the winter months for our collective safety, as was our traditional practice. It is safer to gather outside during the summer months.

The pandemic has also allowed Indigenous people to return to their traditional ways. This has been a positive side effect for many Indigenous people who have returned to their traditional ways of survival and sustainability. Many children learned how to go on the land, snare a rabbit, skin, and eat it. Indigenous people harvested healthy food for their Elders. Participants reiterated that Mother Earth began to heal herself during the pandemic and that the air and water have become cleaner as a result.

Another discussion related to the theme of healthy environments pertained to child-rearing. Participants discussed feeling safe as children growing up, whether they lived in the city, or in rural areas where natural environment became their pseudo playground. This has changed drastically due to multiple factors, both related and unrelated to climate change. For example: Some participants shared memories of running around in the bush and eating berries and drinking clean water, or playing in town or city parks.

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Participants said their relatives instructed them to avoid sacred areas, such as areas where the little people would be given offerings. Traditional stories and teachings were shared to ensure that children understood and honoured the sacredness of the land and water.

In the present day, the bush in many areas has been adversely affected by climate change, pollution, environmental degradation, and resource extraction. In suburban settings, there is litter everywhere and in some urban locations, there are hazards such as used hypodermic needles where children would otherwise be able to play safely. As a result, parents will drive their kids everywhere, due to safety concerns, which contributes to carbon emissions from excess transportation by vehicle.

Participants agreed that the current lifestyle we are living is not good or healthy for anyone. A renewed connection to the land—to our Traditional Way of Life—to our medicines, our relatives, our language, our culture, our ancestors' ways, and each other, are sustainable and have a purpose.

Many participants referred to their grandmothers in contemplating what a healthy environment means to them. Participants' grandmothers shared many teachings regarding healthy eating, healthy living, and environmental stewardship. For example, that the earth has its natural cycle concerning weather and the life cycle of plants and animals. Also, when a life was taken, for sustenance, it is done with respect and often through an offering of tobacco. This same concept applies to the harvesting of Traditional medicines, such as weekay/weekis, or rat root.

Next, a discussion ensued on the relevance of muskrat to the environment and climate change. Muskrat is full of medicine since they eat rat root, which we, in turn, consume when we eat the muskrat. One participant shared that Muskrat is considered an indicator species, as you can measure the health of an environment by the number of species in the area. Importantly, muskrats depend on wetlands for survival.

Thus, wetlands must be preserved due to the interconnectedness of these animals, traditional medicines, and the survival of Indigenous Peoples. Unfortunately, wetlands are being drained for agricultural use and we are now facing drought. The removal of wetlands also compromises the ability of Mother Earth to heal herself.



References were made to the Creation story, with respect to the muskrat. Teachings were shared regarding how Indigenous People promised the muskrat that when the earth was renewed after the great flood, muskrat would always have a place for its grandchildren to live. Now, this sacred promise has been violated.

In sum, it was acknowledged by participants that all human beings share an equal and collective responsibility to care for Mother Earth if we wish to survive as a species. Earth does not depend on us to survive; we depend on Mother Earth to survive. When we destroy Mother Earth, she will replenish herself even if the two-legged beings have been eradicated. Indigenous People's ancestors historically relied on plants and animals for survival and taught their descendants that when sickness was a threat to Indigenous peoples, certain medicinal plants would grow in abundance.

### QUESTION 1.2 - MOTHER EARTH

#### **Is Mother Earth in Crisis? What does climate change look like in your community or territory?**

Most participants agreed that Mother Earth is in crisis due to climate change and other environmental factors affecting the land and water. One participant said, "We are all in crisis, including the earth, and all of us." This statement is reflective of the interconnectedness that Indigenous people feel with the land, water, and wildlife.

Climate change has resulted in drastic changes to the intensity and frequency of weather patterns, which in turn has repercussions such as drought and flooding. Participants expressed great concern with many factors related to climate change, including mass littering, deforestation, the depletion of wildlife populations, loss of medicines, wild rice and berries, and other sources of sustenance. One participant shared, "Mother Earth is cleansing herself, she is going through a ceremony; a fast."

There has been a shift away from Indigenous people's ancestral roles as guardians and protectors of the land and water, to a situation where our imprint on the environment is much harsher, with long-term and permanent ramifications. Our relatives are taken from the land for economic gain, as opposed to taking what is needed to survive.

Traditionally, harvested resources such as fish, animals, medicines, and berries, may no longer be healthy for use or consumption due to widespread pollution and contamination. One participant noted that Indigenous people are now forced to

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travel far distances to harvest medicine in clean areas. Also, berries and medicinal plants such as sage are difficult to find in areas where they were once plentiful.

One participant noted that illnesses, such as cancer and diabetes, are on the rise in Indigenous communities and among Indigenous populations. Many of our traditional medicines come from the water, but if the water becomes a carcinogen, then where will Indigenous people turn for medicinal healing?

It was further noted that if the land and water are not healthy, what they produce will no longer be beneficial to the health of Indigenous peoples. A lack of consistent and reliable access to traditional, Indigenous foods has led to a spike in diabetes, heart disease, obesity, and other diseases at disproportionate and exponential rates.

It was acknowledged by the participants that there is a disconnect between Mother Earth and Indigenous people that has led to identity loss, loss of our collective purpose as keepers of the land, and poor mental health. Indigenous populations also continue to experience declining physical health due to climate change, including an increase in the prevalence of heart attacks, diabetes, and kidney disease.

Among the reasons for this are the food and water that Indigenous people are consuming. Water quality in many Indigenous communities is so deplorable that increased chlorine is needed to treat the bacteria present in the water, which in turn produces carcinogens such as trihalomethanes.

One participant said, "Everything we do to Mother Earth, we are doing to ourselves, and we are destroying ourselves." In terms of socio-economic impacts, it was noted that violence, domestic violence, drug, and alcohol abuse are on the rise. A lack of transference of Knowledge was cited as a contributory factor for the increase in social problems.

Participants raised concerns in flooding, drought, global warming, air and water pollution, acidic rain, plant and wildlife extinction, urban sprawl, and ozone layer depletion. It was noted that in the process of beautifying yards in urban centres, harmful chemicals and pesticides are being used to kill weeds, many of which are medicines.

One participant said Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals collectively feel Mother Earth's anxieties. For example: When everything shut down due to the pandemic, human beings felt anxious, which is likely what Mother Earth was feeling

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before Covid-19. Anxiety is unsettling: There is no peace, nor sense of calm. As a result, depression increases, and mental health becomes unstable. In particular, the current generation of Indigenous youth is experiencing unprecedented rates of depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues.

Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals must take time to grieve, slow down, and pay attention to their bodies, and their families, to live a balanced life. This includes honouring one's moon time, sleeping more in winter, and taking the time we need to practice holistic wellness and self-care.

A crisis of disconnect is evident in our children and grandchildren. Kids in school are cutting leaves out of paper in the fall instead of venturing outside to collect real, natural leaves. It is artificial to learn about fall this way, and to learn in this manner, because there is no connection to the "living" life.

Another issue raised as being a crisis was food security for Indigenous peoples. The lack of winter road access due to global warming is a huge issue in northern Manitoba, which is how supplies entered communities. In turn, this causes high priced increases for food and fuel. Thus, there is a strong push for northern food sovereignty. As such, Indigenous communities were not prepared for the global pandemic and the resultant food sovereignty crisis. Now there is even further need for new access roads. Indigenous people are facing forced relocation due to forest fires and flooding. In sum, the pandemic has resulted in widespread dependency on an unsustainable, colonial system.

Hydroelectric dams, and the resultant pollution and environmental degradation, were contentious issues for several participants. Hydro dams have polluted lakes and waters, making fish and other aquatic wildlife unsafe for consumption. Northern lakes and rivers are no longer clean, or clear, and there have been immeasurable social impacts as well. People, such as commercial fishers, have had their livelihoods destroyed by hydroelectric projects. Many have lost their pride as a result and have experienced severe and adverse impacts to their mental and emotional well-being, as well as their physical and spiritual health.

As a result of environmental degradation due to hydroelectric projects, Indigenous people now need a boat, motor, and gas to travel far distances to hunt, fish, and harvest in clean locations. Most Indigenous Peoples cannot afford this, especially



in northern and remote locations; which leaves many people rely on processed foods from Northern stores, which are greatly overpriced and lacking in nutritional value. These factors lead to a drastic increase in illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes.

### QUESTION 1.3 - ISSUES AFFECTING WOMEN AND GENDER-DIVERSE PEOPLE

#### **What are the key issues affecting Indigenous women and gender-diverse people in Manitoba?**

##### **Mental Health Issues:**

One of the key issues affecting Indigenous women and gender-diverse people in Manitoba is mental health. It was noted that reclaiming Indigenous women's roles instills fear and anxiety among those who are not ready for the restoration of matriarchal and matrilineal Indigenous societies. It is the matriarch that must lead. The matriarch is rooted in kindness and the preservation of our ways.

One participant shared that in over 20 years of teaching high school-aged Indigenous students, she has never witnessed such high rates of depression, violence, anxiety, and fear. All participants agreed that it is the loving kindness and gentle discipline that is missing—the customary values of the matriarch.

##### **Violence Against Indigenous Women and Gender-Diverse Individuals:**

Violence in every aspect was raised as a major issue affecting Indigenous women, especially domestic violence and sexual violence. Importantly, the violation of Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals coincides with the violation of Mother Earth concerning construction projects. The emergence of development camps, also known as “man camps,” has led to an increase in violence, as some of the men employed in these camps have perpetrated sexual violence against Indigenous women and gender diverse individuals.

Historically and culturally, there are significant cultural differences and race-based ideologies that perpetuate this violence, which includes the widespread sexual violence. Some cultures view women as being submissive and subordinate to men, leading to increased violence against Indigenous women. Further, the sexualization and objectification of Indigenous women has led to sexual harassment, unwanted physical contact, and sexual assaults.



### **Gender and Race-Based Discrimination:**

As one participant stated, “We are being treated the same way the land is being treated regardless of roles and purpose.” Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals are not being recognized for their roles and what they contribute in terms of Indigenous culture, ways of knowing, and ways of life.

These attitudes also lead to discrimination in wage disparity, where men are paid more than women in “man camps,” and in almost all other areas of work and business. Indigenous people are trying to find a balance between the male and female energies within gender-diverse populations, and there is a pressing need for society to understand those energies.

Regarding binary roles and women, the question was posed: “Where do gender-diverse people fit?” It is imperative to understand that binary approaches to everything must change so all are treated with respect and as equals. One participant noted that it is difficult for Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals to live in artificial systems that are not designed for our health and well-being, but only to get things out of us.

Indigenous women have a sacred responsibility to protect the water. This responsibility extends to the land and Mother Earth. Participants shared that Indigenous women’s roles are not respected in the following areas: Health, wellness, relationships, culture, governance, decision making, what constitutes a good life, and regarding matters related to finance and economic development. Also, Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals must fight to be a part of various governmental systems in Canada.

Importantly, one participant stated, “It’s just about making money and having money—for mainstream society. It’s assumed that if you can make money, you can do everything you need in life. Money, however, is not a replacement for life.” It was also noted that Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals are not included in the economy in a meaningful way, and that business can be very patriarchal and characterized by, “Men with suits making substantial amounts of money.”

There was an extended discussion on the juxtaposition between Indigenous People’s reliance on the natural environment for survival, and settlers—particularly: “White men in suits,” who employ a very capitalistic approach. There is a distinct level of exclusion of Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals in business



and capital-generating ventures. Finally, Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals must be included in decisions regarding allocation, expenditure of funding, what is happening to the land, and social structure in their territories.

### QUESTION 1.4 INCLUSION

#### **How are Indigenous women and gender-diverse being included in climate change adaptation?**

The overall conclusion is that Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals are being largely excluded in climate change adaptation: They are simply not part of the conversation. One participant noted that in some instances Indigenous women are now being integrated into community positions concerning climate change adaptation plans, which is new representation and inclusion for women and gender-diverse individuals in this capacity.

Historically, Indigenous grandmothers stood up in the lodge and were called upon to provide direction: To take their role. They would gather with each other and take responsibility for the land and water—they made space for themselves. Reference was made to the Women's Water Council and the Assembly of First Nation's Grandmothers' Councils, but participants maintained that the current state of inclusion of Indigenous grandmothers, women, and gender-diverse people is not yet satisfactory. In existing patriarchal systems, even when Indigenous women are afforded opportunities to make recommendations, decisions are still being made by others.

Historically, and before colonial influence, there was space for Indigenous women, and their roles were respected. Decisions were not made in the absence of Indigenous women's voices. The inclusion of Indigenous women is not synonymous with respecting their traditional roles as decision-makers. Moreover, there are many Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals who already work in this area, yet are not always recognized.





### SESSION #2:

#### QUESTION 2.1 TRANSMITTING KNOWLEDGE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

##### **How are we transmitters of Knowledge related to climate change for future generations, and why is it important?**

In their roles as mothers, aunts, and grandmothers, our Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals are our first teachers for Indigenous children. Thus, Indigenous women can nurture children to understand their relationship with the environment, and how that relationship is evolving with climate change. Examples of critical Knowledge for intergenerational transmission include teaching children how to reduce, reuse, recycle; not litter, leave the land the way they found it, and to respect the land. Children are also taught how to pick medicines respectfully by leaving an offering of tobacco, and leaving the root of the plant intact.

Children are taught how to berry pick sustainably, to rotate “berry picking spots” and to leave the seeds for regeneration. They are taught the importance of planting for rejuvenation purposes. Indigenous children are taught about conservation and sustainability: How to regrow plants, identify traditional medicines, and how to use every part of animals taken for food, clothing, and shelter—as everything has a purpose. They are also taught not to over harvest fish, wild game, berries, medicines, etc.

It was noted that all children must be taught these values and put them into practice, not just Indigenous children.

Finally, children are taught how to “read the land” and to be able to recognize weather patterns. In many territories, this Knowledge is critical for survival. For example: To recognize when a storm is coming, when a snowstorm can lead to white-out conditions, and when to go to shore and seek shelter when boating or fishing on a lake or river.

Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals can teach children traditional ways of living on the land, our culture, our languages, and the importance of kinship. Indigenous peoples’ ancestors learned through language and Indigenous cultures are rooted in Indigenous languages; therefore, culture is literally inside the language. This is why the revitalization of Indigenous language and culture is so important.

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Regrettably, Indian Residential Schools took Indigenous children away from their land and their families, severing them from their language, their parents, their identities, and their connection to the land and water. This is the Knowledge that was historically transmitted to our children by our first teachers.

Indigenous women and gender diverse people believe that the land will always heal them and provide for them. Thus, it is vital to take care of the land and water, and act as protectors of the land and water.

Because Indigenous women intuitively have a nurturing ability that is second nature to them, they must take every opportunity to teach others about environmental stewardship and Traditional Ecological Knowledge. When it comes to the environment, take every opportunity to exchange Knowledge with those wanting to know.

Indigenous women have specific practices for recreating ties to the land for their children and grandchildren. For example, some Indigenous mothers and grandmothers hold ceremonies in their Traditional territories to honour the afterbirth, which gives roots to the newborn and provides them with a lifelong connection to the land. As children grow older, the connection between youth and Knowledge Keepers must be maintained. As the leaders of today, Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals must be empowered because they are strong, and they carry critical Knowledge. Indigenous Elders share this Knowledge with the youth.

Participants also discussed the importance of land-based education programs for Indigenous youth, as they help them to understand historic and contemporary relationships with the land and all living things, which is a sacred relationship. Land-based education programs are reflective of educational integration of concepts such as Indigenous culture, Indigenous language, science, and physical education. Further, Mother Earth truly is a healer, when children are taken out on the land, she becomes their regulator.

It was acknowledged that there has been a shift in the relationship between the land, the water, and Indigenous Peoples. There is a disconnect that is causing people to not care about issues connected to climate change and the importance of having a healthy, sustainable relationship with Mother Earth. In sum, Indigenous women are vested with sacred responsibilities, such as being guardians of water, speaking for the water, and always ensuring that water is present at ceremonies, as well as the importance of these values and teachings being passed from one generation to the next.



### QUESTION 2.2 ROLE IN ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

#### **What is our role in environmental conservation?**

Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals are at the centre of environmental conservation. Moreover, all action taken for Indigenous women to honour themselves—to honour each other as women, and to assume their role to speak to the value of life itself—is of paramount importance. Indigenous women must teach others to honour the water, use it with respect, and not waste it. For example: Do not let leaking taps go unfixed, and have a water supply handy in the event of contamination or frozen pipes, etc. As human beings, we must be cognizant of our footprint on Mother Earth. We must consider what the environmental ramifications are of our actions and/or inactions, and how human behaviour can affect food security.

Participants said a complete societal mentality shift is needed if we are to protect Mother Earth's environment. For example: Corporate and government greed is so powerful and pervasive that the protection of land and environment has been criminalized. Provincial and federal governments succumb to pressure from industry to treat Indigenous People like criminals, and to persecute them, so they may continue to profit from mass extraction of Indigenous resources.

Finally, Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals must seize every opportunity to strengthen their voices, revitalize their relationships with one another, and build our sacred relationships with the land, animals, and waters. The effects of colonization make it extremely challenging for Indigenous women and gender-diverse women to carry out their traditional roles as land and water guardians.

### QUESTION 2.2A - DECISION MAKERS

#### **How can we be more represented in decision-making bodies related to climate change?**

Indigenous women have already become leaders by taking action. This is shown through starting recycling programs and initiating land-based Traditional healing with their families, communities, and respective territories. Many of the women who have shared this experience stated that these women are in positions of leadership, such as executive directors, or members of boards/committees/groups. It is evident that women need to be in leadership positions so they can provide leadership in all decision-making.



Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals should be better represented in decision-making bodies related to climate change. This representation could include speaking at different forums, through word of mouth, by doing research projects, becoming involved in policy actions, and/or by putting forward their ideas concerning climate change.

### QUESTION 2.2B - RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CANADA

#### **What suggestions would you like to make to the Government of Canada?**

The Government of Canada must stop asking the questions if they are not prepared to act in response to the Knowledge and information they are given.

The Government of Canada can provide funding for communities to pilot, establish, expand, and/or improve pre-existing, land-based, education programs. This should not be limited to Indigenous communities or populations, as the land is a great teacher and healer to all.

Participants expressed that the Government of Canada needs to mandate provincial governments to include topics related to climate change in their respective curricula, as there exists a tremendous opportunity to educate all Canadians within pre-existing educational systems.

Canadians must not take water for granted. We must not assume that we will always have a supply of clean and safe drinking water. Canada must be brave enough to pass laws that will protect the water.

The federal government must invest more in provisioning Indigenous communities with clean and safe drinking water, as they have created these conditions through land dispossession, resource extraction and exploitation, and pollution, in the name of progress. There are still many Indigenous communities where people do not have running water or sewage. Although Canada is not a third-world country, many Indigenous people live in third-world conditions and are forced to use water barrels and slop pails; which is inhumane and unacceptable.

Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals do not wish to be researched, questioned, or surveyed for the sake of conducting research and writing reports. For consultation with Indigenous Peoples to be meaningful, it must be followed with



actions. Traditionally, the federal government has posed a barrier to change when it comes to issues affecting Indigenous Peoples, particularly Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals.

The Government of Canada must take more aggressive and proactive measures to counteract the effects of colonization and assimilation; both of which they are responsible for. All Canadians must be educated on environmental issues and the effects of resource extraction-based industries on the land, wildlife, and water.

Environmental issues are not just Indigenous issues. All Canadians must walk with Indigenous People as they lead the fight to save Mother Earth. Therefore, the Canadian government must make it mandatory for Indigenous perspectives to be shared with all Canadians. Sharing this Knowledge must come from a variety of sources, as opposed to just from scholars.

Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals are not included as decision-makers at any level of government. One participant asked, “What is the goal for Indigenous environmental standards, versus governmental standards for the environment; when the government bases all of their decisions on money?”

Another participant summarized, “The earth is our mother. What happens to her, happens to us. She is the life-giver, and it is our responsibility to stand up for Mother Earth; for ourselves. We have to make better decisions and sacrifice; do without. We need to think about how much we are taking—share what we have, and take only what we need, and leave some for the rest.”

### QUESTION 3.1 - GUIDANCE FROM THE KNOWLEDGE KEEPERS

**How can Indigenous Knowledge Keepers and Elders help resolve current environmental issues? What are they teaching us now? How can we support, or learn from, these efforts?**

Indigenous Knowledge Keepers and Elders teach us how to survive from the land. They pass on teachings on how to survive off the land. We need these people to share what they know before this information is lost forever. When elected officials are put in place, we must make it a standard that Elders are a part of the process and discussion. This should be mandated. Elders must be a part of the political voice. Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals must honour their Elders; they



should be included with the government in Indigenous communities

Indigenous communities are becoming so westernized and colonized that personal care homes for Elders are becoming the norm in Indigenous communities, and Elders are losing their place in Indigenous homes.

Indigenous Knowledge Keepers and Elders carry important teachings on how to respect Mother Earth and what Creator provided for us. They are a critical part of culture camps for youth, families, and communities. Elders and Knowledge Keepers teach their people about the natural cycle of harvesting natural resources and hunting for moose and caribou.

As women and gender-diverse people, we need to continue to listen to, and record, our Knowledge Keepers for present and future use. This information can then be shared with children in schools. Indigenous Elders are coming into schools to allow children to model from them and we need to support these Traditional Teachings. At the end of session two, one participant acknowledged that when it comes to environmental issues related to climate change, there is no Cree way, nor Ojibway way—only Creator’s way.

### **SESSION #3:**

#### **QUESTION 3.1 - ADDRESSING IMPACTS**

How are Indigenous women and gender diverse individuals in your community helping to address the harmful emissions that contribute to climate change? And, how are they helping address adverse, climate-related impacts?

Participants began by listing practical approaches they take within their homes to contribute to climate action. This included day-to-day practices such as car-pooling, recycling in the home, reusing goods such as bags, cloth, recycling clothing, and blankets.

A few participants shared stories of when women go back to the camps, such as the old community sites, they go back to the old ways. The women are leaders in practicing the art of cooking over an open fire, making natural smokehouses, and staying in tents. These practices allow for the people to use the land and restore it to its original conditions after use, leaving little to no ecological footprint. This is an important teaching and many of the women carry and practice these teachings. We must give them more opportunities to do so.

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These stories led to an important discussion that women must always be learning from each other. This is Knowledge that they cannot keep to themselves. It must be shared amongst the women and gender-diverse people, to then be shared with all community members.

To share pertinent Knowledge that will result in long-term sustainability, participants identified the need to share with other communities as well. It was identified as an important action to come together to share what we know with one another and among all the Nations.

Participants talked about how, primarily due to COVID-19, there has been less travelling. Less driving and flying has resulted in reduced emissions. They described how this needs to be looked at and understood as an important teaching. We have learned and proven that much of the work external to communities can be done virtually. Information sharing can be virtual. We can lessen our ecological footprint by only travelling with purpose.

It was also noted that there are times when face-to-face gatherings are needed. Participants said some things are more impactful when done in person, especially regarding the transfer of Knowledge. Examples include: Medicine camps, women's gatherings, National Knowledge Exchange, and major developmental or transformational projects. Communities will request in-person meetings to initiate relationship building before they will commit to a project.

### **Other actions that can be taken to address these impacts may include:**

- Coordinating large-scale clothing exchanges, toy exchanges, and passing items down to other children in the family and community.
- Using higher density travel such as motor coach buses, especially for long distances and/or for large groups of people.
- Establishing rules regarding community waste disposal sites. One participant shared how people will come to their First Nation's waste disposal site because there are no rules. People can dump anything and there is no recycling.

Participants collaboratively expressed that, "Initiative must start from us. We cannot wait for the elected leaders to make the decisions." Women and gender-diverse people can position themselves to ask, "How are we going to address climate change?" in all the work that we do.

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Many participants expressed that people in their communities would love to recycle. In many community planning meetings and reports, community beautification is always a top priority problem. It needs to be the top priority action for implementation, as well.

Participants said they can be a part of the solutions by starting with themselves and in their communities. This is a small start that can have ripple effects throughout. Environmental conservation, protection, and promotion will require a major shift in mindset to result in the behavioral changes that are needed. People need to feel ownership and pride in clean communities, and this will require collective action.

Participants shared two examples of communities that have taken collective action: Peguis First Nation and Fisher River Cree Nation. They have clean communities with beautiful landscaping and there is no visible garbage throughout the community. Both First Nations have champions that ensure their recycling facilities are well-maintained and managed appropriately. They also cultivate partnerships with the green action centre and the pathfinder programs.

Communities may have the recycling program, transfer station, equipment, and staffing, but without a champion advocating for the programs and bringing awareness to the community, behaviours and values will not change. Collective effort is key.

We know ownership and collective values are critical to reclaiming our ways. Participants shared stories of empowerment manifested through our connection to the land. We still see it today—when women are at camps, or our families that still have their fish camps and traplines, the camps are immaculate and well-maintained. Everything is organized. There is so much thought put into sustainability. There is significant pride that is visible in how the cabin is built and maintained. This is because the people put their blood, sweat, and tears, into building it. They knew that they needed to live sustainably. They were always prepared because if you didn't do it, no one would do it for you. This is an important value that has been impacted by colonial policy and imposition. We must bring these values back into how we organize and manage our own homes and the First Nation.





### QUESTION 3.2 - PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

#### **How can Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals work toward solving issues related to climate change?**

Participants discussed how women must start finding their voices and strength with each other. Once this happens, a shift will begin. We need more women in leadership and decision-making positions because women are intuitively nurturing. We are starting to see more non-masculine energy leading to important changes in the community.

Our women have been faced with a multitude of barriers to becoming active leaders in matters such as climate change. They are worried about poverty, hydro, and just living. There is no empowerment in poverty. As First Nations, we must stop doing things that do not empower our people.

Participants expressed that when our women must worry about these things, they become stuck in poverty. Our communities cannot progress if our women and gender-diverse people, do not progress. Strategies and solutions must focus on empowerment and ownership.

Ownership is about building pride and maintaining accountability. Participants stated that First Nations people were not like this. Oppressive systems and policy took away from our way of life—they took away our independence. For example: Returning to the discussion on taking care of camps and traplines, there was a strong sense of ownership. Our people felt they were investing in their livelihood and the sustainability of their livelihood. This was identified as a major Knowledge gap. People, particularly those currently leading climate change initiatives, need to break down this major barrier by creating space for women and gender diverse peoples to assume leadership roles in climate change initiatives.

Participants discussed how they can encourage and promote more women and gender-diverse people to move into leadership positions so they may take their rightful place in decision-making. They indicated that any woman, or person, would believe they can do it if they have the support. Our women need to have support. To do this, we must remove lateral violence and obstacles such as gossip and backstabbing. Lateral violence is a huge issue, as is "adult bullying." A few participants shared their perceptions on how lateral violence can be very destructive. One participant shared a story and described when someone does not like someone else, or has a conflict

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with another woman, they will put their energy and effort into recruiting others to join in the lateral violence. There are many dangerous stereotypes, belief systems, and attitudes that threaten the rightful place of our women and gender-diverse people. For example: Looking beautiful and taking care of oneself is perceived, or judged, as “acting better than.” Jealousy is harmful energy that often deters people from taking action. Participants identified that, “There is a target toward us as soon as we leave our homes.”

We need more women supporting women. If we support each other, compliment each other, build up other women, and be open to women coming to you for guidance and support, we will start to see the mindset shift. We will heal our people when we heal ourselves, as women. When we heal our people, we heal our lands and waters. This will require our communities, organizations, and institutions to be more trauma-informed and focus on healing individuals.

Participants spoke about us needing to be the change. One participant expressed that, “I want to be on my best behaviour when my children are watching me. I must lead by example and support other women so that they will too. This is how we teach and learn, by being.”

Participants described what we see happening to our women as neo-colonialism. Colonization suppressed the voices of our women and attempted to reduce their rights, and this is still happening today. The participant expressed that, “We want them to speak.”

The participants discussed how having positive mentors has contributed to their sense of security and empowerment. This will be a critical component of supporting women and gender-diverse people to lead solutions in climate change. They must have a support system and that includes support for the home fire, such as childcare, cleaning, organizing, ceremonies to support women leaders, and recognition of good work women do within the community.

In addition, for women and gender-diverse people to be meaningfully engaged will require trauma-informed leadership. People in positions of power and decision-making must have this understanding, including the Government of Canada.

Women all lead in different ways. One participant shared that in her home, they teach their sons that this is where you came from, a woman who first fed you, showed you, taught you. Sometimes men need to be reminded where they came from, feeding them (in every way—nurturance), nourishing mind, body, and spirit,



to be taken back to the beginning where life comes from. This keeps us humbled. As we help each other as women, we must encourage men to help each other too. This can be role modeled by nourishing our partners and our children mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

As women leaders rise, we must look at who also needs to rise and support those individuals as well. We must ensure that the women around them are strong and secure, too. Empower all the women around you. Surround yourself with women who will want to protect you. It is our duty and responsibility to support with kindness. We must share opportunities to be together as women and with other women leaders, participate in ceremonies together, and put our energy into the recognition and promotion of our women and gender-diverse people.

Concerning climate change, we can create training and opportunities for young girls to learn from leaders of today. We also need our communities to partner with academia to bring environmental programs that are accredited to communities and into every school and every grade level.

### QUESTION 3.3 - SUSTAINABILITY

#### **How can Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals promote sustainability?**

To conclude the session, participants responded to this question through a roundtable brainstorm:

- Recycling.
- Reducing emissions (driving, flying, etc.).
- Reusing and sharing items such as clothes and toys.
- Sustainable thrifting: Be proud of sustainable consumption. Have an understanding that it is good for the environment; no shame.
- Teach our children to be environmentally conscious.
- Learning online: It can be scary, the world in 30 years will be so different.
- Water conservation.
- Energy efficiency: Reduce use.
- Wood stoves.
- Educating ourselves about these things. Using social media and the internet.

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- Gardening—growing our own food; implementing garden beds.
- Home cooking and eating out less.
- Growing gardens and creating your own soil through composting (recycling food waste).
- Teach these values in schools, incorporate them within workplaces, and practice in the home.
- We must ask ourselves: “What do we really need?”
- We must lead by example and show our children how absolutely every one of our actions impacts the environment.
- Supporting local business, bartering, etc.

### QUESTION 3.4 RESPONSIBLE DEVELOPMENT

#### **How can Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals help promote responsible, economic growth, and development?**

Women and gender-diverse individuals can buy local, and support and promote Indigenous businesses that have sustainable and socially responsible management practices. Women are major consumers and can strongly influence environmentally conscious products.

The revitalization of our languages plays a major role in how we engage in responsible economic development. Our language has key terms and messages for fostering feminine energy, promoting respect and sustainability, and connecting all our actions to the land, water, and resources.

Women can play an integral role in restoring balance to economic growth by advocating for greater green design, green space, walking paths, and sustainable neighbourhoods that serve their family’s needs.



### QUESTION 3.5 COMMUNITY BEST PRACTICES

**What environmental best practices have been developed by Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals in your communities, regarding solutions to address climate change?**

- Pinaymootang First Nation: Youth-led recycling program.
- Peguis First Nation: Waste diversion and recycling.
- Fisher River Cree Nation: Recycling and litter control.
- Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation: Gardening initiatives.
- Fisher River: Solar farm.
- Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation: Sustainable, medium-density housing, with solar power.
- First Nation: Bee farms, greenhouses, composting.
- Local community markets such as farmer's markets but with beadwork, regalia, housewares, cooked products. These support local community members to make, and keep, money in the community.
- Feast bundles at meetings and gatherings to eliminate Styrofoam.
- Create a space for recycling at ceremonies and gatherings.
- Second-hand clothing store in Winnipeg called, Closet Space, which helps gender-diverse people find affordable clothing in a safe, supportive, environment.
- National plastic reduction strategy happening to reduce single used plastics, because China is not taking our recyclable plastics anymore so as a country, we need to reduce its production.
- Use of paper and reusable metal straws.
- Teaching people how to reupholster and recycle furniture.
- Mother Earth Beds: Also provide tours.

Next Steps:

Participants have agreed, by consensus, that the report should be shared publicly, as well as nationally, with the Native Women's Association of Canada. They would like the next step to include promotion to Indigenous women and gender diverse people on actions that they can take to be a part of the implementation of solutions.

# APPENDIX A

## SESSION 1: DEFINING THE ISSUES:

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**Question #1:** What is a healthy environment?

**Question #2:** Is Mother Earth in crisis? What does climate change look like in your community and/or territory?

**Question #3:** What are the key issues affecting Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals in Manitoba?

**Question #4:** How are Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals being included in climate change adaptation?

## SESSION 2: EMPOWERING INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND GENDER DIVERSE PEOPLE:

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**Question #1:** How are we, the transmitters of Knowledge, related to climate change for future generations? And, why is it important?

**Question #2:** What is our role in environmental conservation?

**Question #2a:** How can we be more represented in decision-making bodies related to climate change?

**Question #2b:** What suggestions would you like to make to the Government of Canada?

**Question #3:** How can Indigenous Knowledge Keepers and Elders help resolve current environmental issues. What are they teaching us now? How can we support or learn from these efforts?



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## SESSION 3: FINDING SOLUTIONS:

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**Question #1:** How are Indigenous women and gender diverse individuals in your community helping to address the harmful emissions that contribute to climate change? How are they helping address adverse, climate-related impacts?

**Question #2:** How can Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals work toward solving issues related to climate change?

**Question #2a:** How do we get women into leadership positions?

**Question #2b:** How do we protect their energy?

**Question #2c:** Who were your role models?

**Question #3:** How can Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals promote sustainability?

**Question #4:** How can Indigenous women and gender diverse individuals help promote responsible economic growth and development?

**Question #5:** What environmental best practices have been developed by Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals in your communities concerning solutions to address climate change?



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## APPENDIX B:

## PARTICIPANTS:

NAME:	MEMBERSHIP/COMMUNITY:
ALBERTINE SINCLAIR	MOOSE LAKE FIRST NATION MEMBER, NISICHAWAYASIHK CREE NATION RESIDENT.
ANDREA GERARD	SAGKEENG FIRST NATION MEMBER, WINNIPEG RESIDENT.
ANGELA LEVASSEUR	NISICHAWAYASIHK CREE NATION MEMBER/RESIDENT, FORMER O-PIPON-NA-PIWIN CREE NATION RESIDENT.
CECILIA BAKER	O-PIPON-NA-PIWIN CREE NATION MEMBER, WINNIPEG RESIDENT.
DAWNIS KENNEDY	BLOODVEIN FIRST NATION, WINNIPEG RESIDENT.
DENISE COOK	PIMICIKAMAK CREE NATION, WINNIPEG RESIDENT.
GEORGINA MOODY	NISICHAWAYASIHK CREE NATION MEMBER, THOMPSON RESIDENT.
KATHLEEN BLUESKY	NISICHAWAYASIHK CREE NATION MEMBER, THOMPSON RESIDENT.
LIANNA ANDERSON	NISICHAWAYASIHK CREE NATION MEMBER, FORMER SOUTH INDIAN LAKE RESIDENT.
MARILYN LINKLATER	NISICHAWAYASIHK CREE NATION RESIDENT.
SHANNON HOSKIE	SAGKEENG FIRST NATION, WINNIPEG RESIDENT.
SHIANNE MCKAY	PINE CREEK FIRST NATION, BRANDON RESIDENT.
STEPHANIE SINCLAIR	SANDY BAY OJIBWAY NATION/PEGUIS FIRST NATION.
TARA PETTI	PEGUIS FIRST NATION, WINNIPEG RESIDENT.
VANESSA TAIT	O-PIPON-NA-PIWIN CREE NATION MEMBER, WINNIPEG RESIDENT.



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## APPENDIX C:

## Hydroelectric Projects Adversely Affecting First Nations in Manitoba:

NAME OF STRUCTURE:	RIVERS AND/OR LAKES AFFECTED:	DATE OF COMPLETION:	INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES AFFECTED:
CHURCHILL RIVER DIVERSION: THE MISSI FALLS CONTROL STRUCTURE: THE SOUTH BAY DIVERSION CHANNEL: THE NOTIGI CONTROL STRUCTURE:	CHURCHILL RIVER. NELSON RIVER. RAT RIVER. SOUTHERN INDIAN LAKE.	1976	O-PIPON-NA-PIWIN CREE NATION. <sup>7</sup> NISICHAWAYASIIHK CREE NATION. <sup>8</sup> FIRST NATIONS ALONG THE NELSON RIVER (SEE BELOW).
GRAND RAPIDS GENERATING STATION:	SASKATCHEWAN RIVER.	1965	MISIPAWISTIK CREE NATION. <sup>9</sup>
JENPEG GENERATING STATION:	NELSON RIVER.	1979	TATASKWEYAK CREE NATION. <sup>10</sup> PIMICIKAMAK CREE NATION. <sup>11</sup> KISCHI WÁSKÁHIKAN CREE NATION. <sup>12</sup> MAKASO SAKAHIGAN <sup>13</sup> CREE NATION. KINOSAO SIPI CREE NATION. <sup>14</sup>
KELSEY GENERATING STATION:	NELSON RIVER.	1957	
KETTLE GENERATING STATION:	NELSON RIVER.	1970	
LIMESTONE GENERATING STATION:	NELSON RIVER.	1990	
LONG SPRUCE GENERATING STATION:	NELSON RIVER.	1977	
PINE FALLS GENERATING STATION	WINNIPEG RIVER.	1952	SAGKEENG FIRST NATION.
WUSKWATIM GENERATING STATION.	BURNTWOOD RIVER.	2012	NISICHAWAYASIIHK CREE NATION. O-PIPON-NA-PIWIN CREE NATION. TATASKWEYAK CREE NATION.

## Sources:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_generating\\_stations\\_in\\_Manitoba](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_generating_stations_in_Manitoba).

[https://www.hydro.mb.ca/corporate/facilities/water\\_levels/churchill\\_river\\_diversion/#](https://www.hydro.mb.ca/corporate/facilities/water_levels/churchill_river_diversion/#).

7 South Indian Lake, Manitoba.

8 Nelson House, Manitoba.

9 Grand Rapids, Manitoba.

10 Split Lake, Manitoba.

11 Cross Lake, Manitoba.

12 York Landing Cree Nation.

13 Fox Lake Cree Nation.

14 Norway House Cree Nation.



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## APPENDIX D:

Photo of a Sturgeon caught on the Nelson River before the Jenpeg dam was constructed, and Map of Hydroelectric Projects in Manitoba:



Sturgeon caught on the Nelson river before the Jenpeg dam was built, picture was taken in Cross Lake, Manitoba, John Peter Halcrow, and Albert Halcrow.

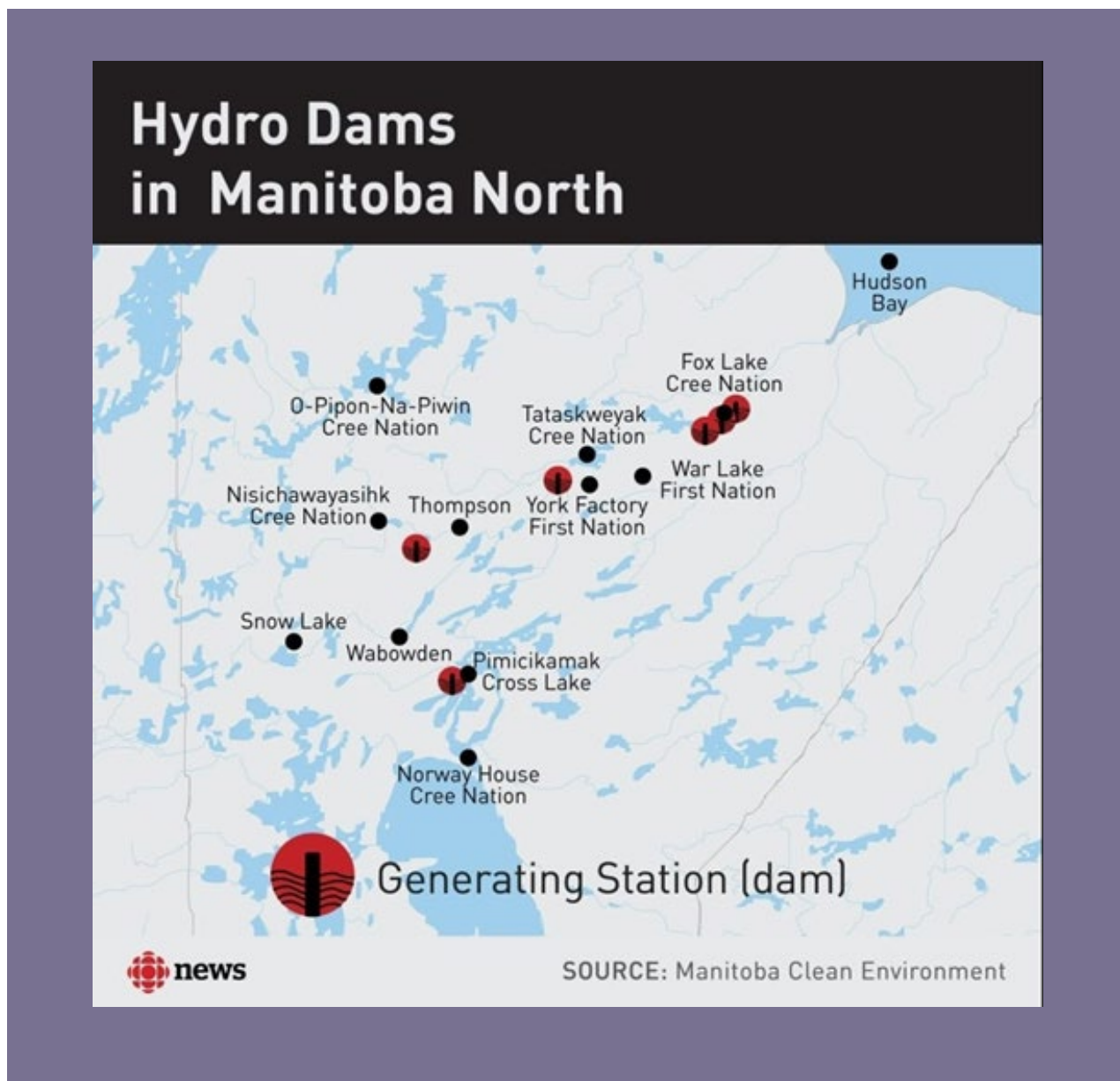


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## APPENDIX E:

Map of Hydroelectric Projects in Manitoba:



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## EMBRACING OUR CONNECTION TO THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Engagement with Indigenous Women and Gender-Diverse  
People in Manitoba on Environmental Conservation  
and Climate Change



### SUMMARY REPORT

Native Women's Association of Canada

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L'Association des femmes autochtones du Canada