

Celebrating and Honouring the Stewardship of Water:

The 2019 Keepers of the Water Gathering

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In mid-July, I attended the Keepers of the Water gathering in Wabasca, Alberta. My attendance marked AWA's first opportunity to participate in a general assembly for the Keepers of the Water. It was a tremendous experience.

The Keepers of the Water is an organization dedicated to protecting the air, water, wildlife, and land within the Arctic Drainage Basin. While that may seem to be a fairly large and daunting objective to attain, the primary motivation behind this organization remains relatively straightforward: acknowledge the importance of water to all living things, and secure it for generations to come. The foundation and momentum

behind the Keepers of the Water comes from a wide assortment of indigenous communities, non-governmental organizations, environmental groups, concerned citizens, and localized grassroots groups such as the Keepers of the Athabasca or Keepers of the Peace that work year-round to protect watershed regions.

Since 2006, Keepers of the Water have been traveling to communities throughout western Canada to talk about the importance of protecting and maintaining clean water for all communities. This year's gathering was cohosted by the Bigstone Cree First Nation. Local community members from the Bigstone Cree Nation, Wabasca, and other nearby hamlets played a critical role

in this event. They generously welcomed us and shared their time, space, knowledge and experiences with all attendees.

The main theme of the gathering was focused on water and attendees were asked to reflect on the question: *'What does water mean to you?'*

Initially, I thought the answer to this question was easy and fairly universal. Water is vital to life and all populations should have access to it. However, during the gathering I was introduced to a multitude of different perspectives on how we think about water. It's much more than "just" a necessity for life.

The gathering was held at the Lakeview Sports Centre, a relatively new addition to the area's infrastructure. While the hamlet of Wabasca is quite small (Statistics Can-



Wabasca Lake PHOTO: © N. PETTERSON

ada reports its 2016 population as 1,406), it has been built up to accommodate the surge of industrial activity, primarily forestry and petroleum in the region. Large hauling semi-tractor trailers, working trucks with diesel tanks, and logging trucks were as common as mosquitoes in most of the hotel parking lots, with ongoing construction of new facilities near the sports centre adding to the traffic. The basic amenities such as a hospital, drugstore, grocery store, and gas station were also there to support the bustling and transient nature of remote working industries.

Most of the gathering took place in the main gymnasium of the sports centre.

Coffee and a hot breakfast greeted the people who trickled into the gymnasium. I chose a vacant table at the front of the gym with good views of the stage and screen. There I was joined by a family from Calling Lake I had met briefly upon my arrival. Having made the hour trip north to participate in the gathering, they explained to me how they had lived in the area for quite some time and were staying at the Kapaskwatinak Area in their tipi. They viewed the gathering as an opportunity to learn more and to further or build new connections with individuals who were equally concerned about changes in the landscape.

As we joked over breakfast about the relentless mosquitoes we dealt with the night before, we were joined by Dr. Josie C. Auger. Dr. Auger is an assistant professor at the University of Athabasca, a Bigstone Cree member, and was one of the featured presenters for the gathering. Her arrival was welcomed by many attendees, a reaction that conveyed how she was a well-known, active, and respected community member both within the Bigstone Cree First Nation and Wabasca.

As breakfast continued, our conversations touched on a variety of significant community issues: an underfunded local education system that is not conducive to indigenous learners, a general disregard for natural or sacred law in modern society, a resurgence of women and restorative justice, how indigenous communities define crime, and finally, paths towards healing for indigenous

communities. For me, these conversations were opportunities to listen and learn. Some of the concerns shared during these conversations might have surprised people from Alberta's major urban centres. Such surprise would have sprung from the fact that small rural communities are still struggling to resolve water quantity and quality issues solved long ago in major municipalities. The people who live in communities such as Wabasca need empathy and support from their urban cousins as the former try to secure conditions that the latter take for granted.

The first day of the gathering officially began with a welcoming speech from Chief Silas Yellowknee of the Bigstone Cree First Nation. While he used humour in his speech, his message and concerns were sobering: neglect of the landscape needs to stop now. In his speech, Chief Yellowknee emphasized how nature is an integral part of who we all are, and how we cannot dissociate ourselves from the place where we originated. As Chief Yellowknee elaborated on his personal struggles and those of his community's with respect to changes in the local watershed and landscape, he continued to reiterate his commitment to continue to live with and through nature with the phrase: "As long as the Sun shines, the Water flows and the Grass grows."

Hearing that saying reminded me that the promises of the treaties between First Nations and Canada were not kept; the Treaties were an everlasting promise to respect and secure the way of life of Indigenous people. Despite Chief Yellowknee's belief in the importance of that commitment, he told attendees that his community was very concerned their ambition to live with and through nature was threatened.

One of the subsequent presentations that stood out for me was a water sampling report from North Wabasca Lake. The Bigstone Cree First Nation was the catalyst for the report and sought an investigation after locals expressed concerns over changes they observed within the lake. A major concern was that some fish caught in the lake had deformities or lesions. After brief communication with the provincial government,

the band launched a formal collaboration with Alberta Environment and Parks (AEP) to study the lake. The study tested a variety of parameters such as lake depth, shoreline perimeter, fish populations and condition, oxygen levels, and surrounding land-uses. Troy Stuart, a representative from the lands department of the Bigstone Cree First Nation, scrolled through the report pages as they were projected onto the screen. While he had been a part of the study from the beginning, he offered little discussion and interpretation of the results (perhaps because AEP hadn't sent a representative). What especially concerned me was that there seemed to be very little impetus or intent for continuing research in the local area, or in considering land-use changes to help reassure the communities of Bigstone Cree and Wabasca that their concerns were being seriously addressed.

Frustration rooted in lack of action also permeated the Water Talking Circle held later in the afternoon. The majority of the tables and chairs in the gymnasium were rearranged to make room for the session which was inspired by a sharing circle, a common practice amongst many indigenous communities. Generally speaking, First Nation sharing circles are an essential part of their oral tradition; most Indigenous communities host sharing circles to transmit cultural knowledge, feelings, or experiences between generations and community members whether they be elders, families, or just friends. Approximately half of the attendees for the gathering stayed to participate in the water talking circle. Participants were encouraged to share thoughts or experiences about water or the landscape more generally. Those who did not want to participate were welcomed to listen. This was my first experience participating in a sharing circle. I was seated next to an Elder who started the conversation by welcoming everyone. He held a beaded sleeve to symbolize a talking stick, and explained that the person holding the sleeve had an opportunity to speak truthfully and courageously from the heart without interruption.

As the sleeve was passed around the circle,

quite profound stories, feelings, and knowledge were shared. I was particularly struck by the thoughts of a woman from the Bigstone Cree First Nation. She expressed her concern for the state of the earth, not just for her family, but for all generations to come: “I am afraid that there is nothing left for them.” Attempting to control her emotions and tears, she explained how the changes she has seen in the local landscape such as unprecedented algae blooms in lakes, fish with deformities, and little to no moose left to harvest has altered the way she lives her life. Conditions on the landscape were no longer enabling water to deliver the lifestyle that she expected.

By the end of the sharing circle, I felt completely overwhelmed by a whirlwind of different emotions. I believe that most people there, like me, were buffeted by feelings of anger, sadness, helplessness, hope, and betrayal. They all competed for our attention.

Participating in the Water Talking Circle was one of the more difficult things I have experienced in my lifetime. Witnessing the intense, raw emotion of people who genuinely fear for their future was overwhelming. What may be distant worries for many of us took on real urgency. The fast pace of resource development in the Wabasca wil-

derness has left the people of Bigstone Cree First Nation and Wabasca feeling as though all they have ever known is being compromised or taken from them unfairly. So much of who they are as a people and a community is tied intimately to the nature that has surrounded them for generations. That nature is changing profoundly.

As I packed my things to leave for the day, I felt guilty that I hadn’t appreciated the level of frustration or fear that so many of the local people at the gathering are living with. They were losing parts of their identity, an experience I haven’t experienced yet and hope never to experience.

Reflecting on my Water Talking Circle experience, I return to thoughts I shared previously with respect to my own lifestyle. In my last *Wild Lands Advocate* article, I wrote about how my fishing and hunting excursions allow me to connect with a version of myself that I identify most strongly with. Alberta’s wilderness is a “channel for delivering more profound moments in my life.” While I may choose this lifestyle and reap the benefits of having this choice, members of the Bigstone Cree First Nation and the Wabasca community were *born* into it. Most importantly, those who want to choose to affirm that heritage feel as though that choice is at

risk because of what is happening to their home. The essence of their existence – their culture and traditions – are at risk of vanishing since it is tied so tightly to the presence of healthy and thriving ecosystems. As the latter are compromised, so too is their essence. Water and food security mean more than maintaining a healthy quality of life; for these communities they are integral means to protecting a way of life.

The second day of the gathering focused on community priorities related to fulfilling natural or sacred law which were reinforced by western science. A series of presentations expanded on pursuing the idea of water and food security in ways allowing indigenous and local communities to continue their ways of life.

Dr. Janelle Baker, an assistant professor from the University of Athabasca, presented first. Through her work in Traditional Land Use studies and the BEAHR program (Building Environmental Aboriginal Human Resources), Dr. Baker found that not enough emphasis in land-use impact assessments was placed on the quality of bush food for Indigenous communities. This led her to the Centre for Indigenous Peoples’ Nutrition and Environment at McGill University, where she studied the quality of traditional food within the hamlet of Wabasca and the Bigstone Cree First Nation. Dr. Baker’s emphasis on how important her studies on traditional food quality were given the amount of industrial activity taking place on the landscape resonated with me. Her informative studies help to support the Bigstone Cree First Nation in continuing First Nation harvesting traditions and fostering their vital connection with nature.

Dr. Shauna Reckseidler-Zenteno and Dr. Tarah Kynch briefly presented on the research they are about to undertake – research on microbial communities in northern Alberta waters. They plan to investigate the impact human developments on surrounding landscapes may have on the composition of microscopic communities. Their findings could be critical to water security issues within the Bigstone Cree First Nation and other Indigenous communities.



Seamless...this portrayal of water suggests well how interconnected water is to so many aspects of living well. PHOTO: © R. RASMUSSEN

Dr. Susan Kutz, a professor in Ecosystem and Public Health from the University of Calgary is also building working relationships with indigenous communities. She described how her research team has studied the population health of moose and caribou in the Northwest Territories. What I found extremely interesting during Dr. Kutz's presentation was the effort put into encouraging and enabling First Nations, and other communities, to contribute important information towards the project by developing hunter sampling kits and an educational DVD.

Dr. Josie Auger offered the morning's final presentation. There she focused on the self-determination and sovereignty of Indigenous women, a topic she has studied for many years. Dr. Auger's current research is compelled by the striking similarities she sees between Canada's First Nations and other Indigenous communities across the world. A series of trips through Central Asia and France helped her further develop the idea of how Indigenous people struggle to maintain identity and culture through oppression. Dr. Auger focuses on how Indigenous women, by reclaiming sovereignty over their bodies and spirituality, will strengthen their self-determination. She believes such strengthening is integral to restoring balance and peace within cultures that generally have suffered at the hands of

colonial societies.

Dr. Auger further elaborated that cultural oppression creates and perpetuates a disconnection between Indigenous communities and nature. It does this by preventing them from fulfilling sacred law and traditional understandings of their destiny. Using Indigenous women as an example, Dr. Auger sees women as the keepers of water not only because people are essentially made of water, but because water is such a huge component of the life-giving process that is a part of the feminine entity when considering the womb and placenta. There is an intimate connection between women and water, as both are vessels for life, and essential to the growth and survival of man. Water is the life blood borne by Mother Earth and kept by women.

By participating in the Keepers of the Water gathering, I learned much about how a disconnection from nature changes how we value it. How we use the land alters the importance of the values we have for nature. Some may be privileged while others may be diminished. While some people value Alberta's wilderness for its beauty, recreational, or industrial opportunities, others regard it as a direct means to their survival both in terms of sustenance and self-determination.

By advocating for water security throughout the province of Alberta, and supporting organizations like Keepers of the Water, Albertans can help to empower those who

wish to maintain their vital connection to nature, sustain themselves from the land, and practice their culture and traditions.

Collaborative efforts that secure the lifestyle of Indigenous communities for generations to come benefit all: we all need clean water and the life it provides. Many Indigenous beliefs and practices are based on information collected over centuries. Those beliefs align with conservation initiatives that nurture and foster biodiversity and thriving ecosystems. Elements such as sustainable harvesting based on ecological capacity would serve to help our societies pull away from industrial scale practices with respect to logging, resource extraction, and agriculture. It would encourage communities to develop while reducing their environmental footprint. It may foster a greater appreciation for how Alberta's wilderness sustains us.

Back to the question we were asked to consider as the gathering began. Through my experience in Wabasca I would say that water is so much more than what you drink, or where you play, or what you use it for. It is a natural force that connects all living things; therefore, it should be respected deeply as its purity and quantity are fragile. It is clearer to me now that water is more than a basic necessity; it is also a force that allows us to live the life we choose. 🌿