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Traditional Knowledge: Considerations for Protecting Water in Ontario

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Abstract

In Canada, the water crisis increasingly felt around the world is being experienced primarily in small, usually Indigenous, communities. At the heart of this issue lies an ongoing struggle to have Indigenous voices heard in the decision-making processes that affect their lives, lands, and waters. As part of ancient systems of Traditional Knowledge (TK), Indigenous people bear the knowledge and the responsibility to care for the waters upon which they depend for survival. A series of internationally developed documents has supported Indigenous peoples' calls for increased recognition of the importance of TK in resolving environmental crises, including those involving water. Ontario provincial and Canadian federal governments have been developing legislative and regulatory documents to help fend off further water-related catastrophes within their jurisdictions. Despite such efforts, a number of barriers to the successful and appropriate involvement of TK in water management remain. Based on years of community-based and policy-related research with First Nations people involved in water-related undertakings, this article highlights progress made to date, and provides Indigenous viewpoints on what further steps need to be taken. Key among these steps are the need to restore and maintain Indigenous access to traditional territories and ways of life, and the requirement for mutually respectful collaboration between TK and Western science.

Keywords

traditional knowledge, water, Indigenous peoples, water crisis, Indigenous rights

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I would like to thank the Elders, Traditional Knowledge holders and practitioners, traditional teachers, hunters, trappers, grandmothers and grandfathers who shared their time and knowledge with me on this important topic. Miigwetch.

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Traditional Knowledge: Considerations for Protecting Water in Ontario

This article provides a summary of work completed over the past decade on the topic of water. I first began to work on water-related issues in 2000 when the Chiefs of Ontario¹ responded to a request to provide a First Nations submission to the Walkerton Inquiry. The report was submitted to the commission in 2001. The submission from the Chiefs of Ontario made it clear that Traditional Knowledge (TK) must be included in decision-making around water protection. Since 2001, a number of initiatives have come to the forefront to address water-related issues in First Nation communities.

Based on the TK work completed from 2000 to 2011, this paper provides an overview of what water means to Anishinabe peoples in Ontario. Emphasis is placed on the fact that such meaning has application in both historical and contemporary times. Anishinabe knowledge, like any other, is dynamic, continuously adapting to contemporary situations and incorporating aspects of knowledge learned from others. Many Elders, grandmothers, grandfathers, and other knowledge holders (spiritual leaders and healers, hunters, trappers, fishermen, gatherers, etc.) retain a great deal of this knowledge. This knowledge is based on ancient philosophies, the principles of which are used to determine which new information might appropriately be incorporated to address contemporary challenges.

I hope that by sharing my experiences working on environmental issues, especially those concerning water, I am fulfilling an important responsibility as an Anishinabe woman. As a mother, clan member, member of a First Nation, and teacher I have a responsibility to share knowledge. This reflection paper is based on my work with Elders, traditional knowledge holders, and practitioners in Ontario in relation to the role of traditional knowledge (TK) in protecting water.

The ideas and insights that I will share in this paper are essentially lessons and teachings from Elders, knowledge holders, practitioners, Anishinabe thinkers, scholars, and others over the years. Nothing I will say here is, therefore, particularly original, as these teachings generally have been passed on for generations within our Nation. I will share my own reflections on the teachings and my current understandings of TK in relation to water. I hope to convey at least some of the TK that I have learned over my lifetime in a way that makes sense. My goal is simply to share what I have learned from those far more knowledgeable than I. It is part of my role as an Anishinabe-Kwe to share such knowledge.

From the International to the Local Context

Ensuring an adequate water supply for human populations is rapidly emerging as one of the major global environmental concerns of the twenty-first century (Corpuz, 2006; Goldtooth, 2006; United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2003). The Indigenous Peoples' Kyoto Water Declaration (2003), prepared by Indigenous participants at the 3rd World Water Forum in Japan, describes Indigenous interests in water and water protection issues. The declaration specifically affirms Aboriginal peoples' "... relationship to Mother Earth and responsibilities to future generations ..." and states that, "we recognize, honour and respect water as sacred and sustaining of all life. Our traditional

¹ Chiefs of Ontario is a coordinating body for 133 First Nation communities located within the boundaries of the Province of Ontario. The purpose of the Chiefs of Ontario office is to enable the political leadership to discuss regional, provincial and national priorities affecting First Nation people in Ontario and to provide a unified voice on these issues (see www.coo.org).

knowledge, laws and way of life teach us to be responsible in caring for this sacred gift that connects all life” (Boelens, Chiba, & Nakashima, 2006, p. 176). Section 15 of the declaration outlines the role of TK in water management and the strengths it can bring to addressing global water issues:

Our traditional practices are dynamically regulated systems. They are based on natural and spiritual laws, ensuring sustainable use through traditional resource conservation. Long-tenured and place-based traditional knowledge of the environment is extremely valuable, and has been proven to be valid and effective. Our traditional knowledge developed over the millennia should not be compromised by an over-reliance on relatively recent and narrowly defined western reductionist scientific methods and standards. We support the implementation of strong measures to allow the full and equal participation of Indigenous Peoples to share our experiences, knowledge and concerns. The indiscriminate and narrow application of modern scientific tools and technologies has contributed to the loss and degradation of water. (Boelens et al., 2006, p. 177)

The 4th World Water Forum, held in Mexico City yielded the Tlatokan Atlahuak Declaration (2006). Again prepared by Indigenous participants, this new document reaffirmed the Kyoto declaration and emphasized that, “for all Indigenous peoples of the world, water is the source of material, cultural and spiritual life” (p. 1)²

Indigenous peoples have sought for decades to have a voice in environmental and resource management at the international level. The recently ratified United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 2007) is a prime example of how this voice is now being expressed. Article 25 in the Declaration states that:

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard. (UNGA, 2007)

The discussion of issues around water quality and conservation is thus not new to Aboriginal peoples. As in many countries, these issues are only becoming more serious in Canada as time progresses. In this paper, water governance in Ontario will be explored in relation to First Nations people, their potential roles and contributions, and the importance of Anishinabe knowledge. This article links international, national, regional, and local efforts to protect water and further shares insights gained over the past decade from Elders, traditional teachers, grandmothers, grandfathers, and environmental professionals I have encountered as part of the various water-related projects I have worked on during that time.

Starting with Creation

Origin stories say a great deal about how people understand their place in the universe and their relationship to other living things. Creation stories are the means by which cultural communities ground their identity in particular narratives and particular landscapes (Johnston, 2006). The Anishinabe

² See <http://www.worldwaterforum.org/files/Declarations/Indigenous.pdf> for the full declaration.

Creation and Re-Creation stories inform us of our beginnings and provide the conceptual frameworks for an Indigenous understanding of our relationship to Creation and its many beings. The Creation stories of First Nations people vary from nation to nation, although there are remarkable similarities among the concepts and messages contained in these stories. Teachings that emerge from Creation stories uphold ideas of holism and the importance of inter-relationships among all elements of Creation. The Earth is described as a living entity, bearing special responsibilities towards supporting the continuation of life. As a fundamental component of the Earth, water plays a central role in Creation stories. An Anishinabe view on the importance of water and its relationship to the people is expressed by Benton-Banai (1988), who states that, “the Earth is said to be a woman. In this way it is understood that woman preceded man on the Earth. She is called Mother Earth because from her come all living things. Water is her lifeblood. It flows through her, nourishes her, and purifies her” (p. 2).

In the Anishinabe tradition, water is also a powerful purifying force in the Re-Creation stories. As many of the teachings contained in these stories warn, if we do not take care of Creation as instructed by the Creator and if we do not fulfil the duties and responsibilities as we are taught, then we will suffer along with the Earth. In the Re-Creation story, the people do not perform their duties as instructed – they have not followed the instructions for living appropriately with Creation. Balance and harmony are, therefore, not maintained. The people begin to bicker and quarrel. Peace among peoples suffers, and Creation is not respected. The Creator becomes very sad with this situation and decides to purify the Earth. Water is chosen as the means to do this, and the Creator sends a flood to cleanse the Earth. Afterwards, water is again used to re-create the Earth. “Water beings” play an integral role in this re-creation; they help the first woman and, thus, have a special place in the lives of First Nations people. For more complete versions of these stories, see Benton-Banai (1988) and Johnston (1976).

In the Creation and Re-Creation stories, instructions are given by the Creator on how to relate appropriately with all beings of Creation. In the Anishinabe worldview, these instructions are often related to people in the form of stories, although there are other forms. People obtained such instruction or knowledge from many sources, including Creation itself (Johnston, 2003; McGregor, 2004). Many stories and teachings are obtained from animals, plants, the moon, the stars, water, wind, and the spirit world. Knowledge is also gained through visions, ceremonies, prayers, intuitions, dreams, and personal experience.

Taking care of water has been part of our knowledge for most of our history as Anishinabe people. It is only recently that we have not been able to exercise these responsibilities. Our relationship with water is not only historical or in the past; it continues to the present day. We recognize that water continues to play a role in our daily lives not just for drinking, but also for numerous other important activities, including providing a source of food. Our relationship to water also plays a vital role in passing on knowledge to younger generations. They too must learn about the importance of water.

In the Anishinabe tradition, women have a special relationship with water, since, like Mother Earth, they have life-giving powers. Women have a special place in the order of existence. They provide us, as unborn children, with our very first environment – water. When we are born, water precedes us. With this special place in the order of things come responsibilities. No one is exempt from caring for, and paying respect to, the water, but for women there is a special responsibility. In some ceremonies, women speak for the water. For example, Grandmother Josephine Mandamin, through the “Mother Earth Water

Walk”³ she founded, has inspired many others to “walk the talk” in order to heal the waters. Many have decided to follow her example of raising awareness of the responsibility to care for water. Grandmother Josephine and the water walkers demonstrate the spiritual role that women have with respect to water.

Water, First Nations Peoples, and the Canadian Context

Although the most publically known water issue facing First Nations is the lack of access to safe drinking water, the complexity of First Nations legal, financial, social, economic, and cultural systems indicates that water management by and for First Nations is a multi-layered problem (Phare, 2011). In 2000, seven people died from E. coli contamination of the drinking water supply in the rural town of Walkerton, Ontario. An inquiry into the tragedy was held, and two years later Justice O’Connor released his report on Part 2 of the Walkerton Inquiry, outlining 121 recommendations. Key among these was the recognition that First Nations face serious problems in relation to water quality, and the difficulty in resolving these issues is compounded by jurisdictional issues among federal, provincial, and First Nations governments (O’Connor, 2002; Phare, 2011; Swain, Louttit, & Hruday, 2006). The problems with water quality in First Nations communities are long standing and related to broader historical and unjust relationships between Aboriginal peoples and the Crown (Assembly of First Nations [AFN], 1993; National Aboriginal Health Organization [NAHO], 2002).

This situation, fundamentally rooted in a colonial history, creates a context where many First Nations on a daily basis face a multitude of environmental health challenges that affect community well-being. The historical injustices that Aboriginal peoples have faced, chronicled in great detail in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) report, have had a devastating impact on people, as well as the environment (RCAP, 1996). The focus of this paper is on one area of such impact – water. In some First Nations communities, Akwesasne being one, severing ties with the water source (in this case the St. Lawrence River) has represented the single most harmful event in the history of the community (Ransom, 1999). In the fall of 2005, a drinking water crisis in the northern Ontario First Nation community of Kashechewan drew national attention (Christensen, Gourcher, & Phare, 2010; NAHO, 2005; St. Germain & Sibbeston, 2007; Swain et al., 2006). The community, which had already been under a boil-water advisory for two years due to E. coli contamination, was declared by the Ontario government to be in a state of emergency. Hundreds of people were evacuated from the community with many requiring medical attention (Bakker, 2007; St. Germain & Sibbeston, 2007). The Government of Canada responded with a plan to assure the health of residents of Kashechewan and the long term well-being and sustainability of their community (Ontario Ministry of the Environment [OMOE], 2005). A memorandum of understanding was later signed between the community of Kashechewan and the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada⁴ to address the community’s challenges (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada [AANDC], 2007). The Ontario Ministry of Environment’s contribution to the plan included a technical on-site assessment of

³ See <http://www.motherearthwaterwalk.com/>.

⁴ Effective June 2011, the Prime Minister announced the former Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada’s title and the department’s name would change from Indian Affairs and Northern Development (INAC) to Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC). This change would have no impact on the mandate of the department or the Minister’s statutory responsibilities. Depending on when a particular document was published and website last updated, both Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) and Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) are indicated in the bibliography. See <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1314808945787>

Kashechewan First Nation's drinking water, water treatment system, and sewage collection system (OMOE, 2005). The expert technical team offered a number of recommendations to safeguard Kashechewan's drinking water.

The situation in Kashechewan was sadly not an isolated event. Drinking water advisories are frequent, and water quality continues to be recognized as a serious health concern in many First Nations communities (Harden & Levalliant, 2008; St. Germain & Sibbeston, 2007; Willsie, Pastershank, Lyndon-Hassen, Wu, & Travis, 2009). A recent study by the Ontario First Nations Technical Services Corporation found that over 80 percent of water treatment plants in Ontario First Nations were at medium to high risk of not being able to meet existing regulations (Morriseau, 2011). As Johanne Gelinis (2005), Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, points out, "when it comes to the safety of drinking water, residents of First Nation communities do not benefit from a level of protection comparable to that of people who live off reserves" (p. 3).

Water governance, generally referred to as "decision-making processes through which water is managed" (De Loe & Kreutzwiser, 2007, p. 87), is a complex issue in Canada because both federal and provincial governments have responsibilities towards water. Jurisdictional conflicts frequently arise. Hence, Aboriginal rights with respect to water represent a multifaceted issue (Swain et al., 2006; Walkem, 2007). Aboriginal peoples' involvement in water-related concerns throughout North America has often, though not exclusively, been couched in the Aboriginal and treaty rights discourse (AFN, 1993; Getches, 2002; Matsui, 2005; Walkem, 2007), as well as in discussions of social, environmental, and social justice issues (Lavalley, 2006; Walkem, 2007). The idea that Aboriginal peoples face unique challenges has been clearly recognized (AFN, 2007; Boelens et al., 2006; Groenfeldt, 2006; Phare, 2011; Ransom & Ettenger, 2001; Swain et al., 2006; Walkem, 2007). However, Aboriginal peoples regard Western water management approaches as limited, and science and technology, alone, as being unable to address the challenges faced by global, regional, and local communities in relation to water. From an Aboriginal point of view, alternative perspectives are required in an effort to address such challenges (Blackstock, 2001). Many scholars, activists, scientists, and Aboriginal peoples in Canada have observed, "... water governance in Canada is in a state of crisis (in the true sense of the word)" (Bakker, 2007, p. xv).

Achieving resolution of water-related issues in Canada is proving to be difficult; in this country, jurisdictional division of responsibilities in relation to water management is particularly complex, crossing "provincial, federal and international management regimes" (Saunders & Wenig, 2007, p. 119). Simeone and Troniak (2012) describe such complexity as follows:

In Canada, water and wastewater operations and systems are generally the responsibility of provincial and territorial governments. Over the years, the different jurisdictions have developed comprehensive regulatory regimes for the protection of source water, water quality standards, and the oversight of water treatment plants and water delivery services. However, because section 91(24) of the Constitution Act, 1867 grants to the federal government exclusive jurisdiction over "Indians and lands reserved for the Indians," provincial regulatory water standards do not apply to on-reserve First Nations communities. To date, there has been no federal legislative framework governing drinking water and wastewater in First Nations communities beyond what is set out in federal policies, administrative guidelines, and funding

arrangements. (p. 2)

In summary, jurisdictional fragmentation is far more troublesome for Aboriginal peoples (O'Connor 2002; Walkem, 2007), as Aboriginal and treaty rights cross jurisdictions as well. Simply put, "current Canadian water policy is not working" (Walkem, 2007, p. 309), and this is perhaps most true for Aboriginal peoples.

The State's Responses

In 2003, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada released the National Assessment of Water and Wastewater Systems in First Nation Communities: Summary Report (INAC, 2003). The purpose of the report was to document a comprehensive assessment of on-reserve water and wastewater systems conducted to determine their present status. The results were startling: "Of the 740 community water systems assessed, about 29 percent (218) posed a potentially high risk that could negatively impact water quality ... another 46 percent (337) were classified as medium risk, and the remaining 24 percent were in the low or no risk category" (INAC, 2003, p. ii). These results are remarkably similar to the statistics found for Ontario in 2011, as noted above. Clearly, there is a water crisis in First Nations communities in Canada, and it is a public health, as well as a social equity, issue.

In response to this assessment and the findings of the Walkerton Inquiry, the federal government in 2003 announced the creation of the First Nations Water Management Strategy (FNWMS) aimed at improving the safety of water supplies in First Nation communities (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada [INAC], 2003). This strategy focused on seven key areas: developing comprehensive guidelines, policies, and standards; educating on-reserve residents about drinking water issues; clarifying roles and responsibilities; building and upgrading water systems to standards; improving operations and maintenance; providing operator training; and expanding water testing (Gelinas, 2005). The strategy began with a budget of \$600 million for five years. Despite such an investment and improvements made since the inception of this strategy (INAC, 2007; INAC, 2008a), water issues remain critical and urgent in many Aboriginal communities (Phare, 2011).

In March, 2006, the Minister for INAC announced an Action Plan for Drinking Water in First Nation Communities (INAC, 2006a) that included two noteworthy aspects: (1) a "Protocol for Safe Drinking Water in First Nations Communities" (INAC, 2006b) and (2) the commitment to appoint an "Expert Panel to Advise on a Regulatory Framework to Ensure Safe Drinking Water in First Nation Communities" (INAC, 2006c) to advise on the appropriate regulatory framework required to ensure clean water in First Nation communities (AFN, 2007). The Protocol requires First Nations authorities responsible for drinking water systems, in collaboration with other stakeholders, to develop and implement a watershed or aquifer protection plan, as well as a Source Water Protection (SWP) plan, to prevent contamination of community water sources.

The mandate of the FNWMS drew to a close in March 2008. In April of that year, however, the Government of Canada announced a two year First Nations Water and Wastewater Action Plan (FNWWAP) in its continued efforts to address drinking water quality issues in First Nation communities. A key component of this plan is to conduct an updated assessment of water and

wastewater systems in all First Nations communities, but also to consult with First Nation communities on the creation of a federal legislative framework for drinking water and wastewater on-reserve (INAC, 2008b, 2008c). In 2009, INAC organized a series of one-day sessions throughout Canada to provide First Nations with an opportunity to discuss and provide comments on the federal government's proposals for developing legislation and regulations for First Nations drinking water. In preparation for these sessions the Government of Canada released the Drinking Water and Wastewater in First Nation Communities Discussion Paper: Engagement Sessions on the Development of a Proposed Legislative Framework for Drinking Water and Wastewater in First Nation Communities (AANDC, 2010). These engagement sessions also provided opportunities for dialogue addressing the regulatory gap in First Nations communities in relation to water (Graham, Mitchell, & Edgar, 2009). Over the course of the fall and winter of 2009 to 2010, federal officials met with First Nation organizations to discuss specific issues relating to the federal legislative proposal (INAC, 2010).

In May 2010, the federal government introduced legislation for the development of federal regulations governing the provision of safe drinking water on reserves. Known as Bill S-11, an Act respecting the safety of drinking water on First Nation lands (Simeone, 2010), it has not garnered positive reaction from First Nations (Christensen et al., 2010). In Ontario, for example, the Chiefs of Ontario passed a resolution rejecting the legislation even as it was being proposed (Chiefs of Ontario, 2009). In a later document, the Chief of Ontario (2011) describes Ontario First Nations' opposition to the Bill in some detail, which includes the following:

- The Bill was created without due consultation of First Nations. Rather than being a joint effort between the federal government and First Nations, it is being imposed on First Nations.
- The Bill gives the federal government the authority to hand over significant powers to third parties such that those third parties then assume power over First Nations in terms of water management and regulation. This ignores the existing Nation-to-Nation and fiduciary relationships between First Nations and the federal government and likely contravenes the Constitution Act of 1982 in various ways.
- Not only would the Bill put First Nations under the regulatory power of third party managers in terms of water systems, it would do so without providing any of the resources required for necessary infrastructure upgrades.

The Government of Canada's Aboriginal Consultation and Accommodation Guidelines for Federal Officials to Fulfil the Duty to Consult (AANDC, 2011, referred to here as "the Guidelines") outlines the Crown's legal duty to consult with Aboriginal peoples. The Guidelines define the duty to consult as follows:

The duty to consult is an obligation of the government as a whole. In *Haida*, *Taku River* and *Mikisew Cree*, the Supreme Court of Canada held that provincial and federal governments have a legal obligation to consult when the Crown contemplates conduct that might adversely impact potential or established Aboriginal or Treaty rights. (AANDC, 2011, p. 61)

First Nations in Canada, as noted above, consistently stated that the Government of Canada did not fulfill their legal duty to consult on these matters. More specifically, the Assembly of First Nations and Chiefs of Ontario argued that Aboriginal and treaty rights would be adversely impacted by the proposed legislation (AFN, 2012; Chiefs of Ontario, 2011). Also, as noted above, “engagement” sessions, not consultations as the Expert Panel called for, were held with various First Nations. Engagement is explained in the Guidelines as including “discussion groups and formal dialogue, sharing knowledge and seeking input on activities such as policy, legislation, program development, or renewal” (AANDC, 2011, p. 61). Engagement often precedes formal consultation if the engagement reveals adverse impacts, not previously known, on the exercise of Aboriginal and treaty rights. The Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources states, in *Consulting with the Crown: A Guide for First Nations*, that, at the most basic level, consultation must be meaningful, fair, and conducted in good faith. The discussions must be substantive (Guirguis-Awadalla, Allen, & Phare, 2007). Clearly, as First Nations have articulated, the impacts of S-11 are far reaching and require more than one-day engagement sessions.

In response to criticisms from First Nations across the country, the federal government, in February 2012, released a revised version of the Bill, now referred to as Bill S-8. While containing a new clause stating that the Act is not to, “... abrogate or derogate from any existing Aboriginal or treaty rights of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada under section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982,” it also states that this is the case, “... except to the extent necessary to ensure the safety of drinking water on First Nation lands” (Simeone & Troniak, 2012, p. 6). This seemingly contradictory clause appears to be the most significant change in what Ontario Regional Chief Angus Toulouse has referred to as, “... almost an exact replica of ... Bill S-11” (cited in Morriveau, 2012). Needless to say, the Chiefs of Ontario rejected Bill S-8 just as strongly as the earlier version, despite the government’s claimed improvements.

As noted above, although the federal government has begun taking legislative steps to resolve water concerns in First Nations communities, they have not begun to appropriately address such problems from an Aboriginal perspective. First Nations continue to call for the Crown to work in partnership with First Nations and respect the guidance provided in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNGA, 2007) on such matters. First Nations have called for a government-to-government process that recognizes First Nations authority and jurisdiction over their lives and territories (AFN, 2012).

Aboriginal people are not only concerned about water in their communities, but on their traditional territories as well. In Ontario, First Nations territories outside the federal reserve system fall under the jurisdiction of the province. In response to the Walkerton Inquiry, the Province of Ontario embarked on a process of water reform, which included the passage of the Clean Water Act (2006). The Act focused on source water protection as the first barrier to overcome in a multi-barrier conceptualization of protecting drinking water. The Clean Water Act is primarily concerned with source water protection planning. The Act helps protect drinking water at the source as part of an overall commitment to safeguard human health and the environment. This legislation sets prevention as its fundamental principle. Keeping the sources of drinking water free of contamination is smarter, safer, and more effective than cleaning up problems after the fact (OMOE, 2010). Justice O’Connor stated, “the best way to achieve a healthy public water supply is to put in place multiple barriers that keep water contaminants from reaching people” (OMOE, 2010, p. 72). The idea is to keep the source water as clean

as possible to lower the risk of contamination. Thus, a multi barrier approach formed a major recommendation in the Walkerton Inquiry that has since been implemented in the Province of Ontario. O'Connor explains, "a multiple-barrier system for providing safe drinking water, the selection and protection of reliable, high-quality drinking water sources is the first barrier (OMOE, 2010, p. 89). Source water is understood in the multi-barrier approach to be "untreated water from streams, lakes or underground aquifers that people use to supply private wells and public drinking water systems. Source water protection is about protecting both the quality and quantity of these water sources, now and into the future" (Pollution Probe, 2004, p.1).

A primary role in the implementation of the Act and the regimes it created to protect source water has been assigned to the province's Conservation Authorities (CA) who manage water resources on a watershed basis (De Loe & Kreutzwiser, 2007). Conservation Authorities are local watershed management agencies that deliver services and programs, which protect and manage water and other natural resources in partnership with governments, landowners, and other organizations. Ontario has also directed CAs to engage First Nations in establishing working relationships. In general, however, neither federal nor provincial initiatives in relation to First Nations water concerns address core issues such as Aboriginal and treaty rights, governance or decision-making structures and processes, jurisdiction and authority, or recognition of the responsibilities held by First Nations people to care for water (Phare, 2009).

Indigenous Responses

Despite tremendous obstacles, First Nations people continue in many instances to fulfill their responsibilities towards water. The Women's Water Walk, inspired by Josephine Mandamin, is a prime example. As described in the introductory paragraphs of this article, Indigenous peoples around the world have asserted their views and knowledge through various declarations. In Ontario, the Chiefs of Ontario, through a regional policy forum on water, drafted the "Water Declaration of the Anshinabek, Mushkegowuk and Onkwehonwe" (Chiefs of Ontario, 2008), which was subsequently adopted through resolution by the Chiefs in Assembly. This Declaration emphasizes the importance of exercising the caretaking role of Indigenous people with regard to water and the environment. The Declaration recognizes the special role of women and traditional knowledge in decision-making regarding water. It denounces the lack of state recognition and respect for the authority and responsibility of Indigenous peoples to care for water. It also calls into question the authority and jurisdiction of governments in making decisions about water. In summary, Indigenous peoples recognize that government-led solutions for addressing water-related challenges have thus far failed.

Indigenous Realities

Water is a sacred thing. This is reflected in many traditional beliefs, values and practices. (Elder Ann Wilson in McGregor & Whitaker, 2001)

According to Elder Ann Wilson, "water is a sacred thing. This is reflected in many traditional beliefs, values, and practices" (cited in McGregor & Whitaker, 2001). First Nations across Canada are diverse in terms of culture, language, identity, governance, and traditions, and it is often a challenge to convey

key concepts and ideas regarding water. The Expert Panel on First Nations Drinking Water observed that,

It is risky to treat First Nations as a homogeneous group. If there was one area, however, in which attitudes were widely shared, it was traditional beliefs and attitudes toward water. In addition to sustaining life itself, water was traditionally a means of transportation, or a source of food, or both, for every First Nation and remains central to the lives of many communities today. The pervasiveness of this traditional view of water and the related stewardship role for First Nations gave us a strong sense of how the goal of achieving safe drinking water on reserve should be pursued. (Swain et al., 2006, p. 32)

From a First Nation perspective, water quality is not just an “environmental” or ecological issue (AFN, 1993; Phare, 2011). In the Anishinabe tradition, one of the main features of knowledge, based on thousands of years of living sustainably with Creation, is its holism: the recognition that all aspects of Creation are inter-related. Thus, degradation of water quality directly impacts the people, permeating every aspect of their lives. It threatens their very survival. First Nations maintain unique perspectives on (and relationships with) water and feel these perspectives should form an integral part of water governance (Mandamin, 2012; McGregor, 2009).

This section focuses on work undertaken by the Chiefs of Ontario on traditional knowledge and water in preparation for their submission to the Walkerton Inquiry in 2000, along with workshops and presentations since then (see for example, Kamanga, Kahn, McGregor, Sherry, & Thornton, 2001; Lavalley, 2006; McGregor, 2009; McGregor & Whitaker, 2001; Noojimawin Health Authority [NHA], 2006). The teachings and understandings expressed were shared by approximately 80 First Nations Elders, traditional knowledge holders and practitioners, grandmothers and grandfathers, and leaders from across Ontario. These individuals participated in various water-related workshops and other initiatives hosted by the Chiefs of Ontario over the past decade. The perspectives shared here summarize key messages that participants wished to share within the context of a dialogue around traditional knowledge and relationships to water. As noted above, such findings are similar to observations made by others throughout Canada (Anderson, 2010; Anderson, Clow, & Haworth-Brockman, 2011; Blackstock, 2001; Phare, 2011; Swain et al., 2006).

Water is alive. It is a being with its own spirit. Workshop participants continually stress that water must be respected as a living being. Water bodies are thought to have various personalities and responsibilities that require different demonstrations of respect. Water is understood to have feelings and can be sad and/or angry if not respected or treated properly. Water must be free to fulfill its responsibilities; it is not appropriate for people to interfere with water’s life-giving duties.

Water is sacred. Water is regarded as sacred and is often used in ceremonies. It is a powerful medicine and must be respected as such. It has life-giving properties. We need water to live. “Water is life” is a common sentiment expressed among Elders and traditional teachings.

Water is a relative. Not only is water alive and infused with spirit; it is a relative. In one workshop, an Elder referred to water as my “little brother” and scolded participants for speaking about water as if it

was a thing. One speaks to water as one would a relative, with caring and compassion. Water is not a commodity to be bought and sold. It is to be revered and treated with respect and dignity.

Water is part of a holistic system, a part of Creation. Water is not a single, discrete aspect of the environment; it is part of a greater, interconnected whole. When one considers water, therefore, one must consider all that to which water is connected and related. Elders felt current government initiatives around water to be limited and short-sighted. When one considers water, one must consider all that water supports and all that supports water. Therefore, a focus on just drinking water is misguided. It is not in keeping with traditional principles of holism and the interdependence of all living things. One must also consider, for example, the plants that water nourishes, the fish that live in water, the medicines that grow in or around water, and the animals that drink water.

Water is key to survival. Water is critical for the spiritual, emotional, physical, and intellectual life of Aboriginal people. Water fulfills many functions for continued life on Earth. The role of water in life must be recognized. Therefore, it is not appropriate to deprive others (including other beings of Creation, such as fish, plants, and land animals) of water, by hoarding water for oneself.

Appropriate water use is about proper relationships. From a traditional perspective, one does not really use water. One speaks to, and seeks permission from, water to utilize its life-giving properties. One does not seek to treat water as a commodity, but should find an appropriate relationship with water based on respect and the recognition that water is a living spiritual force. Water is regarded as a gift. In traditional teachings and values, there are protocols to ensure that proper relationships with water are maintained so that water, in turn, is able to fulfill its responsibilities.

Water must be treated with an ethic of thanksgiving. Water is critical to the survival of all life on Earth, and Aboriginal peoples are most thankful for water's existence. There are protocols and ceremonies for giving thanks to water and for establishing and maintaining a spiritual connection to water. A central component of the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving address involves giving thanks to the waters. In Aboriginal cultures, water is not taken for granted and its life-giving qualities are routinely recognized and honored.

People have specific responsibilities to protect water. People are taught that they have an obligation, a responsibility, to care for water. This responsibility has recently been proclaimed in international declarations involving water (see for example Boelens et al., 2006) and was frequently addressed by participants at the aforementioned workshops. Work with Elders over the years has also revealed that women, in particular, are considered to have specific responsibilities in relation to water (Anderson et al., 2011; Lavalley, 2006; McGregor, 2005). This means that consideration must be given to the gender of decision-makers, especially with respect to Aboriginal women, who have the responsibility of speaking for water in Aboriginal communities.

Planning for water governance must take a long-term approach. Decision-makers must plan at least seven generations ahead. Any decisions about water should be based on recognition of the impact such decisions will have on subsequent generations.

Knowledge regarding water must be shared. There was a strong sentiment among workshop

participants that Aboriginal peoples' unique views and values in relation to water must be shared with non-Aboriginal society. It is felt that current mainstream processes for protecting water are misguided, limited, and too dependent on the compartmentalized approach of science and technology. Elders feel that traditional teachings around water would benefit the broader community, so non-Aboriginal people can also learn to develop proper relationships with water.

Women have a central role.

Everyone has a responsibility to care for the water. Women, however, carry the responsibility to talk for the water. (Elder Ann Wilson in McGregor & Whitaker, 2001)

Everyone has a responsibility to care for the water. Women, however, carry the responsibility to talk for the water.

The recognition of women's role in creating life along with water means that women and water have a special bond (Mandamin, 2012). This bond is often expressed in ceremonies, where the role of Anishinabe women is to speak for the water:

In the water ceremony we make an offering to water, to acknowledge its life-giving forces and to pay respect. We have a responsibility to take care of the water, and this ceremony reminds us to do it. Women bring forth life, the life of the people. Water brings forth life also, and we have a special role to play in this responsibility that we share with water. (Akii Kwe in McGregor & Whitaker, 2001)

Language retention is critical. Another common theme that emerged from the water workshops over time is the importance of language. Reclaiming language and re-naming the waters with their proper names, rather than the newcomers' names, is important in helping the waters heal. Grandmother Josephine Mandamin (2010), in a Great Lakes water workshop in the summer of 2010, said that, "learning the proper names and stories for particular places relating to water will also help Anishinabe people heal as people".

Traditional Knowledge in Action

We are the voice for Water. (Akii Kwe in McGregor & Whitaker, 2001)

For many years, Indigenous women have noticed changes in water quality, particularly because they have a close and special relationship with the water. In the process of rediscovery, revitalization, and healing, the women of Bkejwanong Territory (Walpole Island, Ontario) have organized themselves to speak for the water. Akii Kwe is an informally organized grassroots group of women speaking only from what they know. They began by protesting what was happening to the water, especially pollution contaminating the waters flowing around Bkejwanong Territory. The women decided to speak for the water and to try to stop such actions (McGregor & Whitaker, 2001). In a 1998 submission on water quality issues, Akii Kwe members stated that in Bkejwanong nature provides the foundation of Anishinabe culture and the ways in which the people conduct themselves (systems of governance). As

part of this, the people have a responsibility to act on behalf of the water (Akii Kwe, 1998).

Josephine Mandamin, introduced above, is a Grandmother fulfilling a prophecy by walking around the Great Lakes to remind people of their responsibility to water. The water walks take place in the spring and are led by a Grandmother (www.motherearthwaterwalk.com). They begin with a water ceremony, feast, and celebration. Routinely covering distances of over 1,000 kilometres, the goal of each walk is to raise awareness about water and to change the perception of water from that of a resource to that of a sacred entity, which must be treated as such. On these journeys the Grandmothers carry with them a vessel of water and an eagle staff. The beauty of this effort is that it is led by women who are fulfilling their role in raising awareness of the spiritual and cultural significance of water and trying to engage as many people as possible (Mandamin, 2012). The walks have inspired Anishinabe women in other communities to organize their own water walks. Grandmother Josephine Mandamin's incredible journey is now featured in *Water Life*, a National Film Board documentary (NFB, 2009).

Water-related traditional and spiritual knowledge that is driving the Mother Earth Water Walks and the activism of groups, such as Akii Kwe, is slowly finding its way into current decision-making processes. In March 2007, the Anishinabek Nation⁵ announced the creation of a Women's Water Commission aimed, in part, at providing input to the Ontario government on Great Lakes water issues (Union of Ontario Indians [UOI], 2008). The foundation of the Anishinabek Women's Water Commission, "... is the traditional role of the Women in caring for water" (UOI, 2008, p.1). It was established in recognition of this traditional role along with the need to include women as part of the decision-making processes in formal environmental and resource management.

This commission, led by none other than Josephine Mandamin, gained momentum with the appointment of political representative Chief Isadora Bedamash in March 2008. Chief Bedamash's appointment is seen as being vital in the effort to, "... strengthen our leadership role in the area of water policy in Ontario, and enhance the leadership of the Women's Water Commission itself." (UOI, 2008, p. 1) Through its work not only with member First Nations but also with government agencies, it is hoped that this Commission will provide valuable insights into the approaches required for the ongoing protection of the Great Lakes and other waters.

Conclusion

As an Anishinabe-kwe, I have a responsibility to speak for water and address equity issues in relation to water. Sharing my work over the years and advocating for the inclusion of Anishinabe perspective in various capacities has been, and continues to be, part of my responsibility to all my relations and to Creation as a whole.

In this chapter, I have offered insights shared by Elders, traditional knowledge holders, practitioners, leaders, grandmothers, and grandfathers from the various initiatives in which I have had the privilege of participating. Within the context of the Anishinabek people, key concepts of Anishinabe Traditional Knowledge are critically important to sustaining appropriate relationships with water. Anishinabe Elders

⁵ The Anishinabek Nation, through its secretariat, the Union of Ontario Indians (the oldest political organization in Ontario), is the political advocate for 42 member First Nations in Ontario.

have stated that water is a living spiritual being with its own responsibilities to fulfil. As Anishinabe people strive to address the challenges we face in relation to the water in our communities, we must go beyond the “techno-fix” advocated by governments and others. There is too much of a reliance on science and technology to solve issues. These solutions tend to be shortsighted and do not deal with the root of the problem. There is no quick and ready answer for the challenges that we face. Water must be considered in a holistic fashion. Other aspects of Creation, along with people’s role in creating the current water crisis, must be included. While the tools of science, applied appropriately, can aid us, we must turn to the traditions and knowledge that did not fail us for thousands of years to find a real solution. While we face new challenges, the traditions are still as viable as they have always been.

Miigwetch...

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