

Keepers of the Water Declaration

September 7, 2006

We the peoples gathered in Liidlii Kue, Denendeh, from September 5-8th, 2006, having come together as Keepers of the Water, connected as peoples residing in the vast basin including Lake Athabasca, Nsededha (Slave river), Tucho/Tu'neda (Great Slave Lake), and Dehcho.

RECALLING THAT the Creator sent Zhambáhdézhá as a messenger to the Indigenous peoples who live on Mother Earth, bringing us sacred laws to live by. We have been taught that the land is our Mother, and the waters are her blood that sustain life for all peoples, lands and creation. We are born from our Mother Earth and we are inseparable from her.

AFFIRMING THAT water is essential to life, and the right to life constitutes a fundamental human right, recognized by all countries of the world.

FURTHER AFFIRMING that as Indigenous peoples, since time immemorial, have fundamental rights to live on our own lands and to survive as peoples. As a sacred trust we have been given responsibility from the Creator to ensure the integrity of all waters in our lands in all its many forms – from the aquifers deep underground, to the rich marshlands, rivers and lakes that connect and sustain our communities, to the glaciers on the high mountains, to the rains and snow that restore and replenish our Mother Earth in an unending cycle of renewal.

RESPECTING that our sacred laws have not been honoured and that our Mother Earth is being abused out of ignorance and greed.

CONVINCED that our fundamental human rights with respect to water must be acknowledged and respected by all others.

CONVINCED that climate change, together with the unprecedented impacts of oil and gas extraction, oil sands developments, land conversion, deforestation, hydroelectric development, mining activities, industrial discharges, atmospheric pollution and water withdrawals on our waters, are diminishing the quantity and quality of water in our basin, other present and any future activities that change our land.

BEARING WITNESS THAT we are seeing the impacts of these changes before our eyes. When we travel our lands and waterways we see receding shorelines and depleted populations of fish and wildlife. Exotic species of plants and animals are encroaching, while indigenous species are disappearing as conditions change too quickly for them to adapt. The land and wildlife are being poisoned by pollution and contaminants. The very rhythms of the seasons are no longer familiar to us.

RECOGNIZING that causes of these changes are many and complex, but they are all caused by human action, government and industry, and we as the peoples of the Basin all share a common fate.

ASSERTING our rights to defend and protect the body and blood of our Mother Earth according to our sacred laws. Demanding that immediate steps must be taken to ensure that the spirit of the water, which sustains all life within the Basin, be protected today for our ancestors and future generations.

WE PROCLAIM THE FOLLOWING PRINCIPLES:

Water is a sacred gift, an essential element that sustains and connects all life. It is not a commodity to be bought or sold. All people share an obligation to cooperate to ensure that water in all of its forms is protected and conserved with regard to the needs of all living things today and for future generations tomorrow.

All peoples in the Basin have a fundamental human right to water that must be recognized nationally and internationally, and incorporated into domestic law and policy. Progress towards the realization of the right to water must be monitored, and appropriate institutional mechanisms developed to ensure that these rights are implemented.

These rights require water undiminished in quality, quantity or natural rate of flow, to access waterbodies for purposes of harvesting, travel and navigation, and to prevent or seek redress for any action that may affect these rights. These rights extend to water as part of a healthy environment, and recognize spiritual and cultural values, taking into consideration the needs of the most disadvantaged and of future generations.

The use of water for industrial and commercial purposes is fundamentally limited by the requirement to not substantially alter the quantity, quality or natural rate of flow of the water within the Basin. The full costs of such water use decisions must be internalized and assumed according to the principle that polluters must be held accountable. This principle includes environmental bonds that would be great enough to ensure full remediation and reclamation from potential damages.

All governments and industry have common responsibilities to protect and conserve water, and must sustain commitments to implement these responsibilities.

The precautionary approach must be widely applied in all decisions or actions that may affect the quality, quantity or natural rate of flow of water within the Basin.

Comprehensive watershed management and land use planning to safeguard water sources and maintain ecosystem integrity across the Basin must be implemented in advance of industrial allocations or development decisions.

The health and integrity of the Basin as a whole will only be achieved through integration and cooperation at all levels. Measures to protect and conserve water must be enacted and implemented by all levels of government.

Local communities have obligations to act decisively to protect the health and integrity of their water sources. All governments share responsibilities to take proactive steps to fund and sustain local capacity, training and infrastructure to improve and maintain the health and integrity of water and waterbodies throughout the Basin.

Indigenous and local communities play a vital role in water management because of their knowledge, traditional practices and relationships to the land. Formal mechanisms to improve scientific and traditional knowledge and understanding and to advance the effectiveness of measures to monitor, protect and conserve water must be undertaken by governments, industry, academic institutions and non-governmental organizations.

Information about the state of water within the Basin must be collected and be disseminated to communities in a timely and accessible way. This will be sustained by a network of Indigenous and local communities who will gather to share experiences, knowledge about how to sustainably develop, protect and conserve their watersheds.