

Tú bet 'a tsená. Pîmótisowin Pêtâw. Nipiy Pimatisiwin

# WATER IS LIFE

ANNUAL REPORT **2023**



## KEEPERS OF THE WATER ANNUAL REPORT

Keepers of the Water is an organisation dedicated to the protection and preservation of water, guided by Indigenous knowledge and perspectives. We recognize the sacredness of water and the vital role it plays in sustaining all life.

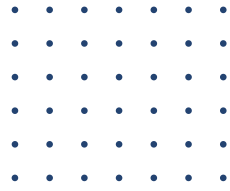
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# Keepers of the Water

## A Message from Our Executive Director



Reflecting on this past year, Mother Earth is entering “uncharted territory”, rising temperatures are contributing to more intense wildfires worldwide and the lowest water levels are being seen by our Elders within their lifetimes. Reports are finding as Earth reaches dangerous extremes, opportunities to reduce the damage are becoming harder to find. This tells us that there is an urgent need for Indigenous science and ecological knowledge to be heard, understood, respected and embraced as critical solutions to overcome our water and climate crisis’.

We are reminded by our Elders that we must “prepare”, we do not know what our ancestral territories will have to endure as the climate rapidly changes and waters are continuously being mis- and over-used. Food sovereignty has become foremost in our minds, with our thoughts on food security and climate change infrastructure, we look to those who can guide us to ensure we can thrive as the Earth rapidly changes. As we approach the year ahead, we know that education, collaboration and communication with those who share our vision for sustainable water protection and conservation is key.



Indigenous water and land stewardship must be revived for future generations. Access to clean waters where we find healthy ecosystems and communities living in harmony, this is our vision for future generations and hope that through our work we can help make it a reality.

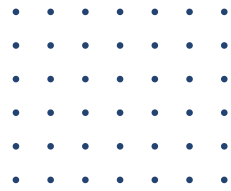
We are grateful for the support, trust and confidence from our partners and community supporters.  
Water is Life.

Thank you/Ayhay/Mahsi Cho/  
nitsiniyi'taki/ Miigwech

Jesse Cardinal, Executive Director,  
Keepers of the Water

# Keepers of the Water

## Messages from Our Board of Directors and Elders' Wisdom Council



Jean L'Hommecourt, a Denesuline member of the Fort McKay First Nation in Northern Alberta and Keepers of the Water Co-Chair for the Board of Directors shares "There are no right words. The northern half of Alberta is being destroyed and drained. At the same time, fires were happening and burning up everything. But that's not stopping anything; it's business as usual. The Imperial Oil toxic tailings leaks are 13 kilometres from my family's trapline. The land and surrounding waterways are where I hunt to feed my family and community members. When will government stand up with action for Indigenous rights in this country?"



### Message from Elders' Wisdom Council Francois Paulette

Elder, Former Chief Francois Paulette, gave an opening address at our Water is Life: Legal Summit and stated the importance of working together. "People that live on the land see the changes. ...It is important that the Inuvialuit, the Metis, and the Dene come together to provide direction to look at the water." In closing, Elder Paulette offered, "We live by water. What more can we give our children?"

# Keepers of the Water Who We Are



## Staff

- Jesse Cardinal, Executive Director
- Brandon Gauchier, Finance Director
- Crystal Stamp-Cardinal, Project Funding Coordinator
- Tori Cress, Communications Manager
- Paul Belanger, Science Advisor
- Daniel T'seleie, NWT Outreach Manager
- Alyssa-Mae Laviolette, Tar Sands Community Outreach Coordinator
- Beverly Andrews, Communications Coordinator

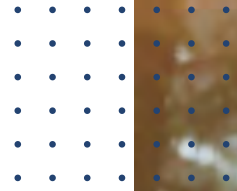
## 2023-2024 Board of Directors

### Elders' Wisdom Council

- Nancy Scanie
- Vera Cardinal
- Florence Quinn
- Bruce Jackson
- Francois Paulette
- Harvey Scott
- Florence Blois
- Cleo Reece
- Marius Paul

### Board of Directors

- Jean L'Hommecourt - Co-Chair
- Susana Deranger - Co-Chair
- Ken Dion - Co-Chair
- Dr. Josie C. Auger
- Brenda Tourangeau
- Alvin Manitopyes
- Candyce Paul
- Brian Deheer
- Dr. John O'Connor
- Jim Antoine
- Kevin Ahkimnachie
- Blu Sayazie (Youth Member)



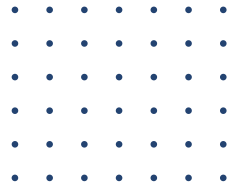
AT A GLANCE

# Highlight – Indigenous Artist

Brianne Island

# Highlight - Indigenous Artist:

## Brianne Island, Sturgeon Lake First Nation



**Brianne (Bree) Island** is a Nehiyaw Iskwew / Cree woman from the Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation, Treaty 8 Territory. She is a practicing Woodland artist and self-taught visual artist. Grounded in cultural protocols, her art is an intimate sharing of Nehiyaw / Cree worldviews and teachings, and honours connections to land and spirit. She shares visual stories as acts of resistance, ancestral reminders on how to decolonize our minds, and a place where transformations can be witnessed. It is Bree's hope that her art will bring shared intergenerational healing to her family and community.

Much of Bree's current creative energy is focused on reclaiming language and imagining Indigenous futurisms. She creates art in both digital and traditional mediums, and in motion, to show that Indigenous peoples exist as living, breathing, and vibrant cultures. Bree's mindful art practice is rooted in ensuring that no matter what the future looks like, we bring our Indigenous values and ancestral knowledge with us.

Follow Brianne (Bree) Island

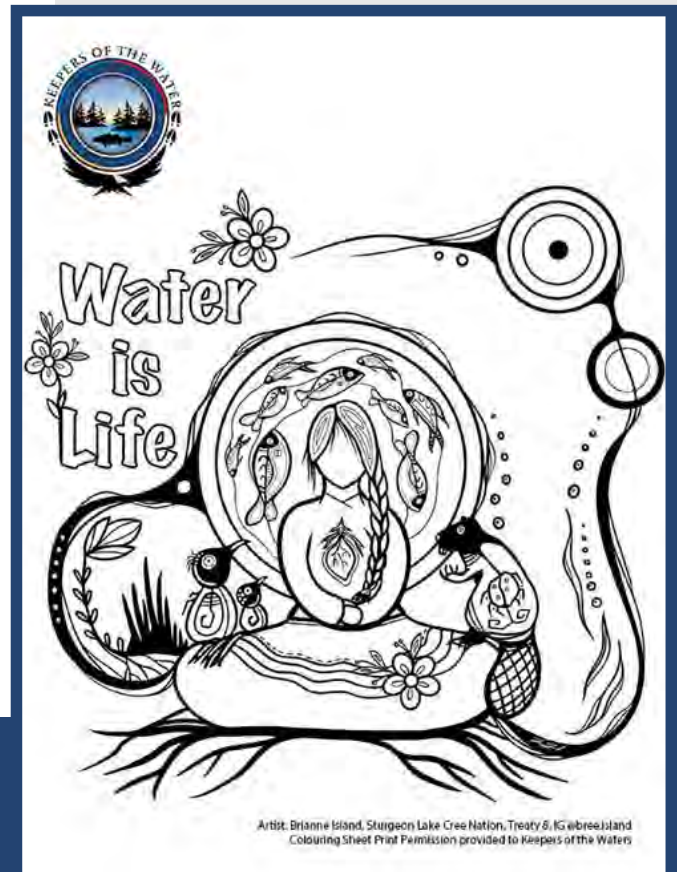


@bree.island



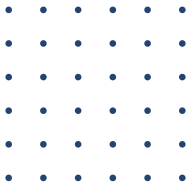
www.mixedcreatives.co  
m

Brianne created these colouring pages that can be found and printed [here](#)



# Highlighting Indigenous Artists

## Brianne Island, Podcast Logo Contest Winner



**Brianne Island** is one of the Owners and Creative Leads of Mixed Creatives, a 100% Indigenous-owned and operated business based in the settler state of Canada. Brianne was awarded the \$1500 prize, and we sincerely appreciate her creative Spirit and profoundly meaningful art that we are honoured to feature within the scope of our Water Protection Work.

For more information on Mixed Creatives: <https://mixedcreatives.com/>

There were many submissions sent in from Indigenous artists who we gifted Keepers of the Water merchandise for their hard work, creative energy and bravery in putting their beautiful talents to be shared.

***'As Long As The Rivers Flow' watch for our New Podcast  
COMING SOON: on Spotify and Apple Music.***







AT A GLANCE

# Keepers Direct Action



# A Toxic Legacy: 5.3 million litres spilled from the Imperial Oil: Kearl Mine's tailings "pond"



- **Unreported Seepage** to groundwater began on May 19, 2022.
- **On February 4th, 2023, 5.3 million litres spilled and seeped from Imperial Oil's Kearl Mine tailings "pond"**
- Two Olympic-sized swimming pools worth of toxic waste entered the watershed but both Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) and **the surrounding Indigenous communities were not made aware of these incidents until February 7th, 2023, NINE MONTHS** after the first seepage was reported.

Keepers of the Water, Indigenous leaders and environmental groups released a joint statement and gathered at Parliament Hill to rally against Imperial Oil in solidarity for Indigenous Nations impacted by toxic water contamination.

## Following Parliamentary hearings, Keepers of the Water and environmental organizations demand action on tar sands toxic tailings through Joint Statement

May 2, 2023 | Traditional, Unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabeg People – Keepers of the Water, Indigenous Climate Action, and Environmental Defence, alongside over a dozen other Indigenous and environmental organizations, sent a letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Alberta Premier Danielle Smith expressing their deep concerns about the irresponsible management of toxic wastewater in the tar sands. The letter follows a week of parliamentary hearings where members of parliament interviewed representatives from impacted Nations, Imperial Oil, and the Alberta Energy Regulator.

The letter, addressed to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Alberta Premier Danielle Smith, as well as ministers responsible for environmental and Indigenous issues, calls on both levels of government to step up and use their full jurisdictional powers to address this urgent matter by taking actions to mitigate further harm from the leaks and prevent future disasters from occurring. Read the [Joint Statement](#)

# TAILINGS OVERVIEW: FACT SHEET

## WHAT ARE TAILINGS PONDS?

The tar sands region in northern Alberta contains a form of fossil fuel that is not what most people would call “oil”. The tar sands contain a tar-like substance called bitumen mixed with dirt, sand and rock. To separate this mixture the bitumen can be strip-mined or melted underground using superheated steam generated by burning huge amounts of natural gas. Either process requires an enormous amount of water, 10 barrels of water for 1 barrel of oil.

The wastewater left over from processing oil is called “tailings” and are stored in enormous lakes, or ‘tailings ponds.’ which contain a significant number of toxic chemicals, including half of the World Health Organization’s “ten chemicals of major public concern.”

The Tarsands’ Tailings “ponds” now contain over 1.4 TRILLION litres of toxic waste and cover an area more than TWO TIMES THE SIZE of the city of VANCOUVER



The Narwhal Photo: Todd Powell / Alberta Fish and Wildlife

These constituent materials include dangerous levels of mercury, arsenic, cyanide, benzene and **naphthenic acids, which are entirely unique to the tar sands.**

This toxic contamination has been linked to severe health effects, including rare cancers, with an overall 30 percent higher rate in Indigenous communities downstream from tar sands operations.

Some estimates claim that tailing lakes are leaking about 11 million litres per day, but the volume could be much higher. Of that, Environment Canada found 6.5 million litres a day leak into the Athabasca River - a source of drinking water for several Indigenous communities and internationally recognized for its ecological value.

[“What are Tar Sands?” Keepers of the Water](#)

# Tailings Portfolio - Clean Up Toxic Tailings



## HOLD THE OIL INDUSTRY ACCOUNTABLE FOR CLEANING UP THEIR MESS

[Click Here](#) to read and sign the letter addressed to the Prime Minister, Ministers in charge of environmental and Indigenous issues, and the CEO of the Alberta Energy Regulator.

This disaster underscores the ongoing failure of tar sands producers to responsibly manage their waste and the danger that poses to ecosystems and human health.

Environmental Defence, Keepers of the Water, Indigenous Climate Action and 12+ organizations from across the country sent a letter to Prime Minister Trudeau and the Alberta government calling for action and accountability for the disaster.

**Clean Up Toxic Tailings Campaign with Environmental Defence Canada [View Here](#)**

### Responses to Tailings Activity |

*Click underlined text to view*

- Keepers of the Water Jesse Cardinal, Executive Director, and Paul Belanger, Science Advisor [Joint Statement](#)
- Responses to Tailings Spill: [View Here](#)
- Imperial Oil Kearl Project Site's Tailings Spill [Reaction Kit](#)
- Keepers of the Water and Environmental Defence [Joint Statement](#)
- Dene Nation Nagwichoonjik Water Summit [Joint Press Release & Statement](#)
- Instagram Live | Bringing Justice to the Tar Sands | [View Here](#)



Environmental Defence  
Photo by Garth Lenz

# Tailings Portfolio: Impacts to Our Watershed | Lake Athabasca



## Declines and Impacts to the Peace-Athabasca Delta in Northern Alberta

The Indigenous population in the downstream communities of Northern Alberta, specifically in the remote communities of Wood Buffalo rely on the water within the Peace-Athabasca-Delta for hunting, trapping, travelling and an overall way of life. Environmental destruction has impacted their abilities to adapt and advocate for critical protection of the watershed. The Athabasca Delta is the lifeline for Cree, Dene and Metis Peoples who have a historical connection to the land and water. It is the second-largest freshwater delta in the world at it is at risk.

## Geography and History of Lake Athabasca

The lake covers 7,850 km<sup>2</sup> (3,030 sq mi), is 283 km (176 mi) long, has a maximum width of 50 km (31 mi), and a maximum depth of 124 m (407 ft), and holds 204 km<sup>3</sup>(49 cu mi) of water, making it the largest and one of the deepest lakes in both Alberta and Saskatchewan (nearby Tazin Lake is deeper), and the eighth largest in Canada.<sup>[12]</sup>Water flows northward from the lake via the Slave River and Mackenzie River systems, eventually reaching the Arctic Ocean.

## Industrial Impacts

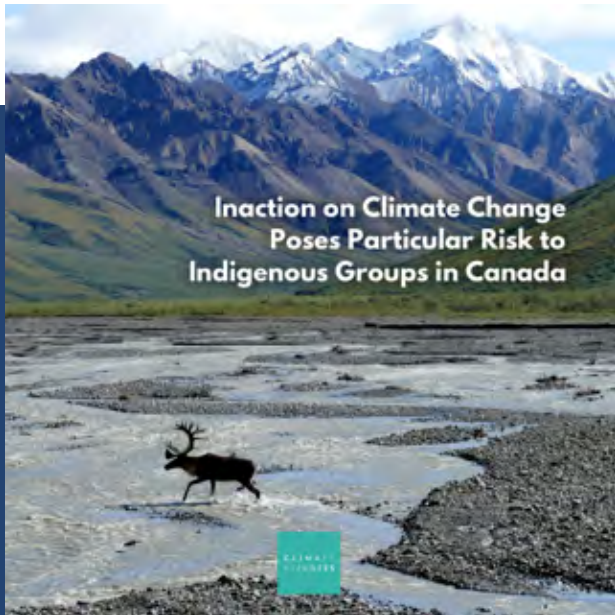
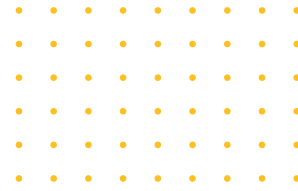
*When companies like Imperial Oil recklessly pollute the waterways of Indigenous nations with toxic waste, they are not just threatening the environment, but also the very existence of the downstream communities.*

- Tori Cress, KOW Communication Manager

### Environmental

**It is time to stop the <sup>Racism</sup> discrimination and unchecked capitalism impacting communities along the Athabasca River. The Nations and Metis communities are directly threatened by climate change, food insecurity, increased gendered violence and environmental injustice.**

# An urgent message from the front lines of climate change



Joris Beugels via UNSPLASH

## WATER 4 CLIMATE

“First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples in Canada are “uniquely sensitive” to climate change because they often inhabit areas experiencing rapid climatic changes and tend to have a “close relationship to and depend on the environment.” (*Plano, Climate change will worsen existing inequities of indigenous in Canada*)

***Indigenous peoples are often on the front line of destruction but on the backbench of decision-making, Alyssa-Mae Laviolette and Aliénor Rougeot write.***

Amid climate disasters wreaking havoc across Canada, an out-of-control fire forced the full evacuation of [Fort Chipewyan](#). This remote community, which is home to the Athabasca Chipewyan, the Mikisew Cree, and the Fort Chip Métis, was also recently endangered by a leak of toxic industrial waste from one of Imperial Oil’s Alberta tarsands facilities. Indigenous peoples, such as the residents of Fort Chipewyan, are often on the front line of destruction but on the backbench of decision-making. This Indigenous History Month, it falls on all of us to advocate for change.

In late May a wildfire forced the evacuation of Fort Chipewyan and surrounding communities. Nearly one thousand people fled their homes in under two days, by boat or plane. While the evacuation and fire control efforts were impressive, several cabins and significant pieces of infrastructure were burnt down.

The intensity and scale of this wildfire season is due to climate change, caused by the production and consumption of fossil fuels. None of the residents of Fort Chipewyan can recall a fire of this magnitude ever occurring in the area. However, the community is all too familiar with the impacts of industrial development.

## Keepers of the Water

# First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples in Canada and the Impacts of Climate Change

Indigenous Peoples are uniquely sensitive to the impacts of climate change, given their close relationships to land, waters, animals, plants, and natural resources; tendency to live in geographic areas undergoing rapid climate change, especially Northern Canada; and greater existing burden of health inequities and related determinants of health. (*Climate change and Indigenous Peoples Health in Canada - NCCIH*)



### Direct Path of Industrial Activity, Jean L'Hommecourt, Fort McKay First Nation

"I am living in the direct path of Suncor and Syncrude, two major oil refineries in Northern Alberta. I feel the impacts, the smells and hear the impacts of industry" she spoke about the diseases that come from the contamination by tarsands extraction, specifically the water, she grieves for not being able to fish from the Athabasca River where she once, "could dip a cup in the water that she could drink", and fears the community's high rates of cancers.

## Impacts to Indigenous Communities as a result of Climate Change

- Removal of traditional ways of living (accessing plant medicines, harvesting wild game, using the land and water)
- Increase in health issues (disease, accessibility to medical services, lack of healthcare providers in remote communities)
- Increase of flooding, wildfires, draught, melting of permafrost
- Accessibility by transportation to buy goods and services (ice road access, traditional lands access, import of fuel and water)
- Mental impacts (climate-anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress)
- Displacement of their homes, community, and families with long term evacuation resulting in job-loss, financial insecurities, overall well-being



*Water levels have been significantly dropping in Hay River, N.W.T., resulting in waterfalls turning into trickles. - cbc.ca*



Dene Nation Presents

## Nagwichoonyik (River through a big country) Water Summit

**A historic gathering of Dene Leadership, Inuvialuit, Metis, and citizens sharing observations and directives for the path forward.**

Keepers of the Water attended the Nagwichoonyik (River through a big country) Water Summit in Inuvik on March 13-17th which brings together Dene leadership, Inuit and Metis delegates from across the territories.

The summit focused on topics surrounding water quality, loss of fish habitat, wildlife health and traditional history that shows the destructive impacts from industry's water contamination. Prior to The Summit Imperial Oil's Kearl Mine leaked and concerns for impacts downstream brought together delegates with traditional knowledge and indigenous science to discuss the path forward and actions to protect the watershed.

### Suncor's Tailings Pond 1 Leak Into the Athabasca River

Presentation of data by Paul Belanger

Paul shared an overview of the Tailings Pond 1 Leak into the Athabasca River, estimated over 42 years of a total (51,000,000 cubic metres)

- 1967-1972: 1,500,000 cubic metres
- 1973-1978: 4,380,000 cubic metres
- 1979-1984: 6,570,000 cubic metres
- 1985-1990: 8,100,000 cubic metres
- 1991-1995: 8,100,000 cubic metres
- 1996-2000: 8,760,000 cubic metres
- 2001-2005: 8,790,000 cubic metres
- 2006-2009: 4,820,000 cubic metres

Suncor reported pond #1 leaked at a rate of 1,600 cu/meters a day in 1996. Groundwater monitoring by an independent researcher found the rate of flow was three times what Suncor reported to the Alberta Energy Regulator.



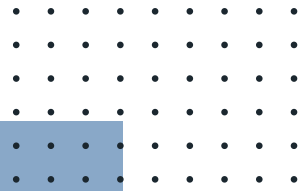
**"People that live on the land see the changes. ...It is important that the Inuvialuit, the Metis, and the Dene come together to provide direction to look at the water." In closing, Elder Paulette offered, "We live by water. What more can we give our children?"**

DenesuṭinÉ Elder, Keepers of the Water Elders' Council, François Paulette

[Click Here](#) for access to the Water Summit Recordings and Join Statement



# Thermal Coal - the world's dirtiest fossil fuel



The existing Vista Mine near Hinton, Alta. - cbc.ca

*"We are going to court to protect water, our first and foremost responsibility. Knowing that Vista will jeopardize and impact freshwater sources is why we're in this work – to make this corporation accountable and show that this massive mine application will have irreversible effects."*

**Jesse Cardinal, Keepers of the Water, Executive Director**

In the spring of 2023, KOW and Ecojustice were in court against Coalspur Mine Ltd. in a Judicial Review on the expansions of the Vista Mine Phase 2 and Vista Underground Mine.

Unfortunately, the court ruled in favour of Coalspur and the expansions will be released from the requirement for a Federal impact assessment.

While Phase II still requires Provincial assessment, the Underground Mine has all Provincial approvals. However, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada has confirmed that both expansions still require Federal permits and cannot proceed until Coalspur applies for and receives permits under the *Fisheries Act* and *Species at Risk Act* ("SARA"). We will continue our campaign to the Federal Government to enforce these laws and not allow the expansions.

**"Thermal coal is the world dirtiest fossil fuel, a relic of the 19th century that has no place in the modern world. Canada is contributing to the global climate emergency by continuing to export millions of tonnes of coal through its ports each year to be burnt abroad."**

**- Fraser Thomson - Ecojustice**

# Smallboy (Mountain Cree) Camp - Impacts from Thermal Coal Mining



## Mountain Cree (Smallboy) Camp

A small isolated community of 125 residents in northwestern Alberta, this traditional, isolated community is located deep within the Rocky Mountains near Nordegg, Alberta. There is still no running water or plumbing in Mountain Cree camp. Community members must gather their water for everyday use, including drinking water, from the nearby creek. Within close proximity is the Vista Coal Mine, a large open-pit mine that produces thermal coal. As a result of the extraction process, it requires enormous of water while the by-product produces high concentrations of selenium, often found downstream in water systems. This mining process directly affects the Mountain Cree camp community residents who depend on untreated river water for their only source of drinking water and way of life.

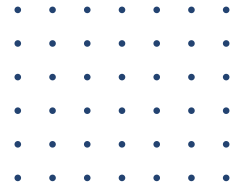
## Impacts of Vista Coal Mine Expansion

- Breach of Aboriginal and Treaty Rights as health and well-being affected.
- Decline and loss of fish and animal habitat.
- Species endangered and at risk as a cause of mine expansion.
- Water contamination - community relies on spring water for daily usage.

*Paul Belanger, Science Advisor has been actively traveling to take water samples in and around the Smallboy Camp area. In early June, findings were relatively good but could be improved.*

View our Portfolios:

- [Tailings](#)
- [Thermal Coal](#)
- [Uranium Mine Expansion](#)
- [Community Engagement](#)
- [Water Monitoring](#)



AT A GLANCE

# Keepers in the Community



Keepers of the Water

# Water is Life Legal Summit in Partnership with Indigenous Knowledge and Wisdom Centre

On December 8th - 9th, 2022 Keepers of the Water and the Indigenous Knowledge and Wisdom Centre hosted the Water is Life Legal Summit where we discussed Water Protection through an Indigenous lens.

The 'Water is Life' Legal Summit shed light on topics related to Indigenous sovereignty and the protection of water from an Indigenous worldview. These presentations highlighted the significance of recognizing Indigenous nations as sovereign entities. They emphasized their inherent rights, natural laws, and rich cultural traditions that have endured before and after treaties were established. Knowledge keepers and Elders from across Treaties 6 & 8 travelled to share their knowledge, stories and cultural traditions.

The Summit was opened in ceremony with a pipe ceremony conducted by respected Elders. Following protocols, each day, the conference began and closed in prayer.

This two-day event brought together Indigenous legal and Traditional Ecological Knowledge holders to protect water and was held in Treaty 6 Territory at the Edmonton Inn and Conference Centre, Edmonton, Alberta. Indigenous people have stewarded the land world-wide since the beginning of time. We hold the answers to protecting water and we shared a line-up of speakers addressing important topics such as the doctrine of discovery, grassroots actions, and Indigenous legal systems.



**Water is Life -  
Legal Summit  
Final Report**

[View Full  
Report Here](#)



Keepers of the Water

## World Water Day: Honouring the Sacredness of Nipi (Water) with Kihêw Waciston

On March 22nd, 2023, in celebration of World Water Day 2023, a gathering was held at kihêw waciston/Grant MacEwan University to Honour the Sacredness of Nipi. The event, hosted in partnership with kihêw waciston/Grant MacEwan University at the Robbins Health Learning Centre, featured presentations by Keepers of the Water Board of Directors Co-Chair Jean L'homme-court and Science Advisor Paul Belanger. Elder Molly Chisaaka led the day's teachings, which culminated in a solemn Water Ceremony following the presentations.



## National Elders Gathering - Oct 30 to Nov 2

**"The National Gathering of Elders Kanata, igniting the spirit of sharing and celebrating through the guidance and wisdom of Elders, walking in harmony,"**

From October 30th to November 2nd, First Nation, Metis, and Inuit groups from across Turtle Island convened in Edmonton, Alberta. The gathering was to provide a platform for Elders to share their teachings and perspectives, to assume their rightful roles as advisors, teachers, and leaders.

KOW's Executive Director co-hosted five climate change panels alongside Kolton Billy Daniel from Tuktoyaktuk. The gathering saw Elders from across Canada convening to discuss the changes they have observed to their ancestral lands and waters and present solutions they are implementing in their communities. Countless Elders emphasized the need for solutions to begin now and the importance of returning to ceremony and natural law.

Elders recounted the destruction caused by fires that occurred during the summer of 2023. Reports indicate that indigenous Peoples accounted for 75% of all evacuees, with some still displaced from their homes.

Our current reality is one in which we have climate change refugees, and governments have yet to take adequate measures to address these issues. Instead, there are plans for further mining and extraction, which only exacerbates global warming.

Keepers of the Water

# Northern Community Tours: Fort Chipewyan, Fort McKay, Fort McMurray First Nation #468



## Northern Community Involvement Sessions

Our team visited Northern communities in Alberta to facilitate presentations in Fort Chipewyan, Anzac, and Fort McKay to highlight our water monitoring program, community engagement, interactive map as well our tailings updates. We pride ourselves in meeting with community members and fostering relationships.

## What We Shared

- Keepers of the Water presentation
- Tailings Updates - Joint Statements Water Monitoring Program
- Overview on Interactive Map

## What We Heard

Water is integral to who we are as Indigenous people, it carries a spirit and connects us to Mother Earth. When we spoke with community members they highlighted the importance of traditional teachings that come from the water and the life it provides for us and our identities.



**Cleo Reece, Fort McMurray First Nation Member  
Keepers of the Water Elders' Wisdom Council**



Keepers of the Water

# Two-Part Webinar Series: Decolonizing Our Diet

## Reclaiming Traditional Teachings Through Food

Keepers of the Water hosted a two-part webinar series on the decolonization of our diets and reclaiming traditional foods as Indigenous peoples. Food sovereignty traces back to our original teachings, to learn about the connection between the land and our food supply and connection to community through traditional foods.



## Meet the Speakers



Jared Qwustenuxun Williams, Cowichan Chef



Dr. Kevin Lewis, Cree, Kaniyasihk Culture Camp



Paul Belanger, Science Advisor, Keepers of the Water



Tanya McCallum, Cree, K-12 Land Based Educator

Watch the 'Decolonizing Our Diets' webinar [Here](#)



Keepers of the Water

# Webinar: Traditional Hunting Teachings



## Traditional Hunting Teachings

Keepers of the Water hosted a webinar on traditional hunting practices with three Indigenous hunters, trappers, fisherman and hide-tanners. All from different territories who shared their knowledge and teachings of ethical harvesting practices and Indigenous teachings passed onto them.

## Meet the Speakers



Tim Peekeekoot, Cree, Elder, Educator, Hunter



Angela Code, Sayisi Denesuline, Hunter, Hide Tanner, Artist



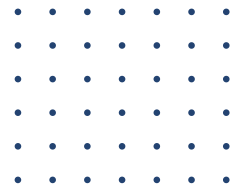
Jarret Nelson, Cree, Hunter, Trapper, Fisherman

Watch the 'Traditional Hunting Teachings' webinar [Here](#)



Keepers of the Water

## Community Engagement: Treaty 7 Territory



### Inside Education's 12th in-person Youth Environmental Leadership Summit, Generate and Navigate 2023.

Keepers of the Water has honored to present to 20 high schools from across Alberta and northeast BC that were selected to come together in Canmore, Alberta, to better understand the science, issues, technology, and careers related to energy, climate, and water.

The three-day Summit was an unique opportunity to meet and engage with over 70 expert guests from academic institutions, industry, government, Alberta's Indigenous community, and environmental groups.



### Cardston Elementary School Presentation

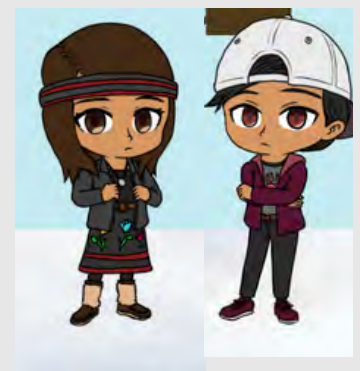
Early April, Keepers took a trip to Southern Alberta to Cardston to spend the day with the staff and kids at Cardston Elementary School.

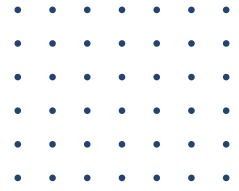
Students in grades 2, 3, 4, and 5 learned about water and watershed education, protecting our waters and lands, and the harmful destruction of thermal coal mining in the Rocky Mountains.

Students also learned about Understanding water pollution in our watersheds through a fun, hands-on activity. Youth participants received certificates from Keepers of the Water acknowledging their water pledge to be Water Protectors.

**Access our educational resources page [here](#)**

The Keepers of the Water Educational Resources page is a tool for children, students and adults highlighting Indigenous knowledge and resources.



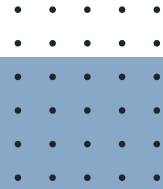


# Water is Life

Tú bet 'a tsena.  
Pîmótisowin Pêtâw.  
Nipiy Pimatisiwin



# Community Water Monitoring Program



## Indigenous-led Monitoring Program

This program is an Indigenous-led, community-based water quality monitoring program that will allow Keepers of the Water to change how water data is reviewed, used and shared. This program will occur through an Indigenous lens guided by Traditional Ecological Knowledge Keepers, Creation storytelling and knowledge-sharing practices that teach us how to live in balance with the natural world during our physical time on Mother Earth.

## Community-Based Water Monitoring

Our monitoring tools allow community members to measure oxygen, salinity, temperature, and water levels that support Keepers of the Water’s ongoing work demonstrating the impacts of tar sands mining, including the tailings ponds and its impacts on the Athabasca River. More than a trillion litres of toxic waste are stored in tailings ponds near Alberta’s Athabasca River that we know by recent reports are leaking. There are many cumulative impacts due to open pit and in situ mining, including water quality and quantity, deforestation, land disturbance, and ecosystem contamination that includes land, air, water and living beings.

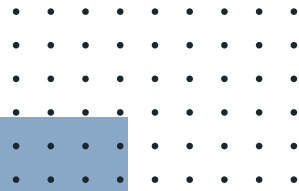
Every tributary in the Arctic Drainage Basin is vital to the Indigenous Peoples living within their watersheds. These sacred places allow Indigenous Peoples to exercise our right to hunt, fish, trap and exist in our territories. This also includes freely practicing our ceremonies and seasonally gathering food and medicines from the rivers, lakes and surrounding lands.

## Youth Water Monitoring

We visited with youth in the Treaty 8 region alongside Board of Directors member, Cleo Reece in Fort McMurray First Nation #468 where the youth got to learn about our water monitoring program. We will be planning student/youth involvement in 2024.

Keepers of the Water

# Wave of Change: Empowering Youth in Land-Based Learning



## Supporting Youth-Led Initiatives

Keepers of the Water recognizes the need for youth outreach in our work, as the youth are inheriting the responsibility to protect the lands and waters. As Keepers of the Water grows as an organization we aim to grow our work with youth, too.

**“We hosted youth groups to pick rat root and taught them how to pick and clean. They learn fast, and smart!**

**I’ve been learning this medicine for a long time now, thankful to share what i know, so much more i have to learn. Nanaskamon”- Jesse Cardinal**

### Instagram live discussion

We hosted a panel with activists and members of affected communities to learn about the harms the oil industry in Canada is perpetuating on Indigenous communities and how, together, we can demand justice and change.

We were led in conversation by Alyssa-Mae Lavolette, Denesuline, Tar Sands Outreach Coordinator, Sarain Fox, Anishinaabe activist, and Aliénor Rougeot, Climate and Energy Program Manager at Environmental Defence and Climate Justice Activist.

View Instagram Live [Here](#)

Keepers of the Water has done numerous workshops in schools teaching about Water. In summer of 2024, we will also be running a youth water protector program, which we’re very excited to put together! [Contact us](#) to learn more about this program or [donate](#) to support its creation.

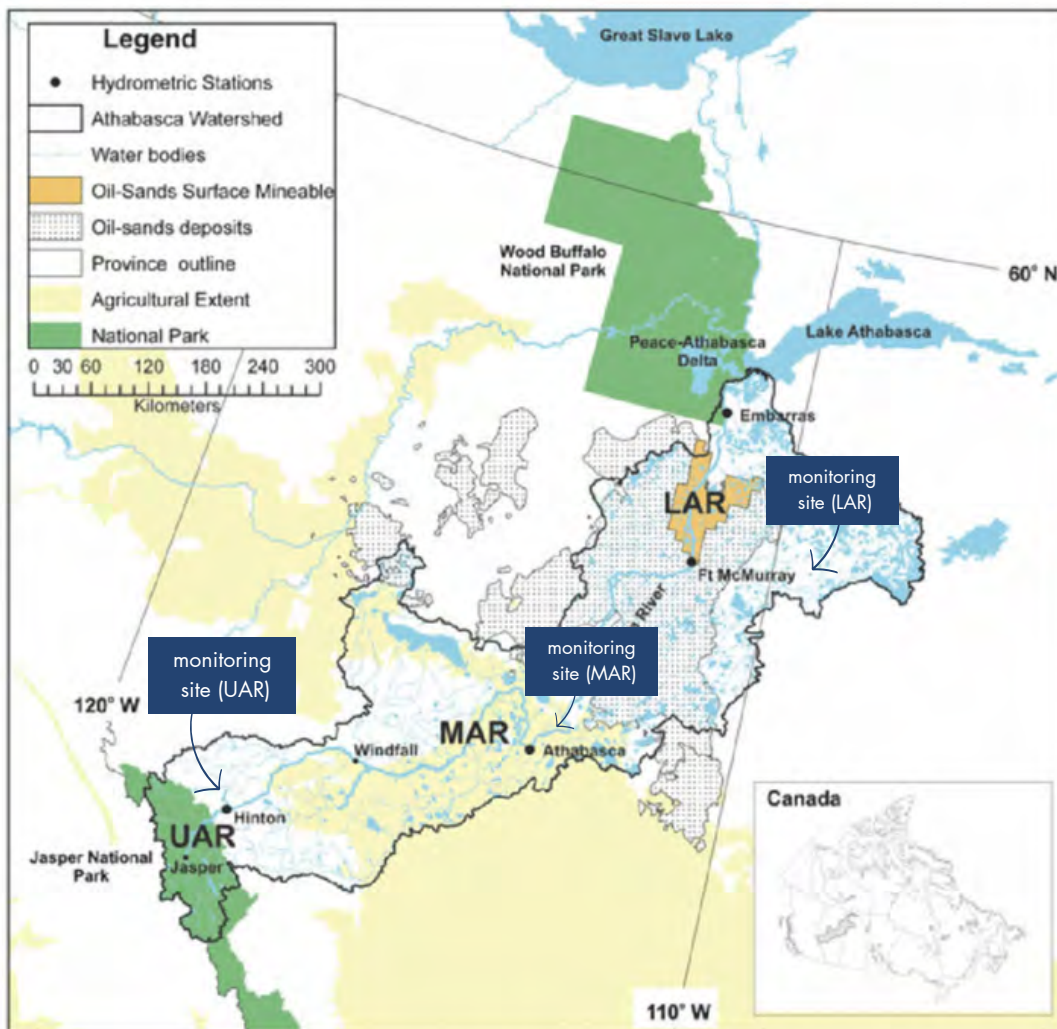
# Community Based Water Monitoring: Athabasca River Monitoring Sites and Data

The initial phase of this program collects essential but critical water quality measurements. As the program grows, more types of measurements will be taken. We are collecting data to determine these critical water quality conditions: **Water Oxygen Levels, Temperature, pH, Conductivity, Salinity, and TDS (total dissolved solids).**

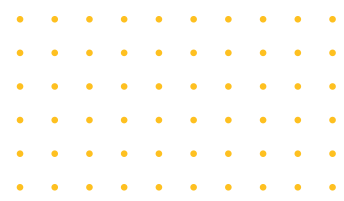
A user friendly educational resource tool used by schools and communities.

## Water Monitoring: Upper, Middle and Lower Athabasca

With our water monitoring tools, community members measure water oxygen levels, temperature, pH, conductivity, salinity, TDS (total dissolved solids), and water levels. This work is part of our ongoing effort to raise the alarm bell in so-called Canada about the devastating impacts of tar sands mining, the growing toxic tailings ponds, the Athabasca River and all of the life that relies on that river.



Map of Athabasca River watershed in western Canada. UAR, MAR and LAR are the Upper, Middle and Lower



# Keepers of the Water Research and Reports

**Collaborative research projects guided by Keepers of the Water and supported by Research for the Front Lines (R4FL)** - a network of researchers who offer time and labour on research projects led by communities and movements on the frontlines of the fight for environmental and climate justice in so-called Canada

FINAL REPORT  
OCTOBER, 2023

**Legal Personhood for the DehCho River?**  
Research to inform a community-led campaign



## Legal Personhood for the Deh Cho River?

Destruction to ecosystems and communities is rampant. But inspiring, heartfelt and powerful community-led strategies to protect their lands, waters such as the “Rights of Nature” (RoN), has been building worldwide. The Mutehekau Shipu (Magpie) River in Québec was granted **legal personhood** after two parallel resolutions were adopted by a First Nation and neighbouring municipality. This strategy has inspired hope in the fight for environmental justice and Indigenous rights in so-called Canada.

Through online research and interviews with people involved with the RoN movements around the globe, this project has gathered as much relevant information that was available to inform a potential community-led campaign to affirm the rights of the DehCho River (also known as the Mackenzie River).

## **Mapping Deforestation and Water Use in Treaty 8 Territory**

So-called Canada’s boreal forests are the largest and most intact in the world. They are carbon stores, home to a wide variety of birds and mammals and provide water to plants, animals, and communities. This report provides a background to the regulation of forestry and water, highlighting the often absent consultation with Indigenous Peoples in Treaty 8 Territory. It also highlights impacts on the boreal forest ecosystems and how deforestation and water use practices are undermining Indigenous Rights. Ongoing oil and gas extraction within Treaty 8 Territory has resulted in forest fragmentation and loss of biodiversity and critical habitats. Forestry has also impacted water flow, water quality and aquatic habitats and deforestation is affecting communities’ ability to exercise Treaty Rights to have access to food, medicines and clean waters, ‘as long as the rivers flow’..

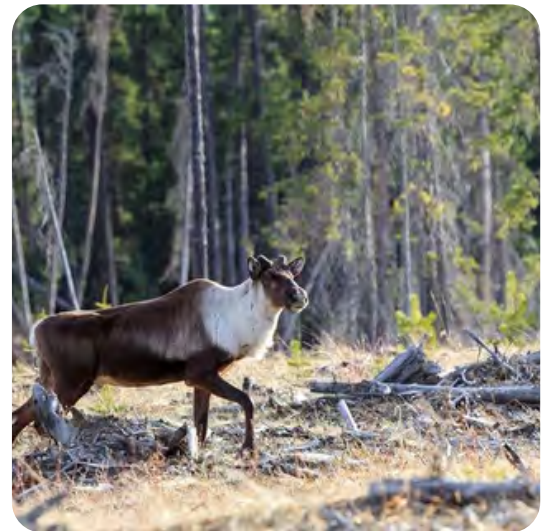
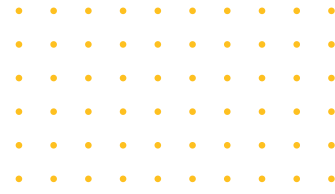


PHOTO © JOHN E. MARRIOTT

Mountain Caribou are continually impacted by logging and industrial development within their habitat range, considered the largest endangered mammal in North America.

## Keepers of the Water

# Research and Reports



**Research projects guided and supported by GW Solutions** - an environmental consulting firm specializing in hydrogeology. The team has a combined skill set that covers the technical, software, educational, and field related aspects of hydrogeology. Based in Nanaimo, BC, they are involved in projects throughout western Canada and the Yukon. Working collaboratively with First Nations, other companies, and regional and municipal governments, identifying practical and economical solutions to manage and protect groundwater and watersheds.

### **Research with GW Solutions Inc. - Compilation and preliminary analysis of water quality data along the Athabasca River**

The Analysis of the available data of water quality testing of the Lower Athabasca Region (LAR) shows an adverse impact on the Athabasca River beginning in the mining area north of Fort McMurray. The data showed increased concentrations of sulfate and chlorides in this area. These are typical indicators of oil sands mining activity.

Several metals and other parameters such as total arsenic, total lead, total mercury, total cadmium, total chromium, total aluminum, total iron and total manganese, fluoride, dissolved sulfide, pH, temperature, TDS and color have a record of exceedances of Guidelines for Canadian Drinking Water Quality.

This is predominantly observed downstream of the tailing ponds and oil sands operations having exceeded thresholds of the Guidelines for the protection of aquatic life.

#### **Some recommendations:**

- Groundwater quality data is very limited across the lower Athabasca.
- We understand there are much more monitoring stations both surface water and groundwater within the oil sand regions for which data are not publicly available.
- We recommend continuing the search for data sources, allocating more time and resources in interpreting the existing information, in particular identifying parameters that show similar trends to better connect the presence of certain elements with sources.



# Keepers of the Water Annual General Meeting: Cold Lake First Nation, AB - November 16 and 17



A primary part of our work is in-person community engagement and we were pleased to be able to host our Annual General Meeting at the Cold Lake First Nation's Hotel Dene and Conference Centre.

Our AGM is a time for staff and Board get together to create a vision for the year ahead. Staff provided updates on the past years work, sharing our projects, campaign highlights and identifying where support is needed.

During the recent meeting, a meaningful discussion took place regarding the preliminary data results of our Water Monitoring Program for the Athabasca River. The data indicates that the river is experiencing severely low levels and an increase in temperature.

The Board made motions to support our community members with relevant water monitoring data. Additionally, directives were given to revitalize the KOW "Land, Water and Climate" Annual Gathering, scheduled for the summer of 2024.

Updates were shared on extraction campaigns such as our; tarsands and tailings in Northern AB, coal mining along the Eastern slopes and uranium mining in Northern Saskatchewan.

With Research, Monitoring and Education programs at the forefront, in 2023 we launched our:

- Interactive Water Data Map
- Educational Resources Page
- Reports on:
  - *Legal Personhood for the DehCho River? Research to inform a community-led campaign*
  - *Deforestation and Water Use in Treaty 8*

## Water Teachings: An evening with Jeff Wastesicoot

We were joined by Jeff Wastesicoot from Pimickamack Cree Nation. Jeff has dedicated his life to preserving the Nehiyew language. He shared with us the importance of water through ceremony and the teachings that followed with our creation story and how we are deeply connected to Mother Earth as Indigenous Peoples. His teachings will be long lasting for protection our lands and waters.



Watch the video [HERE](#)

*"It is very important to learn, each day, to seek out that learning. 'Cause in our term we never graduate, we don't receive Masters or PhDs from the life of learning. It is these things I have come to understand how I am related to the land and I don't think we can distantiate and separate water from land. Because without land, we would not have water." - Jeff W.*



# Keepers of the Water

## Traditional Healing and Wellness

Indigenous Peoples have practiced traditional healing and wellness since time immemorial. Traditional healing refers to the practices, approaches, knowledge and beliefs that incorporate traditional healing and wellness. These practices include using ceremonies, plant and animal medicines, energetic therapies and physical or hands-on techniques.

### Timeline of Events

**2010-2014**

#### **Tar Sands Healing Walk**

Indigenous leaders and allies host healing walk in the tar sands bringing hundreds together outside of Fort McMurray, AB.

**2015-2019**

#### **KOW Water Gatherings**

Keepers of the Water hosted multiple water gatherings in Treaty 8 communities including Bigstone Cree Nation, Fort Smith, NWT, Fort St. John, BC, and Dene Tha' Nation.

**2020-2023**

#### **Water Protection Work**

Hosted women's water gatherings, webinar series, youth events, on-the land learning to explore water protection through an Indigenous lens, advocating for the Athabasca due to industrial activity, partnered on rallies and national campaigns.



### **Tar Sands Healing Walk**

[The Tarsands Healing Walk](#) is an event that Keepers of the Water hosted for several years, it was founded by Cleo Reece and a coalition of women and allies who understood that time needed to be taken for prayer and healing, that the land, water and air and all living things needed prayers. This walk was a ceremonial walk that took place in the Tarsands and was led by Indigenous women elders.

### **Healing Through the Land and Community**

In 2024, our focus will be on connecting through land-based teachings and learning, youth led events, ceremony and continuing our water protection work in community.

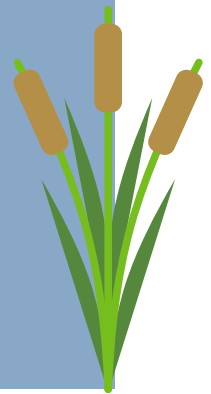
- Significance of the 'round dance': [read here](#)
- History of the 'tea dance': [read here](#)

# Looking Ahead: Our Upcoming Campaigns for 2024 - Protecting Wetlands and Peatlands of the Boreal Forest



## Significance of Wetlands in the Boreal Forest

Canada's Boreal Forest contains 85% of wetlands, making it the largest concentration of natural filtration of water on earth as wetlands store large amounts of freshwater. This is why they are integral to the health of watersheds. The wetlands also provide a vital habitat for wildlife, medicines, and berries. The wetlands also help combat climate change as it stores carbon.



## Wetlands Integral to Indigenous Plant and Medicine Harvesting

Whether it is harvesting rice on the prairies of Saskatchewan, to picking rat root, diamond willow, and the plants that are part of our four sacred medicines near marshes and along the edges of rivers, wetlands are an essential habitat to provide us with these natural gifts from the land to sustain us and our families.

## What are Wetlands?

“Wetlands of all types are integral components of Alberta’s landscape and play an important role in sustaining healthy watersheds. In turn, wetland health is influenced by a variety of factors including climate, groundwater, surface water, vegetation, soils, and human and animal activity.”

(Government of Alberta, Wetland Consultation Workbook, 2007)

## Our Water Protection Work

In 2024, we aim to expand our contributive work to the protection of peatlands and wetlands as they are critical to the health of our environment, as Indigenous people; it is essential to our livelihood and food security.

Keepers of the Water

# Looking Ahead: Revitalizing Our Annual Water is Life Gathering

Our Keepers of the Water - Annual Gatherings were halted during Covid, and we are revitalizing this event in 2024 to ensure that ongoing communication is occurring and supported in Indigenous communities directly affected by fossil fuel and energy extraction. We are raising funds and looking for supporters to have our next gathering in Hay River, NWT.

Gatherings can last three or four days and includes education opportunities by invited presenters, reports back on innovative community research, introduction of solution-based water and land management, techniques to respond to climate change false solutions, ceremonial events and opportunities to create community connections.

See our past Annual Water is Life Gathering:

- Bushe River, AB [view here](#)
- Fort St John, BC [view here](#)
- Fort Smith, NWT [view here](#)
- Bigstone Cree Nation, AB [view here](#)

## Acknowledgements

Water is life. We embody water. Water is a sacred gift. Love, honour, and respect for water are essential to human existence. We honour the life-giving Waters and the Lands we are genetically connected to. We share a vision of unity based on Elders' guidance, ceremonies, Traditional Ecological Knowledge and the natural laws that govern all life.

Those responsible for **concept and coordination**:

- Elders Wisdom Council
- Board of Directors
- Keepers of the Water Staff
- Partnerships and Sponsors





*Keepers of the Water would like to thank and honour the members of our Elders' Wisdom Council who guide us with their knowledge and inspire us in all that we do. Our work is able to continue with the support of the community members, our funding partners and those that have walked with us and engage with these important initiatives.*

*AyHiy/Mahsi Cho/Miigwech*

*-The Keepers of the Water Board and Staff*



# Get Involved



## Reclaiming Environmental Sovereignty

Keepers of the Water (KOW) has been co-hosting an Annual Gathering in different Indigenous Communities within Alberta, B.C, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and N.W.T since 2006.

Keepers of the Waters' Annual Gathering is vital to ensure that ongoing communication is occurring and supported in Indigenous communities about Water, traditional knowledge and how to move forward. These are meaningful, not only for the community that hosts the Gathering, but to the many others who travel to attend these gatherings. This has helped KOW to build unity and a stronger voice.

If your community is interested in co-hosting a Keepers of the Water Gathering or looking to get involved please contact us.

**DONATE**

**Help protect the Arctic Ocean Drainage Basin**

Become a Water protector by supporting the grassroots work of the Keepers of the Water today! It is through your generous support that we continue to evolve and grow.

## Contact Us



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