



Aboriginal Women and Water

The degradation of water by human waste and industrial activities is detrimental to the quality of our water, and can seriously harm our communities, families, and Traditional way of life. The Great Lakes, in particular, remain vulnerable to pollution.

In 1987, Canada and the United States introduced the concept of Areas of Concern (AOC) to the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement (GLWQA). The worst sites of toxic pollution in the Great Lakes are the Areas of Concern. These are places so heavily polluted by raw sewage, contaminated sediment, invasive species and destruction of habitat and wetland that the damage threatens the ecosystem, the economy, water quality, and the health of our communities (Great Lakes United).

How Are Aboriginal People Impacted by Water Pollution?

- Aboriginal people enjoy a sacred connection to the water, water is understood as a living force which must be protected and nurtured.
- Aboriginal people traditionally rely upon the water for sustenance (fishing, subsistence lifestyle and Traditional diet) (Chan, L., 2005).
- A recent assessment released in 2011 indicated that 39% of First Nation water systems were deemed to be high-risk (Neegan Burnside Ltd., 2011).
- First Nations communities are experiencing uranium contamination in their drinking water (Wong, R., 2010), deformed fish (CBC News, 2012.) brown water flowing from residential water taps (Winnipeg Free Press, 2010), and high e-coli levels in the drinking water (Eggertson, L., 2008).
- Many First Nations communities lack the funding and capacity necessary to ensure fully functioning water and sewage systems (CBC News, 2011).
- Many Aboriginal communities have decreased the “consumption of traditional food due to urbanization and fear of contaminant exposure” (Chan, L., 2005).

What Are Some Factors that Threaten Water Quality?

- Mining projects, such as the Ring of Fire chromite mining project, threaten water quality, as large quantities of water are discharged downstream into streams and rivers. As well, the possibilities of fuel spills occurring during shipment and transportation of minerals to generating stations also pose a risk to bodies of water and surrounding wildlife and communities;
- Hydro-fracking (extraction of gas or oil through injecting pressurized water into rock and/or coal beds);

- Soil erosion due to clear-cut forestry (risk of mercury flowing into water);
- Industrial pollution (PCB's, mercury, lead, dioxin, iron, toxins known to be endocrine disruptors, carcinogens and reproductive toxins that leach into groundwater) (Abelsohn et al., 2002);
- Localized point sources within communities including (seepage from waste-treatment plants, incinerator plants);
- Agricultural waste (fertilizers and pesticides).

What are the Relevant Pieces of Legislation that Address Water Conservation?

- The Ontario Safe Drinking Water Act is a main piece of water legislation in Ontario, with the primary focus of the Act being the protection of human health and prevention of drinking water contamination.
- Other important statutes governing Ontario's water regime, include: the Canada Environmental Protection Act, Clean Water Act (2005-Ontario), Ontario Water Resources Act, Lake and Rivers Improvement Act, the proposed Great Lakes Protection Act and Draft Great Lakes Protection Strategy.

What Can I Do on a Local Level to Conserve Water?

- Ensure that the federal and provincial governments continue to respect the inherent Treaty Right of First Nation communities to be consulted and accommodated when environmental projects and strategies are proposed; address the infringement of Aboriginal and Treaty Rights by federal and provincial legislation;
- Support Local First Nation communities in their development of Water Protection Declarations;
- Be aware of what is going on in your community. Check your local newspaper or the environmental registry for updated information regarding the Canadian Environmental Protection Act;
- Educate our children and youth about our Traditional roles and responsibilities;
- Continue to advocate for the strengthening of the Canada Environmental Protection Act and other legislation to your local MP and MPP;
- Raise awareness of environmental issues through print, video and social media;
- Establish composting and recycling programs which can minimize the amount of waste in landfills, resulting in healthier environments for our communities;
- Conserve household water usage (if possible, use energy-efficient appliances); And
- Participate in water-walks.

References

- A. Abelsohn, B.L. Gibson, M.D. Sanborn, E. Weir: Identifying and managing adverse environmental health effects: Persistent organic pollutants. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, vol. 166: MD Consult; 2002. Cited in Chan, L. "Health and Environmental Issues with Canada's Aboriginal Communities-Final Version." McGill University (2005).
- Eggertson, L. 2008. Investigative Report: 1766 Boil-Water Advisories Now in Place across Canada. *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 178 (10): 1261-1263.
- Neegan Burnside Ltd. "National Assessment of First Nations Water and Wastewater Systems - National Roll-Up Report." Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. (2011).
- CBC News. "Clean Running Water Still a Luxury on Many Native Reserves" (2011). Retrieved from: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2011/11/28/f-first-nations-water.html>
- CBC News. "Alberta First Nation says more deformed fish were caught." (2012). Retrieved from: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/story/2012/06/01/edmonton-deformed-fish-lake-athabasca.html>
- Chan, L. "Health and Environmental Issues with Canada's Aboriginal Communities-Final Version." McGill University (2005).
- Great Lakes United. Retrieved from: http://www.glu.org/en/campaigns/healthy_waters/hotspots
- Winnipeg Free Press. "Boiling Mad" (2010). Retrieved from: <http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/no-running-water/without/boiling-mad-its-hard-to-keep-water-flowing-and-to-keep-residents-safe-107674698.html>
- Wong, R. "Keepers of the Water: A wake-up call from the North" (2010).