
Collective Water Ceremony at the Waters Edge Nearest You

By: Susan Bell Chiblow

Reflections on Water, Climate and Humanity | Part 1

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Water in my language, which is Anishinaabemowin, is N'bi. This word encompasses all the different waters and I capitalize the word because my teachings explain that water is alive, it has a spirit, it can heal, it can transform with prayer and song, it has its own responsibilities, and most importantly – it can govern itself.

I grew up on a landform known as a point surrounded by two different rivers, the Root River and the St Mary's River. Being raised by a single parent with 7 siblings had its challenges, but I had the waters, the two rivers that I could go to for comfort. When I was feeling lonely, or upset, I would go to the waters sitting on the shore listening, allowing myself to feel the comfort provided. The waters have had a profound effect on my life. Learning to listen to the waters and feeling the comfort provided gave me insight to how special the waters are at an early age. I did not understand exactly what was happening, I just knew I needed to be by the waters and through the participation of water ceremonies, the Water Walks, and discussing water issues with the Old Wise Ones, that the waters are medicine, having curative powers. This is the Anishinaabek knowledge about the waters.

Anishinaabek peoples have unique relationships to and understandings of the waters. Anishinaabek peoples are often the first to take notice of the degradation of the waters, and the first to suffer from due to their close relationships with the waters. Anishinaabek peoples treat the waters as both providing the source for all life and having a spirit, not something to be owned, managed or acquired. The Anishinaabek knowledge and worldview are in stark contrast to the Canadian worldview that water is a resource and can be managed by human law.

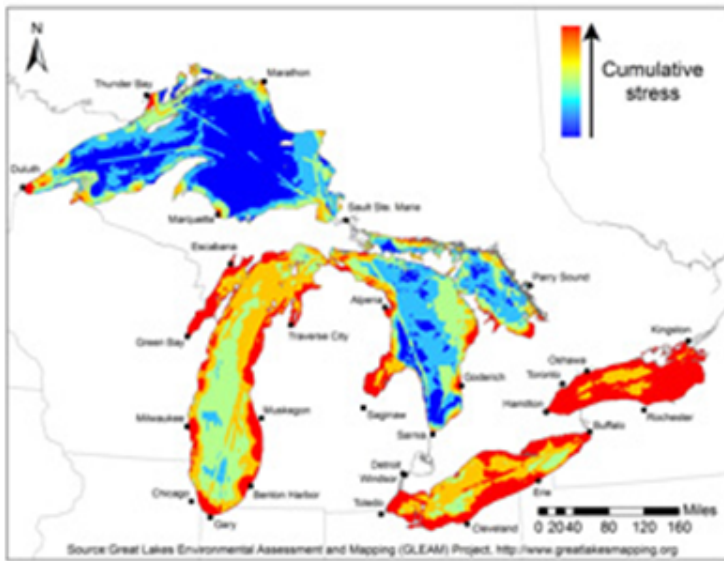
Elder Willie Pine told me of a time when he remembered being able to dip a cup into the Mississauga River and the in-land lakes to get a drink of water. When I worked for the Chiefs of Ontario over 10 years ago, there were 45 First Nation communities on boil water advisories. I feel not much has changed as many communities are still on water boil advisories and can no longer drink from the lakes.

The image below is show the environmental stresses on the Great Lakes. The environmental stresses are caused by humans and their activities. It is not the animals or birds or plants that cause these stresses, it is done solely by humans.

There are currently several agreements and policies that are supposed to protect the waters such as the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement. It is apparent that regardless of the agreements and policies, the waters are contaminated and all humans need water to live. No human is capable of surviving without the waters, so something has to change and it needs to change immediately.

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Courtesy of Great Lakes Environmental Assessment and Mapping (GLEAM) Project

It has been stated by numerous Elders that water is life and without clean water, we as the human family will not survive. The waters are a common ancestor to all humanity and all life. Current colonial laws for the waters are failing all peoples. It is important to remember that Anishinaabek peoples were living sustainably with the Great Lakes always respecting the waters. Anishinaabek peoples have knowledge and laws that can protect our waters.

There has been a movement more recently, to educate all peoples of the waters as a commons. All humans need to understand that water means life. We need to relearn our responsibilities to the waters and let the water govern itself as it has always done. Our relationships need to be reciprocal in all that we do, we need to be grateful and check our own behavior (not manage the behavior of our relatives through such paradigms as natural resource management).

We need to re-centre the political in new and different ways, Anishinaabek women need to be involved in collaboration with other cultures in all water decisions as women are the carriers of the waters. An educational reform is needed to inform peoples of the Anishinaabek ways of living with the waters, which will contribute to the future of how the waters are regarded and governed. The understanding of Anishinaabek ways of living with the waters is old but will be “new” to many current water decision-making regimes. It is urgent that the “new” understandings of politics and governance in relation to the waters be accepted as the waters are not infinite, the waters are needed for all life to sustain itself, and the human family is water.



Author Bio

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Ms. Susan Chiblow is an Anishinaabe qwe born and raised in Garden River First Nation. She has worked extensively with First Nation communities for the last 26 years in environmental related fields. Sue has her Bachelors of Science degree with her major focusing on biology and a minor in chemistry and her Masters degree in Environment and Management.

Sue completed her master's thesis "Social Aspects affecting Mold Growth in First Nations Communities" at Royal Roads University. She is currently appointed as an Adjunct Member to the graduate program at FES, York University and serves as the Environment and Resource portfolio holder in her First Nation. She is currently assisting the Mississauga First Nation, in the development of the community's environmental laws and management regimes under a self-government process. She is appointed member of the national Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge Sub-Committee for Species at Risk.

Chiblow's research examines humanity's relationship to water and efforts on improvement for humans, animals, and the waters themselves. "My work is directly related to environmental justice for Anishinaabek peoples and to the revitalization of Anishinaabek law," she said.

Chiblow's research project N'be Kendaaswin (Water Knowledge) focuses on four sub-themes:

1. Water governance and gender – How does Anishinaabek law construct the role of women in decision making about water?
2. Water memory – How does Anishinaabek law understand the relationship between water and memory?
3. Indigenous laws – What responsibilities do humans have under Naaknigewin (law/Anishinaabek legal traditions)?
4. Reconciliation and relationships with water – Can the broader discourse in Canada about reconciliation assist with improving relationships to water?

