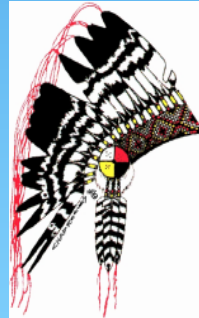


The Right to Clean Water in First Nations: The Photovoice Project

Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation



Assembly of
Manitoba
Chiefs

Presented at:

2nd Annual First Nations Water
Rights Conference
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“The right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation is a human right that is essential for the full enjoyment of life and all other human rights.” - Declared by the United Nations General Assembly July, 2010

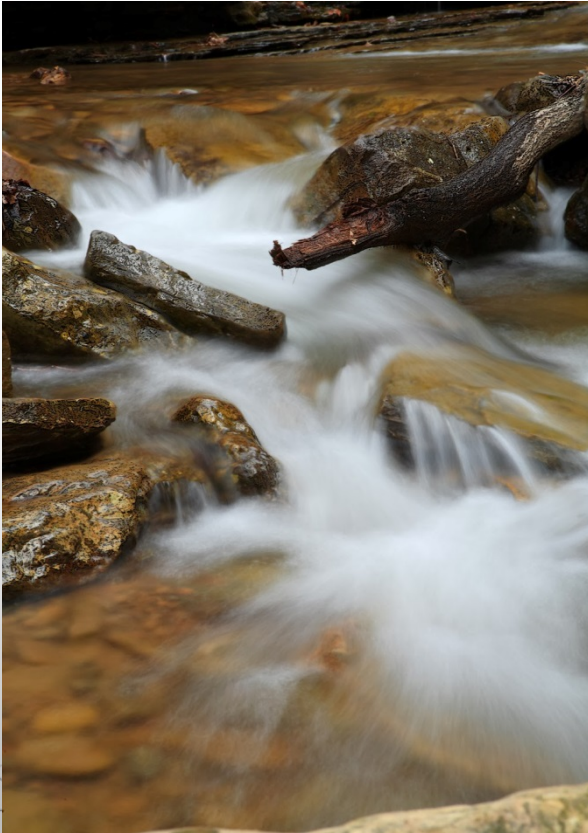
Though the lack of access to such essentials is often conceptualized as an issue of the developing world (Winkler, 2012), First Nations in northern Canada are also struggling with such a crisis (Phare, 2009).

Background



- * In 1977 the Canadian federal government promised to provide reserves with water and sanitation services comparable to similarly situated non-Aboriginal communities (Boyd, 2011).
- * Section 36 of the Constitution Act, 1982 – It provides that the provincial and federal governments “are committed to ... providing essential public services of reasonable quality to all Canadians” (Busby, 2015)
- * Bill S-11 (Safe Drinking Water for First Nations Act) was seen by many First Nations as an attempt by the Feds to create regulations before infrastructure - the cart before the horse (Assembly of First Nations, 2010).

Water as a Sacred Gift

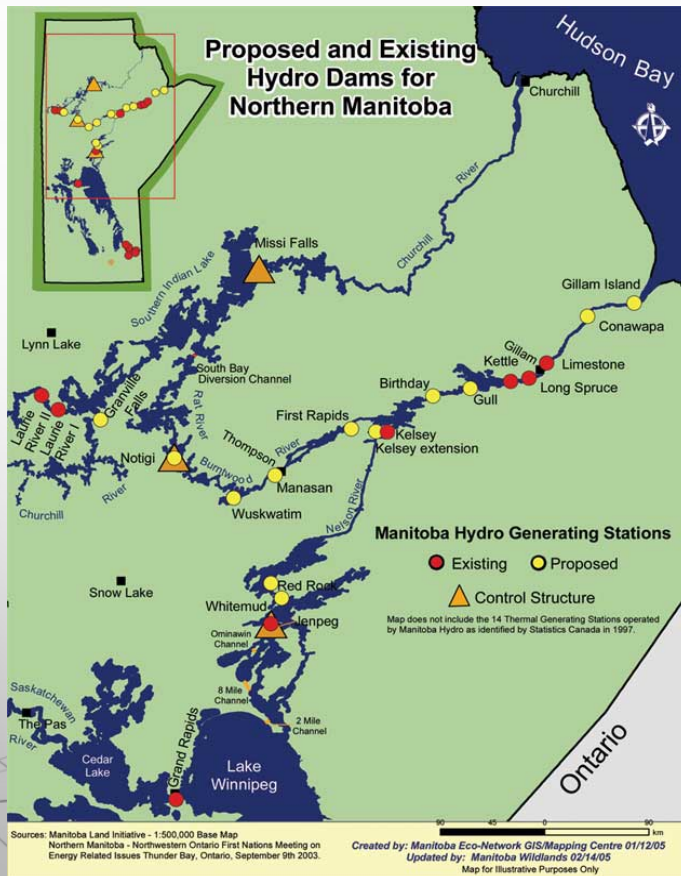


Water is “the most precious gift that was given to us, Indigenous peoples. - [Dene Elder Francois Paulette](#)

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 - [Keepers of the Water Declaration.](#)

Water as Commodity

Hydro Development as Example



1960s – 1970s Manitoba Hydro, a crown corporation, began damming northern rivers in Manitoba (Phare, 2011). As shown here, this development is expected to continue long into the future.

Past hydro projects damaged trapping, destroyed hunting habitat, created problems for commercial and domestic fishing and effected the quality of water available. They contributed to dependency, anger and a sense of injustice by those living in hydro affected First Nation communities (Loney, 1987).

The 2010 Case



In 2010 a series of investigative articles in the Winnipeg Free Press brought to light that on-reserve residents of Manitoba First Nations often lack access to the clean water and effective sanitation essential to health (Fallding, 2010).



Hauling untreated water



Dumping raw sewage

The Project



The focus of this advocacy project is on ways of building and maintaining public support for the actions that are necessary to improve First Nations' water and sanitation.



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Photovoice



- * Photovoice is an approach used to empower community members to work together to identify, represent and enhance their community.
- * It equips individuals with cameras so they can create photographic evidence and symbolic representations to help others see the world through their eyes.
- * Groups can share their stories and have their voices heard through both pictures and dialogues.

Photovoice Project



- * Adult students at the ATEC Centre in Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation were asked to take photos that depicted how they saw their community's current water and sewage system.
- * They then wrote short captions to help describe those pictures.
- * The project's intent is to increase public awareness and appeal to the moral values of citizens about the lack of water quality standards on northern First Nations by visually illustrating the current levels of social inequality regarding quality water systems in one community.



The ATEC Centre
Student Research
Team 2013-2014



The ATEC Centre
Student Research
Team 2014- 2015

Photovoice Project

The project included 50 photos and stories representing the participants' views in the project. They are roughly structured into four theme areas:

- * Introduction to the community and the issue of water in Northern Manitoba.
- * The water treatment process
- * Water delivery and storage
- * Sewage treatment

The following are some examples of the students work.

Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation



Nisichawayasihk - Where Three Rivers Meet

As in most northern reserves, NCN has fresh water surrounding it, but that doesn't mean it is easy to find a clean glass of it to drink.



The shorelines of the lakes and rivers around Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation have been dramatically affected by fluctuating water levels, starting with the Churchill River Diversion in the 1970's. This has forced the community to spend a tremendous amount of money on water treatment.

You can see the levels of silt and decaying trees that have left the water dirty, contaminated and unsafe to drink ... but one day these defects will no longer be in play.



There are differences between federal and provincial legislation and responsibilities around safe drinking water. This can result in side by side communities having very different levels of water treatment, as is the case here.

The Metis community, being under provincial jurisdiction is seen by many to have a higher quality of water treatment.



This is a picture of outside of the Water Treatment Complex. Though this complex has served the community well for a number of years, it is currently way too small for the demand being placed on it. This increases the risk of breakdowns and other water issues. In addition, its current size is holding back the needed construction of new houses and a school in the community.

Recommendations

1. **Build a new treatment plant.** The current one is old and working at over capacity.
2. **Ensure qualified water treatment operators.** There is a need for northern training, regulation and licencing. ATEC could play a role in this for northern communities.
3. **Extend piped water to entire reserve.**
4. **Reduce the risk of contaminations** due to excess handling and storage of drinking water. This includes more cleaning/flushing of tanks on a regular schedule.

Recommendations

5. **Reduce incidents of pipes freezing in winter.** This includes well trained public works people able to fix ongoing problems and the better insulation of tanks.
6. **Community education** on what should (and should not) go in the toilet and sink. The purpose is to reduce contaminants and non-degradable material ending up in the sewage lagoon.
7. **Build a new garbage dump.** The current one is too close to the lake, placing our source of water at risk.

Community Presentation



The photovoice project was displayed at the ATEC on May 14th during a community open house.

Community Presentation



Students providing information to community members about the project and their findings.

Future Work?



Does such a framework provide an important platform for advocates, grounded in the values of social justice and human rights?

- Working in one's own community/group initiative?
- In the broader public domain?

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Artwork by
Jackie Traverse
depicting women
as traditional
water keepers.

Thank you - Questions?