Water Carriers

Phase 3: Roundtable Report

Stories From the Headwaters: Indigenous Women, girls, Two Spirit, and Gender Diverse Peoples' Reflection on Water Insecurity

WATER CARRIERS

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Native Women's Association of Canada

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) is a national Indigenous organization representing Indigenous women, in all their diversity[1] inclusive of First Nations—on and off reserve, status, non-status, and disenfranchised—Inuit, and Métis. Representing 10 Indigenous women's organizations, NWAC was founded on a collective goal to enhance, promote, and foster social, economic, cultural, and political well-beings of Indigenous women within their respective communities and Canadian societies.

For more than 50 years, NWAC has established strong and lasting governance structures, decision-making processes, financial policies and procedures, and networks to help achieve its overall mission and goals. Currently, NWAC engages in national and international advocacy aimed at legislative and policy reforms that promote equality for Indigenous women, in all their diversity.

NWAC's work is rooted in advocacy, legislative reform, and policy development that advances the rights and equality of Indigenous, in all their diversity. By uplifting gender and cultural equity, NWAC plays a critical role in preserving Indigenous knowledge systems and supporting the holistic well-being of Indigenous women, their families, and their Nations.

1 Since February 20th, 2025, NWAC has changed its terminology from WG2SGD+ Peoples to "Indigenous women, in all their diversity," which is an inclusive term that refers to distinct and intersecting identities, including gender identity, age, and location.

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Water is seen as a living entity, specifically as a feminine one because of how we give life as women. We carry life by becoming mothers, and subsequently grandmothers. Life is encased in water during those 9 months of pregnancy before we enter the world through the doorway that is our mother, and that same water helps carry us into this physical realm. Water is life.”

Tasha Beeds
(Walking Earth Woman),
Mide Kwe, Water Walker[2].

2 Beeds, Tasha (Walking Earth Woman), Mide Kwe, Water Walker. *Matriarchal Messages: Volume 3.* Native Women’s Association of Canada, 2023, p. 7. https://nwac.ca/assets-documents/Newsletter-Matriarchal-Messages-Vol-3-ENG.pdf

“Women have been given the role and the responsibility to clean and take care of water for the next seven generations that are coming to us. We use the power of prayer and ceremony to do that. We give thanks to the water. We use it in a good way.”

Grandmother Roberta
Oshkawbewisens[3]

3 Oshkawbewisens, Roberta. Water Carriers Project. Native Women’s Association of Canada, 2024. https://watercarriersnwac.ca

Preface

Throughout this report, we use the term **"Indigenous women, in all their diversity"** to reflect the organization-wide shift in language at the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC). This phrasing replaces ***"Indigenous Women, Girls, Two-Spirit, and Gender-Diverse Peoples (WG2SGD+)"*** but continues to honour the diverse experiences of those within our communities. **"Indigenous women, in all their diversity"** is an inclusive term that refers to distinct and intersecting identities, including gender identity, age, and location. For the purpose of this report, we may interchangeably use WG2SGD+ Peoples to reflect the language used during the sharing circles, however, we acknowledge this transition towards more inclusive terminology.

Background

The Water Carriers Project, led by the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC), is an initiative dedicated to amplifying the voices and leadership of Indigenous Women, Girls, Two-Spirit, and Gender-Diverse Peoples (WG2SGD+) in water discourses. Guided by Indigenous worldviews, this project embraces water as a sacred entity and a vital life-giver, which is deeply connected to all forms of Mother Earth here on Turtle Island and Inuit Nunangat, and beyond. We recognize the sacred relationship between Indigenous women and water, and their inherent roles as protectors and carriers of this life force. In honouring these roles, the Water Carriers Project seeks to uplift their voices and create space for their leadership within water governance and decision-making processes.

During **Phase 1 (2020-2022)** of the project, NWAC centered the engagements around what it means to be a Water Carrier, recognizing that Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples have taken on this incredible role as guardians to the water for time immemorial. The purpose of this was to not only bring awareness to the value of Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples within water governance spaces, but to also guide NWAC in terms of how we can support Mother Earth and Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples in matters of water.

Phase 2 (2022-2024) narrowed in on the escalating water crises facing Indigenous communities. Through two years of engagements across every province and territory, participants highlighted the dual threats of climate change and human industrial activity on water systems—rivers, lakes, and watersheds. However, we inevitably also heard many testimonies on the issue of water insecurity, and how far too many Indigenous communities lack access to clean, reliable drinking water.

From Phase 2 engagement, four core community-driven recommendations emerged:

1. **Establish in-community Indigenous WG2SGD+ Water Governance Councils.**
2. **Integrate Indigenous-led Water and Environmental Education into Schools and Youth Programs in-community.**
3. **Strengthen Indigenous Decision-Making Authority Over Developments Impacting Water and Lands.**
4. **Expand Leadership Opportunities for Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples in Water Governance**

Coming into Phase 3 (2024-2026), we wanted to narrow in on the issue of clean drinking water and water insecurity. As we heard during Phase 2 engagements and research, unfortunately, despite 2015 federal promises to end the long-term drinking water advisories within Indigenous communities, many still face water insecurity, and many methods to resolve the matter – such as treatment facility upgrades - have fallen short. To tackle this complicated crisis, we prioritized two gaps of understanding:

- **Gap 1:** how do Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples experience water insecurity, how does it shape vulnerability, and what decisions are made at the household versus community levels to respond to water insecurity.
- **Gap 2:** how the recommendations we gathered during Phase 2 engagements can be implemented into practical tools and actions that improve water governance and security – actions which can be taken up by communities and taken seriously by government bodies.

To explore these gaps, NWAC convened two virtual national sharing circles:

- **Voices of Water: Understanding Water Insecurity and Its Impacts**
  Focused on lived experiences, household and community-level responses, and how water insecurity exacerbates vulnerabilities among already marginalized groups.
- **Pathways to Empowerment: Translating Recommendations into Action**
  Focused on bridging the recommendations gathered in Phase 2 with actionable frameworks for governance and identifying systemic barriers to Indigenous-led solutions.

This report reflects what was shared in those discussions and presents key findings. It is a tribute to those participants who came forward with their experiences, teachings, and visions for a future where Indigenous Peoples govern water in a self-determined way.

Method of Engagement

Sharing circles are a culturally grounded method used across many Nations to foster mutual respect, community knowledge exchange, and emotional safety. Given the nature of water insecurity, this was considered an ideal method to ensure the comfort of participants during potentially difficult conversations. To facilitate a diverse and cross-regional dialogue, the sharing circles were held virtually on February 11th and 12th, 2025. These sessions brought together Indigenous Women, Girls, Two-Spirit, and Gender-Diverse (WG2SGD+) Peoples who had experienced water insecurity within their community and/or have been involved in water governance. Each sharing circle welcomed approximately 20 participants from various provinces and territories, and were guided by an experienced Indigenous facilitator, as well as an Elder committed to water advocacy.

Participants were recruited through NWAC's regional and online networks, including our Provincial Territorial member Associations (PTMAs). We also disseminated information about the sharing circles with our Health Unit and Capacity Unit to distribute amongst their participant networks, as the discussion topics transcend research sectors. Attendees joined from regions across Turtle Island and Inuit Nunangat: including the Northwest Territories, New Brunswick, Ontario, Manitoba, Quebec, Alberta, and British Columbia. While regional representation varied, the sharing circles reflected a wide range of lived realities, cultural contexts, and community-based expertise. Contributions were shared verbally or through the chat, guided by a series of thematic questions. Both sessions were recorded with consent, and quotes used in this report have been anonymized to protect participant confidentiality.

What We Heard

Lived Experiences of Water Insecurity and Methods to Survive.

For most people in this country, water insecurity is a distant crisis, something seen on television and assumed to only persist in less developed nations. However, the reality it is that water insecurity is and has been deeply woven into the everyday lives of Indigenous communities here on Turtle Island and Inuit Nunangat, for generations. Participants described it not as a singular issue, but as a layered, ongoing, cumulative experience. It is felt in the weight of a water jug, the taste of what comes from the tap, the absence of fish from the rivers, and the silencing of ceremonies that once thrived along the shoreline.

In the North, participants shared stories where upstream contamination from industrial development has altered the quality and quantity of water for decades. Such activities have completely destabilized the water table, and as climate change escalates, drying up waterways and dropping water levels, further consequences have emerged such as sediment contamination which toxifies the water. Long term impacts like cancer have become common in these areas, with some pointing directly to carcinogenic exposure in local water systems. Traditional foods are now feared rather than celebrated, and entire practices—like swimming, fishing, or harvesting along the banks—are disappearing under the weight of contamination and fear.

"We cannot drink from the taps. We cannot trust what we were once taught to live by."

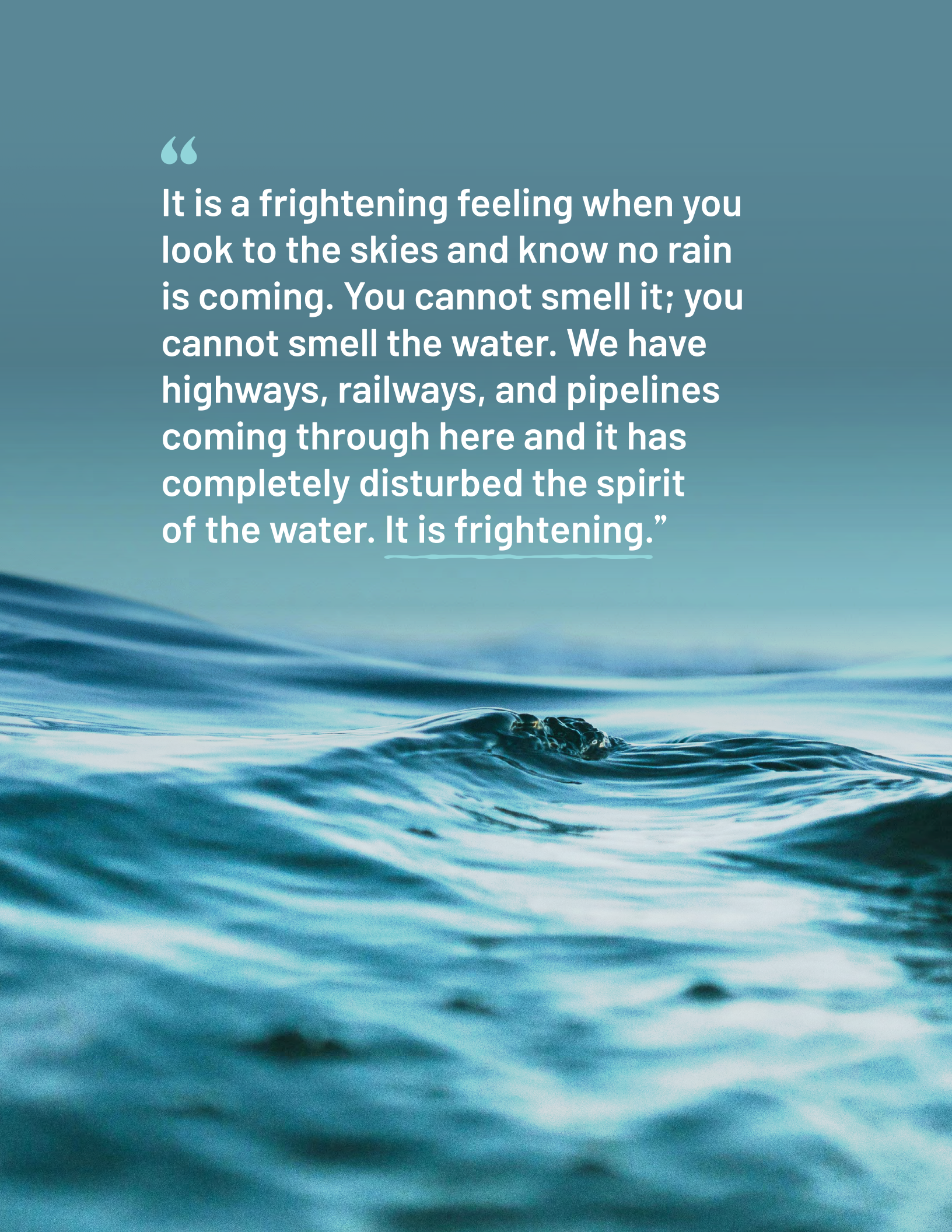
These realities have emotional impacts that cannot be overstated. Participants described an undercurrent of grief, anxiety, and spiritual disconnection. One woman from the Alberta region shared the haunting experience of watching the 2024 wildfires ignite before spring. At that time, the forest was still asleep, and the trees had yet to draw up water trough their roots. The drought conditions were so intense that the river ran low, the fish were gone, and the air was dry. The forests burned like kindle and the rain never came.

Others spoke of the economic hardship that water insecurity brings. In communities where bottled water is the only safe option, stores have notoriously raised prices when crises hit. One woman shared that it is not uncommon to see bottles triple in price when people are desperate. Another participant said her water utility bill doubles every month—an unbearable burden for those already facing poverty and housing insecurity. The cost of water isn't just financial—it reshapes entire household budgets, forcing families to make sacrifices often at the expense of sustenance. As more people rely on store-bought water, economic stability begins to unravel.

The health impacts of water insecurity are undeniable. Participants referenced gastrointestinal illness, rashes, skin infections, and in some increasingly widespread cases, **H. pylori**—a waterborne bacterium that can cause cancer. Community infrastructure is often too outdated or inadequate to address these risks. In many regions, water must still be trucked in, and any delay in delivery results in families being left without—again. Elders, children, and those with chronic illnesses are especially vulnerable. The mental load this place on caregivers—especially mothers—is heavy, persistent, and invisible to those who do not live it.

In response, communities have developed their own survival strategies. Families share bathwater. Rain barrels are set up to catch water when it comes. Sinks are filled with water and held throughout the day to avoid waste. Elders continue to teach traditional filtration methods, and there is ongoing education within communities about how to protect water sources or reduce water waste. Such teachings, rooted in respect and reciprocity, have sustained communities for generations. But today, they are being stretched to their limits.

"My family keeps large containers of water in the house for cooking and drinking. It's time-consuming, but it's the only way to avoid being exposed to bacteria or toxins."



“It is a frightening feeling when you look to the skies and know no rain is coming. You cannot smell it; you cannot smell the water. We have highways, railways, and pipelines coming through here and it has completely disturbed the spirit of the water. It is frightening.”

Participants made it clear: these are not stories of helplessness. These are stories of people doing what they can with what they have. But these survival strategies, while creative and resilient, are not solutions—they are reminders that people are being forced to patch together systems of care in the absence of what should have already been there.

Who Is the Most Vulnerable in Community

Water insecurity does not affect everyone in the same way. While entire communities feel its weight, certain groups bear the heaviest burdens—those whose age, health, gender, roles, or physical mobility limit their access to information, infrastructure, and safe water. Participants were clear: it is Elders, children, land users, gender-diverse people, pregnant women, and those living in poverty or isolation who are most impacted, and far too often, the least supported.

Elders, for instance, are particularly at risk. Many cannot haul water or boil it safely, at least not without the support of someone else. This is a high-risk reality as their immune systems are more vulnerable to illness and pathogens. In some communities, Elders who cannot access Facebook, radio, or government bulletins end up drinking contaminated water simply because they have not been warned. Some participants spoke of older relatives who were quietly sick for months before anyone suspected their illness could be linked to water. Others described repeated trips to kidney specialists or clinics for skin conditions—chronic illnesses tied to unsafe drinking water.

"It's not just the physical risk; it's the emotional toll of watching our Elders lose trust in something that used to sustain us."

Children, too, are deeply affected. Not just physically, but emotionally and culturally. Participants spoke about young ones who are now scared of the river, the tap, of water itself. *"Our children are growing up afraid of something that is supposed to be sacred,"* one woman shared. Many children rely entirely on adults to fetch, boil, or purchase safe water—creating additional strain on families already carrying so much. In homes without safe running water, day-to-day tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and even preparing medicine becomes more complicated, and the emotional stress begins to ripple out.

Gender-diverse community members were also highlighted as particularly vulnerable—not only to the physical impacts of water insecurity, but to the systemic exclusion from community spaces and decision-making processes. Participants shared that some Two-Spirit and gender-diverse people have been exiled from their home communities, which limits their access to water-related resources, support systems, and information. Even when they remain connected to the homeland, they may lack access to decision-making or programs due to colonial and cultural erasure of their roles.

Land users—like hunters, trappers, and fishers—were another group significantly highlighted. Many do not have internet access or phones when they are out on the land, and as a result, they often learn about contamination after they have been exposed. They use the water as they always have, and then after their return, perhaps days later, are told it was unsafe and must face the implications. These individuals carry vital knowledge and connection to the land, and yet they are placed at risk because they are often the last to be informed.

Fishing-dependent groups are also witnessing devastating impacts. Participants shared that rising water temperatures are softening fish, changes in sediment flow are rerouting spawning channels, and industrial activity is pushing traditional fishing grounds farther out of reach. For families and communities who rely on fishing for both sustenance and cultural continuity, these changes are not just inconvenient— they are threatening to sever intergenerational ties to the land and water.

In every story shared, it became clear that vulnerability is not about weakness—it is about who has been structurally excluded from protection. Whether it is a lack of accessible information, inadequate health care, or economic barriers to bottled water, the consequences are always most severe for those already marginalized. Yet, these same individuals—Elders, land users, women, children, gender-diverse people—continue to lead, adapt, and carry their communities in the face of it all.

Role of Indigenous Women in Water Governance

Throughout the Sharing Circles, participants spoke with clarity and conviction about the sacred relationship between Indigenous Women, Girls, Two-Spirit, and Gender- Diverse (WG2SGD+) Peoples and water. In many cultures, women are known as the original water keepers—life givers who carry water, not just through childbirth, but through prayer, ceremony, and care for the land. Yet, colonial systems have persistently stripped WG2SGD+ Peoples of their rightful roles in decision-making over waters that have always been theirs to protect.

"Women are connected to water. We carry our children in the sacred waters. So, women and children have this inherent relationship with water. It's a spiritual relationship. It is where we were living before, we joined the blue planet."

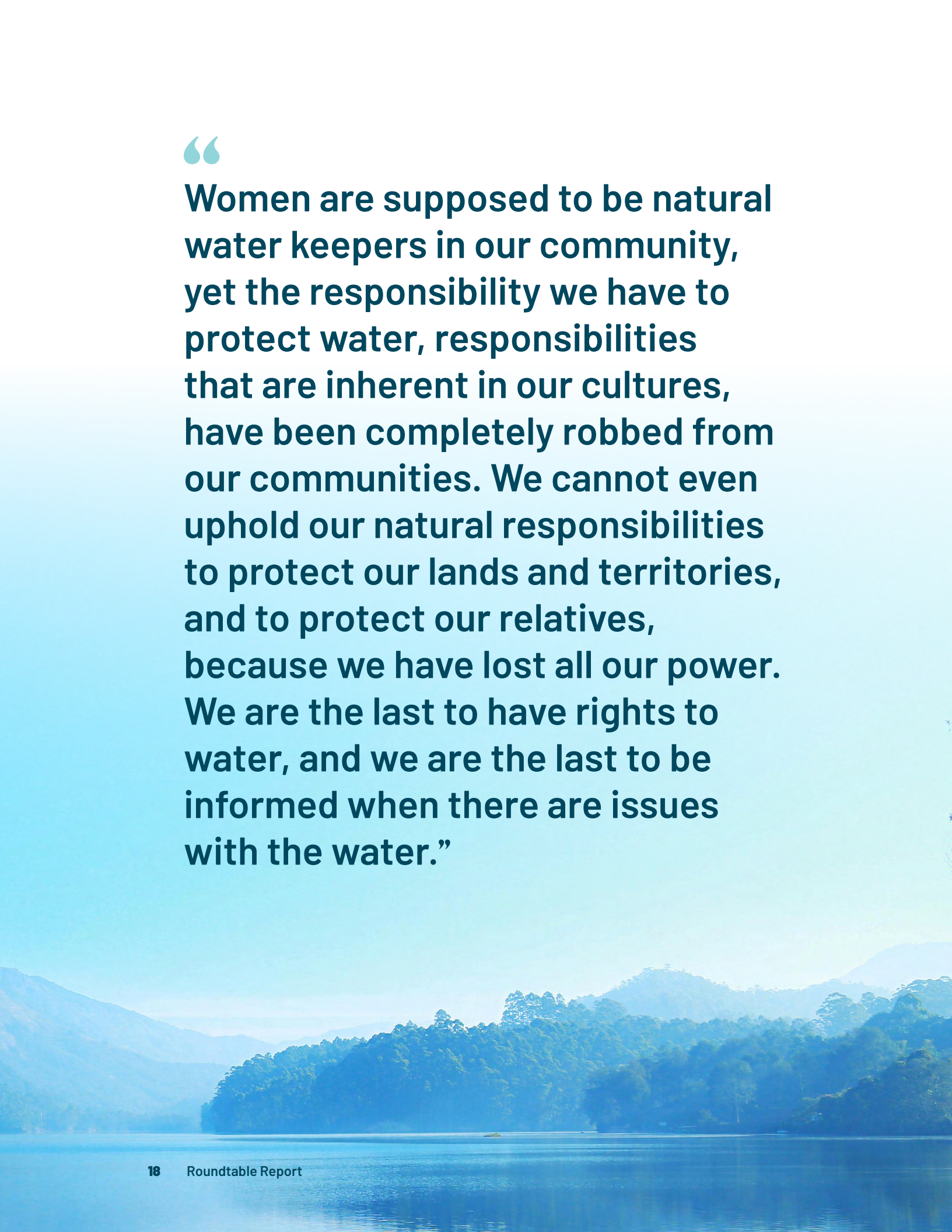
Despite these inherent roles, women are often the last to be informed when there are issues with the water and the last to have access to decision-making spaces. Participants described how their natural law responsibilities—the sacred duties embedded in their culture to care for land, water, and all living beings—have been systemically undermined. The disconnection from these roles has been deeply painful, but on a larger scale, it has had intergenerational implications for all life forms as the removal of Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples form their inherent roles has had inevitable imbalances in the natural system of relations.

Yet, there are remarkable signs of resurgence. Many emphasized the transformative impact of returning to ceremony. Water ceremonies are happening again across Turtle Island. Songs are being sung. Teachings are being remembered and shared. And it has had real healing effects on the water.

"In the moment of ceremony, sometimes you're not sure if it is helping, but then you feel the importance within you. Ceremony has an outwards ripple effect, and we may not know how much of a difference or when the difference is going to take place, but it will."

Participants described the knowledge and strength that WG2SGD+ Peoples carry—knowledge that is often overlooked in Western governance frameworks. They spoke about designating women to lead water governance efforts in community

“Women are supposed to be natural water keepers in our community, yet the responsibility we have to protect water, responsibilities that are inherent in our cultures, have been completely robbed from our communities. We cannot even uphold our natural responsibilities to protect our lands and territories, and to protect our relatives, because we have lost all our power. We are the last to have rights to water, and we are the last to be informed when there are issues with the water.”



and called for a return to traditional forms of leadership that include Two-Spirit people as mediators, decision-makers, and caretakers.

"Historically, Two Spirit people headed leadership roles as mediators, caretakers, and decision makers. Today many continue this legacy by advocating for water protection and environmental justice."

Too often, colonial governance and western science-based systems define what counts as *"knowledge"* and who is allowed to lead. Participants called out how policies and frameworks compartmentalize ecosystems and prioritize technical data over lived experience. One participant shared the story of a pipeline spill, where testing concluded that the water was safe to fish from, however, the community refused to fish from those waters. *"We leave it to heal,"* she said, *"because we know, in our bodies and in our ways of knowing, that it's not okay."* Another person stated: *"Western science may say something is fine, but our Elders and knowledge know that it's not."*

Participants urged the need for **Two-Eyed Seeing** and the creation of ethical spaces —where Indigenous and Western knowledge systems can co-exist respectfully. But right now, many felt only one of those systems is truly being upheld. They emphasized that water governance must go beyond environmental metrics—it must recognize the interconnectedness of water, land, community, spirit, and culture.

"If the land is not well, we are not well. If the water is not well, we are not well."

True water governance[4], they argued, does not begin at the policy level—it begins in community. It begins with storytelling, ceremony, teachings, and land-based learning. It begins with asking the people who are on the land and water every day, who see the changes first-hand, who carry the history of those places in their bodies. *"The ability to share knowledge through storytelling is essential in water governance,"* one participant said.

4 **Water Governance:** Water governance refers to how decisions about water are made and who is involved in making them. From an Indigenous perspective, it means respecting water as a living being and upholding responsibilities to care for it. This includes leadership from Indigenous communities, especially WG2SGD+ people, based on traditional laws, knowledge, and relationships with water.

"The ability to share knowledge through story telling is essential in water governance – ensuring that decisions are rooted in lived experiences and collective wisdom."

Ultimately, what participants called for was not symbolic inclusion—it was restoration. Of knowledge. Of roles. Of responsibilities that have always existed. And of the right to lead, protect, and govern water as Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples always have.

"There is a habit of thinking that humans can create law, but we know through our culture that the land and all its beings are the source of knowledge and teach us we how we ought to behave and thrive. Women are in touch with that. Yet, there is a lack of involvement of WG2SGD+ People who have this unique, sacred relationship with water. There is something with the way we are created as women, and how we respond to what we know is true in our bodies. Our voices are needed: to represent, to sing, to learn from, to view the land. Our representation is needed to bring in more solutions."

Message to Governmental Bodies

Participants were united in their message: when it comes to water governance, the status quo is not working. Too many government solutions are short-term band-aids that fail to address the root of the issue. Shipping in bottled water, installing treatment plants that are unsustainable, or announcing investments that lack long- term support—these measures offer temporary relief, but leave the deeper harms untouched.

"We can't just look at what's happening right now, we have to look at the compounding issues."

At the heart of these issues is a systemic disconnect between Indigenous communities and the federal, provincial, and municipal governments responsible for water governance. Policies created at these levels often ignore or override Traditional Knowledge systems and allow higher levels of toxins than would be

considered acceptable in non-Indigenous communities. Participants noted that decisions are regularly made without Indigenous representation. "Nobody looks like us in government," one person said. Others described feeling as though water management prioritizes economic growth over human and ecological health.

"It feels like very few people care about the impacts on the water system, versus the financial benefits of their decisions."

The historic exclusion of Indigenous Peoples from water governance continues to shape current realities. One participant explained how, particularly in Alberta, water rights were handed out through **"first in time, first in right" (FITFIR) system** in the 1800's, however Indigenous communities were not allowed to access to this process because they were classified under federal jurisdiction. As a result, municipalities and industries were able to apply for and secure long-term water licenses that remain legally binding today. This is why Indigenous communities are now considered some of the late stakeholders when it comes to water systems, and instead, decisions are largely left to the hands of regional governments and industries with legally recognized water rights. This colonial oversight now presents a massive barrier to communities trying to reclaim their water rights.

"Our water rights should have been upheld at the highest level with federal parties. Our treaties predate the provinces, and yet our rights are being treated like they came last."

Additionally, there was overwhelming frustration about consultation processes that are often limited in their effectiveness and authenticity. Participants made it clear that consultation without implementation is performative. Too often, it is used to pacify, delay, or distract, while development projects move ahead without meaningful input. *"We're not saying stop consulting us,"* one participant explained. *"We're saying that consultation without respect, without consent, and without implementation means nothing."*

Instead, participants called on governments to uphold the standards of **Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC)** as outlined in the *United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP).* FPIC is not simply about informing communities. It is about respecting their right to say yes or no, in their own time, and in their own way—whether through ceremony, traditional governance, or

“So many policies were put in place just to paralyze Indigenous voices.”

“Colonial politics lacks a spiritual component. That’s how destructive decisions get made, like stopping rivers for pipeline development. It’s not just about power. It’s about not understanding the life of water.”

community dialogue. *"If we're not doing this,"* one person said, *"then we're not even meeting the bare minimum of international standards."*

When asked what change could look like, participants were clear: **governments must recognize the inherent and treaty rights of Indigenous Nations to govern their own waters.** That means returning authority to Water Protectors, land defenders, Elders, and those who know their ecosystems intimately. It means creating governance structures that reflect the laws, relationships, and responsibilities rooted in each Nation. It means resourcing Indigenous-led frameworks, not just reviewing them.

"Water protectors and land defenders should be responsible for water governance, and no decision should be made without the fully informed and voluntary consent of Indigenous Nations, particularly regarding industrial projects."

Participants acknowledged that each Nation has its own water, its own teachings, and its own ways of governing. While solidarity is important, **self-determination must remain the foundation**. The vision shared was not one of complete opposition or submission to government systems—it was one of healing, balance, and sovereignty. As one participant put it: *"The answer is not in being completely radical or completely submissive. It is somewhere in the middle—finding that healing path of what it means to be in balance with our culture, our history, our rights, and our responsibilities as Indigenous Peoples."*

Community-Based Solutions Rooted in Self-Determination and Decolonization

In the final portion of the Sharing Circles, participants were invited to reflect on how the recommendations from Phase 2 of the Water Carriers Project could be implemented at the community level. These recommendations, which were developed over two years of engagements, outlined key pathways for empowering Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples in water governance.

Of the four Phase 2 recommendations, **Recommendation #1: Establish Indigenous WG2SGD+ Water Governance Councils within communities**, resonated most deeply with participants. Many shared that such councils would not only create space for Indigenous women and gender-diverse leaders but also restore cultural responsibilities and foster a stronger sense of accountability, ownership, and healing. Councils led by and for Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples were viewed as essential for building community trust, honoring traditional roles, and ensuring that those most affected by water insecurity are the ones leading solutions.

Participants emphasized the need for intentional implementation. Councils must be well-resourced and visibly supported within the community. Participants spoke about the importance of offering honoraria, providing meals, ensuring childcare, and holding workshops to encourage participation. *"These things may seem small,"* one person shared, *"but they are what allow us to show up."* The presence of youth culture camps and land-based learning opportunities were also mentioned as ways to strengthen intergenerational engagement, while re-grounding governance in Indigenous teachings and relationship with the land.

Several emphasized that council structures must not replicate colonial governance models. They must be shaped by traditional knowledge systems, flexible to each Nation's specific needs, and open to spiritual and ceremonial elements. Some participants spoke about involving Elders through their own advisory circles, and others about the importance of Two-Spirit representation.

"If we want to decolonize, we need to be honest about what that actually means, and about who gets to lead."

Bridging the gap between Chief and Council structures and traditional leadership was raised as an ongoing barrier. Participants called for a deeper effort to bring these two systems into dialogue—acknowledging that both hold knowledge, but that colonial impositions have created disconnection.

"At some point, our Chiefs and Councils need to meet in the middle with our traditional councils and Knowledge Keepers. That's a healing process, not a policy decision. We need to bridge the gap between in order to truly decolonize."

Across the discussions, participants pointed to examples of what's already working at the community level. A participant from the New Brunswick region highlighted a women-led watershed nonprofit that is building localized solutions through knowledge-sharing and collaboration in her community. Others spoke about community-led water monitoring systems, macro-level involvement in water project proposals, and the use of natural water conservation strategies, such as reusing water for irrigation, drip irrigation, mulching, and traditional filtration practices. Some communities have also begun treating wastewater for agricultural and industrial reuse—demonstrating that innovation rooted in tradition is not only possible but already happening. Ceremonies, water songs,

and teachings were all named as tools that both educate and empower, inviting people back into relationship with water in ways that feel meaningful and accessible.

Participants also recognized that everyday realities, such as poverty, overwork, and intergenerational trauma, limit the time people have to engage with water governance. This is not due to apathy, but due to the "business of survival." Indigenous WG2SGD+ Peoples are juggling multi-directional responsibilities and navigating intersectional hardships – all while standing strong as matriarchs for their family and community. It is essential that the spaces we create for WG2SGD+ Peoples in water governance are ones that mitigate existing stressors and offer as much support possible to ensure productive and uplifting experiences. True decolonialization means not only disassembling colonial practices but also opposing patriarchal limitations. Above all, participants urged that any water governance model must be flexible, community-driven, and self-determined.

“We need to define what leadership looks like on our own terms, and we need to be given the space, the time, and the trust to do that.”

Conclusion and Next Steps

The voices shared throughout this report are not only testimony—they are truth.

They are the stories of Indigenous Women, Girls, Two-Spirit, and Gender-Diverse (WG2SGD+) Peoples who are living the impacts of water insecurity and, despite centuries of colonial harm, continue to lead in their communities as water carriers. These voices reflect an unshakeable understanding that water governance must be grounded in traditional knowledge, lived experience, and self-determination.

Participants in the Sharing Circles were clear: restoring our relationship with water is not only about infrastructure or policy—it is about restoring balance. Water governance must be gendered, spiritual, and cultural. It must begin in ceremony, be carried in community, and flow into systems of governance that reflect who we are as Indigenous Peoples.

As we move forward into the next stage **(2025-2026)** of **Phase** of the Water Carriers Project, NWAC is committed to turning these insights into action. Our next steps will involve developing concrete tools, resources, and community-facing materials that reflect the priorities identified through this report. These tools will support communities in establishing their own WG2SGD+ water governance councils, support in navigating water crises and emergencies, integrating Traditional Knowledge systems into local water strategies, and advancing self-determined models of water leadership.

NWAC will also continue to advocate at the federal, provincial/territorial, and international levels to ensure that Indigenous voices—particularly those of WG2SGD+ Peoples—are not just included in water governance but are meaningfully leading it. The Water Carriers Project is not just about research or engagement—it is a movement of reclamation, resurgence, and responsibility to Mother Earth and each other.

Together, we carry the water forward.

“

Systems of patriarchy have silenced us for far too long and dismissed the roles and responsibilities that we have as WG2SGD+ Peoples. This is our time to stand up and shine, restore our power, honour our connection to water. It is time to heal the unbalances. We cannot restore water balance without restoring gender balance. It must be holistic. We have so much power as women, and it is time for us to reform those system that subject and oppress our voices.”

Acknowledgment

We extend our deepest gratitude to the Indigenous Women, Girls, Two-Spirit, and Gender-Diverse participants who joined the Sharing Circles and shared their truths. Your voices are not only the foundation of this report—they are acts of resistance, care, and leadership. Thank you for trusting us with your stories, for carrying knowledge that systems have tried to erase, and for continuing to protect the waters that have always known you.

This work is for you, and because of you.

Resources

NWAC Resources

- **Water Carriers Project – NWAC**
  Overview of the Water Carriers Project, including reports from Phases 1 and 2, Matriarchal Messages series, and project background.
- **Matriarchal Messages Series (Video & Written Testimonies)**
  Stories, teachings, and reflections from Indigenous women water protectors across Turtle Island and Inuit Nunangat.
- **NWAC Environment Unit**
  NWAC's broader environmental policy and water governance advocacy.

Academic and Theoretical Foundations

- **Sharing Circles: An Indigenous Methodological Approach for Researching with Groups of Indigenous Peoples**
  An outline of the methodological use of Sharing Circles in research.
- **Two-Eyed Seeing & Ethical Space – Elder Albert Marshall**
  Teachings on integrating Indigenous and Western knowledge systems withbalance and mutual respect.

Indigenous-Led Water Initiatives

- **Decolonizing Water Project**
  An Indigenous-led research collective exploring water governance, Indigenous law, and resurgence.
- **Mother Earth Water Walkers**
  Led by Anishinaabe women, this initiative uplifts water walks and ceremony as tools for advocacy and spiritual connection.
- **Idle No More – Water is Sacred**
  Campaigns and teachings focused on the protection of water and land led byIndigenous women and Two-Spirit organizers.
- **Nibi Walks – Water Walks Led by Indigenous Women**
  An Indigenous-led initiative, founded by Anishinaabe Grandmothers, that involves ceremonial walks along waterways to pray for and bring awareness to the spirit of the water. Rooted in traditional Anishinaabe teachings and women's responsibilities to water.

Legislative and Policy Frameworks

- **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)**
- **Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) Guidelines – UNPFII**

For more Information

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WATER CARRIERS