

Featuring Layla Staats

MATRIARCHAL MESSAGES V.I



WATER CARRIERS PROJECT

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NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA



Matriarchal Messages V.I

Canada is a first world country, and this means it is an industrialized, technologically advanced, educated, and wealthy nation. Living under these privileged circumstances, it is easy to dissociate from the experiences of those less fortunate.

For many of us, our lived experience is one of ease. We stress over the little things. We remember childhoods spent at water parks and drinking Kool-Aid under the sun. We dream about the beautiful house we want, and vacations we promise ourselves we will one day take. We live under circumstances that present so many options at our disposal that we get overwhelmed not by the lack of meeting our needs, but the desire to satisfy all our wants.

The irony of this nation is that adjacent to such privileged settings are Indigenous communities whose day-to-day circumstances involve food insecurity, housing crises, and not having access to clean drinking water. Contrary to a life of ease, these communities are in survival mode. Surrounded by blue water bottles, families are forced to ration their limited water supply between cooking, cleaning, drinking, and bathing—some households receiving as little as 4 litres of clean, bottled water to last an entire week. Parents continuously make life-affirming sacrifices, such as Connie White (Shoal Lake 40) who used to drive an hour away from home just to rent a hotel room to bathe her children in safe water. Indigenous Peoples across Turtle Island suffer skin conditions, compromised health, and critical illness due to the bacterial infested, poisonous water flowing from their taps.



How is this possible? How could this be happening in Canada—a country rich in fresh water and resources?

Like so many Indigenous rights issues, lacking potable water is a manifestation of colonialization.

◀ *Why First Nation Communities Still Don't Have Clean Drinking Water*
 ~ with Dawn Martin-Hill (Mohawk, Wolf Clan).

Today, there are 26 long-term drinking water advisories for First Nations communities across Canada, long-term meaning they have been in effect for over a year. Additionally, there are 28 short-term water advisories affecting First Nations communities, most of which are boil water alerts, excluding those in British Columbia which roughly account for another five water advisories.



CONTENT WARNING: The following content discusses potentially triggering or upsetting subjects. Read with care. If you or someone you know is struggling, or in crisis, resources are listed at the end of this newsletter.

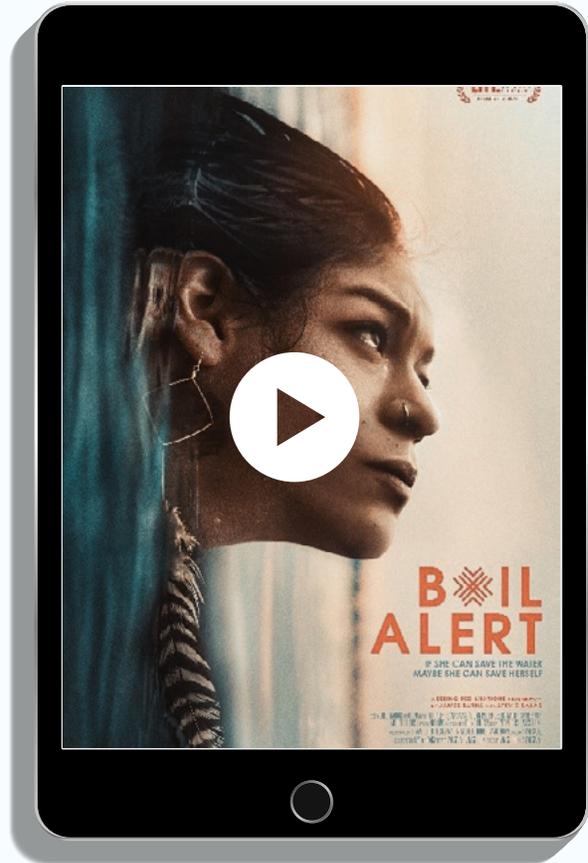
While progress has been made since [2015 federal commitments to end long-term water advisories](#), many communities are realizing there are [systematic issues](#) yet to be addressed. Such is the case in [Hollow Water First Nation](#) whose water treatment plant was upgraded in 2018, but has yet to be connected to dozens of homes. Or in numerous other First Nation communities, like [Nazko](#), who received enough funding to establish water treatment systems, but [not enough to operate or maintain them](#). So as climate change impacts are escalating at a ferocious rate—threatening our lands, waterways, and ways of life—water insecurity is anticipated to worsen, putting Indigenous communities at an even [higher risk](#).



To understand the depths of this water crisis, the Water Carriers project turned to some incredible Indigenous activists who are prominent in the fight for Mother Earth. In this edition of **Matriarchal Messages**, we look to **Layla Staats**—a Mohawk (Haudenosaunee) filmmaker, speaker, and activist from the Turtle Clan of Six Nations, Grand River. She has used her voice and platform to highlight systemic issues continuously affecting Indigenous communities, and she brings forth a surplus of first-hand experiences to water injustice.

“ I just recently had my world premiere of our documentary called *Boil Alert* at TIFF. It was a 2-year journey of me finding myself, but also uncovering these stories of water security in our Indigenous communities. Physically with my own eyes, I have seen water that is radioactive. I have seen one hundred per cent of an Indigenous community poisoned by mercury. I’ve seen people just completely disconnected from their way of life and their connection to the water, to the fish, to their hunting and fishing, and all the elements of who we are as Indigenous people. They have been taken from them because of the lack of access to clean water.

[Click for Trailer ▶](#)



Grassy Narrows First Nation

- Long-Term Water Advisory from 2014-2020 Mercury contaminated water due to paper mill upstream.
- Dryden Chemical company discharged their effluent into the Wabigoon-English River system.

“Grassy Narrows is one community that I carry with me in my heart. One hundred per cent of their community has been poisoned by mercury from a paper mill up the river. And something I learnt when I was there is that when a mother has mercury poisoning, the fetus gets a crazy amount of mercury dosage and density of poisoning. So, these kids that are being born are experiencing massive impacts. They’re seeing health implications, migraines, tremors.”

When I was speaking to Nora, who was a 16-year-old girl in Grassy Narrows, she said it just feels like a death sentence when you know you have this poison in you. She said the headaches would get so bad she felt like she was going to die.

But one of my favourite lines from Nora was that even though all these things were happening, she would say, I still love Grassy Narrows. She was still so grateful to be from this place. It was so beautiful. It was home.”



▲ *The Story of Grassy Narrows Documentary*
~ PSAC-AFPC

“It’s interesting, because when we were first going through the pandemic in Ontario, we had a shortage of toilet paper. The shelves were empty, and people were fighting over it. I want you to flip it in your mind as if toilet paper is water, and there’s a limited supply and only a certain amount is brought into your community. The wealthy people have access, and they’re buying it all, stockpiling it, and then even selling it. That sounds like some kind of crazy apocalyptic world, but it’s happening right now with water.”



▲ *How Mercury Exposure is Affecting Grassy Narrows Residents*
~ Toronto Star



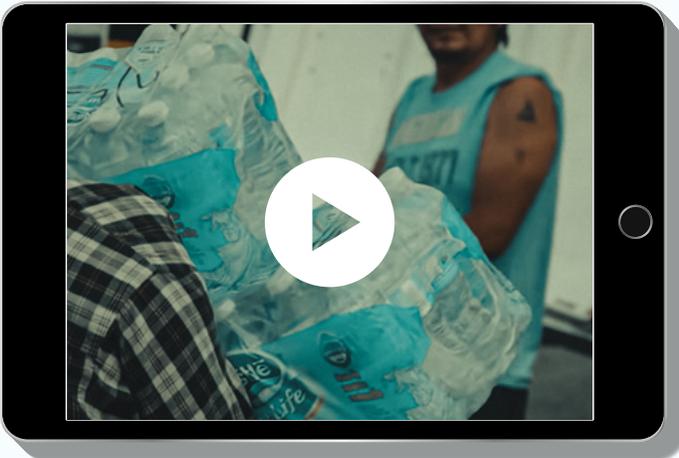


Neskandaga First Nation

- Long-Term Water Advisory Since 1995. Canada's longest water advisory of any First Nation.
- Unsafe water and plastic pollution crisis.

“One of the communities we went to was Neskandaga. At the time, they had been under boil water advisory for 10,000 days. That's 27 years. I lived in their community, I sat in their homes, I sat in their kitchens. They were on a 1.7 litre ration of water per day, per person. So just think about being on a water ration, and that's your only option.”

[As of 2024, the Neskandaga community has now been under a water advisory for [29 years.](#)]



◀ Canada's Waterless Communities: Neskandaga
~ VICE Documentary

“The chief of Neskandaga sat with me, and he explained that they're in a state of emergency... There are massive social implications to this crisis that are affecting all elements of life.”

“They are forced to bring in these plastic water bottles that their community depends on, so they are also feeling connected to more problems. It's not just like, ‘Oh we're hurting... actually, we're also hurting the land.’ That's one of our relatives. We see the water, the land, the trees, and animals as our family.”



“People ask me all the time, ‘why were you willing to put your life on the line? Why were you willing to get arrested? Why were you willing to go on this journey and continue to be a voice for the water?’ For me, it’s not just because we need it for survival. But it’s because it feels like, our mother is being attacked. If your brother was being poisoned and killed, what would you do? You would stand up. You would protect them. So, when we see water as not, just a resource, not just something we need but someone that we are in relationship with, we are willing to stand up, we are willing to treat it differently.”

“I think one of the big things I’ve seen is how disconnected we are from water. We don’t even think of it, we just turn the tap on. We flush the toilet, we do the laundry, we do the dishes, and there’s no thought of our connection to that water. Whereas when I was in Navajo, in the desert, they honour every single drop that they bring into their home. They sing for their water; they use it four or five times in their home before they put it out in the earth.”



“Water is not just a resource. We are not respecting it. We are not taking care of it.

~ Layla Staats, Boil Alert

"I think our society has really brainwashed us to be in a singular mindset. People think 'I am just one person; how can I save the water? How can I even make a difference?' But people should realize that we are a collective, and I have seen the power of people when they come together."

“There are these 2 simple lessons that an Elder told me, and he said:

- 1. Never take more than you need.**
- 2. Leave things better than you found them.**

If everyone—including the mining companies, logging companies, and paper mills—followed these simple principles, we wouldn't have these issues.”

“When you're walking out on this land, you feel life, right? You feel that connection. You're in ceremony with the land, with Creator, and with the water. I think it is really important as we are on this red road to listen and use our ears to hear the stories. Slow down. Take time to listen. Keep hope. Do not get overwhelmed by worry and negativity, just live in gratitude for everything around you, and you'll never want for anything.”

~ Layla Staats



BOIL ALERT



If you or someone you know is in crisis and needs help, resources are available.

For Indigenous Peoples: Hope for Wellness provides immediate non-judgemental, culturally competent, trauma-informed emotional support, crisis intervention, or referrals to community-based services-24-hours a day, 7 days a week. Call 1-855-242-3310 or go to <https://www.hopeforwellness.ca/> for chat services.

If you are under the age of 18 you can also contact Kids Help Phone which offers 24/7 text service that does not need a data plan, internet connection, or an app to use. Text CONNECT or call 1-800-668-6868.

[Click here](#) to access regional and national crisis resources for Indigenous Peoples.