

## **Water Wise: Watersheds 2016 an inspirational conference**

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Last month I went to Vancouver for a conference, together with a couple hundred other people who spend a disproportionately large amount of their time thinking about water and watersheds. Like all good conferences, Watersheds 2016 was meant to inspire and to send us back into the world with new tools to do our important work. For many of us, the learning part was secondary to the opportunity to be inspired.

None of us really needed more information about climate change and climate-related threats to our water. But we were reminded anyway, since all our work is affected by this central challenge of our times. We were also reminded how crucial our work is to society itself, and how a shift in the way we all think about water is the missing ingredient for a sustainable future.

The hope and inspiration we were offered came largely from the indigenous presence at the conference. Thanks to a slew of court victories and decades of effort, First Nations are gaining influence in the decisions that affect their land and water. They are showing up to speak for their land, and this includes encouraging all of us to have more collaborative and inclusive conversations about water.

A representative from the Fort Nelson Nation spoke about the impact of fracking on her community's water. Coast Salish Elders offered support and wisdom to sustain us in our work. A youth from the Tla'amin First Nation near Powell River shared her vision and songs about social and environmental justice.

In 2016, as we learn to listen to the long-term stewards of the land, each of us are reminded how our own health depends on the health of the land and water around us. This sensible approach is really the only way forward on a planet where humans dominate the landscape. Thankfully, we will be hearing more and more of it, with our federal government's efforts on reconciliation with the indigenous peoples of Canada. This growing recognition of our first peoples comes at a time when we need their voices to help us chart a new path.

We are entering the age of adaptation. No longer can we assume that we will have access to clean water when and where we need it. Reconciliation—especially shared decision making—is an emerging strategy for a healthy water future. Discussions and plans for our shared water future need to happen at the local level between residents, landowners, First Nations and resource users. In technical terms, watershed-scale collaboration is called watershed governance. Essentially, it is a way for the provincial government to give up some decision-making power to local committees who can decide which values need protecting, and how best to share water between competing users and uses. This will include, crucially, how much water will be left to protect aquatic life and the landscapes that depend on water.

Watershed governance looks different in different communities, and it is built step by step. An example of this is the Cowichan Watershed Board, which has been working together to make some challenging decisions, even in the absence of formal decision-making powers. B.C.'s new water law, the Water Sustainability Act, recognizes the need for local planning and expertise, so we can expect watershed-scale decision making in more parts of the province, with the force of law behind it.

I look forward to seeing how B.C.'s First Nations, governments and communities step up to the growing challenge of keeping enough water in our rivers for fish and other aquatic life, while providing for our human needs.

Working better—together—has to become the new normal.

Because it's 2016.

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