

Theory of Change: Mni Ki Wakan Decade of Water Summit

Authors: Alice Lubeck, Wakinyan LaPointe, LeMoine LaPointe, Dr. Nicole MartinRogers



O C T O B E R 2 0 2 1

451 Lexington Parkway North | Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104
651-280-2700 | www.wilderresearch.org

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Mni Ki Wakan

Theory of Change

We believe that Indigenous water rights and water justice for all will be achieved by mobilizing Indigenous Peoples, youth, and elders to proactively innovate, boldly articulating the rich sovereignty of Indigenous worldviews, wisdom, and transformative visions through advocacy, education, and alliances that inform policy, governance, sustainability, and support Indigenous communities. As Indigenous Peoples, we believe water is a sacred gift that occupies a central relationship to all life and is essential to our existence.

Strategies Mni Ki Wakan uses:

- Human Rights advocacy and diplomacy, Treaty Rights: United Nations; state and federal government agencies and legislatures; coalitions, alliances, and collaborations
- Education and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) experiential learning for youth, tribal nations, non-Indigenous water justice advocates, decision-makers, policy makers, nonprofits, water agencies: providing capacity building, education, training, presentations, and workshops

Areas Mni Ki Wakan impacts:

- Indigenous knowledge and cultural revitalization
- Indigenous youth leadership development
- Organizational and program development
- Community development
- Water policy and governance
- Water investment and infrastructure
- Environmental sustainability

Traditional customary law and original instructions

Indigenous knowledge, technology, innovation, and values preserve, protect, and sustain water

Mni Ki Wakan
Water is Sacred

- Building connections and relationships: Community conversations and summits
- Research and reports

- Identifying and supporting Indigenous water initiatives, ambassadors, and champions

Ultimate goal:

Achieve Indigenous water rights, and Indigenous-led water justice for all.
Water is Sacred!
Mni Ki Wakan!



“Water is a big issue that involves every one of us. People are so stuck within the confines of city limits ... never seeing something is happening. [For example] with Antarctica and heat rising, fires going on. Something serious is happening. All the predictions shown in 1980s, [climate change is] happening. Water will become more valuable than gold, that’s the way we are headed. I believe there’s a way to intersect and intervene, but people need to respect the creator and everything in it.”

About Mni Ki Wakan

The Mni Ki Wakan Indigenous Water Decade Summit is a human rights advocacy and educational program that culminates in the annual Indigenous-led summit. The summit brings together Indigenous peoples from around the globe who are working toward Indigenous water justice. The Summit is a convening that builds connections, empowers youth, and educates Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants working in all aspects of water justice. The purpose of the Mni Ki Wakan Summit and its strategic programming throughout the year is to “mobilize Indigenous Peoples, youth, and elders to proactively innovate, boldly articulating the rich sovereignty of Indigenous worldviews, wisdom, and transformative visions through advocacy, education, and alliances that inform policy, governance, sustainability, and support Indigenous communities. Ultimately, to advance Indigenous water rights and water justice for all (see Mni Ki Wakan Theory of Change on p. 1).”

Since the commencement of Mni Ki Wakan in 2017, the Lakota tiwahe (the LaPointe family) that launched this initiative has used various frameworks to advance Indigenous water rights. Among the Oceti Sakowin (the Seven Council Fires), the traditional governing confederacy of which the Lakota are part, the tiwahe is the traditional Lakota family system. It

Indigenous peoples are composed of Indigenous Nations, communities, and individuals; they share an ancestral relationship with their traditional territories, share a common language, and share in a collective culture and history (Cobo, 1981).

The United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples (UNDRIP) describes inherent aspects of Indigenous water rights, which differ in many ways from western-based water rights systems that focus on usage and ownership of resources once governed by Indigenous peoples. For example, article 25 outlines the spiritual rights of Indigenous peoples and future generations to water, stating:

“Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas, and other resources and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard.”
(United Nations, 2007, p. 19)

represents the foundational leadership, governing, and kinship unit dedicated to the prosperity of their people and all life. The LaPointe tiwahe's initiatives have established well-informed partnerships with Indigenous activists, scholars, youth, and organizations. In partnering with Indigenous peoples, Mni Ki Wakan's approach centers on Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination.

The initiative draws from the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and a "working definition" of Indigenous Peoples by Martinez Cobo (1981) that outlines features which distinguish Indigenous Nations from colonial nation-states. Mni Ki Wakan draws from this working definition to recognize and build on the autonomy, innovation, and sovereignty of Indigenous water justice, governance, and associated concepts. Historically, nation-states, sectors, and organizations have approached Indigenous peoples as one homogenous and monolithic group, erasing distinct Indigenous Nations and their knowledge and contributions to water justice and other contemporary social issues. Establishing this basis for effective and meaningful Indigenous-led partnership moves us away from stereotypes of Indigenous peoples as uncivilized, uneducated, and dependent.

Mni Ki Wakan uses these frameworks for understanding and strengthening Indigenous rights, particularly in regards to water. This worldview conceives of water as a spiritual entity and relation that provides for and relies on us to provide for it. This mindset guides all of Mni Ki Wakan's strategies including how they connect with partners, conduct research and advocacy, frame the summit topics, and provide other education and training, as well as how they support others who are doing Indigenous water justice work.

About this report

Wilder Research was contracted by Mni Ki Wakan to complete a literature review and interviews about the various ways in which Indigenous-led activities and strategies can support water justice, water conservation, and water sustainability. The literature review and interviews were conducted in partnership and with the guidance of Mni Ki Wakan team members. These interviews were conducted with Indigenous and non-Indigenous summit attendees, all of whom are active advocates of water justice. The interviews collected wisdom from individual water justice advocates and scholars from across North America and mana'o from the Pacific. This current project is also a continuation of an ongoing effort among the LaPointe family and Dr. Nicole MartinRogers to develop an Indigenous Youth Research and Development Center and to otherwise advance the work of Mni Ki Wakan through Indigenous-led research and evaluation.

We are using the findings from the literature review and interviews to help show what others working toward Indigenous water rights are doing, and how they conceptualize Indigenous water rights. These two pieces of information helped develop the Theory of Change to lead to the ultimate goal Mni Ki Wakan is working to achieve: full enjoyment of Indigenous water rights. In the literature review we focused on four key areas of Indigenous water rights: Indigenous-led water research, governance, advocacy, and education. Our goal was to identify examples from the literature that illustrate the innovative Indigenous knowledge and practices that can create water justice for all, and it

was not an exhaustive review. This literature review also identifies some of the challenges to implementing these practices within colonial knowledge and governance systems.

In tandem with the findings from the literature, we cite themes and quotes from 12 interviews conducted with participants and partners of the Mni Ki Wakan Decade of Water Summit. The purpose the interviews are to help us learn what how Mni Ki Wakan participants and partners think about and implement elements of Indigenous water justice, as well as challenges to those strategies. Interview respondents were also asked to speak about their experiences with and hopes for Mni Ki Wakan, and visions for other work that needs to be done to achieve water justice for all.



Indigenous water research and reports

Mni Ki Wakan uses research as one strategy to address water justice issues. Research topics include Indigenous-led water policy and governance, advocacy, and infrastructure innovations. Mni Ki Wakan shares and synthesizes research with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous people working toward water justice.

When asked about the best possible future for water, one interview respondent said: “Considering the legacy of colonization, my main concern is ensuring our core concepts of reality are brought through and not colonized, and we are not mish mashing worldviews. That we ensure that strategies and actions align with our worldviews, that they are safe, safe from more colonization. That’s what we are working toward … ensuring the knowledge systems are distinct and safe, and have integrity in their own right. That concepts aren’t being watered down and our actions are attached to our knowledge system.”

Doing research about and utilizing Indigenous knowledge systems as it relates to water justice is one key aspect of an Indigenous-led water justice effort. Indigenous research and knowledge systems are embodied and practiced through “people being *in* place where ways of knowing and being in the world are continually performed through the relationship between people and their … country [land]” (Ayre and Mackenzie 2013, p. 754 emphasis in original).

This approach has several key distinctions from Western research approaches. Western research approaches describe reality by using generalized methods conducted by “neutral” observers to establish facts (Ayre & Mackenzie, 2013). These differences in research approaches can be seen in many examples from water research (Arsenault et al., 2018; Ayre & Mackenzie, 2013; Chief et al., 2016; Diver, 2017; Robison et al., 2017), and in other contexts (Robertson et al., 2004). These examples show that Indigenous-led research can create new and actionable knowledge for Indigenous communities (Diver, 2017, Robertson et al., 2004).

For example, during a mapping project with the British Columbia Ministry of Forest, members of the Xáxli’p tribe mapped their use of areas for contemporary subsistence use. The Canadian government had not taken this subsistence use into account when drawing their land use maps (Diver, 2017). This new mapping, along with new use categories

developed by the Xáxli’p, showed only 30% of the territory was suitable for logging “compared to 70% of the area in Ministry logging plans” (Diver, 2017, p. 6). The new map not only had ecological implications, including potential impacts on water, but also “required the Ministry to approve substantial policy shifts that: 1) enabled Xáxli’p to access a long-term Community Forest Tenure, 2) provided funding for the Xáxli’p Community Forest through existing First Nations forestry programs, and 3) recognized Xáxli’p self-determination interests and land use values” (Diver, 2017, p. 8). This shows how, given the opportunity, the in-place knowledge from the Xáxli’p tribe impacted both the ecology and politics of an area.

In another example, Robertson et al. (2004) describe how Indigenous-led research can support sovereignty and nation building. These authors describe how Indigenous methodologies can create new knowledge in any research discipline. The authors were evaluation researchers for the Comprehensive Indian Resources for Community and Law Enforcement (CIRCLE) Project, and they worked to make “federally mandated evaluation [of CIRCLE] as useful to the Oglala people as possible” (p. 499). They found that research and evaluation activities “Guided by Lakota methodologies, have become vital supports in the ‘nation building’ efforts undertaken through CIRCLE...” (p. 500). While CIRCLE worked in the context of the criminal justice system, the evaluation of the project, led by Oglala Lakota College, shows how Indigenous epistemologies can create research that provides context-specific actionable research in any context. This demonstrates how an “in-place” research team allows for a “sustained attention to data collection so that data that might not otherwise be generated are compiled” (p. 513). It also allowed for data to be generated that was directly of interest to the tribal community.

The importance of Indigenous methodologies to create new knowledge can be seen in water research as well. For example, the Hopi Department of Natural Resources (HDNR) worked with a researcher from the University of Arizona to incorporate local knowledge through “rapid assessment, organizational ethnography, and participant observation, as well as interviews and multiple discussions with Hopi citizens...”, and make sure Hopi

“We need more Indigenous research, decolonized methodologies, and water rights in our own hands. We are capable of managing our own water, and Native tribes will be hopefully applying for water rights and resources. A major thing, water is a moving thing and is connected through the whole planet. Whatever happens to the river upstream or downstream in that watershed will affect that water. We need to take control and build decent relationships with parts of government, like the EPA, that deal with water resources.”

“What we’re saying as Indigenous people, it’s our inherit role [to be the guardian of lake or river]. We need our own ability to monitor, regulations. This [our water monitoring system] builds on all of that, the way we observe, monitor, use information.”

citizen concerns were at the forefront of the drought monitoring system (Chief et al., 2016, p. 13). By incorporating local knowledge and skills, the system was able to provide more relevant, locally specific knowledge than “using instrumental data from external sources, which is sparse across Hopi lands” (Chief et al., 2016, p. 13). The authors report that through this research, HDNR hopes “The shift to locally controlled data … will place more control in the hands of local decision makers and community members who are most affected by drought impacts” (Chief et al., 2016, p. 13).

These examples show that research using Indigenous methodologies, including “in place” research and incorporating community knowledge, can create new knowledge that positively impacts both the ecology of an area and promotes policy shifts leading to greater self-determination. The founders and partners of Mni Ki Wakan plan to further their work in Indigenous methodologies by creating the Indigenous Youth Research and Development Center (IYRDC) to facilitate more Indigenous-led Youth Participatory Action Research on the topic of water justice and related issues.



Wopasi: Lakota research methodologies

Mni Ki Wakan and the IYRDC uses Wopasi, the Lakota-based research methodology espoused by Lakota organizations.

Historically, Indigenous peoples have been researched using conventional methodologies that have dissected and stolen their knowledge without informed, and prior consent and consultation, as required by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007). A culturally appropriate Indigenous-led, participatory research approach is crucial for respecting the inherent, universal, and fundamental rights of sovereign and self-determining Indigenous peoples for full, equal, and effective participation in research about them.

“In the Lakota language, the term ‘Wopasi’ means to pursue inquiry, to push the limitations of one’s knowledge, and to seek greater understanding by looking for meaning and wisdom above, beneath, and all around.” LeMoine LaPointe

In the Lakota way of life, when a young person makes a traditional offering of cansasa (ceremonial tobacco) to an elder, asking for teachings and knowledge, the youth acknowledges the elder as a tunkashila (grandfather) or unci (grandmother). Subsequently, asking wopasi woiyunge (research questions) has similar significance, meaning, and protocols. This differs from western research where people are approached as subjects and it may be purely transactional. In this example, Lakota knowledge brings about hunka (making of relatives) and unity, not division, hierarchy, and ownership.

Thus, a guiding principle of wopasi (research) is mitakuye oyas’ in (all life is related). This means there are inherent functions of wopasi in the Lakota way of life. Knowledge production and transmission through wopasi contributes to Unci Maka (grandmother earth), a sense of relatedness, future generations, and honoring knowledge bearers.

Other principles include, but are not limited to:

- Lakowicoh'an: the Lakota way of life comprised of ceremony, customs, laws, and protocols guide the Lakota people in everything they do. This includes Wopasi.
- Wolakota: Creating peaceful relations between tiwahe (families), tiospaye (extended families), and oyate (nations), including all life.
- Waunsila: Compassion, care, and sincerity for each other and all life.
- Woksape: Individual and collective wisdom in balance with all life and the universe.
- Tawacin Tanka: Use of individual and collective wisdom, intelligence, and knowledge for the best possible future.

When asked what role does Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices around water play in water governance and research, one respondent said:

"[They have] the instructions on how to take care of water, the real instruction. The human connection between ourselves as humans and water as a spirit and living being. Within our knowledge, teaching, stories, interactions, how it's used in ceremony, for transportation, fishing, how we have used it to survive, [it goes] beyond a few thousand years, but since the beginning of time."

Each principle is utilized in wopasi by Mni Ki Wakan and IYRDC researchers, partners, and leaders.

Indigenous water governance

Water governance is another strategy or mechanism that Mni Ki Wakan and IYRDC pursues with the ultimate goal of achieving water justice. Indigenous water governance reflects ancient systems which predate colonialism and persist today in environmental water conservation and restoration. Many of our interview respondents described how Indigenous governance appeals to ancient systems of knowing, and how these systems can transform into modern political and ecological contexts.

Almost all of the interview respondents mentioned that the first priority of a water governance system should be to protect and value the water itself. Water is a living spirit and the first priority should be the health of that spirit. Respondents mentioned how this is one of the oldest and core tenants of their understanding of water governance.

"Water governance encompasses nationhood, citizenship, and diplomacy in fulfillment of future generations and water itself as a living relation. Water justice is about the process by which we create opportunities of realization, fairness, equity, and relationally. The relational piece is that we don't ask 'what do we need from water?' but [instead, we ask] 'what water needs to exist and thrive and be healthy and happy.'"

“[Indigenous-led water] governance would look more as a collective centering the community from the ground up, of course keeping prayer at the center. ... [Water governance should be] more collective, not top down. That [top-down] system has worked effectively in certain populations, but it’s not effective in Indigenous communities.”

Interview respondents also described governance systems where Indigenous people need to have meaningful decision-making power in water governance, not just input into policy. Once crucial argument for Indigenous people having direct governance over water is that this would allow them to maintain their traditional relationship with water. Interview respondents said many Indigenous peoples around the world are linked to water as a relation, and maintaining that relationship means having access to clean water and sacred sites to do ceremony. For example, in the Lakota language the word “mni” (water) comes from the phrase “mnye wani” (I am alive). Additionally, interview respondents said water governance should be community-led. Interview respondents noted that governance of water reflects the sovereignty of Indigenous people.

Indigenous-led governance systems can be in tension with more ubiquitous Western governance systems (Arsenault, 2021; Chief et al., 2016). For example, Arsenault (2021) heard from an interview participant that a First Nations community who was working to initiate a collaborative water well project was running into pushback from the government. The government “tended to favour water treatment plants as the primary source of water treatment in First Nation communities” (p. 11) whereas the local Indigenous community preferred a collaborative water well system. This type of tension can exacerbate power differences between Indigenous and Western governments (Chief et al., 2016). When there are differences between Indigenous governments’ recommended ways to manage water and colonizer governments’ recommendations, colonizer water management approaches often remain dominant due to historic and contemporary power imbalances (Chief et al., 2016; Diver, 2017).

In some cases, the tension between Western and Indigenous approaches to water governance can be resolved. For instance, in New Zealand the Whanganui Maori people contested the Crown’s governance of Treaty of Waitangi grounds. To solve various disputes, the New Zealand government passed the Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Act 2017, which acknowledges the river “as a living whole that stretches from the mountains to the sea, including both its physical and metaphysical elements” (cited in O’Donnell & Talbot-Jones, 2018). Te Awa Tupua, in “the spirit of the Treaty of Waitangi,” will “be represented by two people, one person appointed by the Crown and the other by Whanganui Iwi” (cited in O’Donnell and Talbot-Jones, 2018). Additionally, there is an advisory group with representatives including “Iwi with interest in the Whanganui River, local and central government representatives, tourism, conservation, recreation, and wild game” (O’Donnell & Talbot-Jones, 2018). These pathways give the Whanganui Iwi direct governance power and create a new governance system (O’Donnell & Talbot-Jones, 2018).

Interview respondents had several suggestions for how Mni Ki Wakan can influence governance of water through policy work. About half of interview respondents noted that the learning and experience of Mni Ki Wakan informed their work afterwards. A

respondent noted that the Summit itself could be used as a place to build consensus, and that consensus could be leveraged to build political power. Many respondents suggested that the LaPointe family continue their work at the UN because they are already well established there, and support partners who enact policy on more local levels through best practices or position papers. One reason a few respondents suggested this approach is because policy work is often context specific, and it would be hard to do a lot of that context-specific work at a global Summit.



Indigenous water advocacy and diplomacy

Mni Ki Wakan also uses advocacy as another strategy to address water justice issues. Indigenous communities have used several strategies to gain legal recognition of their rights and relationship with water, thus provide viable alternatives to Western governance and water injustices of colonialism. Not only do these advocacy strategies push back on Western governance, but they also create new pathways for Indigenous governance of resources.

"I want to take care of water because I have a passion for water. Water has a right to be clean for itself. It's not just for commodification, to make money, and that's true for everything else on the planet."

Indigenous communities around the world have also used legal action and advocacy to grant rivers personhood, which is an Indigenous value that pushes back on Western ideas of water being a commodity (Bouayad, 2020; O'Donnell & Talbot-Jones, 2018; Smith, 2019). In some cases, courts have granted rivers personhood rights such as the Whanganui River in New Zealand and the Ganges and Yauma rivers in India. Recently the Yurok Tribe declared the rights of personhood for the Klamath River, which is the first time this has happened for a river in North America. This creates legal advocacy routes, as well as expressing Yurok values. "In essence, the Yurok resolution means that if the river is harmed, a case can be made in Yurok tribal court to remedy the problem" (Smith, 2019).

The White Earth Band of Ojibwe furthered this legal framework in a novel way by creating a tribal law entitled *The Rights of the Manoomin*, which "codify the right of the plant to 'exist, flourish, regenerate, and evolve' and the correlative right to 'pure water and freshwater habitat' and to 'a healthy system and natural environment free from human-caused global warming.'" These rights also include the "right to be free from patenting; as well as rights to be free from infection, infestation, or drift by any means from genetically engineered organisms." On August 4th, 2021, the White Earth Band of Ojibwe brought the first case in tribal court, citing *The Rights of the Manoomin*, as well as rights recognized in the 1837, 1854, and 1855 Treaties, against the State of Minnesota for allowing the Enbridge Corporation to take five billion gallons of water for the construction of a crude oil pipeline (Line 3) (Pember, 2021). Although the court system has not yet heard the case, the filing of the case shows how novel legal frameworks authored by Indigenous peoples can create new governance and advocacy for the rights of plants, water, and nature.



Indigenous water education

An important component to creating a world with Indigenous water rights is educating youth, both in and out of the classroom, including the topics of historical and modern systems of Indigenous water research, governance, and advocacy. Water education curricula authored by Indigenous people for use in a public school setting demonstrates how Indigenous knowledge can be integrated into the curriculum for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. This content engages students with Indigenous worldviews about water and offers alternatives to Western teaching approaches. A few examples are the Advocacy and Water Protection in Native California Curriculum (Save California Salmon, 2020) and the Indigenous People's Curriculum Resources (Science Teachers' Association of Ontario, n.d.). The themes represented in these courses mirror many of the themes in Indigenous-led research and governance, and call for the inclusion of respected Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), understanding of historical and current power dynamics between Indigenous and Western communities, and locally specific content.

For example, Indigenous-authored water education places an emphasis on understanding and teaching TEK and how it differs from Western scientific knowledge (Save California Salmon, 2020; Science Teachers' Association of Ontario, n.d.). The Save California Salmon curriculum writers explain that in order for a teacher to teach TEK, they need to understand that “TEK is a science in its own right and does not need to be validated through Western science.”

There are historic power imbalances between Western science and TEK. Teachers need to recognize this dynamic; the curricula suggest they do so by teaching the history of colonization and how that affects Indigenous peoples’ modern day TEK, practices, and land management (Save California Salmon, 2020; Science Teachers' Association of

The Science Teachers' Association of Ontario's Indigenous People's Curriculum Resources (n.d.) curriculum answers “Why should I include Indigenous Science and Indigenous knowledge in my classroom?” by saying:

“As an educator, there will likely be many diverse students in your classroom with diverse learning needs and understandings of the world. By incorporating Indigenous knowledge into the classroom through the appropriate mechanisms and supports, you will allow students of all backgrounds to a unique and beautiful way of learning and knowing the world. For non-Indigenous students, it opens their minds to another way of learning and understanding the world which may resonate with them or may not. By providing authentic Indigenous voices into your classroom or school, you are working towards uncovering the true history of Canada which many Canadian children to this day are still denied. Additionally, for Indigenous students in your classrooms, you are demonstrating that you understand their unique cultural background and are honoring it in an appropriate way.”

Ontario, n.d.). For example, the Save California Salmon Curriculum recommends discussing how damming practices in California altered the water, land, and habitat across the state. These western practices led to the physical erasure of the Indigenous peoples in this area through flooding of villages and sacred sites.

However, the writers of the curriculum recommend it is not enough to talk about the historical context of Indigenous peoples; teachers also need to talk about modern day Indigenous research and land management. To do this, there are various courses and materials built by Indigenous people that allow for de-colonizing education around TEK (Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, 2011; Save California Salmon, 2020; Science Teachers' Association of Ontario, n.d.). Teaching students about TEK and modern land management practices through Indigenous pedagogy shows TEK is not a static body of knowledge, but rather an evolving one. It also provides a pathway for students to understand water through a TEK worldview instead of through a Western pedagogical approach.

TEK and Indigenous knowledge systems were developed in nature using land- and water-based learning, and those systems of learning continue today, outside of formal Western educational systems and school settings. This is reflected in the Mni Ki Wakan summit, where many activities occur outside and involve being with water. Many of the interview respondents noted the experiential learning opportunities and time spent outside the conference room were some of the most powerful experiences of the Mni Ki Wakan Summit. Many respondents said that their favorite parts of the Summit were the experiential learning opportunities. On these trips, respondents remember the stories that were told and the ceremonies that they participated in. Additionally, interview respondents noted that Mni Ki Wakan was a natural mentoring space for youth and a space for intergenerational learning. This learning happened both in the group discussions of the conference and in the storytelling that took place on the experiential learning opportunities.

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“There were young people, grandparents, grandchildren. They were all engaged, like in the breakout sessions. People were drawn in.”

Mni Ki Wakan has created other TEK learning events. For example, they are involved in the Mde Maka Ska Canoe Nations Gathering and the Okizu Canoe Nations Convergence. The goals of this event were placing youth back into relationship with water, placing communities back into relationship with water, and using the traditional canoe to restore this relationship. During the most recent Summit there was experiential learning at Pesla (The Heart of Everything That Is) in the Black Hills. This event brought together conference participants and local knowledge keepers at the site where Lakota people carried out water ceremonies. This event is an opportunity for conference participants to be placed in relationship with water.

Reflections on the Mni Ki Wakan Indigenous Water Summit

When reflecting back on the Mni Ki Wakan Summit, almost all respondents said that it was a unique opportunity to gather, learn, and build solidarity with Indigenous people of all ages and from all over the world. Respondents said the summit allowed them to build solidarity by reminding them and reinforcing that they were part of a larger movement. This reminder was particularly important as many respondents noted that they often feel lonely doing water justice work, whether it is policy, research, or advocacy, in their home communities.

Many respondents also said that Mni Ki Wakan felt different than other Western water conferences because Indigenous worldviews, ceremonies, and culture were centered and woven in to all aspects of the Summit. Respondents gave the examples of the outdoor expeditionary learning experiences, having local Indigenous elders and leaders present, and participating in ceremony were all powerful aspects of the Summit. Most respondents appreciated that the Summit fostered global connections and, at the same time, was rooted in the traditional Indigenous territories of the region. Many respondents said both these elements contributed to the Summit feeling uniquely Indigenous, in comparison to other conferences they have attended.

“Yesterday I googled ‘global water summit.’ There’s a big one in Madrid in May 2021, all about utility, how to use water, create more water, nothing cultural, no perspectives. I kept looking. It’s all water science, water use, how to control water, how to sell water. There’s nothing on the intrinsic worth of water itself. Often it comes to Indigenous groups to hold that line [and include the] water protector component of gathering.”

Several respondents noted how much they learned at the Summit. By bringing together participants from all over North America, the Mid-west and the world, the Summit gave many respondents the opportunity to be exposed to new ideas and solutions related to all aspects of Indigenous water rights and water justice. For example, a couple respondents noted a presentation by participants from New Zealand about water monitoring that gave them new ideas about how Indigenous-led water research could look in their home community. Additionally, other respondents noted how the presentations paired with small group discussions allowed for information that was shared to sink in. Respondents

also noted that these discussion groups supported intergenerational learning because the small group sized allowed for everyone to participate and for different combinations of people to talk to each other. A couple respondents noted the expertise represented at the conference allowed them to gain deep insights into topics they were less familiar with.

“I was so grateful to be involved. I loved it! The interactions between all the different areas. In Western conferences, everything is its own different thing [like legal, policy, science]. Dealing with water, everything is connected -- different people, backgrounds, having important conversations. I am really grateful for having more conversations as we battle what’s coming with climate change.”

“We need to do things to top us off. We have a national meeting with the freshwater team and, when you get tired [doing the tough work of water justice], likeminded individuals boost you back up.”

“All First Peoples, we have a similar story of how we’ve managed to live sustainably in an area since time began. Because of imperialism and colonialism, everything went upside down. It doesn’t matter where you’re from. We’re all trying to bring the balance back, to make things good again. Where we are from, who the interrupter is, that’s the difference. But when we get together, it’s healing, we share our stories and support each other. Beyond that, [of sharing and supporting] in gathering, we amplify our voices together rather than as isolated populations. It’s a louder voice. Solidarity is a good thing; it’s healing. Those are the things, great things that happen when we come together.”

“What I like about Mni Ki Wakan is they value teamwork and everyone’s perspectives. The only way to get through this time is together. I really cherish that. Society teaches us you need to be first, on the front cover, the ideal spokesperson who gets all sponsors and funding. Really--when we follow traditional values--everyone has a role and place and everyone is equal. [They] implement [those values] in Mni Ki Wakan.”

Priorities for Mni Ki Wakan

When asked about what the Mni Ki Wakan should prioritize moving forward, several respondents mentioned that they should work to document and disseminate the outcomes of the Summit. A couple respondents noted that the discussions at the Summit were so rich that they wanted to see what came out of those discussions; they were curious what participants were doing six months after the Summit. Many respondents suggested displaying what came after the Summit visually through photography, short films, or through social media posts. Respondents felt that this would help continue the momentum of the Summit by demonstrating and highlighting the outcomes of the convening.

Respondents also mentioned that Mni Ki Wakan should prioritize being a global summit because the global connections were so valuable for respondents. Also, Mni Ki Wakan is the only Indigenous-led water conference in the world. Many respondents felt that the experience of an Indigenous-led water conference was so powerful that efforts should be made to broaden the attendance.

Respondents had many suggestions for how to help maintain and expand the accessibility and relevance of Mni Ki Wakan for international participants:

- If possible, look for funding to help support people flying in
 - Mni Ki Wakan is doing a good job of this already--for example, they offer free lodging--so look for ways to maintain or expand this
- Announce the Summit and location far in advance so participants can save, fundraise, and plan with as much time as possible
- Keep virtual elements to the conference as it allows people who can't come to stay in the conversation
- Continue making contacts at the United Nations
 - Foster those connections so people feel engaged in Mni Ki Wakan even if they cannot make it to the summits
- Have smaller engagement efforts throughout the year
 - For example, virtual discussions or regional convenings, in addition to the summit
- Keep the in-person Summit once it's safe to do so post-COVID-19
- Rotate the Summit internationally

“One of the benefits of the Summit is I love to see Natives going forward with solutions, not just talking about it. [There were] real people there, projects they were doing, solving problems themselves. The Navajo Water Project just blew me away. ... She talked about bringing little sinks into homes that don’t have plumbing. They are able to do that!”

“Participating at the UN forum is a key. That’s where we were able to meet partners from various countries, all coming to one location. ... We make partnerships there. ... It’s important to be present continuously at the UN Summit [on the water rights of Indigenous peoples].”

How to strengthen youth component

One of the priorities for Mni Ki Wakan participants is empowering youth. This aligns closely with the intended goals of the Indigenous Youth Research and Development Center (IYRDC). We asked respondents the best ways for Mni Ki Wakan to engage youth moving forward. Respondents had many suggestions on the best ways to do this:

Ways to engage youth outside the Summit

- Create an action tool kit so youth have resources to work on local water issues
- Create Mni Ki Wakan chapters so that youth can connect regularly

- Have a governance board with youth members that can inform decisions about the Summit
- Network, and potentially partner with other Indigenous youth groups
 - Such as United National Indian Tribal Youth (UNITY)

Ways to engage youth at the Summit

- Create a day or half day at the Summit that's for only youth participants
 - For any initiative make sure to engage youth in a solutions-oriented way
- For example, working with youth to demonstrate the positive impacts they can make
- Including a virtual component to the Summit
 - Could also help youth that can't attend
 - For example, coordinating with classrooms to watch the Summit or have closed loop access

One respondent noted that providing leadership opportunities for youth are most productive when they happen on an interpersonal level. Another participant mentioned that youth can solve problems they are most passionate about, but sometimes need guidance on how to get started. When considering these suggestions, products like an action tool kit, or activities like forming chapters of Mni Ki Wakan, could be good ways to create scalable resources that can then be adjusted to local contexts.

"In small reservation communities, considering all the other things bad things, so it's hard to commit to something like this. So I would say provide the positives, the good outlooks, not just negative. Talk about solutions, what are people doing. Getting kids to interact, not just talking at them, get them involved in conversations. Whenever we do establish these connections, maintain them. People go in and do one little event -- 'here, let me teach you about climate change' -- and I never see you again. So you've got to maintain interaction. Not just tools to do something, but give them confidence."



Ultimate goals

Indigenous water justice is a crucial element of human rights, self-determination, and sovereignty for Indigenous people around the world (Chief et al., 2016; Robison et al., 2017). This was codified in the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The Declaration maintains that "...States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the indigenous...in order to obtain their free and informed consent prior to the approval of any project affecting their lands or territories and other resources, particularly in connection with the development, utilization or exploitation of mineral, water or other resources" (p. 23). Additionally "...for some Tribal Nations who have signed treaties with settler-states, these high-level agreements are the primary means for water protections, claims, and justice" (United Nations, 2007). These agreements need to also take into account the transboundary nature of water. Where activities outside of Tribal Nations impacts the water within Tribal Nations' boundaries.

Not only is Indigenous water justice crucial for sovereignty and self-determination, but also plays a central role in the religion and cultural practices, and is the "essence of life" for many Indigenous people (Robison et al., p. 844).

Ultimately, through the work of Mni Ki Wakan and related efforts, we envision a future where Indigenous-led efforts will create water justice for all. Mni Ki Wakan is advancing this work through human rights advocacy, education and experiential learning opportunities, building connections, research, and identifying and supporting Indigenous water initiatives, ambassadors and champions. By leading with sacred knowledge and approaches of Indigenous peoples, water will be protected, water sustainability, water justice and Indigenous water governance will be advanced!

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Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the interview respondents who shared their wisdom with us. These respondents include:

- Amanda Rouillard- Isanti Sioux Nation
- Heather O'Watch- Nakota & Nehiyaw from Okanese First Nation, Treaty 4 Territory
- Leland Little Dog- Sicangu Lakota
- Liliias Jarding- Black Hills Clean Water Alliance
- 8 other individuals who did not give explicit permission to be named in this report

We would also like to thank all of the study participants and Mni Ki Wakan Water Summit participants for their invaluable contributions, as well as the LaPointe tiwahe (family) for their guidance throughout the project.

Wopila Tanka!
(Our sincerest & immeasurable thanks!)

The following Wilder Research staff contributed to this work:

Amanda Eggers
Heather Loch
Maureen McGovern
Phil Cooper
Rachel Fields

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The Mni Ki Wakan Decade of Water Summit is a human rights advocacy and educational program that culminates in the annual Indigenous-led summit about water justice.