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## **Stakeholder Engagement, Public Awareness and Indigenous Perspectives for Lake Winnipeg Lake Winnipeg Foundation**

### **Project Summary**

#### **Part I. Description**

Participating organizations

- Lake Winnipeg Foundation
- First Nations from around Lake Winnipeg

#### **Background or problem statement**

Over the past decades Lake Winnipeg has been in decline as a result of nutrient loading, climate change, other man-made interventions such as the effect of industry and more recently by the arrival of another invasive species, zebra mussels. These combined effects have had an impact on all those who live, work and play on the lake. The First Nations on Lake Winnipeg have seen significant impact on their cultural, social and economic well-being as a direct result of this environmental challenge. It is widely recognized that Indigenous voices are notably absent from the conversations, decisions and actions on Lake Winnipeg. Despite their cultural, social and economic connection to water, First Nations have, due to a combination of colonial history, financial and capacity restraints and undermining of nation-to-nation relationships, been unable to contribute their knowledge and perspectives on Lake Winnipeg. It is the goal of Lake Winnipeg Indigenous Collective to amplify the numerous Indigenous voices on Lake Winnipeg, to implement projects to protect and restore Lake Winnipeg and to become a resource for other bodies working on the health of Lake Winnipeg.

#### **General description of the project**

Over the past 18 months, with ongoing support from LWF, participating nations have met five times and have identified priorities for action, developed a draft action plan and are establishing a governance structure. LWIC's governance structure includes a steering committee that consists of representatives from seven nations. The steering committee has been responsible for creating the accord, terms of reference, action plan and prioritizing project planning.

The governance structure provides a framework from which many distinct First Nations impacted in different ways by declining lake health can make collective decisions. It also creates stability for the collective to coordinate their responses to a multitude of issues and a wide network of stakeholders. By creating a governance structure, continuity of process is established which can assist with efficiency and reduces duplication of work.

Collective decision making amongst nations is challenging for several reasons including but not limited to a history of colonization and modern colonial systems. This has resulted in the geo-political isolation of individual First Nations. The collective governance structure is a set of tools and guiding values intended to create space where individual nations' perspectives are genuinely heard and the collective can reach consensus on various topics.

Over 18 months relationships have developed and strengthened between First Nations and with LWF. The collective built and strengthened nation-to-nation relationships amongst each other that created a strong foundation and has been valuable in establishing trust and mutual respect as well supporting the

work of the collective moving forward. The nation-to-nation relationships have created a space where common experiences, concerns and observations are all acknowledged with respect and understanding.

LWIC is also reaching out to new partners to establish relationships as the collective develops. As LWIC's voice continues to be strengthened, it will contribute greatly to the emergence of healthy and equitable solutions for Lake Winnipeg and for Indigenous Peoples.

### **Description of outcomes and follow-up**

The products of this project are less tangible than a report but equally valuable in the search for inclusive relationships for Lake Winnipeg. Relationships based on trust, respect and mutual reciprocity that formed between First Nations and with the Lake Winnipeg Foundation. These relationships were built through time spent sharing stories from around the lake, First Nations connecting on common concerns and supporting one another. LWIC's relationships provide the foundation for future success of the collective working towards supporting one another with solutions for Lake Winnipeg.

Going forward, LWIC has prioritized three projects to focus on which include documenting water uses and impacts, establishing a collective treaty rights based position on water rights and governance and compiling data on the current health of Lake Winnipeg for a report.

The documents, acting as the collective's guiding principles, that LWIC created through establishing their governance structure include a mission, a vision and set of values, which guide the collective through their work and connect them to their objectives. Two other documents that LWIC created include: a LWIC accord and terms of reference which act as supporting documents for the work addressing the concerns First Nations share around Lake Winnipeg.

## **Project Summary**

### **Part II. Analysis**

#### **Successes**

The key successes of the project are:

- collaborative planning undertaken jointly by Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups
- 5 productive and meaningful gatherings
- a first step in mobilizing a traditionally marginalized people
- creation of a steering committee
- increased self-identification of the strength of a collective voice
- the creation of a mission, vision and values
- an action plan to move forward for future projects
- a draft terms of reference
- a draft accord

One of the truest successes is the emergence of strengthened voices from First Nations from around the lake who are working collectively to ensure the health issues of the lake are dealt with adequately. By building relationships based on reciprocity, individual nations know that they have social capital to draw from when needed and this is where the value of these relationships is truly apparent. It is more difficult for industry and governments to ignore the voices of many nations together than it is to ignore individual nations.

The mission, vision, set of values, accord and terms of reference are crucial documents that form a basis from which the collective can move forward. These documents outline the collective's main objectives, responsibilities, issues of concern. These written pieces allow multiple First Nations to work from a common place together on shared issues but also allow individual nations to be supported by the collective on issues particular to individual First Nations.

## **Challenges**

Throughout the duration of this project, the most significant challenges include building relationships with the First Nations involved with LWIC. There is a long history of colonialism in Canada and therefore these relationships took time, understanding and reciprocity. At the same time, due to capacity issues and financial restraints, communities were not able to attend every gathering which meant that the relationship process was slower than anticipated and required us to ensure that we communicated consistently all with communities between gatherings.

Another challenge that we had not anticipated was the nation-to-nation relationship building between First Nations at the gathering. Due to past and current government tactics of undermining relationships between First Nations, relationships between First Nations are in some cases fragmented. Over the duration of this project, relationships between First Nations grew stronger and this is apparent in the cohesiveness of the collective at this point in the project.

First Nations have numerous competing priority concerns— access to clean drinking water, food sovereignty, housing crises, quality healthcare, economic development, land management etc. First Nations in Manitoba and across Canada are chronically underfunded in these areas. Consistently, First Nations have insufficient economic and physical access to resources that are commonly accessible to other non-Indigenous communities in Manitoba. Therefore capacity was a challenge in terms of working with the communities between gatherings. Often, representatives would not have the capacity to take on tasks outside of the gathering – which with their guidance LWF was able to fulfill. The capacity to work on tasks outside of the gathering could be built if more resources, such as increased funding for salaries, were available.

Another challenge that the collective and LWF encountered over the course of this project was creating institutional memory. A consistent list of participants were invited to each gathering but due to scheduling conflicts, staff changeover etc. it was challenging for communities to send a consistent representative to each gathering. As a result, a considerable amount of time was spent bringing new representatives up to speed on what had been discussed previously. This has not only been an immediate challenge but also a long term one in the way the collective is partially dependent on this institutional memory to move forward and for gatherings to be as efficient as they can.

## **Lessons Learned**

As a non-Indigenous organization, LWF learned a lot in terms of working within a different worldview, building relationships built on trust and mutual respect and learning from the traditional knowledge that was shared.

LWF learned that in order to successfully support LWIC, we need to demonstrate that we are not to simply fulfill a funding obligation but because we recognize the strength and importance that these added voices bring the Lake Winnipeg issue. LWF did this by securing additional funding to continue the project past the originally anticipated two year mark and to increase the amount of support we could provide in the first two years of this project. LWF has provided a consistent and stable administrative role during the past 18 months and will continue to for as long as LWIC would like us to be involved. Our long term commitment to this project was beneficial in gaining trust and establishing relationships with individual First Nations and with LWIC as a whole.

LWF has learned over the course of this project that to support the emergence of this collective effectively, we need to continuously evaluate our role as LWIC evolves. Depending on which stage LWIC has been at in development, we ask ourselves 'are we supporting LWIC in a way that meets the current needs?' LWF's supportive administrative role is a stable but not a stagnant one. We need to be adaptive and responsive to how, when, where and why we support the work of LWIC.

**What Next? What will you do and what should others do?**

LWF will continue to work with the Lake Winnipeg Indigenous Collective as they strengthen their governance structure, plan projects and form relationships with partners. There are several other groups – government, researchers, conservation districts etc. that are working on the Lake Winnipeg issue and LWIC is starting to establish relationships with them in order to strengthen the conversations happening around the lake.

We will continue to work in a supportive administrative role in a stable and responsive way, until funds and organizational structure are in place to support an Indigenous staff person. At that time, LWF hopes to continue to engage with Indigenous communities from around the lake, through LWIC and beyond. The true intention of this project, which is to make sure that Indigenous perspectives and knowledge are included in the search for solutions for Lake Winnipeg will remain LWF's goal beyond our involvement with this project.

For more information about the project please contact:

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