



Online Knowledge Dialogue

“Application of Indigenous Knowledge in Water Management: Best Practice Models” 22 November 2022

Summary Record

All living beings share a connection with water, the vital resource that gives sustenance to all life on our Mother Earth. We, the Indigenous peoples of the entire world, have had a very special relationship with water, founded on our age-old ways of life and subsistence. Our forbears used their ancestral systems of knowledge and wisdom to address environmental challenges. Today, in the face of new challenges, current and future, we must find ways to restore our traditional knowledge and systems for the same purpose. As we Indigenous peoples play a crucial role in the protection of nature, the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) has undertaken to promote our participation in its actions and processes, so that we may contribute to countering greater environmental challenges in North America and throughout the world.

On 22 November 2022, a knowledge dialogue was held on the **Application of Indigenous Knowledge in Freshwater Management: Best Practice Models**, with the objective of creating an ethical space for respectful interchange, which, in addition to enabling learning, would encourage Indigenous communities from different regions of North America to share their knowledge, experiences and lessons learned regarding freshwater management. Organized by the CEC as part of its *Indigenous approaches to freshwater management in North America* initiative, the event provided participants with a platform to tell their stories, share their best practices and recount their achievements in relation to freshwater management in North America.

The event attracted over 200 online participants who followed the dialogue from points around the world. It began with a moving opening ceremony that invoked and expressed respect for our peoples, officiated by **Cessia Esther Chuc Uc**, a member of the CEC’s Traditional Ecological Knowledge Expert Group (TEKEG).

Cessia Esther shared the following poem¹ in the Mayan language:

Óoxlajunpilinsuutbin u beet a pixan ti’ tu ba’apachts’o’ono’otil ja’
Óoxlajunpilinsuutbin u beet a pixan ti’ tu ba’apachk’áak’
Óoxlajunpilinsuutbin u beet a pixan ti’ tu ba’apachiik’
Óoxlajunpilinsuutbin u beet a pixan ti’ tu ba’apachlu’um
Tu’uxwalakbalech, tu’uxmuuka’an a tuuch, yáaxti’ich’ilil a
Baak’elti’al u jant k lu’umil, ya’axbo’olil u ti’almáakku
Aj kanantiko’ob a pixan, ti’ich’ililjanalti’al u na’tsil u chuunil

¹ This poem was written by Jorge Miguel Cocom Pech, a Mayan poet, storyteller and essayist in November 2022.

A wíinklil
Ti'al a kaxtik u yo'och a wíinklil
Ka beeychajakti'al a kaxtikichil u sáasil ja', ti' nojochts'ono'ot
Ka beeychajakti'al a kaxtiktu'uxkuwáak'alk'áak'
Kuyélelechiltawotoch
Ka beeychajakti'al a kaxtikichil u tomojchi' iik'
Ka beeychajakti'al a kaxtikichil u ki'bokillu'um
Kuts'a'abajojéeltbiyaan u suut a ch'i'ibalwayyóok'olkaabe'

Thirteen times, your spirit will circle the enormous water well.
Thirteen times, your spirit will circle the fire.
Thirteen times, your spirit will circle the air.
Thirteen times, your spirit will circle the earth.
There, where you stand. There, where you buried your umbilicus,
first meat-offering to the earth, primeval tribute
intended for the protectors of your soul, sacred food
for the original mother of your body.
So that you may seek sustenance for your body...
Whether it be in the clear water of the enormous cenote,
or in the fire spirit burning in your house,
or in the augury of the wind,
or in the smell of the earth which,
sown with your seed, announces the return of your lineage.

The opening ceremony was followed by words of welcome from TEKEG Facilitator **Kathy Hodgson-Smith** who underlined Indigenous peoples' extreme degree of dependence on water resources, as well as the grave effects on their cultures and economies wrought by the degradation of freshwater ecosystems and environmental deterioration in general.

Marcela Orozco, Director of Advisory Groups and Public Participation, joined the conversation to present a brief description of the CEC's work and the purpose and objectives of the *Indigenous Approaches to Freshwater Management in North America* initiative. In addition to stressing the important role played by TEKEG, she outlined the strategic pillars of the CEC, emphasizing in particular the issue of water resources.

Next, Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Indigenous Affairs Officer **Yolanda López Maldonado** welcomed the panelists, discussed general agenda points, and gave a general overview of the case studies from the three countries of North America that were selected for presentation at the event.

Lynn Morrison, who is from the Simpcw First Nation (British Columbia) and is a student in the Qwelminté Secwépemc Collective's program on practices of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc community, opened the knowledge dialogue with a presentation entitled "The Séwllkwe-Wai Exchange: An Intercultural exchange between Kua Aina Ulu Auamo (Hawai'i) and Qwelminté Secwépemc." She stressed the importance of recovering Indigenous methodologies for understanding nature.

Next, **Jesse Cardinal**, who is from the Kikino Métis settlement and Executive Director of Keepers of the Water in *Tthebatthi Dë né sułné* – the Smith's Landing First Nation (Alberta), made a presentation entitled "Water is sacred and we must protect it: Dene knowledge regarding water protection." She highlighted the fact that the Keepers of the Water movement was born during the organization's first meeting, on 7 September 2006. The impetus for this meeting came from people in the north Mackenzie River Basin who, alarmed by reports of increasing water turbidity and toxicity and decreasing water flows, wanted to know what was happening with the water and the ecosystems that depend on it. She presented information on water use and protection from the perspective of the Dene worldview, as well as based on her own firsthand knowledge of the changes observed. She also spoke of what was required to stay connected with the land and water. During her presentation, she underlined the importance of environmental justice for Indigenous peoples and the need to arrive at an understanding of water use that would enable us to advance in protecting water here and now.

Pier-Olivier Boudreault, Conservation Director for Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society Quebec (CPAWS Quebec), presented a third case study from Canada and shared his experience regarding the granting of legal personhood to the Magpie River. He explained that the specific rights related to this water course were largely based on the knowledge of the Innu of Ekuanitshit (Quebec). Pier-Olivier Boudreault highlighted the Magpie River's fundamental rights: the right to exist, the right to have its natural cycles respected, the right to flow naturally, and the right to have its cultural biodiversity respected and maintained.

After listening to the three Canadian case studies, **Adriana Martínez Méndez**, department head at Mexico's National Water Commission (Conagua), made a presentation entitled "*Muchitanisa*: traditional practices and knowledge concerning water in the village of San Juan Achiutla, Tlaxiaco, Oaxaca." As she explained, the inhabitants of San Juan Achiutla have conserved a wealth of traditional knowledge and practices regarding the community's rivers and streams, which emphasize community organizing to keep watercourses free of garbage and ensure equitable access to water, preserve knowledge pertaining to its traditions and legends, and the community's agricultural know-how. Adriana Martínez Méndez highlighted the major role the water bodies play in her community as focal points for the weaving of the social fabric.

Next, **Josefina Santiago**, a member of the Committee of the United Villages for the Care and Defense of Water (Copuda), made a presentation on the community of El Porvenir, Agencia Municipal de San José del Progreso (Oaxaca), entitled "Sowing water, sowing autonomy." Thanks to a 17-year struggle, the Zapotec communities of the Central Valleys Region of the State of Oaxaca have established their right to autonomy and self-determination, as well as for their right to water and for its use and preservation, with support for the completion of works for water catchment and regulating its use. Josefina Santiago placed emphasis on the achievements of the region's communities, which even includes a presidential

decree that recognized their water rights, the very first such *Indigenous community concession* (in 2022), as well as their internal regulations and local community water management authorities. In conclusion, Josefina Santiago observed that through the self-management of resources and collective endeavors, such as *el tequio* (traditional in-kind labor), over 500 works for water catchment or recharging aquifers were completed in their community.

Following the Mexican case studies, **Virginia LeClere**, Environment Manager of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation, presented a case study from the United States, entitled “*Penementmanenmbish*” (We will always care for the water), in which she discussed her community’s water stewardship knowledge and shared some of the challenges it currently faces.

Upon the conclusion of the presentations, an interactive dialogue was initiated among the participants. This session included a segment to answer questions from online participants. Next came closing remarks from TEKEG Facilitator **Kathy Hodgson-Smith**, who invited participants to follow the CEC’s activities.

The online knowledge dialogue concluded with words from Yolanda López Maldonado, the CEC’s Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Indigenous Affairs Officer. She thanked the CEC staff for their support, as well as the interpreters and everyone else who made the event possible.