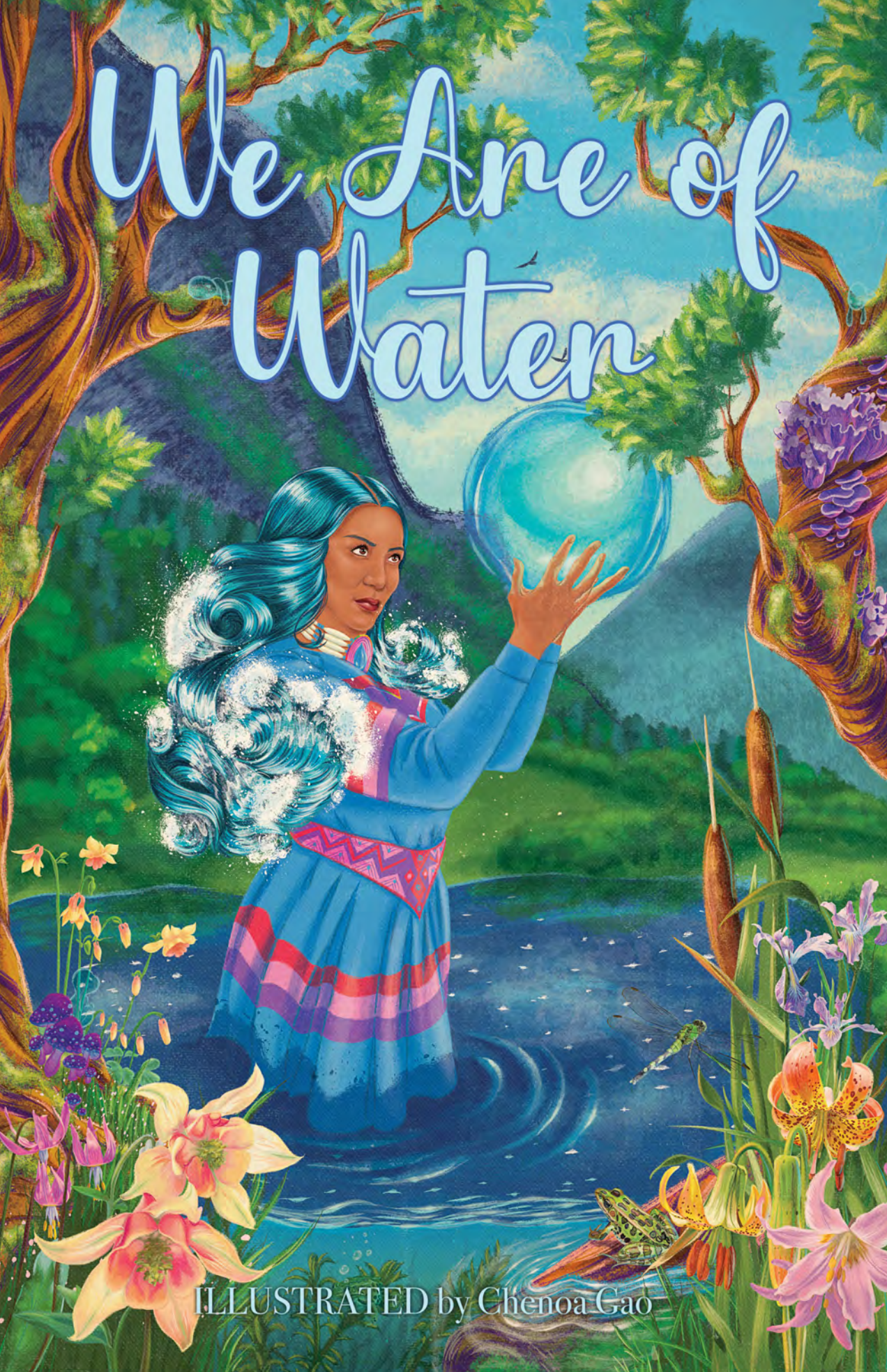


# We Are of Water



ILLUSTRATED by Chenoa Gao



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23 24 25 26 27 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: We are of water / illustrated by Chenoa Gao.

Names: Gao, Chenoa, artist.

Description: First edition.

Identifiers: Canadiana 20230448933 | ISBN 9781738999408 (softcover)

Subjects: LCGFT: Graphic novels.

Classification: LCC PN6733 .W4 2023 | DDC j741.5/971—dc23

ISBN 978-1-7389994-0-8 (soft cover)

*We strongly respect, recognize, and honour First Nations across what is now known as British Columbia, on whose territories we live, work, and learn.*

## Acknowledgements

Thank-you!

To the Elders, youth, and community members who lent their voices and stories for us to share.

To the Healthy Watersheds Initiative's Indigenous Leaders Advisory Circle, the Real Estate Foundation of BC, Watersheds BC, and the B.C. Wildlife Federation who supported and encouraged the vision of this work.

To our Indigenous Advisors, the late Glenn Auger, Diana Cote, and Tara Marsden, as well as Mavis Underwood, Chair of the Indigenous Leaders Advisory Circle for their wisdom and guidance.

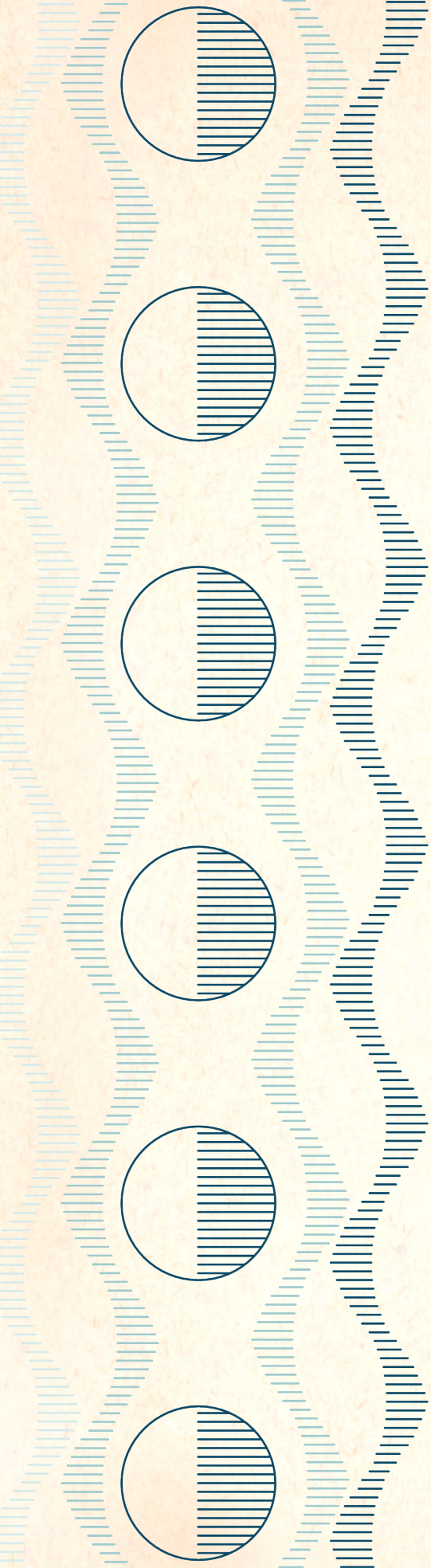
To Chenoa Gao who provided a platform for the beauty of these words to be seen.

To Cheyenne Bergenhenegouwen who helped shape an idea into something tangible.

To all those doing amazing work for our watersheds and waterways.

And to you, the readers, who we hope will cherish these stories as we do and continue to share them.







## Foreword

In countering the impacts of oppression and colonization I often find myself with questions about relationships, responsibilities for care, and education. For Indigenous First Nations, systemic and institutional racism started a long time ago with pressures put on Indigenous First Nations' land and water territories. Now more than ever Indigenous First Nations must uphold culture and traditions that are the foundations of Indigenous natural laws of preservation, responsibility, respect, and care and have upheld systems of conservation and environmental stewardship. The water projects are that reflection of essential connections we all must water as the life-affirming ingredient for all life. This reflection holds the foundational teaching housed within our most sacred relationship with our mothers who nurture and protect us in blessed water.

One of the primary tools of colonization, the Indian Act, was wielded at the discretion of public servants. Indian agents operated to disconnect Indigenous First Nations from lands, families, and history. Now under the influence of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and through recommendations of processes such as inquiries into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls, and the hearings and recommendations of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the compelling truths and history are emerging. We are all witness to powerful shifts in voice and expression of how Indigenous First Nations have coped, resisted, or experienced efforts to assimilate and change, and we witness investment and efforts to decolonize what has evolved in colonial British Columbia and Canada.

Urgently, we must heed the calls to action to understand the basic connections that must be maintained to balance life. As we see the role of wetlands and watersheds thriving or failing, we can also see incremental improvements in restoring habitat and specialized ecosystems. Also, there are benefits in watershed improvements that assist with decontamination, absorbing runoff, torrential rains, or floodwaters. We now see Indigenous Elders and youth encouraging possibilities and reflecting a renewed vision of hope for the future through learning and embracing Indigenous knowledge, history, and tradition. This positive energy shines in *We Are Of Water*. It is alive, turbulent, and life-affirming.



You can see something in the natural world and visually it tugs at your imagination, at your own life, and your imagination may run free. I am seeing the work and aspirations of youth as part of that quest for freedom, place and belonging, leading resurgence, and stimulating dreams and visions of recovery and hope. I, too, have renewed hope that as readers go through the stories, they will gain a deeper appreciation for the work, and the people who do this work. I am inspired by the golden voices of young people who describe a desire to give back, contribute to their families, and participate in generating solutions. I have heard the desire to honour those who gave so much to preserve and protect Indigenous relationships and history.

The material in this graphic novel is momentous. It is a way to animate ideas and embrace the generations of Indigenous peoples. There are so many different, creative ways to share our stories; whether it is oral history, music, written poetry, performance arts, hand-drawn illustrations, photography, or by using computer-generated artwork. The commitment to show work is not easy. It is critical to refresh the perspectives that have overtaken and dominated mainstream society. To see young people relating to science, environment and earth science, and geography is to see them awaken dreams of working in education, language revitalization, health, fisheries, governance, and land development. It is something a lot of people look for in life, to find significant and fulfilling work that instills pride and achievement, as well as building a sense of place and belonging.

I hope those who read through these stories are as moved as I have been by what they see, and by what they witness. Indigenous law in most cases describes a relationship of gratitude, respect, and responsibility for air, land, water, and species that are gifts through creation to help sustain all life.

Mavis Underwood, Tiwenomot  
Tsaowut Community, W̱SÁNEĆ Nation  
Chair, HWI Indigenous Leaders Advisory Circle  
Governor, Real Estate Foundation of BC



FOR MYSELF AND FOR A LOT OF PEOPLE, THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WATER REALLY ROUTES YOU BACK TO YOUR ORIGIN. YOUR PLACE OF BECOMING HUMAN



YOUR PLACE OF GROWTH IN THE SACRED WATER OF YOUR MOTHER



I THINK A LOT OF TIMES PEOPLE JUST FORGET THAT WE HAVE THAT SACRED TIE, THAT SACRED HISTORY WITH WATER



WE NEED TO GO BACK AND REMEMBER THAT ORIGIN AND CONNECTION TO WATER --- IT GAVE US LIFE!



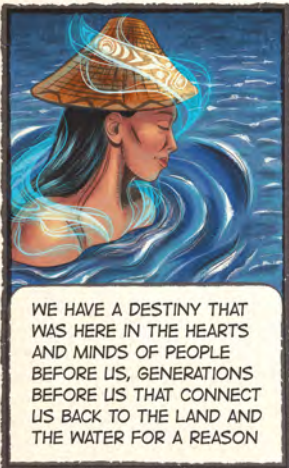
A SMALL THING. A DROP OF WATER AND WHAT IT DOES FOR YOU. IT CREATES THAT GREAT RIPPLE AND YOU NEED TO RESPOND TO THAT



WATER IS A GIFT FOR US FROM THE SKY AND WE DON'T DO ENOUGH TO HOLD IT. WE NEED TO CREATE SPACE TO HOLD IT



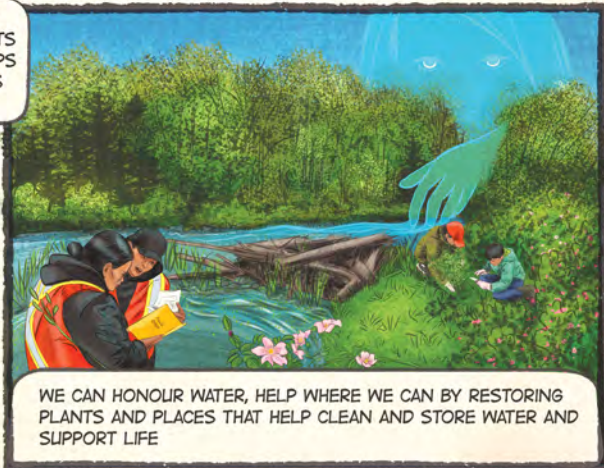
WE HAVE A DESTINY THAT WAS HERE IN THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF PEOPLE BEFORE US, GENERATIONS BEFORE US THAT CONNECT US BACK TO THE LAND AND THE WATER FOR A REASON



WE ALL NEED TO DO OUR PART BECAUSE CLIMATE ACTION STARTS WITH ACTIONS LIKE THOSE DROPS OF WATER THAT CREATE RIPPLES OF CHANGE



WE CAN HONOUR WATER, HELP WHERE WE CAN BY RESTORING PLANTS AND PLACES THAT HELP CLEAN AND STORE WATER AND SUPPORT LIFE





## We Are of Water - Introduction

*To, qu7, too, qó:, qayε?, aks, kayε?, awen', chu, wap, siwlk<sup>w</sup>, séwllkwe, samqwan, qa', bathu, ohné:kanos, tu, wa'aàm, gandlaay, wám̓p, wám̓, choo, wuʔu / napituk, čaʔak, qayε, Aohkii(yi), chuu – water.*

Water is life. It is strong, powerful, a conduit for well-being, a global connector, and the essence of all living things.

The voices and reflections illustrated in this graphic novel were gathered through the Healthy Watersheds Initiative (HWI). The HWI is a \$27-million program supported with funding from the Province of BC, to stimulate British Columbia's economic recovery through investments in community-driven watershed conservation and restoration projects. Through this program, the Real Estate Foundation of BC, in partnership with Watersheds BC, administered grants for 61 Indigenous and non-Indigenous led watershed security projects from 2021 - 2023 in communities across British Columbia.

The purpose of this illustrated novel is to provide visuals connected to voices and knowledge shared by Indigenous Elders, youth, and community members regarding watersheds and water. It provides a visual platform to share the work and stories of Indigenous led watershed projects while creating an educational and engaging resource.

We hope these illustrated stories will amplify Indigenous voices and experience, embrace and advance inter-generational learning between youth and elders, and foster future generations of water champions and stewards.



This project was inspired by an initial collection of stories and the creation of illustrations by the B.C. Wildlife Federation's Wetlands Workforce Project, one of the 61 HWI funded projects.

It was expanded into this current form through a partnership with the Healthy Watersheds Initiative, which enabled additional voices and perspectives from Elders and youth involved in a diversity of HWI projects to be included.

We respect that the voices and knowledge reflected in this graphic novel were offered so these stories and knowledge could be shared with a broader community.

## **Water is a Conduit for Well-being**

Water has a life of its own. We need to honour it. We need to respect it. We need to allow it to be free to do the work that it needs to do.

Most Indigenous First Nations remain water connected by rivers or salt waters and rely on salmon as an important gift of life. At the same time, Indigenous First Nations experience longstanding harm to their traditional lands and waterways from impacts of resource extraction, floods, and fires. Like water, the voices and illustrations of Indigenous leaders within this graphic novel are a conduit for learnings and lessons about the importance of restoring and healing the land and waterways.







## Part I - Stories from Elders

In the following stories, Elders share the deep connection water and land holds for them and their communities. The stories speak to the love, power, friendship, pain, sadness, and hope that are sparked when considering the significance of water and the role it plays in all of our lives.

### Featured Voices

June Johnson is an elder of the We Wai Kai. The territory of the We Wai Kai Nation spans the northeast of Vancouver Island, reaching west to include Upper Campbell Lake and south to Comox Lake.

Rena Joe and Johnny Jackson are community members of the Lower Nicola Indian Band. The Nl̓eḷkepmx Nation is one of the Interior Salish First Peoples in the Southern Interior of British Columbia. “Nl̓eḷkepmx” means “People of the Canyon”.

Marilyn James is Matriarch of the Autonomous Sinixt. Sinixt Peoples’ Təm̓xʷúlaʔxʷ (territory/homeland) extends from the Upper Columbia drainage in Canada to Kettle Falls in the United States.

Faron Hambler is an Elder from Kelly Lake Cree Nation. The Kelly Lake Cree Nation territory includes extensive areas in present day northeastern British Columbia and west-central Alberta.

Diane Sandy is an Elder from the Bonaparte First Nation. Bonaparte First Nation is a member band of the Shuswap Nation Tribal Council of the Secwépemc (Shuswap) people. The band is located west of Cache Creek. Diane’s story is illustrated in the last six pages of this section.



kəʔokwʷi (SKLINK CABBAGE) WAS OUR WAX PAPER BACK IN THE DAY, THEY SAY IT'S POISONOUS, BUT IT NEVER SEEPED THROUGH OUR FOODS



WE HAVE DONE PIT COOKING AND ONCE WE PUT THE HOT ROCKS DOWN AND STOKED THE FIRE REALLY HOT, WE'VE PUT THE kəʔokwʷi ON TOP OF IT BECAUSE THEN WE PUT THE SEAFOOD ON TOP OF IT

WE USUALLY PICK THE BRACKEN FERN, AND LAYER THEM ON TOP AND LAYER OVER THE SEAFOOD



WE ALWAYS USED THE kəʔokwʷi BECAUSE IT'S A BIG LEAF AND WE ARE ABLE TO LAY ALL THE SEAFOOD ON, WE DID THAT OVER IN QUADRA, IN REBECCA SPIT

WE HAD A BIG FIRE PIT WAITED FOR IT TO GET REALLY HOT, THEN WE PUT THE kəʔokwʷi LEAVES AND THEN WE HAD PRAWNS, CORNS, DIFFERENT THINGS WE PUT IN THERE, IT WAS AN ALL-DAY THING AND THEN WE PUT THE BRACKEN FERN ON TOP, LAYERED IT ALL



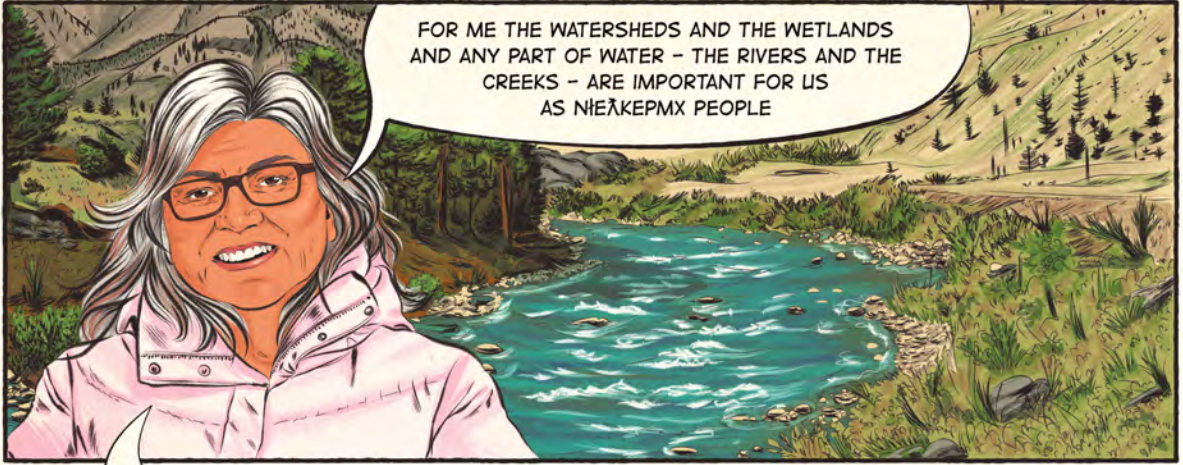
IT WAS AN ALL-DAY COOKING, BUT IT WORKED WITH THE KELP BULB PUTTING THE STEAM TO GO THROUGH IT. THE kəʔokwʷi WAS OUR WAX PAPER WHERE WE WRAPPED OUR FOOD BACK IN THE DAY WHEN WE LIVED IN THE BIG HOUSES

WE GOT ONE OF THE STUDENTS TO GO AND GET A KELP BULB WITH A TAIL AND WHAT WE DID, WE PUT THE TAIL IN WHERE THE FIRE PIT WAS AND THEN WE JUST PUT WATER FROM THE SEA IN THE KELP BULB TO DRAIN AND IT KIND OF STEAMED ALL THE FOOD





Water for Healing  
Rena Joe | Lower Nicola Indian Band



FOR ME THE WATERSHEDS AND THE WETLANDS AND ANY PART OF WATER - THE RIVERS AND THE CREEKS - ARE IMPORTANT FOR US AS NIEŁKEPMX PEOPLE



WE USE THE WATER FOR OUR HEALING. I WAS TAUGHT AS A YOUNG GIRL TO BE MINDFUL OF WATER. SOMETIMES IT CAN BE DANGEROUS. SOMETIMES IT CAN BE PEACEFUL, CALM. WATER WILL HELP YOU, WHATEVER YOUR HURTS ARE



SOMETIMES WE COLLECT WATER WHEN WE GO TO THE MOUNTAINS AND WE BRING THAT WATER TO OUR ELDERS, OR TO OUR FAMILY. THAT WAY WE USE IT FOR OUR OWN HEALING



WATER FOR US IS SO IMPORTANT TODAY BECAUSE NOW WE HAVE TO BUY WATER IN THE STORES



WE CANNOT JUST GO OUT AND DRINK THE WATER ON THE LAND ANYMORE. THAT'S REALLY IMPORTANT TO ME, THE WATER



THIS WILL HEAL THEM. THIS WILL HELP THEM IN THEIR LIFE AND THAT IS WHAT MY MOM AND MY SIBLINGS HAVE TAUGHT ME



I ENCOURAGE MORE YOUTH TO PARTICIPATE IN PROJECTS LIKE THIS AND TRY TO REACH THEM AND LET THEM KNOW THAT THIS IS PART OF THEM



THIS IS THE WAY OF OUR LIFE, IS THE LAND, IS THE WATER, BEING IN NATURE



THIS IS JUST A WAY OF OUR LIFE, IS BEING A PART OF THE LAND



I FEEL REALLY GOOD WHEN I AM OUT ON THE LAND. I THINK THE YOUTH WOULD ALSO FEEL THAT COMFORT AND KNOW THAT THEY'D BEEN LOVED AND THAT THIS IS A WAY OF OUR LIFE



# Water is all Powerful

Johnny Jackson | Lower Nicola Indian Band

MY NAME IS JOHNNY JACKSON. MY REAL NAME IS NEX'O?EYA. THAT NAME IS A NAME HANDED DOWN IN MY FAMILY AND IT HAS SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE STURGEON.



HI, MY NAME IS NEX'O?EYA

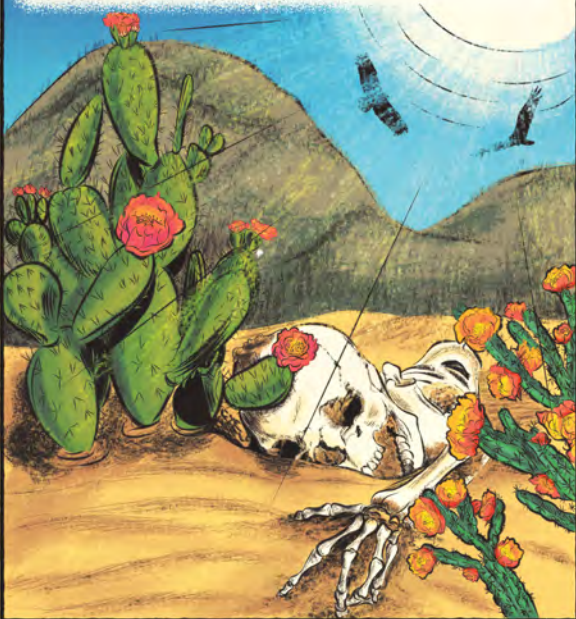


THE STURGEON IS THE ANCIENT ONE, SO I ALWAYS FEEL HONOURED WHEN I INTRODUCE MYSELF AND USE MY NLAKA'PAMLIX NAME.



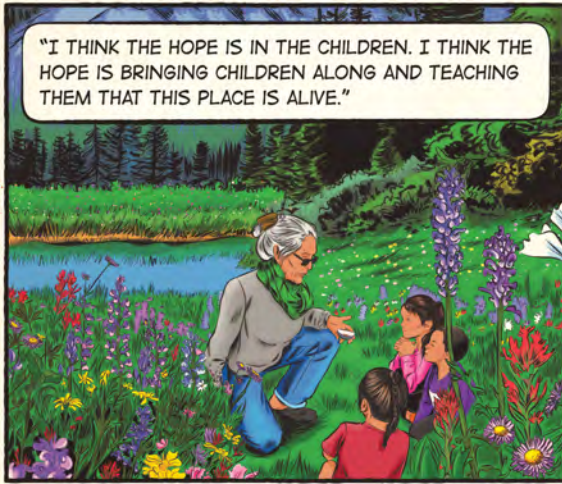
MOST OF OUR NLAKA'PAMLIX FEMALE, THEIR NAMES END UP ENDING WITH Q'U?. THAT'S WATER. AND WATER IS ALL POWERFUL.

WE KNOW HOW POWERFUL WATER IS. IT LOOKS SO INNOCENT, BUT YET IT CAN TAKE YOU AND WITHOUT IT YOU WILL DIE.



I ALWAYS LIKE TO BRING THIS UP WITH THE FEMALE BEING ACKNOWLEDGED AS BEING WATER, BECAUSE THEY ARE WAY MORE POWERFUL THEN THEY GIVE THEMSELVES CREDIT FOR BEING.





"I THINK THE HOPE IS IN THE CHILDREN. I THINK THE HOPE IS BRINGING CHILDREN ALONG AND TEACHING THEM THAT THIS PLACE IS ALIVE."



"THIS PLACE RECIPROCATES LOVE. THIS PLACE IS THE MEANING OF LIFE AND PURPOSE OF LIFE IF YOU HOLD YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO IT."



"THE ELDERS SAY, 'TAKE IT TO THE WATER.' TAKING IT TO THE WATER IS TAKING WHATEVER, IT IS - "

"YOU COULD BE HEARTBROKEN, YOU COULD BE IN PAIN, YOU COULD BE IN GRIEF AND WHEN YOU TAKE IT TO THE WATER, YOU TALK TO THE WATER LIKE IT'S YOUR BEST FRIEND."



"WE ALWAYS CONSIDER WATER AS LIFE. WATER IS A LIFE GIVER, JUST LIKE WOMEN. WATER HAS A FEMALE ASSOCIATION. IT IS A LIFE GIVER. IT GIVES LIFE TO EVERYTHING. IT IS LIFE ITSELF. IF WE DID NOT HAVE WATER, WE WOULD HAVE NOTHING."



"WE ALSO HAVE THE UTMOST RESPECT. IT HELPS US TO HEAL. IT HELPS US TO BECOME WHO WE ARE IF WE APPROACH IT RESPECTFULLY AND WE ACKNOWLEDGE WHAT IT IS."



"IF YOU CAN'T HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH WATER YOU CAN'T HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH YOURSELF."



# Look After the Land

Faron Hambler | Kelly Lake Cree Nation

FARON IS A TRAPPER OF A LONG FAMILY LINE OF TRAPPERS. THE ANIMALS ON THE TRAP LINE MUST NOT TOUCH THE GROUND. ONCE THEY'VE BEEN HARVESTED THE REMAINS ARE HUNG ON TREES FOR THEIR SPIRIT TO GO BACK INTO THE LAND -- THROUGH THE BIRDS, BUGS AND OTHER ANIMALS THAT CONSUME THE PARTS OF THE ANIMAL THAT ARE LEFT BEHIND.



"MY MOM INSISTED THAT I GO TO CHURCH EVERY SUNDAY, GO TO SCHOOL MONDAY TO FRIDAY."

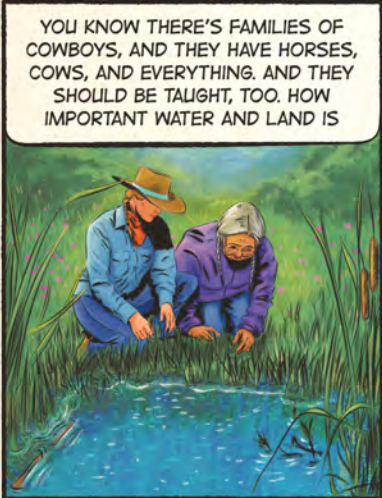
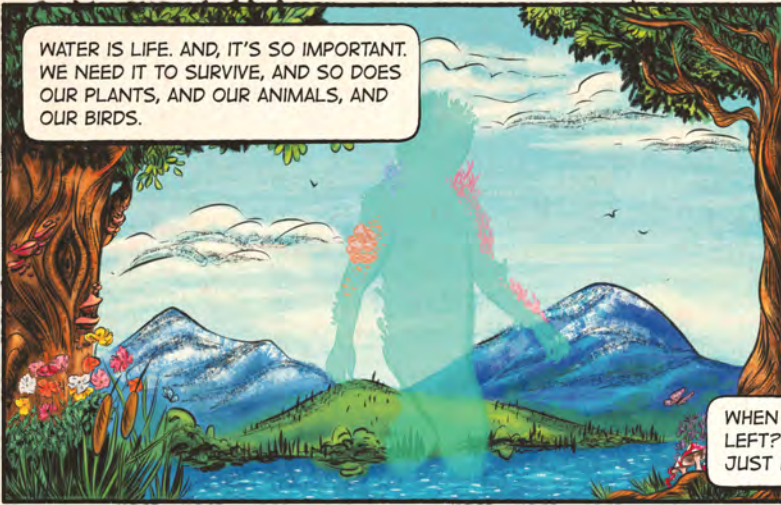


"MY DAD ON THE OTHER HAND WOULD SAY, 'THE LAND WILL LOOK AFTER YOU AS LONG AS YOU LOOK AFTER THE LAND'"

THAT IS MY PHILOSOPHY NOW. I TRY TO LOOK OUT FOR THE LAND, TAKE CARE OF THE LAND TO MAKE SURE THAT IT CAN STILL PRODUCE FOR ME AND PROVIDE FOR ME... WE'VE BEEN TAUGHT THAT THE LAND GIVES YOU WHAT YOU CAN LIVE ON. YOU'RE THANKFUL TO THE LAND. THE ANIMALS GIVE UP THEIR LIFE FOR YOU TO LIVE, BUT DON'T DISRESPECT THEM."





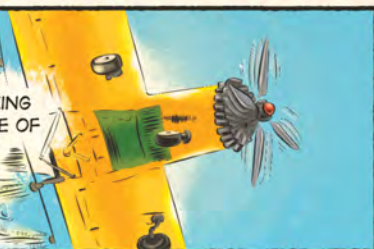


YOU KNOW IT'S SO SAD TO SEE, BECAUSE, OUR LAKES A LONG TIME AGO, THEY WERE JUST CLEAR... WE WOULD GO UP THERE AND CAMP, AND FISH, WE WERE ABLE TO SWIM IN IT, DRINK IN IT... AND JUST ENJOY WHAT WE HAD





WHEN THEY SPRAY STUFF ON THE TREES... THEY'RE NOT THINKING ABOUT WHAT THEY'RE DOING TO SOME OF OUR MEDICINES THAT WE USE IN THE AREA. YOU KNOW?



...BECAUSE, THEY HAD TO SPRAY FOR BEETLES? OR WHATEVER THEY CALL THEM? WE WEREN'T TOO SURE IF WE SHOULD KEEP TRYING TO SHOW THEM STUFF LIKE THAT, BECAUSE, UH... Y'KNOW?



AND THE MEDICINES WE MAKE, IT DOESN'T DO ITS THING ANYMORE



THERE WAS AREAS WHERE WE WERE ABLE TO GO AND PICK OUR MEDICINES AND STUFF AND WE TRY TO GO UP THERE NOW AND THERE'S A GATE RIGHT ACROSS IT, SO... AND WE CAN'T REACH 'EM ANYMORE

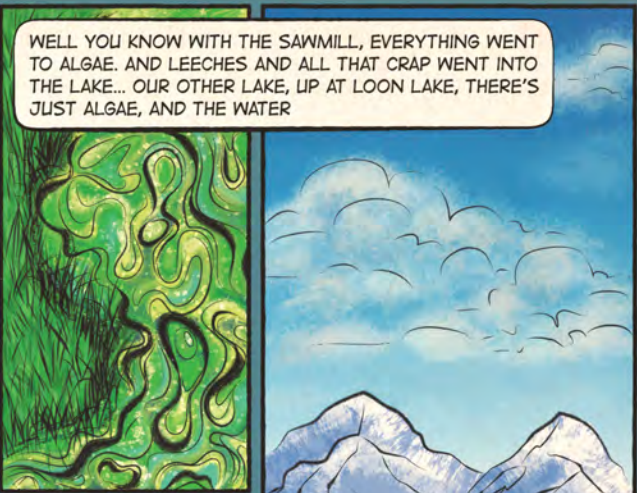
MEDICINES IS SO IMPORTANT TO US. YOU KNOW? BALSAM WAS PART OF OUR MEDICINES, OUR COLDS, AND STUFF LIKE THAT







WE USED TO GO UP [TO THE LAKE] AND CAMP WHILE -- MY HUSBAND, WAS WORKING IN THE MILL THERE



WELL YOU KNOW WITH THE SAWMILL, EVERYTHING WENT TO ALGAE. AND LEECHES AND ALL THAT CRAP WENT INTO THE LAKE... OUR OTHER LAKE, UP AT LOON LAKE, THERE'S JUST ALGAE, AND THE WATER



WE WEREN'T ABLE TO DRINK THE WATER, AND WE USED TO HAVE TO GO UP AND GET WATER FROM THE CREEK THAT WAS COMING INTO THE LAKE



I DON'T EVEN LIKE EATING THE FISH FROM UP THERE BECAUSE I FRIED SOME UP ONE TIME AND IT JUST WENT TO MUSH. IT DIDN'T LOOK VERY APPETIZING. SO THAT'S FROM LIKE, YOU KNOW... THE ALGAE, AND THE WHATEVER WAS USED TO CUT THE TREES AND LUMBER AND STUFF LIKE THAT. IT'S SO SAD




WE USED TO DRY FISH... MY MOTHER USED IT. WE ALL WENT UP THERE, AND WE GOT BAGS OF FISH AND WE DRIED THEM, AND USED THEM FOR FOOD AND EATING AND THAT THROUGH THE WINTER. OUR SURVIVAL TECHNIQUES WAS SOMETHING THAT... WE NEVER STARVED

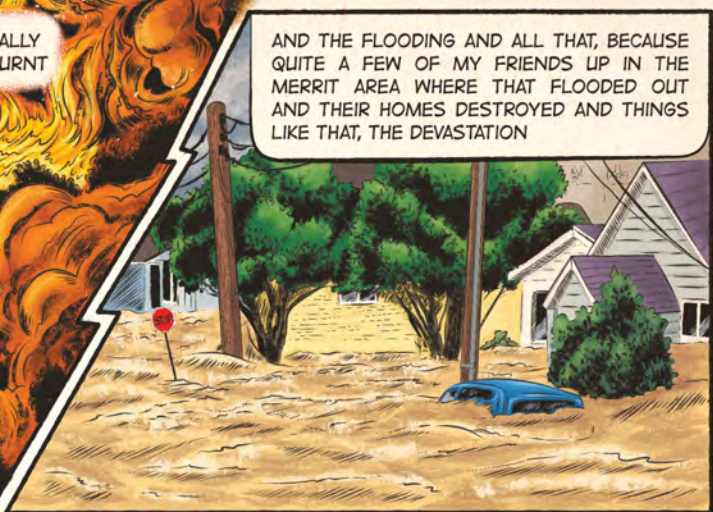


JOBS WERE IMPORTANT AT THE TIME, SO. YOU KNOW? NOTHING WAS THOUGHT ABOUT IT, NOTHING WAS... HOW DO YOU SAY IT? WE SHOULD HAVE BEEN ABLE TO REALIZE WHAT HAD HAPPENED





IT'S A DOWNER FOR EVERYBODY ACTUALLY WHEN THEY SEE THE TREES ALL THAT BURNT



AND THE FLOODING AND ALL THAT, BECAUSE QUITE A FEW OF MY FRIENDS UP IN THE MERRIT AREA WHERE THAT FLOODED OUT AND THEIR HOMES DESTROYED AND THINGS LIKE THAT, THE DEVASTATION



IT'S SO SEVERE, THAT IT'S GONNA TAKE A LONG TIME FOR ANYBODY TO THINK ABOUT SEEING THE FUTURE IN A BETTER WAY

"THAT'S THE SAD PART OF IT. IT'S GONNA TAKE FOREVER TO REDO EVERYTHING THAT'S BEEN DONE TO MOTHER EARTH. IF THEY HAD LISTENED TO OUR ELDERS A LONG TIME AGO, 'TAKE WHAT YOU NEED', I THINK THAT WE WOULDN'T BE WHERE WE ARE AT RIGHT NOW"

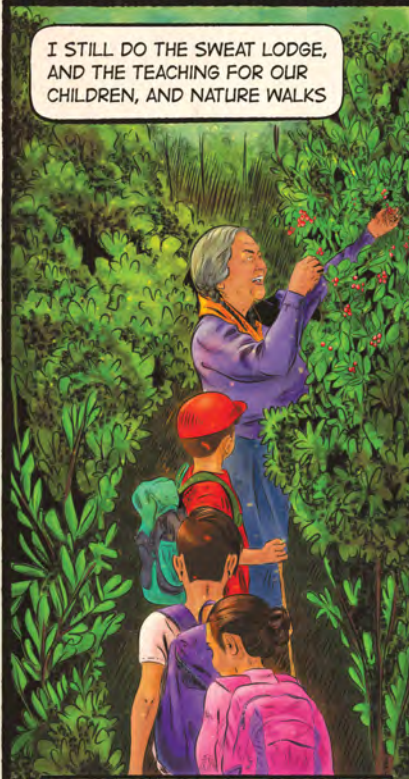
I'VE TALKED TO ELDERS FROM UP TOWARDS ALKALI LAKE, AND HE TOLD ME, WHEN THE FIRE WENT THROUGH, THERE WAS A LITTLE AREA WITH A POND OR BIT OF WATER, HARDLY SEEN WITH COWS AND DEERS... ALL IN THAT AREA THERE BUNCHED UP. HE SAID...



HE JUST CRIED SEEING THAT, HE JUST... YOU KNOW? IF THEY HAD LISTENED, 'TAKE WHAT YOU NEED'



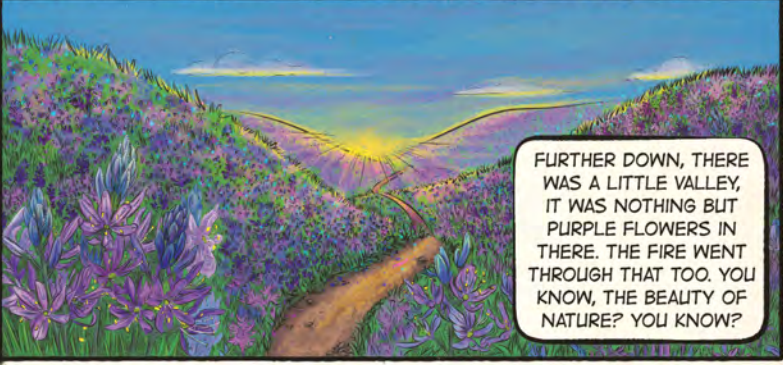





I STILL DO THE SWEAT LODGE,  
AND THE TEACHING FOR OUR  
CHILDREN, AND NATURE WALKS




ONE VALLEY THERE  
IS NOTHING BUT  
YELLOW FLOWERS,  
IT USED TO BE  
BEAUTIFUL. IT'S  
NOT THERE  
ANYMORE. IT'S UP  
BY MCLEAN'S LAKE



FURTHER DOWN, THERE  
WAS A LITTLE VALLEY,  
IT WAS NOTHING BUT  
PURPLE FLOWERS IN  
THERE. THE FIRE WENT  
THROUGH THAT TOO. YOU  
KNOW, THE BEAUTY OF  
NATURE? YOU KNOW?



I WAS TOLD, NOT TO GO HERE,  
NOT TO GO THERE BECAUSE OF...  
THE BURN AREAS AND STUFF, AND  
THERE'S NOTHING THERE. YOU  
KNOW? THE AREAS WE USED TO  
TAKE THEM IN TO SHOW THEM  
THE DIFFERENT FLOWERS THAT  
ARE COMING UP



IT'S SO HARD THAT... THEY'RE NOT GONNA  
HAVE THAT? THERE'S A SONG I KNOW, I HAVE.  
[SINGING] IT MAKES ME CRY, MAKES ME CRY,  
WHEN I DON'T SEE, THE TRAILS, I USED TO. I  
SING THAT TO MY GRANDCHILDREN

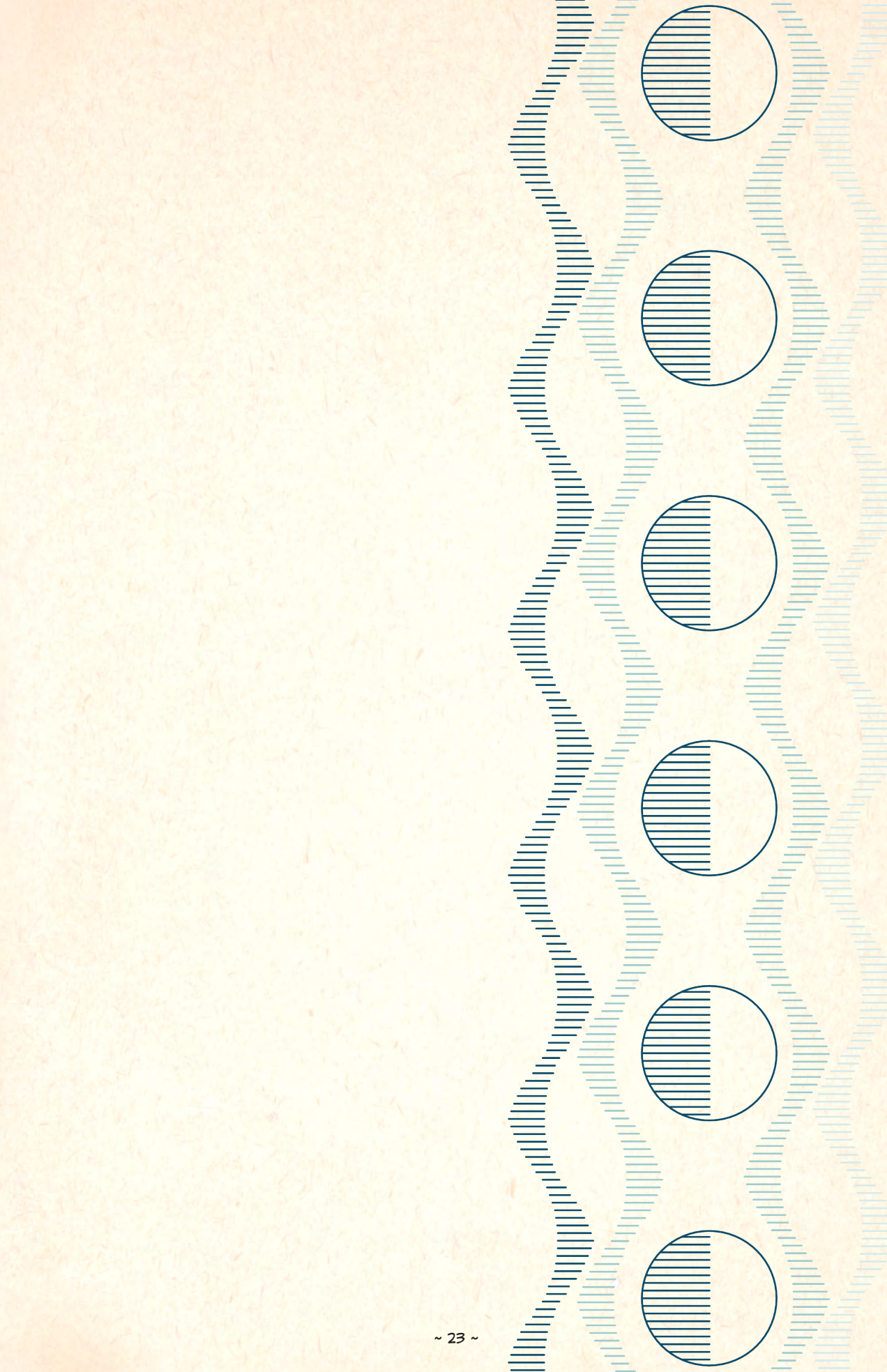


"IT'S SO SAD THAT OUR GREAT-GRANDCHILDREN WON'T BE ABLE TO SEE ALL OF THAT. BUT THEN I THINK WORKING TOGETHER IT WILL COME ABOUT. IT WILL TAKE A WHILE, BUT IT'LL COME ABOUT. YOU NEVER GIVE UP HOPE"



"THAT'S SO IMPORTANT IN LIFE. SO IMPORTANT IN LIFE. THAT YOU LEARN TO RESPECT THE WATER, THE EARTH, THE SKY, THE WIND AND EVERYTHING. THAT'S WHAT I TEACH MY GRANDCHILDREN, RESPECT -- DON'T ABUSE IT."









## Part II - Building Networks of Wisdom

Through the Healthy Watersheds Initiative more than 60 projects – spanning thousands of sites within the province’s eight major drainage basins – restored riparian and wetland habitats, created spawning grounds for salmon, and built habitat and community resiliency to withstand sea level rise and climate change events.

*“We have a destiny that was here in the hearts and minds of people before us – generations before us – that connect us back to the land and the water. Indigenous law in most cases describes a relationship of gratitude, respect, and responsibility for air, land, water, and species that are gifts through creation to help sustain all life. It is exciting to see the outcomes from the work of the project teams and it is inspiring to see young people who are leading the way and are making a difference in their watersheds.”*

- Mavis Underwood, Chair of the Healthy Watersheds Initiative Indigenous Leaders Advisory Circle and Governor for the Real Estate Foundation of BC.

The following stories highlight the work of five Indigenous led watershed projects through the voices of crew members and project leads.



## Restoring Tsihl Hlii Din

Tsihl Hlii Din (McCully Creek) is not too far north of Kispiox, a Gitksan village that sits at the confluence of the Kispiox and Skeena Rivers in the Kispiox Valley. The tributaries of Tsihl Hlii Din flow into the Kispiox River.

The Gitksan Watershed Authorities are working to restore Tsihl Hlii Din by channelizing a braided lower reach of the creek into one channel with sufficient water depth and flow for salmon passage and habitat use. This is being achieved by stabilizing the creek's banks through the planting of locally collected willow, alder, and osier dogwood. The team is also using low-tech methods such as placing woody debris to help reduce the speed of the creek's flow.

Throughout the project, key objectives were to create space for Gitksan involvement and professional growth.

Taylor Wale, Luu'maja, a Salmon Biologist with the Gitksan Watershed Authorities, is leading the Tsihl Hlii Din Restoration Project with the support of two Gitksan youth, Patience Muldoe, and Hailey Wilson.

Taylor is from Wilp xGwoimtxw of the Laxgibuu Clan (Wolf Clan).

Patience is of the Wilp Gutginuxw and the Gisk'aast Clan (Fireweed Clan).

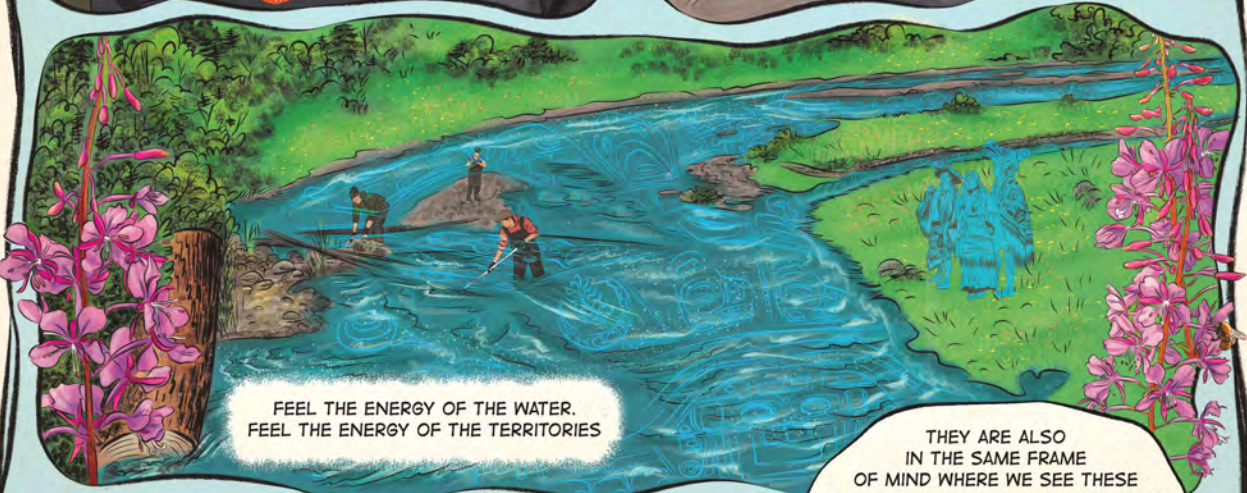
Hailey is from Wilp Sakxum Higookxw of the Laxgibuu Clan (Wolf Clan).



WE'RE REALLY TRYING TO HOLD SPACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO LEARN AND DOING THAT ON THE LAND HAS BEEN A VERY VALUABLE EXPERIENCE



WE ARE NOT DOING THIS IN A CLASSROOM, WE ACTUALLY GET TO COME TO THESE PLACES



FEEL THE ENERGY OF THE WATER. FEEL THE ENERGY OF THE TERRITORIES

THEY ARE ALSO IN THE SAME FRAME OF MIND WHERE WE SEE THESE REALLY BRIGHT FUTURES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE ON OUR TERRITORIES THAT WE DON'T NECESSARILY GET TO LIVE RIGHT NOW



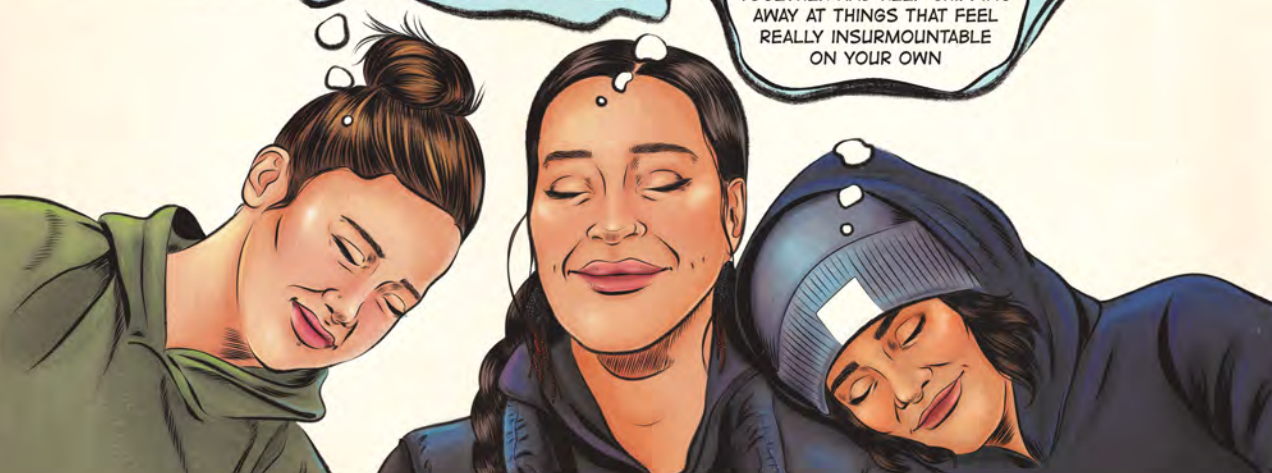
PART OF OUR PROCESS IS GETTING TO SPEND ENDLESS TIME OUTSIDE JUST HAVING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE WORK AND OUR ROLES WITHIN IT



WORKING WITH YOUTH HAS BEEN ENDLESSLY INSPIRING. THEY TEACH ME A LOT ABOUT HOW TO REDIRECT MYSELF, HOW TO CARRY MYSELF, WHAT'S IMPORTANT



WE HAVE THIS SPACE WHERE WE GET TO WORK TOGETHER, DREAM TOGETHER AND KEEP CHIPPING AWAY AT THINGS THAT FEEL REALLY INSURMOUNTABLE ON YOUR OWN







DOING THIS WORK OUT ON THE WATERSHEDS, IT IS REWARDING



AT THE SAME TIME I DON'T CARE IF I AM NOT RECOGNIZED AS LONG AS I AM DOING THE WORK FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS



THROUGH THIS WORK I HAVE LEARNED THE VALUE OF THE LAND



THE GREAT QUALITIES OF A LEADER FROM TAYLOR



HOW TO BE PROUD OF WHERE I AM FROM AND STAND UP FOR WHAT IS RIGHT



I HAVE LEARNED A LOT OF GREAT THINGS

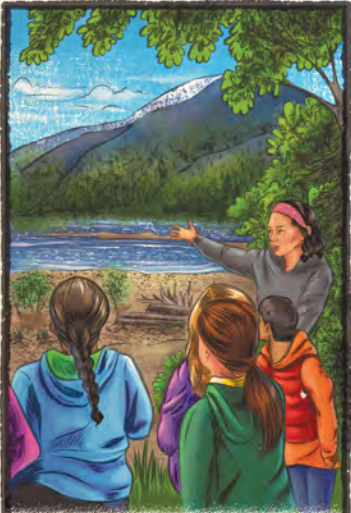




TAYLOR AND PATIENCE HAVE BEEN PRETTY GOOD FRIENDS OF MINE FOR A WHILE, SO BEING PART OF THIS KIND OF PROJECT HAS MADE OUR FRIENDSHIP STRONGER



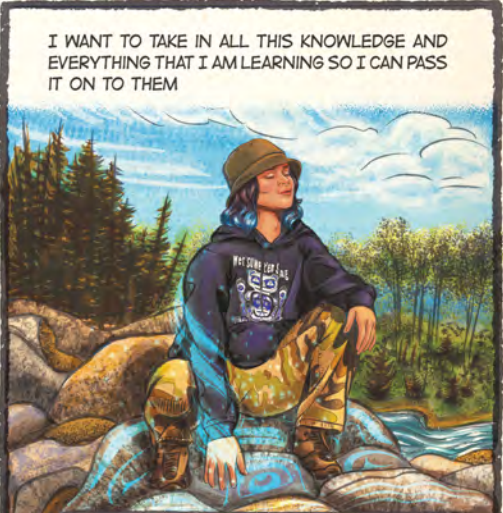
IT HAS ALSO FURTHER INSPIRED ME TO PROTECT THE LAND AND OUR CULTURE



IN A WAY THAT OURSELVES AND THE NEXT GENERATION WILL TAKE THE INFORMATION WE'VE ACQUIRED AND PASS IT ON



DOING THIS WORK, A HUGE INSPIRATION IS MY FAMILY AND MY SIBLINGS. I HAVE QUITE A LOT OF YOUNGER SIBLINGS



I WANT TO TAKE IN ALL THIS KNOWLEDGE AND EVERYTHING THAT I AM LEARNING SO I CAN PASS IT ON TO THEM

THAT IS WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT TO ME, AND IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN MY GOAL SINCE I STARTED RECONNECTING



THE WATERSHEDS THEMSELVES, ARE SACRED TO US. THEY LITERALLY BRING LIFE TO US. THEY BRING FISH AND OUR FOOD, AND OUR RESOURCES



THEY ARE VERY IMPORTANT NOT ONLY TO THE ENVIRONMENT BUT TO OUR CULTURE



## Yaqaan Nukiy Wetlands Restoration

The Lower Kootenay Band is restoring over 517 hectares of naturally appearing and functioning wetlands and floodplains by filling ditches, removing reed canary grass, and recontouring altered wetland basins along the Kootenay River.

These wetlands are being restored with features to provide habitat for Species at Risk, including perennial water for burbot spawning, sandy ridges for Western painted turtle nesting, logs for turtle basking, waterfowl loafing, and snags for bird perches and bat roosting.

Large-scale projects like these are a great way to learn about how important preserving and restoring our environment is to help combat climate change. Any restoration on its own or incorporated into many types of other projects will help stabilize the drastic fluctuations we are starting to experience worldwide, but we must continue to implement these globally to reap their much-needed benefits.

Norm Allard is the Community planner with the Lower Kootenay Band and the lead on the Yaqaan Nukiy Wetlands Restoration project. He shares why wetland restoration work is important.

Kiana Medicine Crane was part of the crew working on this project. Kiana did not know what to expect with her position as she was not too familiar with working in wetlands. Her career aspirations are in health care, with plans to go into nursing and eventually medical school, but the more she got into the work, the more she learned and found it fascinating.





THAT COVER A VAST MAJORITY OF EVERYTHING WITHIN THE AREA



THIS WORK IS IMPORTANT BECAUSE WETLANDS ARE SOME OF THE MOST VALUABLE HABITATS YOU CAN RESTORE

IN RESTORING WETLANDS, YOU CAN CREATE HABITAT



FOR A RANGE OF ANIMALS, PLANTS, INVERTEBRATES, AMPHIBIANS, AND FISH



EVERYTHING USES THEM



I'M BLACKFOOT AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WATER IS THAT IT IS A VERY HEALING ELEMENT



BASICALLY THE ESSENCE OF WHO WE ARE AS INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AS WELL AS NON-INDIGENOUS PEOPLE



AOHKÍ(YI)

OKI



OUR SAYING FOR HELLO IN OUR BLACKFOOT LANGUAGE IS OKI AND THE SAYING FOR WATER IS AOHKÍ(YI)



THEY SOUND VERY SIMILAR BECAUSE WHEN YOU SAY HELLO YOU ARE SAYING HELLO AND COMING INTO THE WORLD



WHEN WE SAY WATER AND THINK OF WATER, WE COME FROM WATER WHEN WE ARE BORN AND THAT IS HOW WE COME INTO THE WORLD

IT IS REALLY SIGNIFICANT FOR ME TO BE OUT HERE AND PARTICIPATING IN THIS, IT IS A BIG PART OF MY CULTURE AND IS EVERYTHING I HAVE BEEN TAUGHT ABOUT WHO I AM



THAT I AM NOT DIFFERENT FROM THE LAND AND THE LAND IS NOT DIFFERENT FROM ME AND WE ARE JUST THE SAME





## **Juvenile Salmon Monitoring at Wet-zuhn-buhn**

The Office of the Wet'suwet'en is leading a Juvenile Sockeye Salmon Monitoring Project at Wet-zuhn-buhn (Morice Lake). The data collected from this monitoring project will help inform the steps needed to rebuild Sockeye stocks. Restoring Sockeye stock is a high priority for the Wet'suwet'en.

Sockeye of Wet-zuhn-buhn are the last anadromous population remaining on the community's traditional territory and are critically important for their food, social, and ceremonial needs. Sockeye has provided for the Wet'suwet'en for thousands of years.

During the project, there was an observation of Sockeye spawning in the Upper Bulkley River, which had not been observed for many years. This project also employed numerous Indigenous youth and women and provided Indigenous youth training on new fisheries sampling techniques.

Brothers, James Brian Michell and Gary Michell are members of Ceneh Lhiy Yikh (House of Many Eyes) Laksilyu Clan. James has worked as a Fisheries Technician for the Office of the Wet'suwet'en for 27 years. Gary has worked as the Fish and Wildlife Ranger with the Wet'suwet'en Nation for 11 years.





I'M DOING THIS NOT FOR ME, IT'S FOR THE ONES YET TO BE BORN

GENERATIONS FROM NOW, WE'D LIKE THEM TO HAVE A FEED FROM THIS FISH THAT WE LOVE



NOT THE ONES THAT COME FROM FARMS. WE WANT THE WILD STOCK LIKE WHAT OUR ANCESTORS HAD



THE FIRST TIME I CAME UP HERE AND SAW THIS RIVER, IT FELT LIKE I WAS HERE BEFORE



MY ANCESTORS ARE TALKING TO ME. THAT'S THE WAY I FELT



THE WET'SUWET'EN, WE LOVE OUR SALMON. WE'RE NEVER GOING TO STOP UNTIL WE CAN WALK ON THE BACKS OF THE SOCKEYE. THAT IS OUR GOAL





IF YOU LOOK BEHIND ME, LOOK HOW BEAUTIFUL THAT IS

I HAVE TO SAY I WANT MY FUTURE SELF AND MY GRANDCHILDREN TO BE ABLE TO SEE THIS AND THE CHILDREN NOT BORN YET TO SEE THIS



I ALWAYS WANT THIS PRISTINE FOR THEM. SO THAT IS WHY I DO WHAT I DO. THAT'S WHY I LOVE MY JOB



I TALKED TO SOME ELDERS IN THE CANYON AND BEFORE, WHEN THE SOCKEYE CAME UP, THAT RIVER USED TO LOOK BLACK

THOSE WERE THE DAYS WHEN IT USED TO BE PLENTIFUL. NOW IT IS SCARCE



IT MAKES US CONCERNED, AND IT IS WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO TO KEEP THIS GOING FOR OUR FUTURE



## Water that Connects Us

The Upper Fraser Fisheries Conservation Alliance (UFFCA), in collaboration with its Nation partners, has been leading a First Nations led water flow management project on the Endako River, and a water quality and quantity monitoring program for 22 streams and lakes throughout the Nechako watershed.

With 22 hydrometric stations already set up throughout the Nechako watershed, the UFFCA accessed Healthy Watersheds Initiative funding to assess, repair, and upgrade systems for data collection, analysis, and information sharing. The stations are being used to understand changes in critical salmon habitats and inform leaders' decision-making and emergency enhancement planning for vulnerable fish populations.

Rebecca Broadbent is the UFFCA Project Coordinator and is a Nadleh Whut'en member. Ashley Raphael is the Aboriginal Natural Resource Liaison for Nadleh Whut'en and Saik'uz First Nation and is a Saik'uz member. They share why this work is important to them and their communities.





GROWING UP I WAS TAUGHT  
BY MY GRANDFATHER



AS YINKA DENE PEOPLE, THE  
TWO MAIN THINGS THAT WILL  
KEEP OUR PEOPLE STRONG IS  
THE WATER AND THE WOMEN



HE EMPHASIZED THAT TAKING  
CARE OF THE WATER AND THE  
WOMEN WILL TAKE CARE OF  
THE REST OF US



EVERYTHING  
ELSE WILL FALL  
INTO PLACE



AS A CHILD, I REMEMBER GOING INTO THE SMOKE  
HOUSE, AND THERE WAS SALMON EVERYWHERE



WE HAVE TO MAKE SURE WE  
HAVE AN ADEQUATE HOME FOR  
THE SALMON TO RETURN TO



WE'D HAVE HUNDREDS OF SALMON, AND NOW  
WE DON'T TAKE SALMON FROM OUR RIVERS

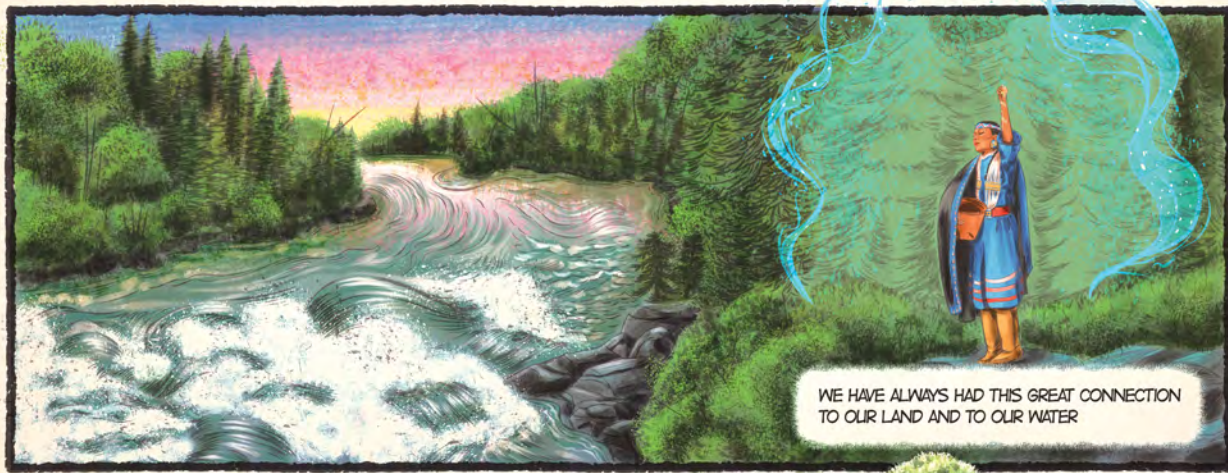


I DON'T KNOW IF MY  
CHILDREN WILL LEARN  
TO SNAG SALMON.  
PROBABLY NOT





I'M DAKELH  
AND OUR PEOPLE  
TRAVELLED BY WATER,  
THAT IS WHAT  
DAKELH MEANS



WE HAVE ALWAYS HAD THIS GREAT CONNECTION  
TO OUR LAND AND TO OUR WATER



BEING ABLE TO BE HERE, DOING WORK ON OUR  
WATERSHEDS IS REALLY IMPORTANT TO ME



BECAUSE I WANT THE WATERSHEDS  
TO BE HOW THEY WERE IN THE PAST



## Xwaaqw'um Village Watershed Restoration

The Stqee'ye' Learning Society is blending traditional stewardship knowledge and historical data to reclaim and maintain ecosystems around Xwaaqw'um Village (Burgoyne Bay Provincial Park). By engaging and educating community members, particularly Indigenous youth, this project applies traditional knowledge through cultural practices that honour the interconnectedness of ecosystems.

Maiya Modeste is the P'hwulhp (Garry Oak) Restoration Project Coordinator with the Stqee'ye' Learning Society.

~

Uy' skweyul siem nu sye'yu tl'i-i-im tsun 'o' ts'iiyulh-  
na'mut, 'u tun'a 'uy' skweyul  
Maiya Modeste thuna sne  
Sulatiye' s-hwulmuhw'a'lh' sne  
Tun'ni' tsun 'ult' kwa'mutsun  
Brianna Thorne snes lhuna t-en  
Chris Modeste snes kwthuna m-en  
Sulsilu Deb I' Ron George  
I silu Diane Modeste I silu'elh Wes Modeste  
Huy tseep q'a siiem huy tseep q'a

Good day, my honoured friends and family, I am very thank-  
ful for this day  
my name is Maiya Modeste  
my traditional name is sulatiye'  
I come from the village of Quamichan in quw'utsun territory  
My mom is Brianna Thorne,  
and my dad is Chris Modeste.  
My grandparents on my mother's side are Deb George (nee  
Nash) and Ron George  
and on my father's side, my grandma is Diane Modeste (nee  
Seymour) and the late Wes Modeste  
Thank you with the utmost gratitude





THERE IS NOT ONE THING ON THIS EARTH, WHICH IS NOT TOUCHED BY WATER. THIS INCLUDES OURSELVES, MADE UP OF WATER



IT IS SIGNIFICANT TO EVERY PART OF LIFE -- WATER IS LIFE



AS INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IT IS OUR MEDICINE, GROCERY STORE, OUR HIGHWAY, OUR TEACHER, AND IT IS US. WE CANNOT EXIST -- NOTHING CAN EXIST ON THIS PLANET WITHOUT IT



WE HONOUR IT BY TAKING CARE OF IT. I THINK GIVING A VOICE TO SOMETHING WHICH IS HEAVILY DEGRADED, DESECRATED, MISTREATED, AND DISRESPECTED IS IMPORTANT

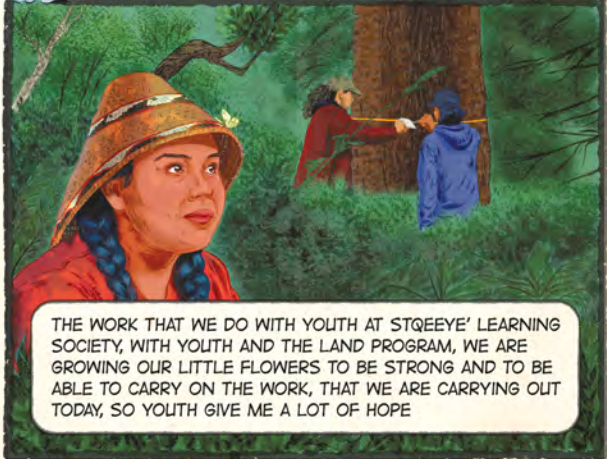
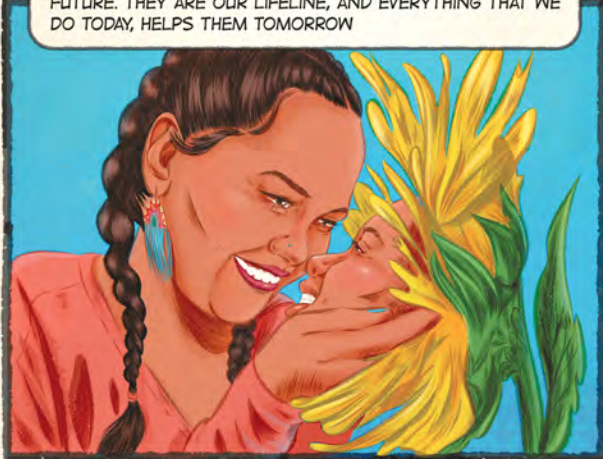


AS AN INDIGENOUS PERSON, IT IS MY ROLE TO GIVE WATER THAT VOICE



IN HUL'Q'UMI'N'UM, WE HAVE OUR NAME FOR OUR CHILDREN, A TERM OF ENDEARMENT SP'E'Q'UM. THAT MEANS FLOWER. WHEN WE THINK OF GROWING OUR YOUTH AND GROWING OUR CHILDREN AS FLOWERS, THEY NEED TO BE NURTURED, RESPECTED, AND HONOURED

YOU NEED TO BE GENTLE WITH THEM, BREATHE LIFE INTO THEM, WATER THEM, NURTURE THEM, AND GET THEM READY TO CONTINUE THIS WORK BECAUSE OUR CHILDREN ARE OUR FUTURE. THEY ARE OUR LIFELINE, AND EVERYTHING THAT WE DO TODAY, HELPS THEM TOMORROW



THE WORK THAT WE DO WITH YOUTH AT STQEEYE' LEARNING SOCIETY, WITH YOUTH AND THE LAND PROGRAM, WE ARE GROWING OUR LITTLE FLOWERS TO BE STRONG AND TO BE ABLE TO CARRY ON THE WORK, THAT WE ARE CARRYING OUT TODAY, SO YOUTH GIVE ME A LOT OF HOPE





## Afterword

*We Are of Water* provides a powerful message about our connection to water as Indigenous people. It shares the knowledge and voices of Elders, youth, and community members in such a creative way while keeping the protagonist – water – at the center of everything.

Water takes so many forms through these stories. It is our mother, caregiver, teacher, and confidant. It feeds us, nourishes us, and connects us. It is a part of everything and everyone.

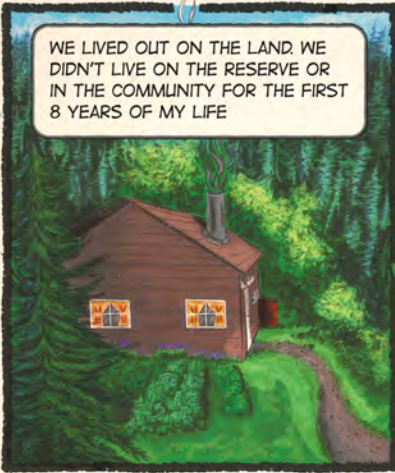
When I was younger, to advance the priorities of Indigenous peoples in terms of water and land protection, conservation, and restoration we had to focus our knowledge and education on science and try to fit into a colonial model of understanding so our voices could be heard. Now, we honour and uphold our traditional knowledge and laws alongside western science, and can also draw on creative methods to share this knowledge. We can engage with youth and provide intergenerational learning. There is so much openness to other ways of learning and doing things differently – creatively. It is empowering, especially for our youth.

I hope these illustrated stories will amplify Indigenous voices, experiences, and knowledge. I hope they will advance intergenerational learning between youth and Elders, and inspire future generations of water champions and stewards.

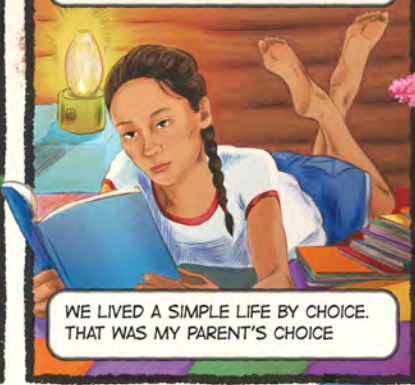
Tara Marsden, Naxginkw  
Gitxsan Nation  
Former Senior Indigenous Advisor, Healthy Watersheds  
Initiative  
UNDRIP Fellow, Real Estate Foundation of BC



WE LIVED OUT ON THE LAND. WE DIDN'T LIVE ON THE RESERVE OR IN THE COMMUNITY FOR THE FIRST 8 YEARS OF MY LIFE



WE DIDN'T HAVE ELECTRICITY. WE HAD WELL WATER. NO TV. NO INTERNET



WE LIVED A SIMPLE LIFE BY CHOICE. THAT WAS MY PARENT'S CHOICE

SO, I HAD A REALLY STRONG CONNECTION TO THE NATURAL WORLD. THAT HAS SHAPED WHO I AM INTO MY ADULT LIFE AND INTO HOW I RAISE MY KIDS



FOR ME I AM CONSISTENTLY LEARNING ABOUT OTHER THINGS THROUGH WATER. I THINK OF IT AS A UNIFIER. IT IS SOMETHING THAT CONNECTS PEOPLE JUST BY ITS NATURE



I AM CONNECTED TO PEOPLE ON THE COAST BECAUSE THE WATER THAT FLOWS BY MY HOUSE IN HAZELTON GOES TO THE COAST. I'M ALSO CONNECTED TO PEOPLE AT THE HEADWATERS. IT CONNECTS PEOPLE AND THAT IS GLOBAL



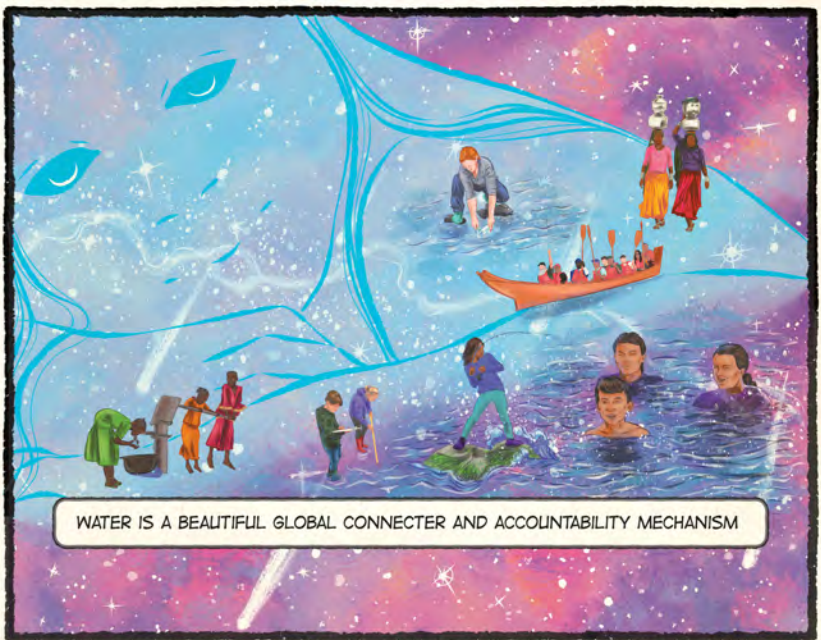
IT IS ALSO THIS ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISM BETWEEN HUMANS. IF YOU DO SOMETHING IN THE HEADWATERS OR THE SPAWNING GROUNDS, IT'S GOING TO AFFECT PEOPLE DOWN BELOW



WE CAN'T KEEP MAKING DECISIONS IN ISOLATION FROM ONE ANOTHER



WATER IS A BEAUTIFUL GLOBAL CONNECTER AND ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISM





## About the Illustrator | Chenoa Gao

I am a Muskeg Lake Cree Nation member. I work as a Conservation Illustrator with the B.C. Wildlife Federation's Wetlands Workforce project, one of the 61 Healthy Watersheds Initiative funded projects. In this position, the idea came to be of illustrating Indigenous voices and messages that were shared with the Wetlands Workforce team.

I didn't have the fortune of growing up with my culture. My mother is a product of the 60s scoop, stripped of her identity in the many white foster homes she was placed in. I never knew how important water was to our identity, how it was a part of this giant cycle that ran so deep. Water is life – a mother's unconditional love, taken away, just like children were taken from their families and placed in residential schools.

Water is so central to a way of life, spiritual, and cultural identity – and yet so many Indigenous peoples don't have access to clean drinking water. They have seen their wetlands destroyed for pipelines and progress. Just like little thought was placed on valuable wetlands, so were the lives of women and girls. They learned they didn't matter, their lives were thrown away like the many Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Yet, women were viewed as central to the community and powerful like water.

Water flowed through them, and they were the bearers of life. As such, they were given the role of water guardians. But with so many women's voices lost, who will stand up to protect vital water resources? If we are to truly protect water, we need to protect Indigenous women and girls, and bring back their central role as environmental stewards.



Turning the Elder and youth voices into comics has been a transformative experience for me. It was like an awakening that allowed me to see my role as an artist and environmentalist. Sharing their stories and giving them life is so important and I hope it inspires my children and young people the way it has inspired me. I want to give back this feeling I've been given to the youth and those struggling with their own purpose and cultural identity.



To learn more about the work of the Healthy Watersheds Initiative,  
Real Estate Foundation of BC, and the B.C. Wildlife Federation's  
Wetlands Workforce project you can visit:

[www.healthywatersheds.ca](http://www.healthywatersheds.ca) | [www.wetlandsworkforce.ca](http://www.wetlandsworkforce.ca)  
| [www.refbc.ca](http://www.refbc.ca)



