



“ I want to restore the faith in tap water in my own community first, and then travel out and restore the tap water quality in other communities.”

ERIC VAUTOUR

Ontario: Empowering youth, the future water protectors

Across Canada, First Nations youth are playing a powerful and emergent role in securing clean drinking water for their communities.

Sitting in the band office of Aundeck Omni Kaning First Nation on Manitoulin Island, Naomi Mandamin of Wikwemikoong Unceded Indian Reserve and Eric Vautour of Sheguiandah First Nation talk about the importance of water and their work as interns with the Canadian charity Water First. Even though their community is not under a DWA, many community members still drink bottled water due to a lack of trust in the on-reserve drinking water.

The Water First internship was started last year in partnership with the United Chiefs and Councils of Mniidoo Mnising, the Union of Ontario Indians and Wikwemikoong Unceded Indian Reserve.

“Water is truly essential to the process which we call life, and it teaches us many different lessons, from lessons of destruction to lessons of healing,” Vautour explains.⁴⁵ Vautour has been involved in water and environmental work since high school, when he participated in a program that engaged youth in environmental initiatives, like shoreline cleanups. Through the Water First internship, established this year, Vautour is gaining valuable knowledge and certifications regarding drinking water treatment, which he hopes will enable him to pursue a post-secondary program next year.

He has big plans for the future. Vautour explains that he “wants to restore the faith back in tap water in my own community first, and then travel out and restore the tap water quality in other communities.” With new awareness of the drinking water issues that many communities across Canada face, Vautour has become more passionate about spreading solutions to even the most remote First Nations.

Mandamin explains that when she started the Water First internship she wasn’t passionate about water. Since then, things have changed. She reflects on the Water Walkers who talked to the interns on their first day, and how they participated in water ceremonies and prayer. The Water Walkers are a group of Anishnaabe women and men who have taken action on the issue of contaminated water by walking the perimeter of the Great Lakes every year to raise awareness about water quality.⁴⁶ “That moment, I knew this was going to be a different journey, not just about learning to work at the

⁴⁵ Personal communication, Eric Vautour, Sheguiandah First Nation. October 24, 2017.

⁴⁶ Water Walkers. (2017). About us. Retrieved from: motherearthwaterwalk.com/?page_id=11.



Naomi Mandamin. WATER FIRST

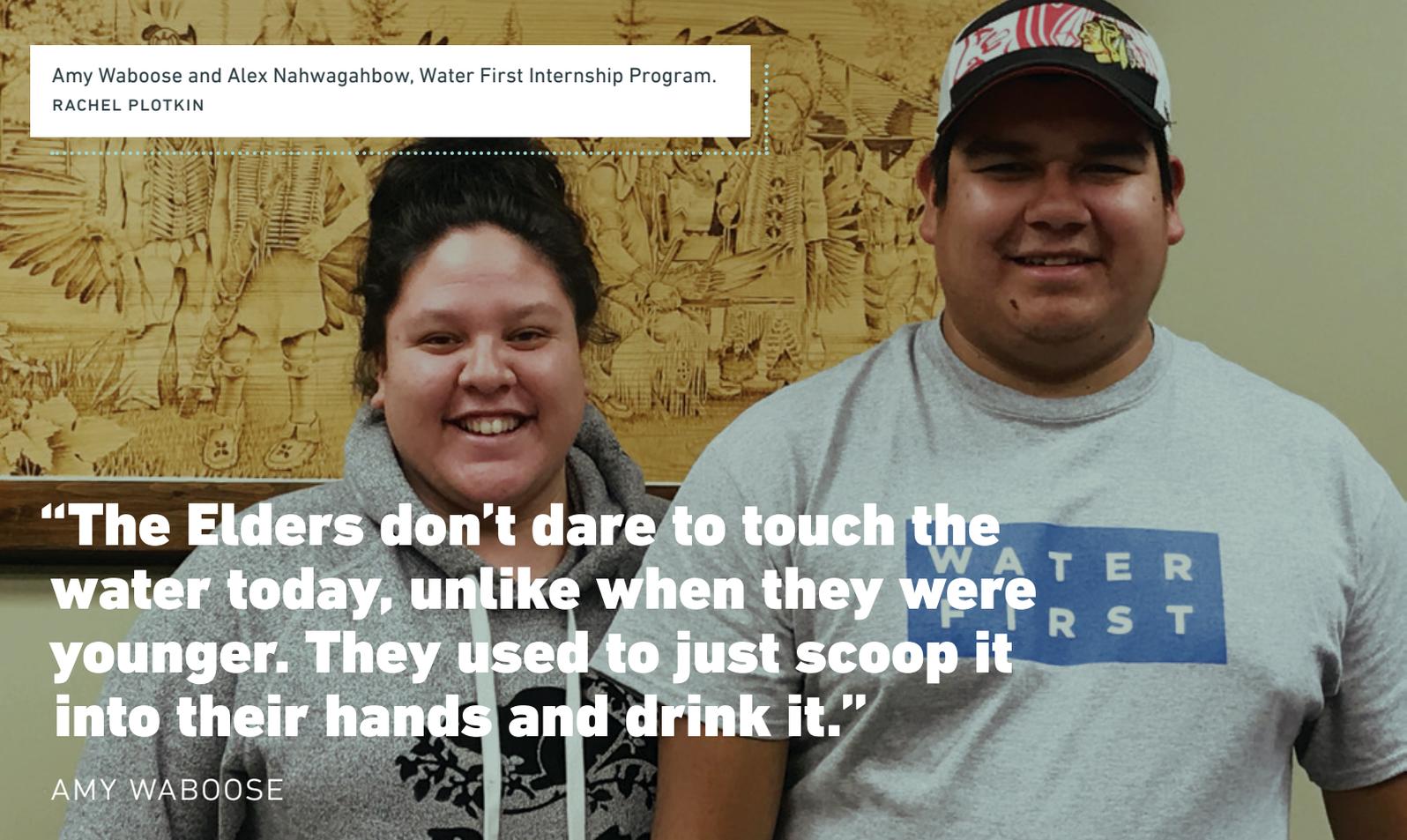
water treatment plant,” Mandamin says. “It was about a different journey as well, a traditional journey.”⁴⁷

Participation in the Water First Internship has not been without its challenges. Mandamin explains that this year, she has had to spend time away from her young son. “I’ll teach him,” she tells us. “I’ll let him know how important it was for me to do this. I feel like I am where I need to be right now.”

Working with water has reconnected these youth to their roots, and reignited in them an interest in ceremony, sweat lodges and water ceremonies. As Vautour explains, working so closely with water has reinforced in him a “broader view of what the water is. It’s alive, it has a spirit. It’s a gift for us to cherish.”

⁴⁷ Personal communication, Naomi Mandamin, Wikwemikoong Unceded Indian Reserve. October 24, 2017.

Amy Waboose and Alex Nahwagahbow, Water First Internship Program.
RACHEL PLOTKIN

A photograph of two young people, Amy Waboose and Alex Nahwagahbow, smiling. Amy is on the left, wearing a grey hoodie. Alex is on the right, wearing a grey t-shirt with a blue 'WATER FIRST' logo and a baseball cap. The background is a wall with a large, intricate wooden carving depicting various figures and scenes.

“The Elders don’t dare to touch the water today, unlike when they were younger. They used to just scoop it into their hands and drink it.”

AMY WABOOSE

Ontario: Protecting water at its source in Whitefish River First Nation

First Nations youth Amy Waboose and Alex Nahwagahbow from Whitefish River First Nation have spent part of the last year as interns in the Water First Internship Program. Both have been actively working on a First Nations–led source water protection plan in their community that aims to protect the rivers, lakes and streams around their First Nation — i.e., to protect water at its source.

Source water protection involves preventing contaminants from entering water sources in the first place, and is the first layer of defence in the multi-barrier approach to water protection.⁴⁸ It is about “protecting both the quality and the quantity of water sources, now and into the future” using a variety of management actions.⁴⁹

Waboose explains that she was first drawn to this kind of work after doing walks and ceremonies around the Great Lakes with Water Walker Josephine Mandamin. “She said

48 Government of Canada. (2014). First Nations On-reserve Source Water Protection Plan. Retrieved from: aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1398369474357/1398369572276.

49 CELA (Canadian Environmental Law Association). (2014). First Nations’ On-Reserve Source Water Protection. Retrieved from: cela.ca/sites/cela.ca/files/First_Nation_SWP_Legal_Toolkit.pdf.

our waters are sick, and everyone started doing more. It's hard to inform people about it, because they don't understand, they don't realize how important it is."⁵⁰

Source water protection usually falls under provincial jurisdiction in Canada, given that watersheds extend outside of reserve boundaries. This can make source water protection planning for First Nations legally and logistically complex. A report by Human Rights Watch explains, "in practice, First Nations cannot carry out their culturally-understood obligation to protect water — either on or off reserve." First Nations leaders have expressed concerns about not being sufficiently engaged in decision-making regarding development activities that could affect their traditional territories and the waters within them. According to Human Rights Watch, "in many cases the lakes, rivers and streams that contribute to the source water for these communities have deteriorated because of pollutants from industries and growing municipalities."⁵¹

Speaking with concern about the quality of water surrounding Whitefish River First Nation, Waboose asks, "Why are the steams gone, the smelts? Pipelines, oil rigs, polluting all the water — for what, money? You're going to die without water. And they don't see that until it's gone."⁵²

Staff from the David Suzuki Foundation meet with youth from the Water First Internship Program in the band office of Aundeck Omni Kaning First Nation on Manitoulin Island. WATER FIRST



⁵⁰ Personal communication, Amy Waboose, Whitefish River First Nation. October 24, 2017.

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch. (2016). Make it safe. Retrieved from: [hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis).

⁵² Personal communication, Amy Waboose, Whitefish River First Nation, October 24, 2017.