

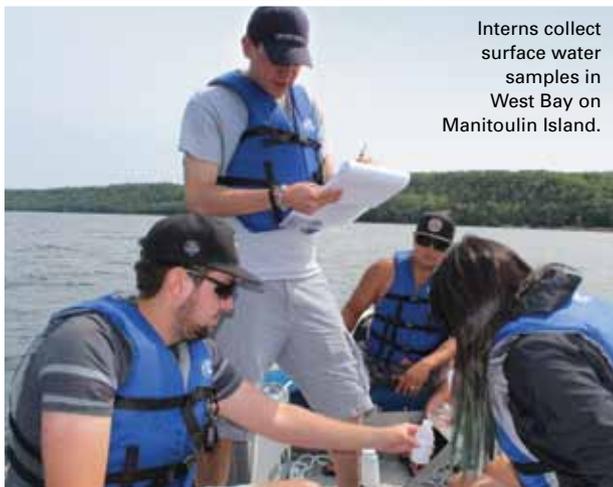


Interns pose with Minister Hajdu after a tour of the M'Chigeeng First Nation water treatment plant.



Eric Vautour, from Sheguiandah First Nation, calibrates equipment in order to test the water around his community's drinking water intake.

PHOTO: WATERCANA



Interns collect surface water samples in West Bay on Manitoulin Island.



Interns with program partners during the Graduation ceremony at the Aundeck Omni Kaning Pow Wow Grounds.

# Water First

Providing employment opportunities for First Nations youth to succeed in the water industry.

BY EMILY WORTS

**WHEN JOHN MILLAR**, executive director and founder of Water First, attended a national water conference focused on First Nations water issues he was shocked at the lack of representation by Canadian NGOs. At the time Millar was running a charity addressing global water issues, specifically in Uganda.

"I went to a conference in Toronto for water projects abroad and there were hundreds of people from dozens of Canadian NGOs," recalls Millar of the conference in 2013.

A few months later, he attended the water conference in Ottawa, expecting to again find dozens of Canadian NGOs, this time addressing First Nations water

issues. He found none. "There were many government, industry, and First Nations representatives present, but there were virtually no Canadian NGOs," says Millar.

At the conference, Millar spoke with Indigenous representatives from coast to coast and enquired as to what kinds of NGO programs were available to them and found none.

Millar returned to his office in Creemore, Ontario and started exploring ways to support First Nations communities with water challenges. He partnered with Carleton University and began working on a baseline water quality study in partnership with Shawanaga First Nation, identifying an intake site

for their future water treatment plant.

"Within three years our First Nations work became 90 per cent of what we were doing so we changed the organization name to Water First (from Tin Roof Global) with an exclusive emphasis on First Nations water challenges," says Millar.

Since then the organization has collaborated with more than 50 First Nations communities. They have worked in Ontario, Quebec, and Labrador and are currently building relationships in Manitoba.

Their latest effort, the Water First Internship program, began with all seven First Nations on Manitoulin Island in the spring of 2017, and aims to increase

the local pool of water treatment plant operators. The internship was piloted in partnership with the United Chiefs and Councils of Mnidoo Minsing (UCCMM), Wiikwemkoong Unceded Territory, and the Anishnabek Union of Ontario Indians, with funding from Employment and Social Development Canada.

In August 2018, 10 successful interns graduated from the two-year program and began careers in water treatment and environmental science, or were inspired to continue studying water at the post-secondary level. The internship helped interns acquire necessary certification to begin a life dedicated to the stewardship of their community's health and well-being.

### Inaugural Water First interns



The Water First Internship means **Chelsea Antoine** Debassige, 24, can work in her home community, Zhiibaahaasing (the most remote area on Manitoulin Island). She is currently the project coordinator for Swim Drink Fish Canada in Zhiibaahaasing, a position she wouldn't have been able to obtain without the experience she gained during the internship.



"As I'm getting older, I'm starting to think about the generations that are coming. This is important work," says **Chris Wemigwans**, 46,

of the Water First Internship. With the hands-on experience and knowledge he gained through the internship, he is now working for his home community, Aundeck Omni Kaning (AOK), as an operator in training (OIT) at the local water treatment plant.



Post-secondary education took **Alex Nahwegahbow**, 23, away from Whitefish River First Nation but he struggled with the necessity of being so far away from home. The internship allowed him to

study in his home community and with his OIT and Water Quality Analyst (WQA) certification he is now working for the Ontario Clean Water Agency in Espanola, Ontario, less than 20 minutes from his home community.



**Naomi Mandamin**, 32, has been fascinated with science for as long as she can remember. "I've always wanted to work in a lab," she says.

The scope of Water First's training—from testing for chlorine, hardness, alkalinity and turbidity to microbiological analysis, and surface water sampling—is right up her alley. Mandamin is now working as the environmental coordinator for UCCMM.



**Paige Manitowabi**, 29, is excited to take what she learned as a Water First intern and combine it with her growing interest in

traditional Anishinaabe ways. That mix of knowledge, she believes, could be the key to solving many issues. Manitowabi is currently combining her passion for water and the environment as the environmental field technician at Wahnapiatae First Nation.



**Alex Cartagena**, 30, a father of two, is excited by the prospect of gainful employment the internship offers.

Before the internship he worked for a quarry and when it shutdown, his bills went unpaid. Tired of underemployment and armed with his WQA certification and GED he now works at his local plant part-time.



"For our culture, water is life. It's important, and I try to teach my son the same," says **Amy Waboose**, 23. She recently accepted a

full-time position at her local water treatment plant and is a youth representative on the Whitefish River Source Water Protection Committee.



**Dallas Goodfellow**, 25, was born in Sault Ste. Marie, and moved to AOK when he was in Grade 3. The Water First Internship inspired him

to continue his education and he is now enrolled in the pre-trades program at Cambrian College and hopes to eventually obtain a diploma in civil engineering or environmental science.



**Cassidy Beaudin**, 20, plans to turn his Water First Internship experience into a job as a treatment plant operator.

Cassidy obtained both his OIT and WQA certification and is looking forward to taking on the everyday tasks that are part of the job, from sampling to tapping into water lines to cleaning out holding tanks. He sees a bright future in the field.



The Water First Internship offered **Eric Vautour**, 25, an opportunity to enhance previous knowledge and grow his passion for

activism. He is working as an environmental technician/OIT in his home community and splits his time between the water plant and working on environmental projects, like his community's source water protection plan. "This Internship has taught me more about the situation of clean water in our province. I didn't know how many First Nations communities were without clean water. I really want to change that in the next few years," he says. (See page 28 for more details about Eric.) *wc*



Emily Worts is a writer based in Creemore, Ont.



For further information on the Water First intern program, visit [waterfirst.ngo/our-projects/water-first-internship](http://waterfirst.ngo/our-projects/water-first-internship)