



W A T E R  
F I R S T

# Lasting Relationships, Lasting Results

2023 ANNUAL REPORT



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## Safe water and strengthened communities

Sustainable access to safe, clean water in Indigenous communities continues to be a pressing need in Canada. As of October 2023, 14%\* of First Nations communities across Canada are affected by drinking water advisories – in Ontario, 21% of First Nations communities are facing this critical challenge.

Water First Education & Training Inc. is a charitable organization that partners with Indigenous communities to help address local water challenges through education, training and meaningful collaboration. To date, we have collaborated with more than 80 communities to support the training of future water treatment plant operators and water resource technicians, and inspire a love of water science in youth.

The ultimate goal of each collaboration is lasting, positive results that remain with the community for generations to come. We work with community partners to identify their training needs and long-term water resource management goals. We then co-create interactive and learner-centred programs that strengthen a community’s capacity to help meet those goals and benefit the local community for the long term.

Together with all partners, including communities, donors, funders, staff, other organizations and individuals who share our goals, we are working towards safe water and strengthened communities.

\*Drinking water advisory statistics are for federally maintained systems on First Nations reserve lands only. These numbers do not include private systems or systems in Inuit communities.

## Letter from the Board Chair

Over the past year, Water First has demonstrated a deep commitment to achieving lasting results through meaningful collaboration with intention. Lasting results is one of Water First’s Strands of Success. Our vision of lasting results includes every Indigenous community enjoying the same access to safe, clean water as Canadians do.

The water challenges facing Indigenous communities are complex. Water First focuses on partnerships with Indigenous communities to co-create programs that weave skills training and water-science education with existing community knowledge and strengths to address the water challenges identified by Indigenous leadership. We take direction from those communities we partner with and work together developing programs that support community goals.

Capacity building plays a significant role in achieving lasting results, and it’s where Water First spends a great deal of effort. Our approach – building programs together with Indigenous communities – is designed to create results that will stay within the community. Capacity building, done well, is reciprocal. Listening, mutual understanding, and respectful collaboration are the perspectives from which Water First builds relationships that result in two-way communication and learning. It’s not just capacity building – it’s co-capacity building.

As you’ll see from the stories in our annual report, building co-capacity together has been fruitful over the past year. We’ve worked with community partners to support Indigenous youth and young adults in skills training to secure jobs, to help high school students gain credits to pave the way to further education in

STEM\*, and to strengthen local technical skills in water resources management.

Internally, Water First has been evolving. We’ve welcomed new members to the board and the Indigenous Advisory Council who bring valuable knowledge and expertise. We’ve built a strong relationship with the Indigenous Professional Association of Canada and were so pleased to be able to support a youth’s career journey with an internship.

Water First staff have been on a learning journey to understand the histories and experiences of Indigenous Peoples in Canada – knowledge that will serve them in their work and their lives for years to come.

As we move into the future, we are building on these successes. There are promising collaborations on the horizon, and we are thrilled to launch our first Drinking Water Internship in collaboration with First Nations in Manitoba as we look to the growth of programs into the West. We are entering our next stage with a sense of intentionality – and always learning.

The Water First approach sets an example for how to work alongside Indigenous communities to achieve lasting results. By codeveloping programs and through co-capacity building, we can effectively work together to create real, relevant, and sustainable change.

\*Science, technology, engineering, mathematics

Leanne O’Brien  
Board Chair





# Our impact to date *in numbers*\*

Water First's journey has been one of **growth, change, collaboration, and celebration**. The programs we have co-created with partner communities have led to positive outcomes for community capacity, employment, education, and meaningful partnerships. The results you see here tell the story of all we've been able to achieve together. Thank you to everyone who has made these successes to date possible.

\*As of October 31, 2023.

## Indigenous Advisory Council

Providing valuable feedback on the work we do, the Indigenous Advisory Council is paramount in guiding Water First through opportunities and challenges.

Composed of Elders, community leaders, water specialists, and educators, the Indigenous Advisory Council (IAC) provides consultation to Water First around community engagement and program development and delivery in Indigenous communities. Along with members of partner communities, the Indigenous Advisory Council is instrumental in navigating the opportunities and challenges that present themselves in the work we do.

The advice, insight, and perspectives shared by the Indigenous Advisory Council allows our work to be approached in an informed, thoughtful way. The ongoing trust and partnership of the IAC, nurtured over time, has been foundational to the evolution of Water First, and their unwavering support continues to guide us as we grow.

[READ MORE](#)

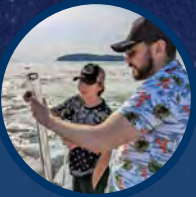
“My involvement with Water First means I can share in something where I’ve taught and feel connected to, from Creemore to Shoal Lake to James Bay.

Water First works directly with First Nations to bring **training, education and problem solving**, so that communities can have autonomy over their own water rights and water safety and **protect the water for future generations.**”

Jean Colburn, Indigenous Advisory Council member



Water First's Indigenous Advisory Council. Missing from photo: Elder Dr. Jeannette Corbiere, Sue Chiblow.



84

Indigenous communities Water First has partnered with from coast to coast to coast



46

Drinking Water Internship Program graduates

174

Drinking water certifications achieved

117,110

Hours of training in the Drinking Water Internship Program

97

Weeklong workshops delivered by the Schools Program team



34

Environmental Water Program projects

84

High school credits earned by students through the Summer Credit Program



7,495

Student participants in Schools Program workshops

80+

Environmental Water workshops delivered



# Coming together to solve water challenges

From collecting water samples waist-deep in a cold river to developing a donor stewardship plan with colleagues, everything we do at Water First is rooted in consultation with each community partner to strengthen our intentional and authentic cultural awareness learning journey.

In coming together as a cooperative team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, we can address water challenges and find meaningful solutions in the communities we work with. The relationships and trust we build are at the foundation of all of our successes and growth, whether we are working alongside community partners, their members, donors, or staff.

Water First's leadership team consists of Indigenous and non-Indigenous personnel, working together with a dedicated Board of Directors, Indigenous Advisory Council, and a growing staff. Together, we strive to provide valuable, relevant programming that addresses community-identified needs. It is through these partnerships, and the guidance directly from the communities we work with, that we can develop the right programs to support meaningful relationships and lasting impact.

We acknowledge that our cultural awareness and understanding is an ongoing learning process and deeply respect the knowledge we gain in the scope of the work we do and the relationships we nurture. And we're grateful for every opportunity to be water helpers, working alongside water protectors and community partners.

Our commitment to collaboration and reciprocal learning is at the heart of every stage of our work – starting with identifying community goals through the delivery of programming and beyond. The graphic on this page — a **framework for successful collaboration** — illustrates how collaboration between and among Elders, Knowledge Holders, program participants, community members, and others leads to positive outcomes.



“With every partnership, every collaboration, our goal is that the benefits will far outlast the project itself. **The key to lasting results is to work together.**

It's Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, coming together, making critical decisions together, and navigating unexpected challenges together – **that's how we're collaborating to address local water challenges.**”

John Millar, Founder and Executive Director  
Water First

## Strands of Success

The Strands of Success represent the essential qualities of Water First's approach. These three Strands – **Trust Building, Meaningful Partnerships, and Lasting Results** – express the ways in which we are intentional and make connections in everything we do.

They tell the story of how the lasting results co-created by Water First and partner communities are built on strong, meaningful partnerships held together by interconnected relationships that flourish through mutual trust and respect.

[READ MORE](#)



### Spotlight Story

Graduation often marks the end of a journey. For **Nigel Debassige** of **Atikameksheng Anishnawbek** and the other Indigenous youth and community members who recently completed a training program to become certified water treatment plant operators, graduation is just the beginning.

On September 22, 2023, **Mamaweswen, The North Shore Tribal Council** and **Water First** celebrated Nigel and the 11 interns who graduated from this co-created program. Their accomplishment represents not just an end to formal training, but the launch of their professional journeys as certified water treatment plant operators.

The program, created to address community capacity needs by training young Indigenous adults in water operations, is a symbol of the success that comes from working together towards safe, clean drinking water in Indigenous communities.

“Our time and weeks of training together will always have a spot in my heart. On graduation day, too, we look outside for inspiration to drive us forwards, but **I see that inspiration right here among us.**”

**Nigel Debassige**, graduate and Valedictorian  
Atikameksheng Anishnawbek



Nigel Debassige delivering his valedictorian speech at the NSTC Internship graduation ceremony, Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. MASON PROUT



# Nurturing connections *between* interns, peers, *and* communities

“When interns become alumni, they will continue to have the support of the Water First staff. But they also leave with **an entire cohort of supporters**. No matter where they end up post-internship, **they will always have the connections that they built through their fifteen months together.**”

Jacey Bonertz, Technical Trainer & Project Coordinator  
Water First

Participants in a Water First program can count on developing new technical skills related to water sciences or resource management that are aligned with a community’s long-term goals. Beyond these outcomes, it’s the connections developed between interns, peers, and communities that will stand the test of time.

Interpersonal connections are nurtured and deepened in collaborations that continue past one successful project – like our collaboration with the **Naskapi Nation of Kawawachikamach** in northern Quebec since 2018. In a testament to the long-term nature of the relationship, participants from past projects shared their knowledge from previous training with new participants to help the team pick up the skills they needed.

Graduates of the Drinking Water Internship Program achieve the technical skills and valuable certifications that will serve them on their path to employment in water treatment or to further education. But for many interns, one of the most rewarding aspects of the program is the connections they make. **Kyle Porter**, a 2023 graduate from **Garden River First Nation**, had this to say: “I joined because I was seeking an opportunity to become involved in my community, and also to learn new skills. Personally, I find that being able to contribute to the community I belong to brings me closer to my family and friends.”

Upon graduation, Drinking Water interns are encouraged to join Water First’s **Alumni Network**. As alumni, they can access ongoing support for their professional journeys in the water science field:

access to a newly unveiled online portal, educational opportunities, funding, and a community of fellow professionals to cheer each other on. Revamped and enhanced in 2023, the Alumni Network is a hub for networking, professional development, and ongoing connections with Water First staff and other graduates.

Water First programs also facilitate connections and support reciprocal learning between communities. Environmental Water participants, for example, often have the opportunity to share their learnings and experiences with peers at conferences and community presentations. The connections that develop through Water First partnerships sustain results well into the future.

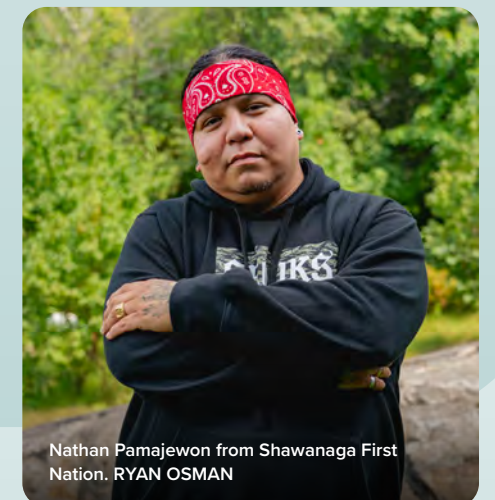
## Spotlight Story

In the spring of 2023, staff from Water First attended the annual **Aboriginal Water and Wastewater Association of Ontario (AWWAO)** training conference and trade show in **Rama First Nation**.

**Nathan Pamajewon**, a graduate of the Georgian Bay Drinking Water Internship Program from **Shawanaga First Nation**, helped organize a special Alumni Network event to bring together graduates and current interns.

“**Water is life, and I consider this to be an honour to keep it protected for now and the future.** I’m glad I learned the process and how to take pride in your work and in keeping everyone safe.”

**Nathan Pamajewon**, Alumni  
Shawanaga First Nation



Nathan Pamajewon from Shawanaga First Nation. RYAN OSMAN



### Spotlight Story

**Aiden Copegog** from **Beausoleil First Nation (BFN)** first encountered Water First when he participated in a school workshop in 2019. Since then, he's been part of four other programs. At the Christian Island Elementary School powwow in June 2023, Aiden approached Water First and asked about potential employment. The stars aligned and he was able to [join us as a youth mentor](#) for the 2023 Summer Credit Program in BFN.

Youth mentors are an important part of Summer Credit Programs because they demonstrate what the pursuit of a water science career could look like. Learners are inspired by seeing their peers excel in an environmental science-related job, while youth mentors also have the opportunity to strengthen their leadership and teaching skills.

During the 2023 program, Aiden helped with the facilitation of activities and brought a youthful energy to the class. He helped troubleshoot the online portal required by the high school, and kept students on task throughout. We hope to stay connected with Aiden whatever the future holds for him!



Aiden works on clean water testing.  
Beausoleil First Nation. ADIRANNA BILINSKI



### Spotlight Story

**Jaylen Andre**, from the **Naskapi Nation of Kawawachikamach**, began his journey with Water First through school workshops when he was 14 years old, in May 2022. He learned about watersheds and water chemistry using [Water Rangers](#) kits, which are water quality testing kits designed for educators. Jaylen got to meet Water First's environmental team and participants, and see the "big kid" versions of the water quality equipment. Jaylen enjoyed the experience so much that he ended up getting hired through a collaboration with the community to work throughout the summer, learning how to do water and fish sampling.

In February 2023, Jaylen, along with two other Naskapi participants, traveled from Kawawachikamach, Quebec to Park Lake, Labrador for a [winter water monitoring workshop](#). At Park Lake, Jaylen made an impression on the guides from **Sheshatshiu Innu Nation** — they liked working with the Naskapi, and specifically with Jaylen as a youth. They were impressed by his passion and enthusiasm, and by how much he loves being on the land.



A group photo at the end of a workshop before heading back to town.  
That's Jaylen on the right! Park Lake, Labrador. RYAN OSMAN



# Listening *and* adapting to community needs

Adapting to the unique needs and priorities of each community we partner with is a hallmark of Water First's approach.

Our robust programs are delivered in collaboration with many different communities and partners. We continually refine programs to make them more effective and efficient, and are constantly researching best practices and new approaches in education and training. However, delivering education and technical skills training programs that will have lasting results starts with listening and understanding what a community's goals are. That's why we embed flexibility in our planning, allowing us to be responsive and adapt to what each community wants to achieve.

Sometimes, adapting a program to better meet the needs of participants comes down to making minor changes that can have a big impact. This can look like changing the timing of a program module to better suit the needs of participants – like we did with the geographic information systems (GIS) training for our partnership with the **Ogemawahj Tribal Council (OTC)**. Normally, GIS is offered much later in the program, but the community was interested in having interns apply skills right away, so it was moved closer to the beginning of training.

Adaptation can also look like changing the scope of a program after launch. A new collaboration with the

**Cree Nation Government (CNG)** began with a water quality monitoring workshop for participants from the **Cree Nation of Waswanipi**, similar to [previous work with the Cree Nation of Nemaska](#).

As discussions progressed, CNG identified the need for this training for participants from **Ouje Bougoumou** and a refresher for Nemaska participants. Our adaptable programs expanded a small workshop with Waswanipi into two weeks of training for thirteen participants, a complete lake survey, and new co-developed water quality monitoring plans for two different Cree communities.

In some cases, adapting a program can mean digging deeper into what a community wants to achieve in the long term. As relationships grow, we gain further insight into what a community's objectives are, and we can create solutions together. With **Innu Nation**, our team worked with the community to [build a new aquatic department](#), beginning with consultations and planning for the future, supporting with grant writing, and translating community priorities into a plan.

Water First engages students in outdoor experiential learning opportunities that integrate land-based teaching with guidance from Elders and Knowledge Keepers, water organizations, and community programs. These programs are adapted to local environments, school contexts, and traditions.

This is particularly impactful in a school setting, where students can be inspired by making connections between a water science workshop and something already happening in their school or community. Integration like this was especially evident in our collaboration with the community of **Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg**.

Kitigan Zibi School reached out to us about collaborating on a water-themed week that also encompassed World Water Day. The team was able to work with every class from kindergarten to grade 12 at the school, taking each group outside to learn about environmental water quality indicators on the frozen lake. Indigenous Guardians also led two groups of students in looking at the water quality of a natural spring in the community. Learning on the land, and relating the learning to local traditions and contexts, helped to align the program with the community's own interests and goals.

**“It was humbling to begin the week beside the water, being welcomed by Kookum Shirley's Thanks Giving Prayer and student-sung honour song.**

**It brought a clear focus to the rest of the week and a shared goal between us and the students for the rest of the program.”**

**Tanya Sackaney**, Indigenous School Engagement Coordinator, Water First

Successful collaborations start with strong relationships, and strong relationships are built on communication, respect, and trust. For Water First, nurturing and strengthening these relationships involves continuous engagement, regular check-ins, and being open to feedback, which all help to ensure that our programs are successful in meeting each community's unique needs. Through a focus on dialogue, program evaluation, and reciprocal learning, we can support a community in achieving lasting results.

## Spotlight Story

Water First has been partnering with **Sagamok Anishnawbek** over the past few years on water science programs. Our visit in June 2023 was going to be a major milestone: for the first time in our history, all three Water First program areas – a Schools Program, the Environmental Water Program, and the Drinking Water Program – were set to happen in the same community at the same time.

Things didn't go exactly as planned, due to the impact of wildfires that were threatening northern Ontario and Quebec. But this change in plans presented an opportunity for the community to come together to address a pressing challenge. And sometimes Water First is lucky to be there, in the community, to support these efforts.

[READ MORE](#)

**“When you're working in the field, Mother Nature will do her thing, or other challenges will arise that mean you have to change priorities or adapt plans.**

**At Water First, we're led by community-identified priorities. We strive to be flexible, understanding, and supportive – even if all we can do is postpone a program so community members can focus on other priorities.**

**We are honoured to be able to support community partners in any way we can.”**

**Mason Prout**, Communications & Development Specialist  
Water First



Ready for a day of monitoring. Waswanipi, Quebec. KEEGAN SMITH



In the middle of a strategic planning session with Innu Nation members. Natuashish, Labrador. ALEX LYNCH



### Spotlight Story

Water First began a partnership with **Brunswick House First Nation (BHFN)** in July 2022 to provide technical training to a team of passionate young participants. The community was interested in establishing a program that could track the effects of climate change on the waters and plants that they most heavily relied on. Water First's role was to support the team in mastering their field and data collection skills.

The first field season was a great success, thanks to the confidence and capabilities that the team members demonstrated. **Santana Vanbuskirk**, the team lead, was inspired to continue this project and along with the Lands and Resources Department, was keen to work with Water First again.

Taking time to understand the community's vision, the group decided to adjust the climate monitoring program's 2023 field season, slowing the pace of technical duties to create more space and time for cultural activities like water ceremony, and focusing on monitoring one specific lake – the community's drinking water source – for contaminants from mining activities.

The 2023 field season – a successful adaptation based on community-led priorities – was ambitious, yet balanced the scientific work with moments to connect with the land and each other.

**“My goal for this project is to create climate change awareness in the community and document long term effects of climate change.**

**I would like to see the Mountbatten Climate Change Project continue to strive for years to come.**

**Climate change means to me that Mother Earth is in pain and she needs more people to protect the water, the trees, the ground and everything in between.”**

**Santana Vanbuskirk**, Environmental Water Program participant  
Brunswick House First Nation



# Lasting results *begin* with strong relationships

**With every collaboration Water First embarks on, we strive to first understand what the community wishes for the long term, and then offer support that leverages our technical expertise.**

Our goal is to co-create sustainable positive outcomes that support each community's priorities and goals, so the benefits of the work stay with the community for generations to come. Lasting results like this are built on strong relationships, meaningful collaboration, and trust.



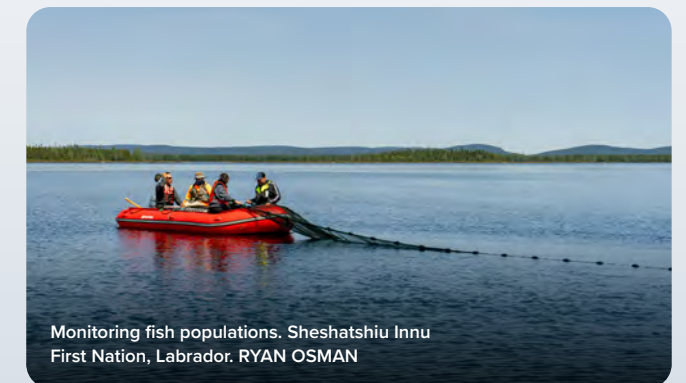
OTC Interns sporting their new Water First-branded coats.  
Rama First Nation. JUSTIN MCGREGOR

This year, we launched a new partnership with the **Ogemawahj Tribal Council (OTC)**, to train Indigenous young adults to become water treatment plant operators. The announcement was made in June 2023, but the initial conversations began many months prior. Investing time in conversations and listening to ensure we understood the goals of OTC and participating communities was a critical first step. From that foundation, and through ongoing work to nurture and support that relationship, the newest Internship Program was launched. This cohort of interns are on a journey to develop technical skills and certifications to be the next generation of water operators.

Strong relationships can also lead to ongoing collaborations, such as our Summer Credit Program. This multi-week, land-based, experiential learning program is full of fun, hands-on water science activities.

While the main objective is for students to earn high school credits in subjects like geography or science, we deliver the program with partners in a way that embraces Indigenous culture: learning on the land, working with water and fish, and learning from Elders, Knowledge Keepers, local organizations, and community programs. *(See the next page for more about the 2023 Summer Credit Program).*

When a community reaches out to us for support in implementing an environmental project or training strategy, it often marks the beginning of a long-term relationship. Just as with a shoal rehabilitation project, laying a solid foundation now can mean successful outcomes in years to come, as with **Sheshatshiu Innu First Nation** in Labrador. Collaboration with the Environmental Water team began in 2021, and has led not only to a long-term fish habitat monitoring program, but the partnership has facilitated enhanced monitoring plans and greater awareness of climate change-related challenges.



Monitoring fish populations. Sheshatshiu Innu First Nation, Labrador. RYAN OSMAN

Water First is in a unique position to be able to work with individuals across different age groups – in-class workshops with school-aged children, young adults starting a journey to a career in water science, as well as Elders, parents, and partners who are working together towards community goals. Our focus on relationships and ongoing learning allows us to have a positive impact that can be felt for generations to come.



“For Water First, the most successful projects springboard into **enhanced partnerships** and **deeper relationships**. There’s no better feeling than getting invited back to collaborate on a new project.”

Cory Girard, Project Manager  
Water First

#### Spotlight Story

**Austin Waboose** from **Batchewana First Nation** graduated from the Drinking Water Internship Program in September 2023. Through this experience, Austin has gained the skills and certifications to support stronger community capacity for safe drinking water.

Described by his instructors as someone who brings a lot of humour, confidence and immense heart into everything he does, Austin’s caring nature shines through. Now, as a recent graduate of the Internship Program, Austin’s impact extends well beyond his peers and Water First staff. Prepared for a decades-long career as a certified water treatment plant operator, Austin is poised to make a lasting, positive impact on an entire community.



Austin Waboose from Batchewana First Nation. RYAN OSMAN

“I’m doing this for anyone who has been affected by water quality **not being held to the highest standard**.

I love helping my community the most, but I wouldn’t mind going elsewhere and sharing my knowledge and energy to help a secluded community. **I’d love to do this for every person who needs it.**”

**Austin Waboose**, Alumni  
Batchewana First Nation

#### Spotlight Story

Water First has been collaborating with **Beausoleil First Nation** since 2018. In summer 2023, Water First returned to southern Georgian Bay to deliver a third year of the Summer Credit Program, as well as a Drinking Water Internship in partnership with **Ogemawahj Tribal Council**, that welcomed two young adults from the community.

It is through sustained collaborations like these that we’ve developed – and continue to strengthen, relationships. Being invited to attend the school powwow in July was certainly a highlight of the season.

“We were touched and honoured to be invited to share in this amazing celebration of culture, and to get to see people that we’ve worked with and built relationships with,” said **Dillon Koopmans**, Water First’s Senior Manager, Education. “It really validated our relationship-first approach.”



# Training the next generation of Indigenous water operators

## DRINKING WATER INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

The water challenges faced by many Indigenous communities in Canada are complex. In some communities, the concern may be around infrastructure; for others, it's source water quality. Many communities also face issues of technical skills training and local capacity.

Having enough skilled people to operate and maintain water systems is critical. Though existing water treatment staff are doing an amazing job with available resources, many Indigenous communities have identified the need for more people with the skills, certifications, confidence, and passion to support solving water issues.



Isaiah Tobobondung working at his local water treatment plant. Wasauksing First Nation. GREG ALLAN

Water operators play an important role in keeping communities safe and healthy. However, there is a lack of locally available opportunities for young adults to gain the required technical skills and experience to enter the field.

The Drinking Water Internship Program is a 15-month, paid training program for young Indigenous adults to gain the skills, certifications, and confidence to pursue a career in water treatment. During the program, interns work with Water First through ten week-long training sessions, and are employed at their local water treatment plant, where they gain experience working alongside existing water treatment staff as well as the hours required to obtain their Class 1 certificate.

The program also looks beyond technical skills, providing interns with skills development in resume writing, employment coaching, networking opportunities, and more. Wrap-around supports are provided, like transportation and access to childcare services, to ensure the program works for a diverse set of participants. After completing the program, graduates are invited to join the Alumni Network, where they can remain engaged, build local networks, and access opportunities for ongoing professional development and peer support.

Piloted in 2017-2018 on Manitoulin Island, Water First has delivered four internship Programs across Ontario, with a fifth launched in the spring of 2023. Each internship is a partnership between Water First, Tribal Councils and communities, employment agencies, local Elders and Knowledge Keepers, water treatment staff, and others. Together, we're co-creating opportunities for participants to pursue careers or further education in water science.

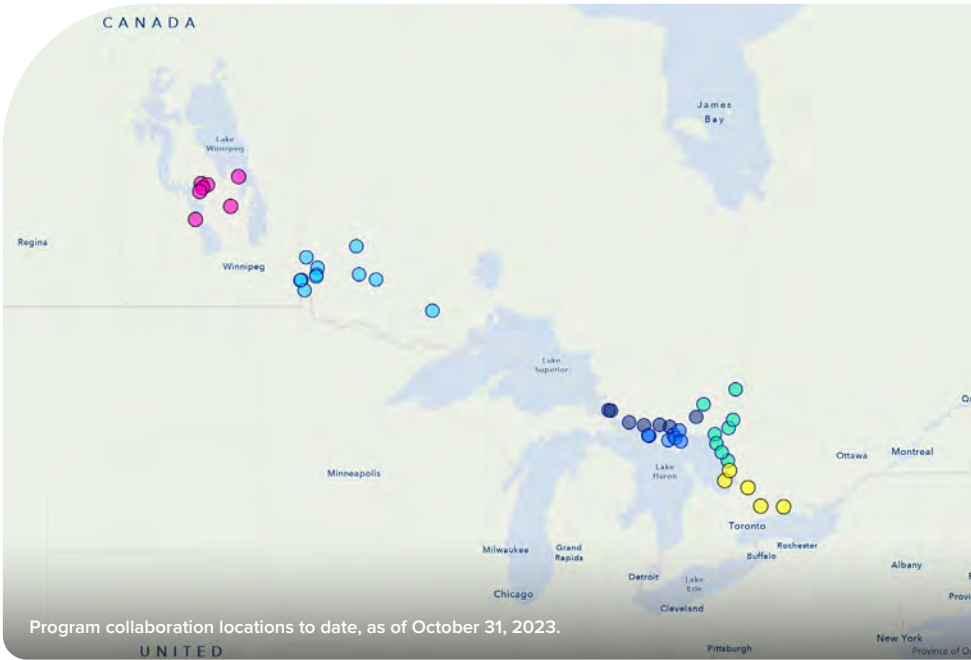
**11**  
Drinking Water Internship Program graduates this past year

**36**  
Provincially-recognized water treatment certifications earned this past year

**24,185**  
Hours worked in local water plants this past year

**78%**  
Of total graduates to date are employed in water treatment or the environmental field, or have gone back to school for further education

**80%**  
Of total graduates that are working in water science field are doing so for a First Nations community or organization



## 2023 HIGHLIGHTS

- ➔ Water First, in partnership with [Ogemawahj Tribal Council](#) and participating communities, is supporting eight interns from five local First Nations communities in our latest internship. This group of passionate young adults is set to graduate in the fall of 2024.
- ➔ In September 2023, eleven interns graduated from the Internship Program partnership between [Mamaweswen, The North Shore Tribal Council](#) and Water First. Over the course of the program, each intern accumulated 1,800 hours of on-the-job experience in water treatment plants and pursued additional water operator certification exams.



North Shore interns celebrating their graduation from the program. Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. MASON PROUT

- ➔ As part of the internship, North Shore interns worked towards their Water Quality Analyst (WQA) certification. This is a major milestone on the path to a career in water science. After completing [two intense weeks of workshops and study](#) in the summer of 2023, 80% of the interns passed the exam! This is the highest pass rate to date since the start of the WQA workshops.



# Taking action for long-term water and fish resources management

## ENVIRONMENTAL WATER PROGRAM

The communities that Water First collaborates with are interested in building technical skills and strengthening capacity for independent resource management. These communities have identified education and training as a key component to managing water resources and tracking the effects of climate change.

Many Indigenous communities have established and invested in the development of their Lands Departments, Wildlife Services, and Guardians Programs to better steward and monitor the land and water. As communities continue to expand environmental monitoring programs, increased capacity building becomes essential – but opportunities to do so are not always readily available.

We focus first on consulting with community partners about their long-term environmental water goals, then once we understand these goals, help determine priority areas and local training needs that our Environmental Water team can address. Project-based training provides a way to apply new knowledge and skills out on the water. A project completed for a community, by a community, can provide invaluable experience and increased confidence throughout the process.

We design custom training programs related to fish habitat restoration, water quality monitoring, mapping, data management, climate monitoring, winter monitoring, and fish contaminant studies. Working with Knowledge Keepers provides opportunities to weave local Indigenous knowledge, values and customs with Western water science.

In 2024, we will launch the Environmental Water Internship to provide paid internships to Indigenous youth and young adults looking to develop skills and achieve certification in water and fish resource management right in their own community. Interns will build technical know-how and achieve certifications related to water quality, data management, and fish conservation.



Hands-on training, out on the land. Cree Nation of Waswanipi, Quebec. KEEGAN SMITH

Our program helps to strengthen communities in a meaningful way with sustainable outcomes. This supports Indigenous communities in continuing to take action towards managing and stewarding local water resources for the long term.

### 84

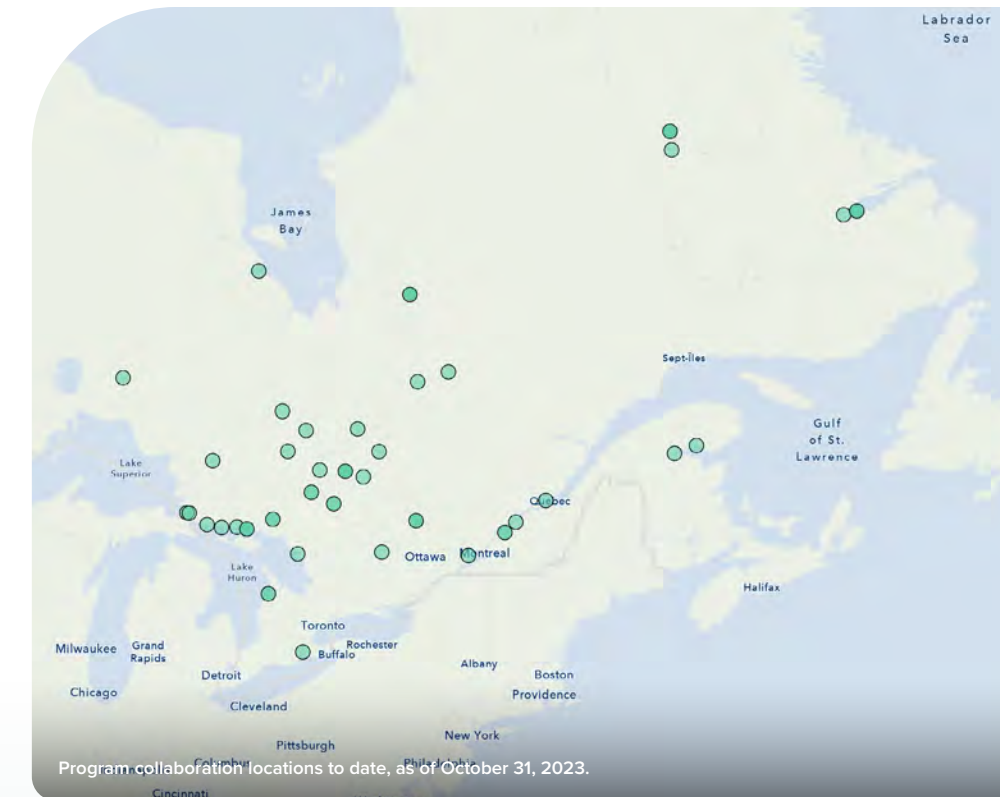
Environmental Water Program participants this past year

### 24

Environmental Water workshops delivered this past year

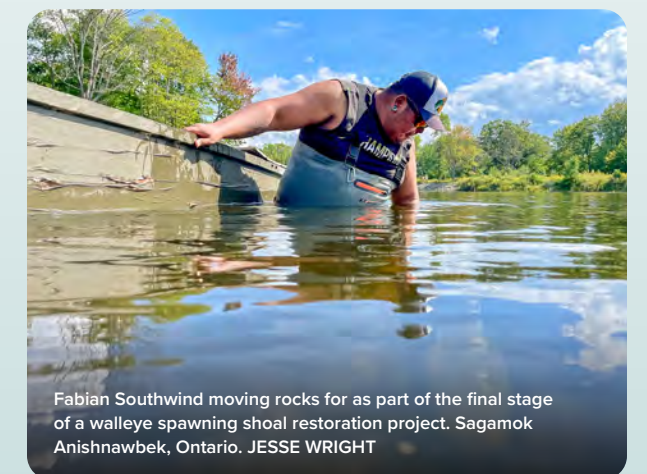
### 1,221

Hours of hands-on, in the field training this past year



## 2023 HIGHLIGHTS

- ➔ In February 2023, **Sheshatshiu Innu First Nation** and the **Naskapi Nation of Kawawachikamach** came together at Park Lake, Labrador for a winter monitoring workshop. The ten participants explored techniques to monitor snow and ice and learned how to use these techniques when out in the field. Gathering winter water data and monitoring lakes and rivers throughout the year provides a stronger understanding of the stressors on aquatic systems and how they change from season to season.
- ➔ Water First returned to **Innu Nation** in 2023 to continue a collaboration and facilitate a cumulative effects workshop. This framework will support a newly created, Innu-led aquatics department to evaluate threats and impacts of multiple stressors on the Innu fish harvest. Innu Nation Guardians participated in the workshop, so their perspectives on the value of and threats to the fish harvest could be gathered.
- ➔ Water First and **Sagamok Anishnawbek** collaborated on a walleye spawning shoal restoration project this year. The ideal site location, Fort La Cloche, was selected after conducting site visits, community consultation, and water and benthic sampling in 2022. During the 2023 field season, the project successfully restored and enhanced approx. 170 square meters of walleye spawning habitat. In 2024, Water First will return to monitor the shoal during the walleye spawning season to measure the success of the work.



Fabian Southwind moving rocks for as part of the final stage of a walleye spawning shoal restoration project. Sagamok Anishnawbek, Ontario. JESSE WRIGHT



# Diving into the water sciences with Indigenous students

## INDIGENOUS SCHOOLS WATER PROGRAM

There is a profound underrepresentation of Indigenous voices in water governance in Canada, as well as a lack of employment and education opportunities for Indigenous youth.

It is critical to offer Indigenous students the most informative, exciting, and empowering water science education learning opportunities possible, to inspire and illuminate the pathways to future careers in water science.

Water First delivers engaging, hands-on, STEM-based water science programs to K-12 students in schools in Indigenous communities. Youth participate in land-based, experiential learning programs with fun, hands-on water science activities and community collaborations. These programs create opportunities for students to strengthen their understanding and relationship with the environment, and to foster a love of water science.

Students are provided natural science and engineering-focused challenges and a community-based project to help them understand the infrastructure of their community and test the quality of their water. Using water science field equipment like interactive watershed models and water ionizers, students learn how to investigate the overall health of their community's watershed by completing a local water source monitoring program.

Our **Summer Credit Program**, co-delivered by certified educators at Water First and community collaborators, is a multi-week education program for

students in Indigenous communities to gain a Geography or Environmental Science high school credit. This hands-on, experiential learning is prioritized as an alternative to mainstream classroom methods.



Water First regularly works alongside other local community land-based learning or outdoor cultural training programs, which helps to strengthen the breadth of the programming and student connections with their lands. Working in collaboration with community members, students gain a greater understanding of their local geography and watershed. Participants also learn about the role they can play, as students and as young professionals, in protecting their water resources.

### 32

Water science workshops delivered this past year

### 1,721

Students participated during the 2022-2023 school year

### 60

Local community members involved in school programming this past year

### 32

Communities have partnered with the Schools Program this past year

### 35

High school credits were earned in the summer of 2023



## 2023 HIGHLIGHTS

→ Local youth were hired to support the delivery of this year's Summer Credit Programs with Beausoleil First Nation, Saugeen First Nation and Chippewas of Nawash Unceded First Nation. Community jobs like these provide youth with work experience, leadership skills, and enhanced connection with learning in their community.

→ For a second year, Water First joined **Aki Kikinomakaywin**, a weeklong STEAM program in Thunder Bay for Indigenous youth from communities across northern Ontario. This women- and Indigenous-led initiative merges Indigenous Knowledge with Western science, introducing youth to careers in environmental science through hands-on, land-based activities.

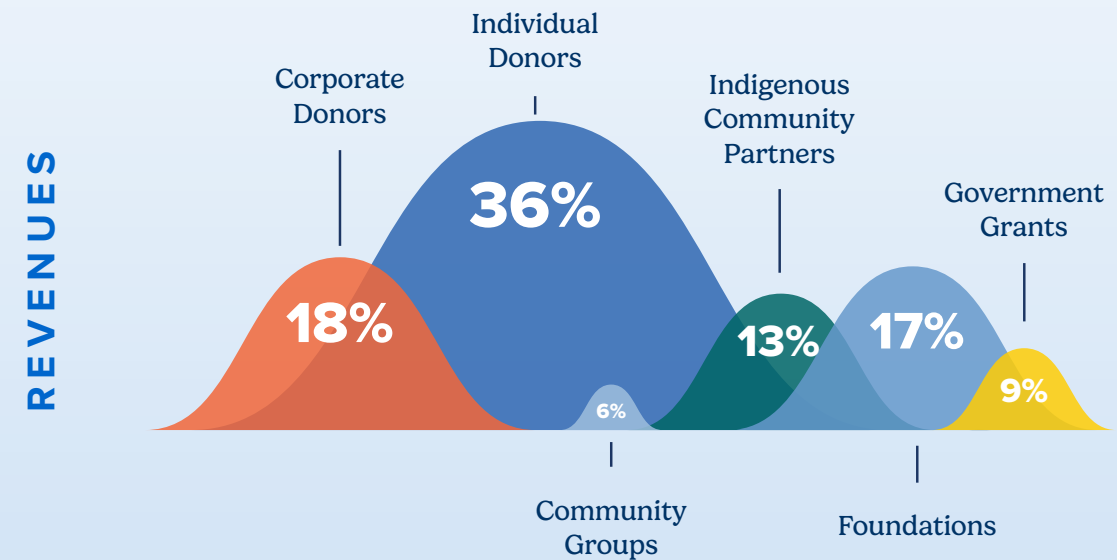
→ Throughout 2023, our Schools Program has been building connections with communities across the country. In particular, this year marked Water First's first-ever partnerships in western Canada, delivering water science workshops to students in the Northwest Territories (with **Déline First Nation**), Alberta (in **Fort Chipewyan**), and British Columbia (with **Boston Bar First Nation** and **Sḵw̓x̓wú7mesh Úxwumixw** [Squamish Nation]).



On a frozen lake collecting water samples. Déline First Nation. CATHERINE MELILLO



# Financial Information



For our second year of being rated by **Charity Intelligence**, Water First received a **5-star rating**, and has been listed as one of the **Top 100 Charities in Canada**. Charity Intelligence evaluates and rates Canadian charities to assess their effectiveness and impact. We couldn't have done this without your support. Thank you to everyone who has supported Water First on our journey to address critical water challenges in Indigenous communities across Canada.



“I get really excited talking about Water First with donors and supporters! Each conversation is a chance to say **thank you, your support helped make these lasting results possible.** When we engage in conversations about our work, we’re building momentum and having an impact, **one person at a time.**”

**Chris Wolnik**, Director of Programs  
Water First



“We must always be **mindful of goals identified by communities themselves**. We need to listen and offer our skills in a way that **supports the community in bridging gaps they’ve identified**.

We don’t necessarily have solutions. We have a blueprint for technical skills, and if what we offer complements Traditional Knowledge and the needs of the community, then **that’s where the solutions come together – through collaboration.**”

**Sarah Jayne Kendall**, Director of Community Engagement  
Water First



Park Lake, Labrador. RYAN OSMAN

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