

TOGETHER WITH INDIGENOUS PARTNERS WE ARE BREAKING THE MOLD.

Building solutions together based on experience and developed best practices. Solving critical water challenges for the long term.

A person wearing a red jacket and grey pants stands in the foreground, looking out over a calm lake. The lake reflects the sky and the surrounding forest. The sky is filled with soft, colorful clouds from a sunset or sunrise. The forest on the opposite shore is dense with evergreen trees.

W A T E R
F I R S T

2021 DONOR REPORT

When I look back on the last year, the weight of the pandemic and the profound, far-reaching and intergenerational impacts of residential schools has been heavy. For our partners, the pandemic was a new crisis overlaid on a long-standing existing water crisis.

As for many families, communities and organizations like Water First, the pandemic threw a curveball at us. However, in meeting and listening to our Indigenous community partners, we adapted and found a path forward together. Community partners have been fully committed to continue working together and I have felt uplifted, and filled with hope and gratitude. I believe that this is because, as an organization, Water First is grounded in a solid foundation of building trust, meaningful relationships, and lasting results.

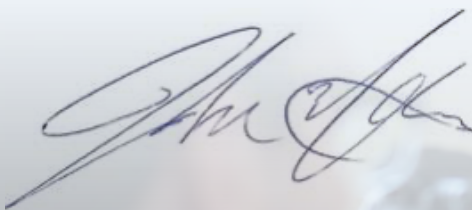
Within weeks of the first lockdown, our team shifted from in-person to online. We sent out technology and textbooks where necessary. For participating interns, weekly remote assignments were created and supported with virtual tutorials. Youth education programs were redesigned for virtual delivery, and supply bins were sent out to schools to support the teachers and students in maintaining a hands-on experience.

We know that the value and impact of working together in person will never be replaced and I am grateful for the dedicated and hardworking Indigenous youth in our programs. Individuals who have stepped up, time and again, over the past year, in spite of the many challenges the pandemic forced upon them. I am inspired by their passion and dedication to continue working through these challenges - and I know you are too.

We have dramatically changed the landscape by which we do this work because of the resources our donors have provided. We are breaking the mold, doing things that few others have been able to accomplish. I truly believe that the trust of our donors and support base is at the heart of this. Thank you.

As I look ahead, I see the importance of growing with mindfulness, intentionality and staying grounded on our foundation so that we can scale our programs to meet the needs of any Indigenous community in Canada asking to partner with us.

Thank you for sticking with us. Let's keep breaking the mold together.



John D. Millar
Executive Director and Founder



First Nations Advisory Council

We deeply respect and rely on the group of Indigenous professionals that make up our [First Nations Advisory Council](#). We come to them with honesty and ask a lot of open questions about how we can [address what our partner communities are telling us they need](#). They trust our intentions. We trust that they will inform us how our expertise can play a role at the community level in a way that makes the most sense.

Jean Marie Colbourn is a retired teacher of 27 years. Water has always been an issue in the First Nations communities she worked in.



“I am trying to preserve the knowledge of our people, the knowledge of the forests and the knowledge of all of creation. To reawaken those who wish to see and choose to see...To pass this knowledge on to the future generations. I think that's the only thing I can do, which is part of working with Water First.”

**Jean Marie Colbourn, Whitefish River First Nation
First Nations Advisory Council Member**

Board of Directors

Our volunteer Directors bring strong experience in governance, First Nations engagement, communications, financial management and business best practices to the organization. Board members include entrepreneurs and financial advisors, communications professionals and environmental consultants.



The foundation of our work with our partners, our donors and each other, is based on three strands: **Trust Building, Meaningful Partnerships, and Lasting Results.** We believe these strands are strongest when implemented together.



TRUST BUILDING

Ensure that respect, honesty, transparency, humility, and integrity are fundamental to our engagements.

MEANINGFUL PARTNERSHIPS

Fully committed to collaborations built on open communication, mutual knowledge exchanges, and common goals.

LASTING RESULTS

Consistently strive toward sustainable outcomes, with skills and benefits remaining within Indigenous communities for the long-term.

The braid is a simple, but compelling, representation to express the many ways our work is interconnected, purposeful, and stronger as a whole.

After delivering hands-on water science workshops with students, the team took the Sheshegwaning First Nation class to the water treatment plant to meet their Overall Responsible Operator Pat and Water First Internship alumni Alex. Students were given a tour of the water treatment plant and were taught about the filtration process from start to finish, applying what they learned in the workshop.





56

COMMUNITIES WE'VE
COLLABORATED WITH TO DATE

38

TOTAL YOUNG INDIGENOUS
ADULTS TRAINED SO FAR



580

HOURS OF VIRTUAL TRAINING
SUPPORT IN THE PAST YEAR

550

SCHOOL STUDENTS
TAUGHT THIS YEAR

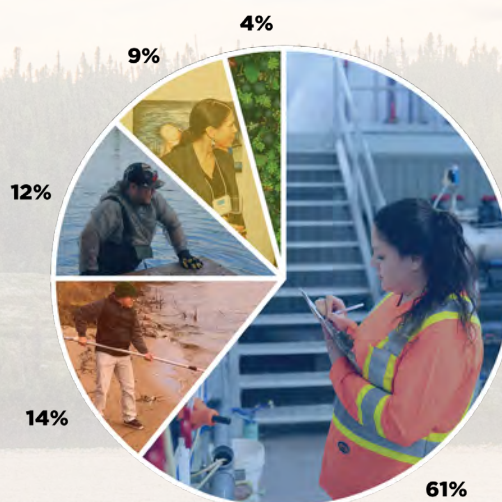
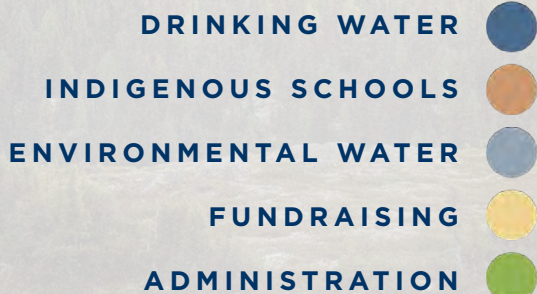


32

COMMUNITY PARTNERS INTERESTED
IN HOSTING OUR PROGRAMS IN THE
COMING YEAR

FINANCIAL SNAPSHOT

Through meaningful collaboration and respectful relationships we blend traditional knowledge and western science, and hire and train locally. These partnerships with Indigenous communities have been the catalyst for developing relevant and sustainable solutions. This is only possible with the support of donors who invest in our approach to education and training.



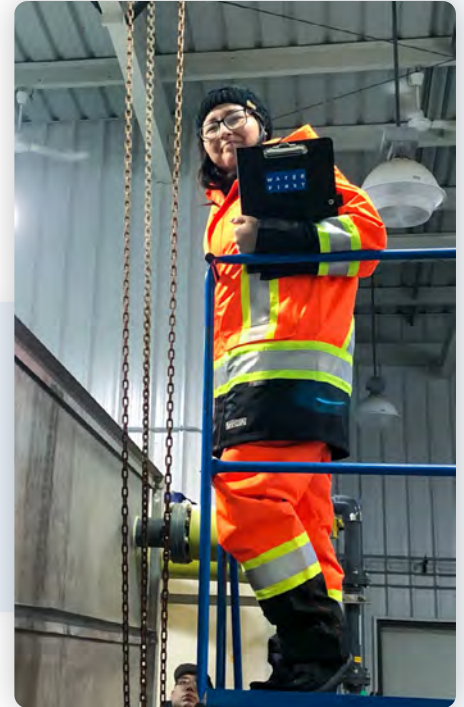
Beyond the technical skills

The [Internship Program](#) is breaking the mold of technical training programs by ensuring young Indigenous adults can overcome barriers to advancing in a career in water science.

Interns are also [supported](#) in areas such as resume writing, interview preparation, employment coaching, and in the Indigenous water field. Graduates of the program become part of the Water First Alumni Network, providing ongoing career development opportunities and an ever expanding professional network.

“The only time people think about where their water comes from is when they can’t drink it. They don’t realize people are working 24 hours a day, testing daily, weekly, monthly to make sure the water is good.”

**Jamie Lee Parenteau, Wabigoon Lake Ojibway Nation
Water First Intern**



Exceeding expectations in spite of the pandemic

Jamie Lee is part of the Water First Internship, in partnership with Bimose Tribal Council, that began in January of 2020. Although the program started with in-person training and work placements in local water treatment plants, by March 2020, with the first lockdown looming, the delivery format shifted to a hybrid between remote and in-person learning. Interns will graduate October 2021.

Through gaps in technology, shifting delivery format, studying remotely, COVID restrictions, and balancing demands of home and families in lockdown - interns have worked over **11,500 hours** worked in treatment plants.

These interns have [exceeded expectations](#).

One of the most fundamental challenges in Canada today is the lack of sustainable access to safe, clean drinking water for Indigenous Peoples.

In 13.5% of Indigenous communities across Canada, the tap water is not safe to drink. The impact is devastating and runs deep. The federal government has committed to improving and expanding infrastructure. However, infrastructure alone does not provide clean and reliable drinking water.



In many communities, existing water treatment staff are doing a great job with available resources. However, communities have identified the need for more young, qualified, and local personnel to support solving water challenges for the long term.

The Water First Internship Program supports young Indigenous adults to become certified water treatment plant operators, ensuring sustainable access to safe drinking water in Indigenous communities for the long term.

In 15 months, interns receive over 2,000 hours of training and experience in the classroom, at local water treatment facilities, and out on the land. This paid Internship provides hands-on skills training and supports interns to obtain four provincially recognized certifications.

This in-depth training program addresses community-identified needs, supports building local community capacity, and provides a solution to addressing critical drinking water challenges.



It is 1:30 PM in the Canadian subarctic.

Lawrence Mameanskum and Noah Kabimbetas Mokoush, two interns of Naskapi Nation of Kawawachikamach working with Water First, gathered around the kitchen table at Lawrence's grandfather Matthew's house. They were there to ask him about his Local Ecological Knowledge regarding fish, lakes and harvesting. Matthew used to be a fisherman and knows the region quite well.

Naskapi Nation of Kawawachikamach in northern Quebec has relied on caribou and fish as primary food sources. Yet, studies have shown that climate change has impacted the caribou migration patterns and local fish spawning shoals. As the community hunts less caribou, maintaining a healthy, sustainable fish population has become increasingly important.



Since 2019, three interns, Lawrence, Noah and Wayne Nattawappio have been working with Water First on a [fish habitat restoration project](#) and a contamination study to determine the health of the lakes in Naskapi Nation of Kawawachikamach and the effects of climate change. The community is focusing its efforts towards Indigenous-led land management by merging Local Ecological Knowledge, like the knowledge shared by Matthew, and Western Science to protect their waters and fisheries in this new northern climate era.

"I hope I can share my experiences and knowledge with the younger generation and teach them about the restoration and conservation of our land."

**Lawrence Mameanskum, Water First Intern
Naskapi Nation of Kawawachikamach**



Skills training to meet a community's vision

While working with many Indigenous communities, we have heard time and again their vision of Indigenous-led land management. Communities want to manage their water resources and track the effects of industry and climate change. As a result, communities are seeking ways to [strengthen their technical capacity](#) to do so.

Environmental technical training is a well-established field. What sets Water First apart is our approach. We consult with our Indigenous partners about their long-term environmental water goals. By understanding their goals, we help to determine priority areas and local training needs.



Project completed by the community for the community

Water First designs [custom training programs](#) related to fish habitat restoration, water quality monitoring, mapping, and data management.

Our training is designed to incorporate an environmental water project. Project-based training provides a way to apply new knowledge and skills out on the water. The long term goals of the community inform and guide which project is carried out. A project completed for a community, by a community, bringing invaluable experience and increased confidence through the process.

5 UPCOMING
ENVIRONMENTAL
PROJECTS

8 FISH HABITAT
RESTORATION
TRAINING PROJECTS

17 WATER QUALITY-
RELATED TRAINING
PROJECTS

"I see incredible value in Water First's inclusive approach to education, by involving our community members in their projects who can provide students with culturally relevant and contextually sensitive ecological knowledge. We have found that Water First understands the value of reciprocal learning and their programs ensure that local and traditional knowledge is applied when practicing water stewardship."

Stella Pien, Director General
Naskapi Nation of Kawawachikamach



Learning strengthened through hands-on experience

Facilitating stronger connections for Indigenous youth to their water, land, and community fuels our passion. Working with students for the first time is magic. Working with them multiple times is inspiring, and propels us to work hard through barriers towards new opportunities.

Take, for example, Emma, Landon, Aiden and Hunter, students from Beausoleil First Nation. Our relationship with these students began in November 2019 when we met them at Christian Island Elementary School. At the time, they were participating in Water First STEM workshops. When the pandemic started, we were unable to continue delivering the program in person. In the fall of 2020, Water First continued providing hands-on programming to the school virtually.

“As a final project of the virtual program, the students presented a summary for their learning with us. It felt like the student-led reflection had a culminating effect as they could clearly communicate what they had learned. We were so impressed and lifted up knowing that even virtually our program had an impact.”
- Dillon Koopmans, Educational Programs Manager, Water First.



With the underrepresentation of Indigenous voices in Canada's water governance and the water challenges faced by many Indigenous communities, it was critical that we continued to offer Indigenous students the most impassioned, empowering, thorough and exciting water science education learning opportunities possible, despite the challenges of COVID.

In the spring of 2021, Emma, Landon, Aiden and Hunter challenged participants in a virtual event, showcasing their knowledge their passion for water sciences.

Water First offers a [wide range of learning opportunities](#) to Indigenous school students that are seen as deeply valuable at the community level. We are not alone in offering STEM workshops to Indigenous youth, however, our approach of having community partners fully engaged is what sets Water First apart. Our relationship with Beau-soleil First Nation is a testament to this as we continue to expand and evolve our work together.

Water First regularly works in tandem with local land-based learning or outdoor cultural programs. This strengthens the breadth of our programming and improves student connections with their lands. We also engage local community members who supplement our fun, curriculum-linked water science workshops. They share insights and relevant cultural, social and environmental priorities. Where possible, we have students visit local water bodies, as well as arrange tours of local water and wastewater treatment plants.

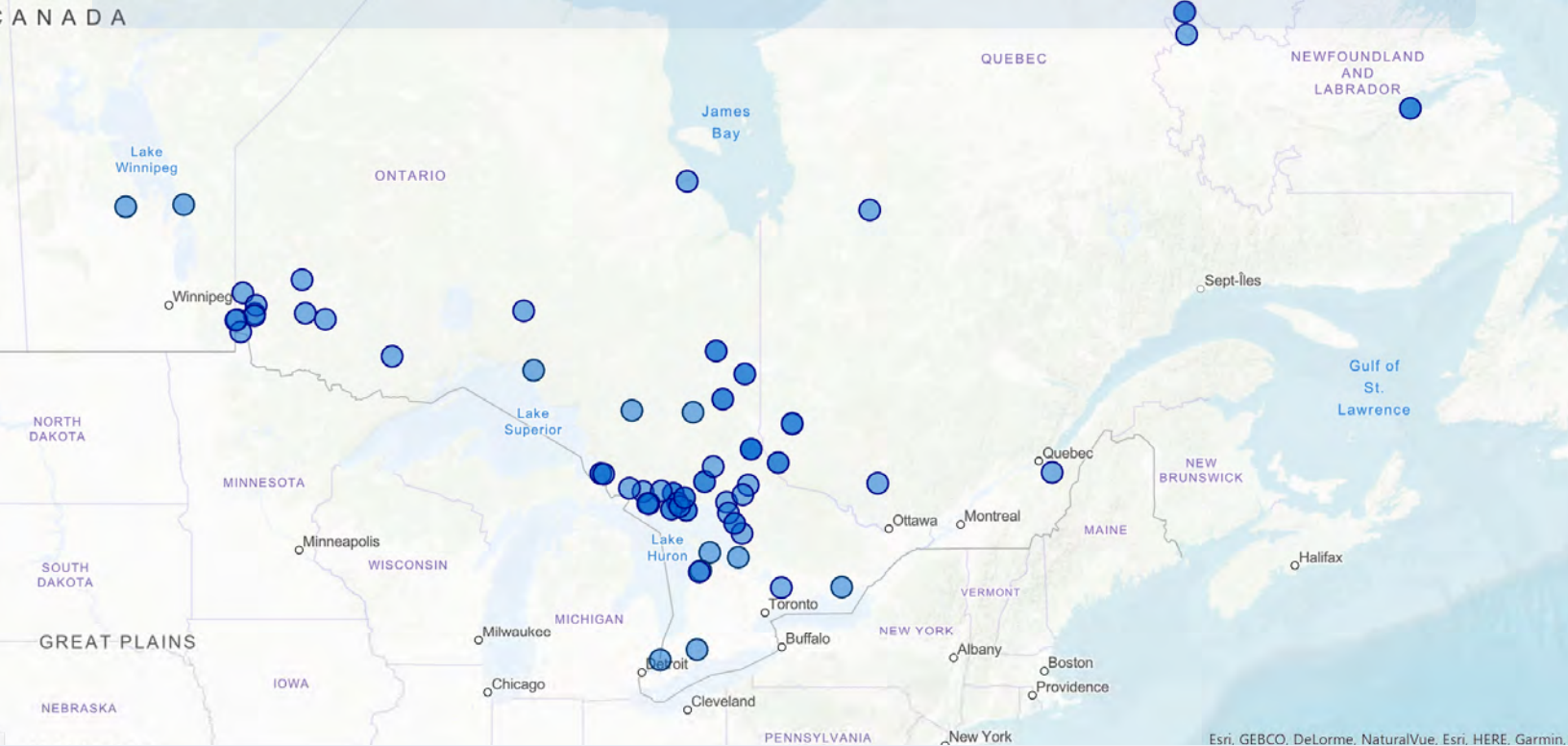


Before the virtual sessions began, a comprehensive kit of tools and resources was shipped to the school. This kit remains in the community so teachers and students continue to use the tools in the future to continue to engage students in water science.



We started small, led by the desire to support communities to overcome critical water challenges.

Over the years, we have expanded our work across provinces and built strong partnerships with 56 Indigenous communities. We would not be here without you - our champions and our donors. Thank you.



*COVID ADAPTATIONS

Water First recognizes the vulnerability of remote communities in light of COVID-19 and have deferred to the decisions of local leaders when traveling.

Water First has only visited Indigenous communities where we have been invited, with approval from local leadership in writing and with adherence to all appropriate safety measures. When travel has not been safe, we have pivoted our in-person learning to online, building experience in facilitating live telephone and video instruction. As well as mailing resources to interns, teachers and school-aged students. We continue to deliver vital programming in collaboration with our community partners.

Thank you to the Ontario Trillium Foundation for their support in producing this report.

Water First is a registered charitable organization founded in 2009, dedicated to partnering with Indigenous communities to resolve local water challenges through education, training and meaningful collaboration.



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