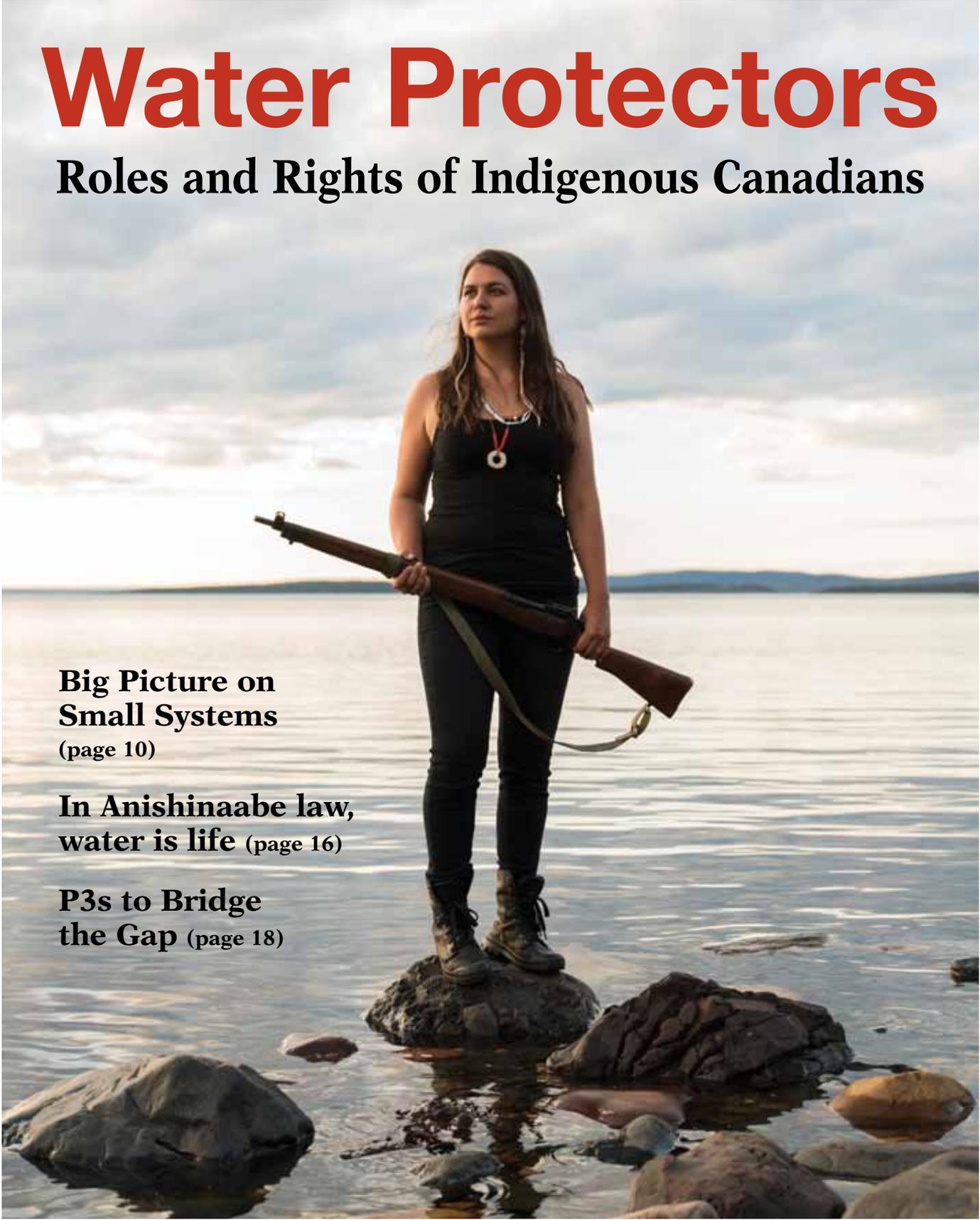


WATER CANADA

Water Protectors

Roles and Rights of Indigenous Canadians

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a black tank top, black pants, and brown boots, stands on a large rock in a shallow lake. She is holding a long-barreled rifle across her body. The background shows a calm lake under a cloudy sky with soft light, suggesting dawn or dusk. The water reflects the sky and the woman's figure.

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Joseph Sutherland from the Fort Albany First Nation conducts a baseline water quality study funded by the Canada/Ontario Resource Development Agreement (better known as CORDA in First Nations).

PHOTO: WATER FIRST

Professional Development

Canada’s funding agencies need to catch up to foster the capacity of First Nations to manage their own water. **BY JOHN MILLAR**

FOR MORE THAN FOUR YEARS, Water First has delivered capacity building and training programs within First Nations communities to address critical water issues in Ontario. Boil water advisories in First Nations communities in Canada are widespread, and a third of First Nations communities in Ontario lack a certified water treatment plant operator. Yet, on more than one occasion, Water First has been the only Canadian charity, or one of just a few, present at national, provincial, and regional conferences related to First Nations water challenges. This is in stark contrast to other gatherings attended, with an emphasis on drinking water challenges abroad, where Canadian civil society has a rich and vibrant presence.

Water First proposes an education and training solution that addresses a key part of the problem—capacity. First Nations peoples are significantly underrepresented in the sciences, and water science is no exception. Widespread boil water advisories in First Nations communities

are directly linked to this reality.

Experience has shown that building local capacity has the potential to generate significant cost savings for governments in the long run by helping to avoid replacing derelict water treatment plants. Local training offers sustainability—when a project ends, the skills remain in the community, facilitating independent water resource management. Our programs experience very high levels of community uptake, and the political will to address this issue is currently strong. And yet, creativity to pursue water-focused capacity building programs through other objectives is necessary, because direct funding mechanisms related to our work, that charities can apply to, do not yet exist.

Creative funding schemes

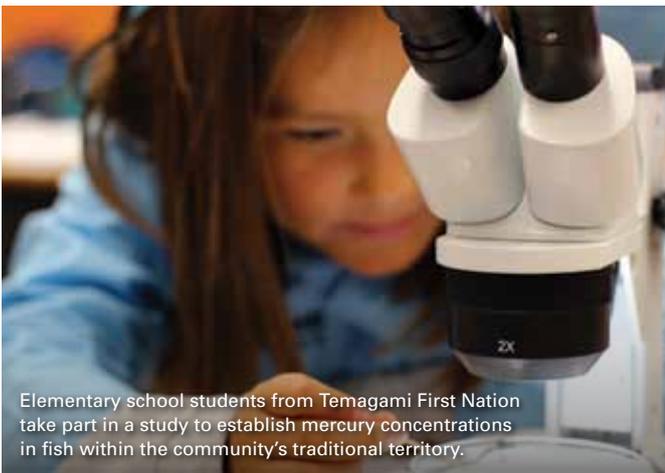
Water First receives annual funding from the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada’s Promoscience program; however, such funding opportunities are rare. We’ve

analyzed the complex frameworks of leading non-profit granting agencies, met with their representatives, and concluded they do not have an avenue that facilitates First Nations water science training as an end unto itself.

To overcome these barriers, we brainstorm projects for which there are established funding avenues and we weave First Nations water science training into them. On the surface, the programs have nothing to do with First Nations water science capacity development; however, the byproducts do. For example, environmental rehabilitation and research projects such as fish habitat restoration, baseline water quality studies, or testing for mercury concentrations in fish can all be opportunities to pursue water science training with First Nations communities. The formal deliverables may be datasets and site restoration metrics, but if we hire and train locally to achieve project outcomes, we can deliver water science



A water education workshop underway at the elementary school at Shawanaga First Nation. The workshop is a part of an environmental water quality research project funded by Health Canada. Water First partnered with hydrologist Murray Richardson of Carleton University to design educational workshops for the local school.



Elementary school students from Temagami First Nation take part in a study to establish mercury concentrations in fish within the community's traditional territory.



A fish spawning habitat restoration project at Temagami First Nation, funded by Environment and Climate Change Canada.

training programs together with First Nations, nonetheless. We've now worked with 28 First Nations communities.

Mnising, Keewaytinook Okimakanak, and the Union of Ontario Indians to create a scalable water management training

activities. Thanks to Prime Minister Trudeau's pledge to eliminate First Nations' boil water advisories within five years, there is more public awareness of the issue, and support for solving it, than ever before. Through this lens, there is a real opportunity to jumpstart Canadian civil society's engagement with First Nations' water challenges.

Canadian civil society has the capacity to deliver programs that lead to sustainable access to clean drinking water. If governments, other funding agencies, First Nations, and non-profits work together to address capacity, Water First's work will one day be obsolete as First Nations gain the capacity to successfully and independently manage their water resources long into the future. **wc**

Experience has shown that building local capacity has the potential to generate significant cost savings for governments in the long run, by helping to avoid replacing derelict water treatment plants.

Private donors, foundations, and corporate sponsors have also supported our programs, yet few of these funding mechanisms have a mandate to scale up. As a result, we create a program, assemble the required resources, deliver that program, achieve decent results, and then shelve the program only to start all over from scratch.

Signs of change

Over the last six months, Water First has been working in partnership with the United Chiefs and Councils of Mnidoo

and certification program for young adults in First Nations communities. Together, these groups propose to deliver an in-depth capacity building program in seven First Nations on Manitoulin Island, with the potential to expand to additional communities. At the time of writing, there's strong government interest in funding the pilot initiative.

Governments, donors, and other funding agencies have a long and successful history of influencing the activities of Canadian non-profits by providing direct funding for desired



John Millar is the founder and executive director of Water First.