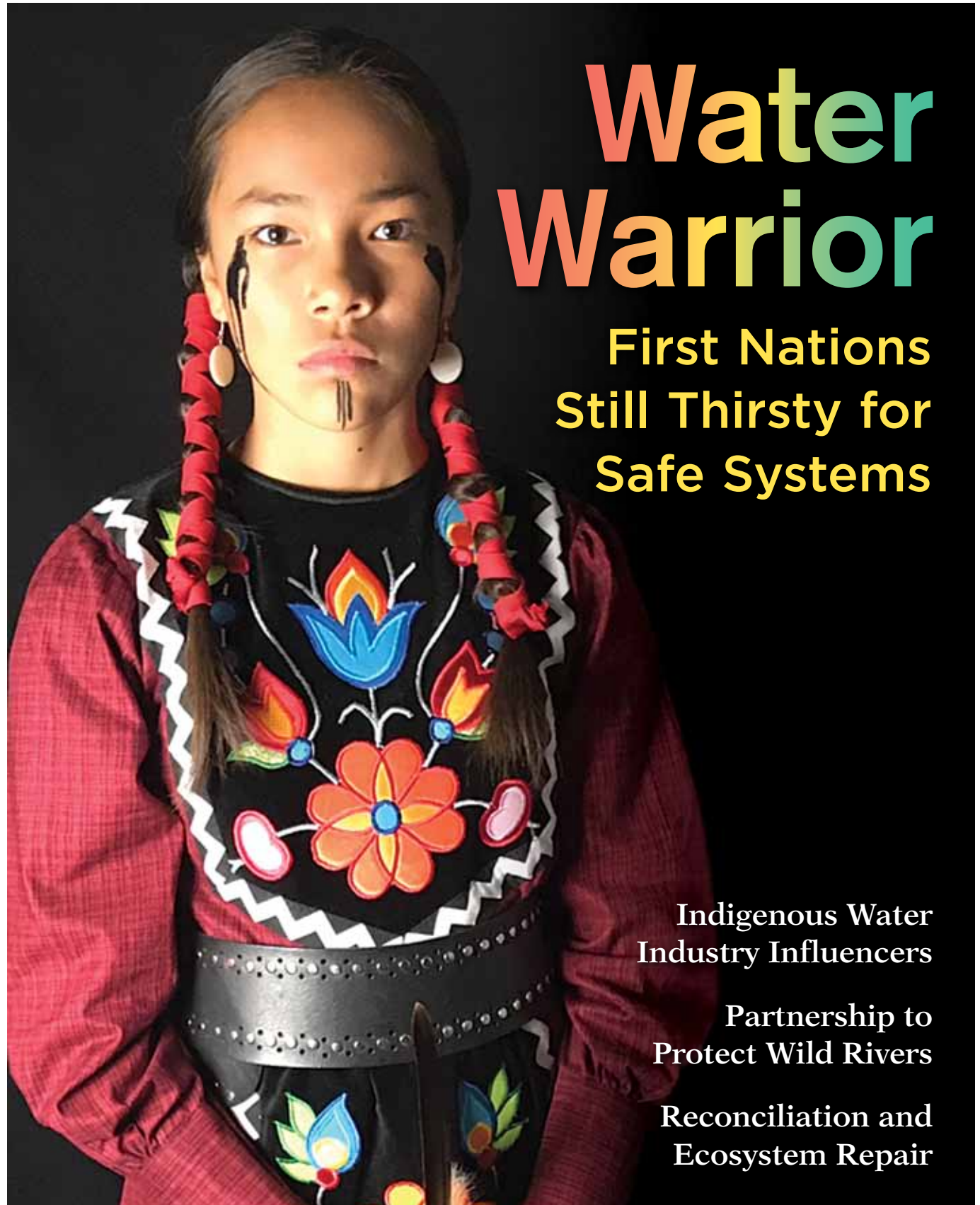


WATER CANADA



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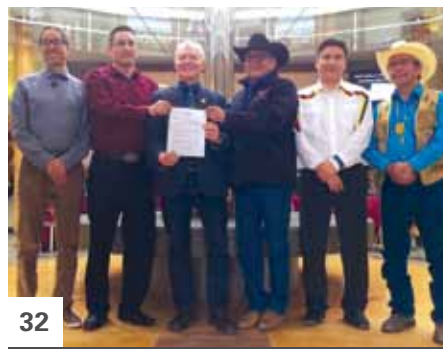
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Interns pose with Minister Hajdu after a tour of the M'Chigeeng First Nation water treatment plant.



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

Photo: Andrew MacIsaac/TV



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

Water First Grad

Star student **Eric Vautour** explains his training and how he's equipped for the future.

MY NAME IS ERIC VAUTOUR and I am from Sheguiandah First Nation on Manitoulin Island, one of seven communities to participate in the Water First Internship. Water First, a leading charitable organization working with First Nations communities to solve water challenges through education, training, and meaningful collaboration. This program allowed me to receive 15 months of paid training in a variety of engaging water science topics while living and working in my home community of Sheguiandah First Nation.

This unique experience incorporated a variety of workshops, hands-on training, on the job training, and incorporated Traditional Knowledge accompanied by Traditional Ceremony. During the program I was able to obtain provincial certification, learn on the land, teach young students in the classroom about water science, and connect with our community and Elders.

Background

I am grateful for everything water does. Water works in the world on many levels yet what we seem most concerned about is how water helps us physically. The Water First Internship has reminded me what water does for us mentally, spiritually, and emotionally as well. Most importantly the internship has helped strengthen my connection to myself, to others, and the world. The relationship that I share with water has been sacred ever since I was young. Attending many Traditional Ceremonies when I was a toddler, and later in my teenage years, nourished this relationship.

I was born and raised on Manitoulin,

close to water in both the literal and metaphorical realm, which shaped me in a very positive way. I had to move to Sudbury for a while, but the Water First Internship allowed me to move back to Manitoulin and the water. I wasn't sure what to expect from this pilot project, but when I learned it would bring me back to my home community and allow me to obtain provincial certifications, it was all the convincing I needed to be a part of this amazing journey.

Internship

The pilot program included a diverse group of interns. Some of us had extensive knowledge and experience working with water, while others had very little. Some were parents, while others were fresh out of school. Others, like myself, were still finding their place in the world. The first week was spent together completing a prep course for our Water Quality Analyst (WQA) exam. Along with obtaining our WQA we also had the opportunity to obtain our Operator in Training (OIT) certificate. Due to our great success we were offered a chance to participate in a prep course for the entry level course for Drinking Water Operators. We also had the opportunity to participate in source water protection plan training which was being offered by the Ontario First Nations Technical Services Corporation. We accomplished what we set out to do and so much more.

There were six weeklong training

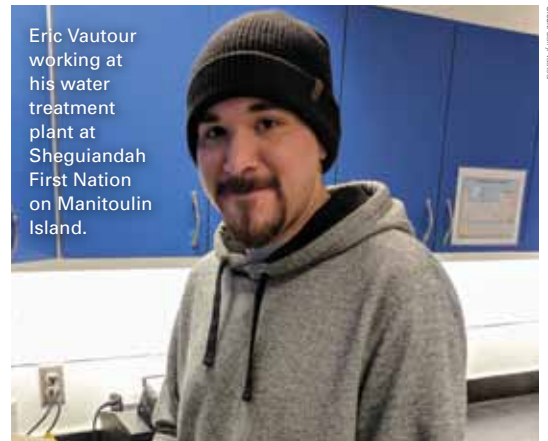
sessions throughout the Internship, all focusing on different themes. Each one was as good as the next. One memorable workshop had Traditional Knowledge Keepers sharing their stories. Another focused on mapping techniques, using GIS and ArcMap software. The most fun and impactful workshop for me was all about environmental monitoring, in which all the interns working collaboratively to collect five soil and water samples from each community. I looked forward to each and every workshop and their underlying focus on water. An added bonus of the workshops was the chance to see our fellow interns and engage with the Water First management team in person.

“Eric asked us to take a chance on him and he's worked very hard.”

— **John Millar**, executive director and founder of Water First

Many of us participating in the program were from different communities but the internship and our love for water unified us and created lasting bonds. I am excited to see this program put into place in other First Nation communities as I believe it is one crucial step in our walk towards a Canada free of boil water advisories. I feel honored every day to supply my community with safe and clean drinking water and I believe this is the field for me for many years to come. WC

Eric Vautour is a graduate of the Water First Internship program.



Eric Vautour working at his water treatment plant at Sheguiandah First Nation on Manitoulin Island.

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