

Water Futures: Historical Perspectives from Indigenous Ecological Knowledge

This symposium brings scholars at different career stages from around the world to consider water futures through the lens of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge. The papers consider the future of water in a number of critically important, but ecologically sensitive, locations throughout North America. These include the Colorado River, the Lake Winnipeg Watershed, the Little Tennessee River Watershed in Southern Appalachia, the Arctic, and Bristol Bay in Alaska. Participating scholars – a mix of Native and non-Native academics – blend methodologies ranging from legal analysis, ethnohistory, oral history, and social and cultural history. A planned journal special issue will highlight the urgent need to reflect on local riparian wellbeing through the historically informed wisdom of Indigenous custodians.

Heather Tanana (Diné)
Visiting Professor of Law
University of California, Irvine

Incorporating Traditional Knowledges into Colorado River Management

In 1922, the future of the Colorado River was decided by a room full of white men—federal and state bureaucrats—without taking into account Indigenous rights or interests. Several years prior, the United States Supreme Court had recognized that Tribal Nations are entitled to sufficient water to meet the purposes of their reservation. Combined, the 30 Tribes within the Colorado River Basin hold rights to more than 25% of the river’s annual flow. Increased efforts have focused on including Tribal representation in Colorado River management. And while Tribal inclusion is critical to protect tribal rights, Tribes also possess valuable knowledge about the natural world. This article discusses the range of Traditional Knowledges held by Tribes and the ways in which Tribes can engage in the decision-making process to protect the river and the large ecosystem that depends on it.

Aimée Craft (Anishinaabe/Métis)
Associate Professor of Law
University of Ottawa

Indigenous legal principles and values as an opportunity for coordinated multi-jurisdictional and transboundary freshwater governance

Imagine Indigenous legal principles and values leading a coordinated freshwater decision-making? It can be part of Canada’s freshwater future, given the Canada Water Agency mandate to ensure collaboration and coordination amongst federal departments, with provincial governments and with Indigenous nation partners relating to freshwater. In the past, Indigenous voices have often been disregarded or silenced in water governance decision-making spaces. The new federal approach, which aims to redefine Canada’s water future, is an opportunity to engage with Indigenous science, knowledge, laws, values, principles and process in order to help ensure sustainability. While water defies jurisdictional boundaries, Indigenous historical and contemporary approaches to water governance have the potential to engage across those boundaries (geo-political, disciplinary and conceptual) to enhance collaborative and sustainable water governance. The paper will canvass three unique approaches within the Lake Winnipeg Watershed (the second largest in Canada) as case studies for Indigenous-led water governance and draw some common themes relating to indigenized and decolonial water governance.

Gregory D. Smithers
Professor of History
Virginia Commonwealth University

Chota's Afterlives: The Life of a River & Memories of a Cherokee Mother Town

In September 1984, Cooper Communities Incorporated began work on a new subdivision along the banks of Tellico Reservoir, located on the Little Tennessee River. The Arkansas-based company saw an opportunity to invest in Loudon and Monroe Counties, located in east Tennessee. Its 'Tellico Village' initiative earmarked over 4,500 acres of land for 'development', with promises to 'make appropriate use of the natural resources and positively impact the surrounding community'. Cooper Communities Inc. also declared that it had hired experts to interpret "with respect the history and culture of the Cherokee Indian as a focus of the Tellico Village identity."

Could a real estate developer really interpret the site of a famed eighteenth-century Cherokee Mother Town and a river rich in stories and biodiversity for future generations? And how, if at all, would developers adjust their plans to address early reports of a changing climate to ensure sustainable uses of Southern Appalachia's fresh water? This essay addresses these questions, engaging with the intersecting histories of memory, environmental change, and economic 'development'.

Joy Porter
Professor of History
University of Hull

Canada's Future Freshwater Wars

An evaluation of Canada's long-term geopolitical significance as custodian of 20% of the world's total, and 7% of the world's renewable, freshwater resources. It explores the history of Canadian fresh-water use, particularly the nation's relationships to its aquifers and freshwater ecosystems across time and the distribution challenges linked to the fact that Canada's water drains north, away from 85% of its population. The second half of the discussion evaluates the safety of Canadian drinking water, including, where available, on Indigenous reserves, and the future implications for Indigenous and other populations of the growing pressure to sell Canadian water in bulk to cash-rich regions such as California. The implications of future internal and transnational sovereign-to-sovereign conflict in relation to fresh-water use across Canada is foregrounded and linked to the current invisibility in discursive terms of acute water stress amongst Canada's Indigenous communities. The future and current role of TEK within solution-sets for water sustainability in Canada is evaluated and a case made for TEK to be considered in relationship to wider themes such as mining as a national imperative, wider geopolitical power dynamics, transnational corporate imperatives and pervasive policy rhetorics linked to inclusivity.

Nicole J. Wilson

Assistant Professor, Canada Research Chair in Arctic Environmental Change and Governance
Department of Environment & Geography/Centre for Earth Observation Science
University of Manitoba

Just Water Futures: Indigenous Knowledge, Relationships and Governance in a Warmer, Wetter North

Climate change is having dramatic impacts on Arctic and sub-arctic hydrosocial systems. Increases in temperature and precipitation are driving cascading impacts of glacial recession and permafrost thaw as well as an increase in extreme events like flooding. While the value of Indigenous knowledge for understanding these changes is increasingly recognised, Indigenous peoples are often cast as ‘vulnerable’ to climate change. I draw on research conducted in partnership with the Tagish and Tlingit people of Carcross/Tagish First Nation in British Columbia and Yukon, Canada to argue that such ‘damage’ centred approaches are unhelpful for advancing just water futures because they ignore the root causes of climate change (i.e., settler colonialism) and sideline the many strengths of Indigenous peoples. Instead, I engage with Tagish and Tlingit relationships of responsibility to water as a living entity to discuss the decolonial possibilities of centering Indigenous visions for a desirable future. Finally, I consider effective ways to foreground such approaches through supporting Indigenous self-determination in responding to the effects of climate change in a warmer, wetter north.

Montgomery Simus
Ph.D. Researcher
University of Hull

What’s Really Critical in the Race for Critical Minerals?

Using Transdisciplinary Frameworks to Investigate the ‘Wicked Problem’ of Whether Critical Battery Mineral Extraction, Fisheries, Indigenous Culture, and Nature Can Co-Exist in Our Clean Energy Future

The global demand for critical minerals and renewable energy to meet clean energy goals has placed unprecedented pressure on Indigenous groups and governments to approve and fast track resource development projects worldwide. But development projects often pose environmental dangers and threaten important cultural heritage sites, bitterly dividing communities and leading to an ‘us vs. them’ or ‘company vs. community vs. nature vs. culture’ mentality. Using the proposed development site at the Pebble Mine Project in Alaska - a case emblematic of a new, global dependence on rare metals, the global race for access to them, and the paradox of clean energy's environmental impact - this paper will investigate the complex interplay between critical battery mineral extraction, fisheries sustainability, Indigenous rights, and environmental preservation, and stake a claim that use of transdisciplinary frameworks to integrate not only knowledge from different disciplines but also engage stakeholders such as policymakers, practitioners, industry, and community members is most effective to address the ‘wicked’ problem inherent in evaluating the coexistence and sustainable development of clean energy resources in critical ecosystems.