

**Liard River Elders Circle
Fort Nelson, British Columbia
May 2-4th 2023**

**What We Heard Report
Sharing Version
March 14, 2024**



Image: Photo taken during the Liard Basin Elders Circle, in Fort Nelson B.C.

Instructions to the Reader

The knowledge shared in this document belongs to participating Elders. To protect this knowledge, it may not be used for any purpose beyond personal learning, or for the Liard River Basin Learning plan, without permission from the Elder participants or their descendants.

Through the signing of a prior consent and knowledge agreement, Elders consented to share relevant knowledge regarding the project without giving any of their knowledge away. That means that, at the end of the project, all knowledge shared by the participating Elders remain as their intellectual property. Beyond consent, special approval was needed to share this What We Heard report and any additional final reports coming from this project to ensure that Elders are quoted properly and the spirit and intent of what they said remain intact. This report represents a subset of the knowledge recorded that has been approved for sharing publicly. The transcription of the entire proceedings remains confidential. This report will live on the

Mackenzie River Basin Board website mrbb.ca and is not to be re-posted on any additional public websites without consent.

Elders recognize that the Indigenous Knowledge they have chosen to share has been purposefully given to them by the Knowledge Holders before them and is intended to be passed down for future Knowledge Holders that will come after them. This summary report is also being shared with Indigenous governments and groups in the Liard basin, other governments that are doing related work in the Liard River Basin, and Indigenous land guardians and youth. Sharing with these groups is important to make sure the knowledge shared is passed down to future generations.

Introduction and context:

This report summarizes the land and water knowledge shared by 15 Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers from First Nations across the Liard River Basin. The objective of this gathering was to identify key Indigenous Knowledge protocols, codes and laws, from which we can build the foundation for a water Learning Plan that includes both the Indigenous ways and No Voice perspective in the process.

Knowledge sharing took place during an Elders Circle on May 2-4th, 2023, in Fort Nelson, British Columbia (B.C.). This coming together was recognized by Elders as a historic moment. The Elders Circle was planned as part of a project to develop a Learning Plan for the Liard River Basin. The Learning Plan will guide where and how new monitoring and stewardship work takes place in the study area. The Liard River is recognized as a “river of concern”.

The Elders Circle was planned by two groups that work together to care for the Liard River Basin, called the Liard Bilateral Management Committees (BMCs). The committees include members from Kaska, Fort Nelson First Nation, Tahltan Central Government, Acho Dene Koe First Nation, and Teslin Tlingit Council, as well as B.C., Yukon and Northwest Territories (NWT) governments.

The participating Elders were selected based on their depth of Indigenous Knowledge on the Liard River Basin through questions that were developed by the proponent BMCs and the facilitator, Copper Joe Jack. The participating Elders represented Fort Nelson First Nation, Nahanni Butte Dene Band, Dene Tha' First Nation, Łíídlı́ Kúé First Nation, Ross River Dena Council, Pelly Banks First Nation, Liard River First Nation, Daylu Dena Council, Teslin Tlingit Council, Dease River First Nation, Fort Liard First Nation and the Prophet River First Nation.

About the Traditional Knowledge Facilitator and Land and Peoples Relationship Model

The Circle was facilitated by Copper Joe Jack, who has thirty years of experience in leadership and management roles with First Nations, at the local and regional levels throughout

northwestern Canada. We are grateful to his involvement, and through the guidance of his Land & Peoples Relationship Model, and the Traditional Knowledge Keepers input, we were able to invite the No Voice to our round table discussions. The No Voice are all entities and parties affected by the roundtable planning group decision making, but who do not have a say in those decisions. Water, caribou, salmon and future generations are examples of the No Voice.

This report has been written through the lens of Elder Copper Joe Jack, who was raised in a traditional Indigenous way of life in the mountains of the Yukon. He had many elder mentors from early childhood throughout most of his adult life. He spent most of his lifetime fighting for Aboriginal rights for Indigenous peoples, and the protection of land and waters in Canada’s northwest. As the creator of a collaborative planning and mediation tool (Land and Peoples Relationship Model-Appendix A) that is based on Indigenous long-ago knowledge, Copper has been proving how land and waters planning could successfully happen between Indigenous and Western knowledge holders. Only three years old, the Model is actively facilitating planning projects in Yukon, B.C., NWT and Alaska.

The report format was purposely set up to follow the traditional story-telling format whereas long-ago stories are told word-for-word (verbatim) as heard from the preceding storyteller. The reason why is that the points and lessons shared are found within the story, and should not be changed. Therefore, the written report directly cites and quotes what the Indigenous Knowledge holders were saying exactly. Immediately following the citation section are the recommendations stemming directly from what the Elders were stating. (See description in Table 1).

Table 1. Shows the process of writing the report based on the Elders Circle workshop proceedings.

	Writing Phases	Description of Process
Step 1	Partial Transcription. Written record of audio recordings.	Written using audio files and notes from the gathering, intentionally valuing and collecting the Traditional Knowledge Keeper’s own words, and key points.
Step 2	First Draft. Collecting and organizing the quotes into categories: Observations & Concerns, Values (Respect/ Care/ Share), and Recommendations.	Pulling quotes from the Partial Transcription that are marked as important or recurring points among the Elders. (This first draft clarifies themes of importance).
Step 3	Table of Contents.	Identifying and naming key themes. Separating big picture ideas into smaller parts of a whole.

Step 4	Second Draft. Adding meat to the bones; adding descriptive paragraphs and direct quotes to the Table of Contents.	Using the Table of Contents to re-organize Elder statements into the themes and sub-themes. Each theme having an introductory paragraph, a section of direct quotes, and a list of associated recommendations.
Step 5	Approval from Elders.	Contacting Elders & TK Holders. Sending each speaker a cover letter, the document containing their individual quotes used in What We Heard report, the full What We Heard Report and the partial transcription. Following up and discussing feedback.
Step 6	Completing Final Draft based on Elder Feedback.	Final edits based on Elder feedback and approvals. Submit Final WWH Report to the BMC.

Participating Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers

Larry Burke (Fort Nelson First Nation)

Larry Burke is a Fort Nelson First Nation Elder who spends much of his time on the land. He is a trapper and hunter who returns to his trapline cabin every spring, fall and winter.

Richard Behn (Fort Nelson First Nation)

Richard Behn is a Fort Nelson Elder who was born on his family’s traditional territory and trapline, adjacent to the community of Fort Nelson.

Leon Konnisenta (Nahanni Butte Dene Band)

Leon Konnisenta is an Elder from Nahanni Butte. He spent fifteen years testing water and working for the Nahanni National Park.

Fred Didzena (Chateh)

Fred Didzena is a Denesuline member of the Chateh First Nation. Chateh, the signatory chief for the Treaty 8 signing, was his great grandfather. Fred is a member of the Bilateral Management Committee under the Alberta-NWT Bilateral Water Management Agreement.

Jim Antoine (Łíídlı́ Kúé First Nation)

Jim Antoine is an Elder who has led a political life on behalf of his people. He served as a member of the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories from 1991 to 2003. He led the Northwest Territories government as the eighth premier of the Northwest Territories from 1998 to 2000. He has also served as Chief of the Łíídlı́ Kúé First Nation on four occasions.

Mary Mckanacha (Prophet River First Nation)

Mary Mckanacha was born at Fish Lake, B.C., and is an active Elder who fights for the animals on the land. She is the Granddaughter of Chief Billy Mckanacha, who signed the Treaty in 1914.

Ruby Johnny (Dease River First Nation)

Ruby Johnny is a Kaska Dena Elder, born out on the land in French Creek, B.C. She is a grandmother and enjoys taking her grandchildren out on the land within the Kaska Territory and teaching them the traditions that were passed down to her while growing up. She enjoys organizing, fundraising for, and participating in cultural events for youth, elders and her community.

Georgina Sidney (Teslin Tlingit Council)

Georgina Sidney is from Teslin, an Elder of the Yanyedi Clan. She is a mother, grandmother & great grandmother - she has twelve grandchildren and three great grandchildren - she shares her knowledge for these future generations. She has enjoyed taking her children out on the trapline and continues to pass on the traditional ways of living off the land.

Deborah Groat (Daylu Dena Council)

Deborah Groat is the daughter of Hazel Frank Groat and Allen Groat; her grandparents are Tommy Frank from Tahltan Nation and Daisy Porter from Kaska Nation. She grew up in Lower Post, B.C., spending a lot of time on the Porter family trapline.

Charlie Dickson (Liard River First Nation)

Charlie Dickson is an Elder Kaska citizen from the Liard First Nation, who resides in Upper Liard (near Watson Lake), Yukon. Elder Dickson is an active trapper and outdoorsman, who likes taking young people out to his trapline cabin, to give them another perspective on their culture and homeland.

Harold Smith (Pelly Banks First Nation)

Harold Smith is a Pelly Banks First Nation Elder, who resides near the Campbell River on the Campbell Highway, Yukon. He spends a lot of time out on the land as he is an active trapper.

Dorothy Smith (Pelly Banks First Nation)

Dorothy Smith is a Kaska Elder who was born in Pelly Banks, and currently works in Ross River. She has served on housing committees, the Yukon Government's Children's Act review, was a board member with the Yukon Women's Association, and served her community as a member of the Ross River Dena Chief and Council. She is a social and political activist, frequently translates between Kaska and English speakers. She enjoys hunting, tanning hides for sewing, and being on the land.

Dennis Dick (Ross River Dena Council)

Dennis Dick is a Kaska member from Ross River. He enjoys being out on the land hunting on the river, and fishing.

Frank Kotchea (Fort Liard First Nation)

Frank Kotchea is an Acho Dene Koe First Nation Elder who spends much of his time on the land. Frank is also a sitting member on the Bilateral Management Committee.

Eddie Siessy (Fort Liard First Nation)

Eddie Siessy was born October 29, 1954, at Bohey Lake, approximately 2 hours away from Fort Liard, NWT. His father raised him out on the land and water, traveling by dog sled. He continues to hunt and maintains his connection to the land.

Objectives and questions:

To guide the discussions and sharing of knowledge during the gathering, the BMC members, (which includes representatives from B.C., NWT and Yukon governments and the 5 First Nations governments and organizations) created a series of questions to seek out understanding and insight into Indigenous perspectives about the Liard River Basin (Table 1). Once all the questions were compiled, they were prioritized as to importance to the study, then edited to make it easier to understand. The objective statements were added to further describe what was meant to be achieved from the questions, so as to assist the facilitator and/or the participating Elders in case of any misunderstanding. The key themes that were addressed are Indigenous relationship with water, stewardship, and the changes observed over time.

Questions guiding the Elders Circle

Table 2. Shows the final Traditional Knowledge holder questions.

Theme	Question	What are we seeking with the question?
Relationship to Liard	1. How do you live in a good relationship with water/land?	What are the place connections of each person?
	2. What special water places are important to you and why? (i.e. fish camps, wetland campsites, drinking water)	To understand places of importance and higher priority.
	3. What lessons does water teach us?	Learn about the water teachings.

Theme	Question	What are we seeking with the question?
	4. What keeps Liard water healthy?	Better understand the holistic (interconnected) view of water.
	5. What does water spirit mean to you?	To better understand the holistic meaning of water to Indigenous people.
	6. What does it mean to be headwaters people?	Better understand the role and responsibility of living in headwaters.
Water Governance/ Stewardship	7. In the old way, what does care and respect of waters look like?	Interested in the process of decision-making then and now, and how to bring traditional practices into water management.
	8. What traditional water laws exist, and how could we use them to maintain healthy waters?	How can we bring back traditional ways of caring for and respecting water?
Changes to Liard	<p>9. What changes do you see in water, (lakes, rivers, groundwater, wetlands)?</p> <p>What do you think is causing those changes?</p> <p>Is there as much water as before? Has the water level changed; does it flow faster or slower than before?</p> <p>Have you noticed new springs or changing flows of springs? (Is water coming out of the land in new ways, or different ways?)</p>	Get an understanding of the way that water is changing the landscape, so we can better adapt to it.

Theme	Question	What are we seeking with the question?
	<p>10. Have you noticed any changes in fish health?</p> <p>Do they taste different?</p> <p>Do they look different?</p> <p>How did they used to be in the past?</p>	<p>Understand the indicators of water health.</p>
	<p>11. Have you seen any changes in animals like moose, muskrats, beavers, ducks, etc.?</p> <p>Are their numbers changing?</p> <p>Are they moving into new places or away from old places?</p> <p>Are the animals still healthy?</p>	<p>Understand the indicators of water health.</p>
	<p>12. If any changes have occurred, how do they affect transportation, access to the land or ability to hunt and fish?</p>	<p>Understand how Indigenous communities are being affected by changes.</p>
	<p>13. Are you worried about any threats to traditional uses of water (i.e., mining, climate change)?</p>	<p>Understand the biggest concerns of Elders so they can be captured in the learning plan.</p>
<p>Stewardship and monitoring</p>	<p>14. What important traditional use places should we watch closely for water changes?</p>	<p>To identify important places that should be monitored.</p>
	<p>15. What stewardship information do we need to know and what actions (if any) should we take to help balance the Liard basin?</p>	<p>What work/research/monitoring should we prioritize in the learning plan.</p>

Observations, concerns, and recommendations:

***What We Heard* during Liard River Elders Circle Sessions May 2-4th 2023**

During the three days that we met with the Elders, who were split into morning and afternoon groups, we heard many stories, observations and teachings that highlighted the changes, importance, and spiritual significance of water. Some themes came up repeatedly and consistently, providing a good foundation for organizing the ideas we heard into categories. For those statements that came up repeatedly, such as “water is life and must be kept clean,” those quotations were intentionally repeated in the What We Heard (WWH) report to show correlation to the numerous times such statements were made purposely by the Elders.

Each theme below is named with a broad title, then further explained in sub-themes, each illustrated with a variety of quotes from Knowledge Keepers from the Liard River Elders Circle sessions. The No Voice (in this case: Water), was also invited into the circle and knowledge holders were given the chance to speak for water, this is provided under Theme 6.

It is important to remember that through the lens of an Indigenous knowledge holder, all topics or issues of discussion are taken into consideration within a “big picture” perspective. Everything is connected, therefore, all feelings and thoughts are systematic. Indigenous knowledge is all about thinking in systems, and viewing parts as interacting elements of a whole. The Traditional and Long-Ago People's Knowledge that was shared has been separated here to adhere to western processes. We take this opportunity to express the utmost gratitude to the thoughtful and insightful contributions of all participants. Their responses will provide an integral Indigenous perspective on our relationship with the water and land, which can be used to guide the next actionable steps forward in the development of the Liard Basin Learning Plan.

Themes - colour coded Table of Contents:

1. Indigenous Laws & Codes of Conduct

- a. Respect
- b. Care
- c. Share
- d. Stewardship

2. Quality of the Water

- a. Access to Drinking Water

b. Pollutants, Contamination

3. Quantity of the Water

- a. Water Levels Dropping**
- b. Ground Water & Soil**
- c. Flooding**

4. Wildlife, Fish and Plant Life

- a. Wildlife Populations**
- b. Health of Wildlife & Quality of Game**
- c. Wildlife Management & Animal Husbandry**

5. Climate

6. Concluding Statements & No Voice Recommendations

1. Indigenous Laws & Codes of Conduct

All of what was shared within this gathering was informed by the guiding principles of three key Indigenous Laws: Respect, Care and Share.

Yukon First Nations' Long-Ago Peoples have always defined themselves as being part of nature, and were sent here by the Creator to care for Mother Earth. Their Key Laws centered around the principles of Respect, Care and Share which were treated equally and used in combination with other Indigenous laws. Traditional Knowledge laws are applied internally first, then to others moving outwards towards the broader worldview.

Respect is the greatest consideration given to life and everything created by the Creator. Care is taking care of the land and each other, which is the responsibility of all peoples. Share is the passing down and sharing of knowledge openly, and in a respectful manner.

The Elders spoke about the ways they were taught to be respectful of the water, to not dirty it, and to acknowledge that it has a spirit, and to treat it accordingly. They all agreed upon water being vital to survival and most mentioned the phrase "water is life". The Elders emphasized that they, as Headwaters people, have a responsibility to care for the water, land and animals. They shared that there are good ways - respectful and traditional ways - of working with, communicating with, and existing alongside water. They are concerned that water, land,

animals and the No Voice in general aren't being cared for, or considered, and will be lost or harmed beyond repair.

a. Respect

Knowledge Keepers Quotes:

Jim Antoine, LKFN: *Water is life.*

Richard Behn, FNFN: *What are my grandchildren seven generations from now... going to have?*

Ruby Johnny, DRFN: *When you touch water you touch one spot and you can never touch it again, it's just like life. You only get one life, and you can only live today and when today is gone it's gone - you'll never get it back. So you have to respect it, and same with water, you have to respect water.*

Georgina Sidney, TTC: *Everything has a spirit and you have to respect it... You have to honour all of creation, because they have a Spirit. Everything, all the animals, everything that lives on earth has to be respected and honoured.*

Jim Antoine, LKFN: *Water is life; it has healing properties; it has human properties to it.*

Ruby Johnny, DRFN: *Everything has a spirit; animals, water, plants. We need to be respectful; it's powerful. Say a prayer, and be thankful for water. Thank the river for the water, or the creek, or wherever you get your water.*

Deborah Groat, DDC: *We learned to pack water, to respect water, and to make sure that we drank it. From the morning my grandpa gave us all water and to the end of the day. He told us we have to respect everything in the water because they're all connected.*

Jim Antoine, LKFN: *Water is sacred; it heals you. The best medicine.*

Ruby Johnny, DRFN: *Water is powerful; it has spirit.*

Dorothy Smith, PBFN: *Creator gave us the water to keep us living. Look after in the right way; keep it clean . . . It is alive; treat with respect. Water is life.*

Richard Behn, FNFN: *Shoshone Woman [said], "There's a ceremony for drinking water. Thank the water as water is life. We need to look at water in the lakes, ground and Air."*

Deborah Groat, DDC: *Water is powerful. Water teaches us how to respect the actual power [of]*

our natural world; without water nothing will survive.

Georgina Sidney, TTC: *It is basic; the whole world needs water just to live. If we abuse it; it teaches us a lesson; we aren't here anymore without it. New Zealand passed laws giving personhood to rivers and water. It's the highest honour you can give it.*

Ruby Johnny, DRFN: *One way to be respectful is also to let the community know... why are you out there? What are you doing? I think the biggest thing is showing the respect to the community that you're on their traditional territory... also ask them if they have any concerns about water around there.*

Charlie Dickson, LFN: *You gotta take somebody with you who knows about things like that... especially an Elder. Respect and pray over that water.*

Dorothy Smith, PBFN: *Thank the creator for the water that you're testing.*

Georgina Sidney, TTC: *To see your grandmother. How would you do it? Do it that way. Like, to go to see your grandma to ask her something. Water is a person. You can't just walk up to it and take it. You gotta talk to it like a person, like a grandma.*

Fred Didzena, DTFN: *We need our rivers to have the same rights as humans to protect our water.*

Recommendations:

- Since all of life on Earth has a spiritual component, it is important that Indigenous protocols, codes and laws be acknowledged and respected when discussing, planning or exploiting the land and waters, while on the land or waters.
- Show respect by acknowledging the water through ceremony.
- When taking samples, or testing water, speak to the water and attempt to consider it as you would a person.
- Accept and acknowledge water's right as a living entity or being could change how water is perceived in the bigger picture, and contribute to how water is considered in planning and decision-making.
- As recognized and acknowledged in Section 35, Constitution of Canada, 1982, Indigenous Traditional Knowledge must be respected and protected in legislation.

b. Care

Knowledge Keepers Quotes:

Mary Mckanacha, PRFN: *Water is life, not only for humans but also for animals.*

Jim Antoine, LKFN: *Whatever happens up the river floats down to us. We need to know this stuff. We need to know how it affects us, and we need to stop this. What happens upriver from us, flows by us.*

Eddie Siessy, FLFN: *Keep water clean. Don't throw garbage in it.*

Larry Burke, FNFN: *Don't dirty it. Look after it.*

Deborah Groat, DDC: *We have a responsibility to care for and respect the headwaters so we can have clean water for the future. For all the people that it sustains.*

Jim Antoine, LFKN: *Water teaches me to start going to court.*

Ruby Johnny, DRFN: *We have been responsible to make sure the headwaters are taken care of and being protected. It's a human responsibility. If it's contaminated it will affect Waters below, and will float downriver.*

Fred Didzena, DTFN: *Governments are handing out millions of gallons of water to companies to pump downhole so that a little bit of oil will come up. What is more precious than water?*

Mary Mckanacha, PRFN: *Water has very high importance to all people and animals, especially the animals . . . Animals were put here to look after the forest. They keep everything in check.*

Recommendations:

- Legal actions should be considered as an option to protect land and waters downstream, when considering bottom lines in cumulative effects on the environment.
- Transparency about what chemicals or contamination are in the waters, including water data collected, be made public as contaminated water moves downstream and toxically affects communities.
- All governments, peoples and developers must practise their responsibility for caring for the land and waters, especially during these rapidly changing climate times.

c. Share

Knowledge Keepers Quotes:

Fred Didzena, DTFN: *It will be hundreds of years before it gets better. We have to start planning now. We need to plan to 300 years.*

Dorothy Smith, PBFN: *They need consent for whatever happens on traditional territory lands.*

Jim Antoine, LKFN: *Do proper protocol of offering tobacco.*

Georgina Sidney, TTC: *You could maybe take an elder with you when you go take a sample... Take an Elder with you and do a ceremony.*

Mary Mckanacha, PRFN: *Don't let your voice stop. Stand strong on what you believe. Somebody has to speak for the land and animals.*

Ruby Johnny, DRFN: *You can get so much from the community you're in. Also ask them, "what are your traditions", one community could be different from another... The area you might be going to could be a sacred area to someone... it could be a burial site... It's good to go to the community.*

Dorothy Smith, PBFN: *When you go to the site... let the people know where you're going to. Also tell them what kind of water it is, if it's polluted or not, so they can know... there's certain creeks that aren't drinkable for people. So if there's tourists... on that road, if we see them getting water... we let them know... what water is good to drink. It's always good to let people know...*

Recommendations:

- Write reports in common English, so that it's more easily understood by Elders and communities, rather than in a government way. Make data accessible.
- Governments need to create relationships and open dialogue with communities.
- Scientists should learn about the traditional laws, and should include Elders and Guardians when they do field testing.

d. Stewardship

Knowledge Keepers Quotes:

Jim Antoine, LKFN: *Stewardship is a very important word and way of life. It's protecting a Way of Life. Protecting the land and water.*

Fred Didzena, DTFN: *We were always told that everything on earth is alive and water is no different. Anything you use, touch, treat it as if it's your neighbor, treat it as if it's your family, respect, care, and say thank you.*

Georgina Sidney, TTC: *How we take care of the land includes the whole environment.*

Ruby Johnny, DRIB: *Guardians monitor; test waters in traditional territories. Look for abnormalities on the land.*

Jim Antoine, LKFN: *Land and water were made for us to keep it as pristine and clean as possible. That's what stewardship means. "Keep it the way it is." All the land is our responsibility.*

Jim Antoine, LKFN: *The water is damaged now. Can't use the water the way we did before. "When the river flows..." Elders thought the water would be maintained. Elders & Spirit of intention: that water would be kept pure and pristine.*

Recommendations:

- Communities are not connected enough to the land; we need more land guardians.
- Land guardians are key links to the land; include them, develop relationships with them and their communities, and support them.
- Traditional Knowledge must be protected from misuse through misinterpretation and misunderstanding. In some communities there is history of Traditional Knowledge and information about sacred sites being used to the Westerner's advantage - sometimes resulting in the disturbance or loss of those unique features and meaningful locations, which is considered disrespectful behavior to that No Voice. Repairing those relationships is integral for successful collaboration between Indigenous and western knowledge.
- All governments, peoples and developers must practise their responsibility for caring for the land and waters, especially during these rapidly changing climate times.

2. Quality of the Water

All of the Knowledge Keepers spoke of the importance of access to clean water in their communities. Where there was once clean, clear water, there is contamination. The Elders explained how this impacts their community's ability to hunt or survive off the land, due to both the difficulty of finding clean drinking water in the bush and the effects of unhealthy water on wildlife and the land. Waste is being mismanaged, Industries profiting from the resources of the region are leaving behind garbage, and their processes have led to pollutants dirtying the

water. Many of the Elders describe the use of cold mountain springs as a way of gathering drinking water for themselves and their communities, as they don't trust the water from their taps and otherwise would be left to rely on purchasing bottled water from stores.

There is a strong concern of access to clean drinking water for their communities now, but also for the generations ahead. Especially, because the health of the water is connected to food sources and quality of life for their children, grandchildren, and beyond.

a. Access to Drinking Water

Knowledge Keepers Quotes:

Dorothy Smith, PBFN: *Water is our life.*

Fred Didzena, DTFN: *People don't go out into the bush very long because they had to buy the water and take it with them. When they run out of water they have to come home . . . We are still very traditional. Everybody goes out hunting. Everybody is hunting ducks and geese right now. We still enjoy that lifestyle.*

Fred Didzena, DFTN: *We were meant to be in the bush, but we can't because we don't have the necessities to stay out there.*

Charlie Dickson, LFN: *Used to get water from Window Lake. Hunting outfitters camp above polluted creek. Float planes polluted the water.*

Recommendations:

- Water is life and must be protected.
- Water must be kept clean to replenish life.
- Work with communities to protect and preserve natural sources of drinking water. Communities having access to clean drinking water should be a priority and a consideration in the planning process.
- If the water is unsafe to drink, communities should be informed.

b. Pollutants, Contamination

Knowledge Keepers Quotes:

Dorothy Smith, PBFN: *We have a responsibility to look after the water and to keep it clean. We need to talk to all the young people, and other people, who contaminate the water. Tell them not to contaminate the water because all of the people that live downriver.*

Mary Mckanacha, PRFN: *When creeks/ivers have green things on top, the rivers are not healthy.*

Fred Didzena, DTFN: *The livestock and farming are a big issue. Every pond has animal antibiotics. Farmers are concerned that wild animals are contaminating livestock. First Nations say otherwise. We see it in the opposite direction.*

Fred Didzena, DTFN: *Pipeline crossing of rivers having effect. Pipelines are cut and capped. Pipeline below the rivers that could become eroded and pollute the land and waters.*

Eddie Siessy, FLFN: *All along the shore we're seeing green water. The water's dirty from the pipe. There's no Creek Water to drink. Now we have to pack water.*

Ruby Johnny, DRFN: *We get those waters tested, that's coming off Cassier, because of all the asbestos.*

Dorothy Smith, PBFN: *There is no way to contain the tailing pond water... You can't contain the water because there is too much rain and snow. We're going to end up with lakes with no fish, and no cariboo calves. It's important to keep our waters clean.*

Leon Konnisenta, NBDB: *People leaving garbage up the Nahanni River. There's illness upriver. We used to clean up garbage along the Nahanni for 2 years. Worked for Parks for 18 years. I had to clean up all the garbage along the riverbank at Prairie Creek and Thompson River mines.*

Jim Antoine, LKFN: *Giant mine left arsenic underground. Made the regulations tighter after the fact. A lot of things need to be done.*

Fred Didzena, DTFN: *Climate change contributing to permafrost thaw. One side wet, the other side dry; road stopping water flow. There are nine toxic chemicals now in the lake; now there is a PH imbalance.*

Ruby Johnny, DRFN: *Today we have to start talking about water laws. We never had laws about water, but today we need to create water laws.*

Ruby Johnny, DRFN: *Every park should have a place for RVs to dump their waste and garbage, because they're spilling their waste (with chemicals) into our creeks.*

Harold Smith, PBFN: *Muddy water is flowing into Big Campbell River. It used to be Crystal clean, now big mudslides upriver. I caught a tourist dumping waste into the Campbell River. Water is very important. We need to make a big sign saying no dumping into any water. Or a fence.*

Recommendations:

- We need to create water laws.
- Parks should have a place for RVs to dump waste & garbage.
- Monitor pollution coming from community sewage lagoons.
- Look at the whole watershed rather than pinpoint specific areas.
- Create an inventory of contaminated sites.
- Clean up old exploration and mining camp sites.
- Share scientific data information with Indigenous communities as information becomes known.
- Legal action against polluters could be the most effective and feasible way to clean up northern waters, which includes the Liard River Basin.

3. Quantity of the Water

The Elders' responses painted a picture of how much the region, the water, and the land has changed over the years with the introduction of industry (mining, agriculture, forestry, etc.) and climate change. They've made these observations through the lens of their strong relationship with the land and waters of their communities, in which water and land guardians have monitored changes, and where they have spent many years hunting, foraging, growing up with and living off of the environment around them.

All of the Elders mentioned the drying of water spaces, including but not limited to: Mountain Lake, Pelly River, Kluane Lake Beach (receding), Slim River, Grandma Creek (is now gone), Nelson River (river bank erosion), Beaver River, Nisutlin, Oxbow lakes, Miller Lakes, Deh Cho (Mackenzie River), Nahanni River.

There was discussion of flooding, and how the water levels have been impacted by the melting of permafrost due to climate change. Erosion of shorelines and mudslides occur as those water levels drop - not to be replenished. Flooding is also a result of the loss of trees, which held back the water, due to forest fires and how they have been managed.

Among the concerns it was noted that the groundwaters are beginning to dry up and affecting the quality and dryness of the soil.

a. Water Levels Dropping

Knowledge Keepers Quotes:

Leon Konnisenta, NBDB: *When you used to camp by the creek, you couldn't go to sleep because*

the creek was too loud. Now there is no water.

Ruby Johnny, DRIB: *Creeks are drying out where animals are getting their water.*

Frank Kotchea, FLFN: *If you put on some boots, you could walk across the Beaver River. We have names of every island along the river and know who is on what island. The Liard River changed a lot in the last 60 years.*

Georgina Sidney, TTC: *There are a lot of changes, I could see a lot of shorelines in the fall. The Nisutlin River is getting really low, and drying up. The disturbed river bottom affects the whole valley. It snakes back into the bay. I discourage using jet boats up river.*

Harold Smith, PBFN: *The water levels are dropping; all creeks, wetlands are drying up.*

Richard Behn, FNFN: *Creeks: a lot of creeks are now dried up. Muskeg water the color of apple juice. Creeks 20 ft wide now only 4 ft wide. Creeks along Highway near Fort Nelson had fish stocks; now no fish at Steamboat Mountain or Peace River.*

Frank Kotchea, FLFN: *Born and raised 20kms on [the] B.C. side of Sandy Creek; beside a little creek called Grandma's Creek that has dried up. My people are buried along the river that's starting to erode; their bodies will come out. Over 400 people used to live where I was born.*

Fred Didzena, DTFN: *Elders say that the muskegs. Swamps, marshes are the cleaning agents for our water. They are starting to disappear due to farming.*

Frank Kotchea, FLFN: *Fort Liard is the canary in the coal mine. We are affected first for whatever happens upriver. Grandma Creek is gone. We can't go up Beaver River anymore. Dundee River you can't go up without a boat. Nelson River forks. It's [been] clear-cut, and the riverbank is eroding. That's what clear cutting has done.*

Recommendations:

- The lands and waters are dying and drying up, something needs to be done immediately.

b. Ground Water & Soil

Knowledge Keepers Quotes:

Richard Behn, FNFN: *Groundwater: water moving slowly. Muskeg water needs to flow. Groundwater is not clean anymore. Parents had to carry town water out on the land for 45 years.*

Frank Kotchea, FLFN: *The ground is too dry; the place we picked cranberries - the ground was red now it's brown. The muskegs are really dry; you dig in with feet still no groundwater.*

Ruby Johnny, DRIB: *There's a lot of underground spring water places drying up; underground water runs through the community.*

Recommendations:

- It is our turn to take care of the lands and waters; in the past, the land and waters have always cared for us; successor legislation (similar to the Mackenzie Valley Resource Management Act (MVRMA)) be in-effect throughout the affected Liard River Basin region.
- Legal challenge against those entities and jurisdictions could be the most effective and feasible approach to cleaning up northern waters including waters in the Liard River Basin.

c. Flooding

Knowledge Keepers Quotes:

Ruby Johnny, DRFN: *Some rivers are higher; some lower; and some rivers are a little trickle. There are fast floods. We're getting a lot of ground melt.*

Harold Smith, PBFN: *Permafrost melting causes road heaves. Some lakes (Coffee, Mud) are filling up due to permafrost melt.*

Charlie Dickson, LFN: *Forest fires cause flooding; trees hold back the water . . . A small fire got big because someone said they're going to monitor it. Told forestry about the fire, but nothing was done.*

Fred Didzena, DTFN: *The last 2 years we had to evacuate 1200 to 1500 people due to flooding. A 100-year flood is now a yearly occurrence.*

Recommendations:

- Monitor permafrost and landslides; use Indigenous land guardians.
- Manage forest wildfires in a way that takes flooding into consideration.
- Higher priorities need to be given to important natural land and water sites, for wildfire protection.

4. Wildlife, Fish and Plant Life

The Elders spoke about how the animals and wildlife are paying the price for the contamination of water, the lack of access to clean drinking water, the drying of water sources, as well as the changes in climate. Less animals are being seen in some regions, the wildlife and thus the meat is showing signs of being unhealthy; including lesions, discolouration, texture changes and tick infestation. With these changes they've noticed a decline in numbers of indigenous species as well as the growing presence of invasive species of animals, insects, and plant life. They also noted how hunting regulations and animal husbandry, the introduction of agriculture, has impacted the wildlife in the area. They worry that hunters from outside the community are not being monitored enough, the introduction of Bison has disrupted Caribou calving grounds, and the beaver populations aren't being managed which is resulting in too many dams.

a. Wildlife Populations

Knowledge Keepers Quotes:

Fred Didzena, DTFN: *no more birds, just the swallows, ravens and magpies. That's all the things that are basically left. And no more insects . . . No more bees.*

Richard Behn, FNFN: *The changes we're seeing show a steady decline of bird populations. We used to hear, for two or three weeks steady, songbirds coming flock after flock. Flocks of Robin sounded like an explosion. I've only seen one Robin in the last three years, the birds are gone.*

Fred Didzena, DTFN: *When I was little, 24 hours a day you could hear a noise like distant thunder and it was the ducks and geese taking off. You could hear that day in and day out - now there is nothing.*

Jim Antoine, LKFN: *More recently, A lot of fish died that summer in the river. The temperature went up by 1 degree. Arctic grayling (blue fish): their waterways are gone. No more Arctic grayling.*

Fred Didzena, DTFN: *Study in 2016 interviewed households in their community "about 1.1*

moose per household that was killed per year, which is 440, and now, today, I think maybe a third of that. In a span of 7 years there's a dramatic drop in moose kills from our people. And talking with our hunters last fall a lot of them said 'nothing' - they went out two, three times, and [saw] nothing.

Deborah Groat, DDC: People are talking about the concerns about the river. No more thick ice, thin ice due to climate change. There's less water. Winter ice fishing is affected by the ice change. There's hollow ice, roughed up ice. The lakes are drying up, getting lower. Lots of sand bars in the rivers. Wetlands are critical, and they're drying up. Swans, ducks, they use them every year.

Leon Konnisenta, NBDB: We need to keep the land clean. In the 1960s oil and gas came in. There used to be lots of sheep in the Headless Valley, now hardly nothing.

Ruby Johnny, DRFN: I used to see lots of sheep, now if you're lucky you'll see one or two. I used to see so many. Goats carry diseases that could destroy wild sheep and goats. I don't see any grizzlies. The moose are not as fat as they used to be. Not as many rabbits, or grouse around now.

Dennis Dick, RRDC: Now using jets [rather] than [propellers] in the Pelly River, water levels are too low. Jet boat fuels are affecting eggs, now no more fish. Don't use fish traps anymore as there are no more salmon. Most of the Yukon River has too many boats fishing out salmon.

Frank Kotchea, FLFN: Harvested more chum salmon in Liard; used to be one or two, now seven or eight. Catching more chum salmon. Hardly see any muskrats, hardly any muskrat push-ups. Delta (around Inuvik area) saying muskrats disappearing up there too.

Charlie Dickson, LFN: We used to catch a lot of fish in Liard, but they're getting scarce now.

Fred Didzena, DTFN: What was captured in the 1960s is a lot less now. collaring data does not belong to the government. Caribou cameras picked up a lot of collared animals, nobody would admit to owning those collars because of legislation - economic development is being prioritized over species at risk. The government is not sharing data due to SARA.

Deborah Groat, DDC: The animals should not be left to suffer. Not much rabbits, even rabbits had ticks. spots on their livers, kidneys, and meat; bears with skinny legs undernourished. Saw Grizzly bear cubs without mother. The mother got hit by a semi-truck; the cubs never made it afterwards either.

Richard Behn, FNFN: Lake Athabasca, we used to trap 100s of muskrats but now they're disappeared and none have returned. Site C dam is powered from lake Athabasca. BC Hydro is

stealing all the water.

Richard Behn, FNFN: *Bennett Dam affects the rivers; rivers don't freeze anymore; animals don't go across rivers anymore.*

Recommendations:

- Population and animal tracking data should be shared with the Indigenous communities.
- Large and small animals are disappearing throughout their natural habitats. What are the health issues facing wildlife species and populations? Concerted efforts needed to assess and rectify the cumulative impacts affecting waters, plants and animals on the land.
- Pacific salmon are migrating north into the Arctic ecosystems to find colder waters to lay eggs. Concerted efforts are required to monitor and to assist Indigenous and anadromous fish species to adapt to their new environment.

b. Health of Wildlife & Quality of Game

Knowledge Keepers Quotes:

Georgina Sidney, TTC: *The animals are paying the price.*

Deborah Groat, DDC: *The trout has mushy soft meat.*

Dennis Dick, RRDC: *Some fish taste awful; grayling, pike, with the softest meat.*

Jim Antoine, LKFN: *We are seeing changes in the fish. chum salmon, seeing more and more each fall. People are starting to eat it more and more. Bigger fish are getting Mercury from eating smaller ones. we're trying to find out about mercury. Starting to see that the mercury is coming out of the permafrost.*

Jim Antoine, LKFN: *Whitefish: seeing a lot of sores. Fort Resolution: catching loche that has green livers. Liver is a delicacy for our people, with lots of great nutrients, we can't eat these green livers.*

Charlie Dickson, LFN: *Grayling caught are lumpy inside the stomach and backbone. Jack fish on our river sometimes have lumps on their heads. The meat still tastes good. I have a cabin at Fish Lake; I usually go fishing there.*

Mary Mckanacha, PRFN: *Moose: white cysts inside. Dead animals found near gas pipes. Creek has green growing on the water. That creek used to be healthy and clean. Fish keep the water*

clean; where there's no fish, green is growing on the water. We hardly see rabbits along the highway. We're living in a dying world. Look at the oceans, we're starting to find dead whales. For years now they've all disappeared.

Eddie Siessy, FLFN: *We're starting to see changes in the animals. Opening up moose meat it's all different and changing color. We threw a moose away. Spruce chicken, see all white spots on the breast. Two Dead Rabbits were bony.*

Harold Smith, PBFN: *The main Caribou grounds in the area. Moose and Caribou are in good shape. Caribou lungs are smaller and looking pinkish; rabbits lungs are smaller and pinkish. Nobody gets salmon anymore. they're really tiny and have mushy meat.*

Georgina Sidney, TTC: *There are a lot of changes happening; people don't go out anymore. We hardly see moose or caribou, not much salmon either. We used to see salmon at Wolf Lake. Now we see moose ticks; yellow fat on caribou. We need a big Gathering of Elders.*

Recommendations:

- The No Voice are paying the price from the pollution sickening their waters.
- We need a big gathering of Elders to begin voicing concerns for the No Voice.

c. Wildlife Management & Animal Husbandry

Knowledge Keepers Quotes:

Harold Smith, PBFN: *Beaver Dams bursting, causing washouts and flooding of roads. There are too many beavers; too many beaver ponds.*

Leon Konnisenta, NBDB: *You see the beaver dam; there's no water. My dad passed his trapline to me and said "keep the trapline clean, it's your land.*

Dennis Dick, RRDC: *There are a lot of beavers - over 30 beavers in a lake.*

Frank Kotchea, FLFN: *Moose calving islands taken over by Buffalo. Bison are transplanted and take over Moose calving ground. Taking over the island. We're tired of the Buffalo.*

Frank Kotchea, FLFN: *Bison are a headache. they don't belong in the Liard. Don't know what to do or say about it. Can't shoot it or else you get in trouble. Nobody eats buffalo, yellow fat turns people off. Just feeding the dogs. No Control. How do you control it? They're starting to overpopulate.*

Richard Behn, FNFN: *There's chemicals being used called endocrine disruptors. They're disrupting the reproductive systems of animals. We need to stop the use of these chemicals on the land.*

Richard Behn, FNFN: *How much disease is floating down the rivers? Because cows and pigs (domestic animals) are allowed to go there. Bennett Dam has a carcass draining device (debris catcher to catch the dead caribou). First Nations are fighting to protect the last seven Caribou living there. Water laws in BC are over 100 years old.*

Recommendations:

- Beavers and their dams need to be managed differently, consultation with Elders and Indigenous communities is suggested.
- Overpopulation of bison and their effects on other wildlife should be considered.
- Monitoring of agriculture and farming's impact on the water, and surrounding ecosystem. Regulations need to be in place to protect water and wildlife.

d) Invasive Species

Knowledge Keepers Quotes:

Frank Kotchea, FLFN: *Changes. Invasive species Canadian thistle. taking over natural species. We will lose berry pastures; we're starting to see strange plants along the river.*

Deborah Groat, DDC: *We see different bugs now. The spruce beetle has been found here.*

Recommendations:

- Invasive plants and animal species must be monitored, and their impact on natural species be rectified immediately.

5. Climate

It is important to remember that all of these themes and subcategories interconnect and are viewed as a big picture through Indigenous perspective. The Elders are concerned about climate change and how warmer temperatures affect the quality and quantity of water throughout the study region. The changes in temperature, weather and seasons have an impact on quite a lot; temperatures rising in water are impacting the quality and species of fish available; the permafrost melt is leading to floods; and there is a growing observation of invasive species taking over the landscape.

Knowledge Keepers Quotes:

Jim Antoine, LKFN: *I see a lot of slumping up and down the Mackenzie River. More landslides yearly; things are changing out on the land.*

Deborah Groat, DDC: *Climate change is drying everything up, the ground is really crunchy. High winds create sandstorms on the river. Power outages are now due to high winds.*

Deborah Groat, DDC: *Really different weather due to climate change.*

Fred Didzena, DTFN: *There are no more insects, no more bugs and bees. There are more invasive species... Starting to see a lot more invasive species... especially from the south. Due to warming weather & equipment coming in that isn't washed properly and carries seeds.*

Jim Antoine, LKFN: *A lot of fish died that summer in the river. The temperature went up by 1 degree.*

Fred Didzena, DTFN: *No more Chinooks; really bad for animals; they will starve if they can't break ice build-up on the snow top.*

Recommendations:

- More testing and transparency about the data is really important to the Circle of Elders. The water, land, plant life and wildlife are all connected according to Indigenous knowledge and that is why it's important for Indigenous communities to have all of that information; data on populations, health of animals, quality of water. It's all connected and therefore all important to taking care of the water and land.
- Monitor water temperature, water levels, humidity of soils, frequency and extent of forest fires, and share this information with communities as soon as information becomes available.

6. Concluding Statements & No Voice Recommendations

Unanimous across the Elders Circle were the following statements:

- The negative impacts felt on the lands, waters and air, which includes all of its plants, animals and peoples of the Liard River Basin, are almost exclusively caused by non-Indigenous entities, institutions and laws, followed closely by the effects of climate change.

- It may take legal action to ensure adequate successive legislation (similar to MVRMA) is in place to protect lands and waters surrounding Indigenous and northern communities.
- The bottom line is that the Liard River Basin needs clean water to sustain life.

The Elders, by sharing their Indigenous Knowledge and recommendations, strongly urge the BMCs to include mitigative steps to address the cumulative effects of pollution and climate change in the learning plan for the Liard River Basin

No Voice (Water) Recommendations:

“I’m alive, treat me with respect, because I am life; apply reciprocity.”

“Life will continue as long as you keep me healthy”

“You have an obligation to respect & protect me”

“You have responsibilities to me; as you have in the past”

“I’m alive, treat me with respect, because I am life; apply reciprocity.”

“You look after me - I will look after you.”

Conclusion

During the Elders’ circle, Indigenous Knowledge Holders and Liard River No Voice spoke the need for clean water throughout their homelands. Information gathered in this What We Heard report along with western science will inform and guide learning priorities for the implementation of the B.C.-NWT and B.C.-Yukon Bilateral Water Management Agreements.

Appendix A - Land and Peoples Relationship Model Document

Land and Peoples Relationship Model

The Land and Peoples Relationship Model is a collaborative knowledge-building process that respects both Yukon First Nations' Long-Ago Peoples Way and Western knowledge. Collaborative knowledge-building is a process by which participants reach favorable conclusions through the sharing and exchange of knowledge. Participants are asked to show the greatest respect possible during the planning and decision-making stages. The model uses three key laws (Respect, Care, and Share) combined with two decision-making tools (No Voice and Knowledge Stream Tree) that include affected parties' viewpoints and long-ago knowledge. The model is the guideline that directs and balances the collaborative planning process. The crux of the model is how respect is shown among participants within the planning and decision-making processes. The roundtable experts function as a neutral body focused solely on resolving issues, based on relevancy and usefulness. The Model also describe a sacred space.

Respect, Care and Share

Yukon First Nations' Long-Ago Peoples have always defined themselves as being part of nature, and were sent here by the Creator to care for Mother Earth. Their key laws centered around the principles of Respect, Care and Share which were treated equally, and used in combination with other natural laws. Respect is the law applied to all other natural laws. Long-Ago Peoples laws are applied internally first, then to others moving outwards into the broader worldview. For instance, long ago people's laws apply to self, immediate family members, Clan, community, Nation, pets, dwellers, plants, land, water, air, and universe. Respect is the greatest consideration given to life and everything created by the Creator. Care is taking care of the land and each other, which is the responsibility of all peoples. Share is the passing down and sharing of knowledge openly, and in a respectful manner. The model attempts to rebuild equal respect between the land and people, knowing that reconciliation cannot happen if people continue to view themselves as superior to nature and life. The model also aims to rebuild respect between people, where no knowledge system, gender, or group is superior to another.

No Voice Perspective

Long ago people's approach to land relationship and care include the perspective of all affected parties such as future generations, non-human relations, land and waters in planning and decision-making. The model includes "those with no voice" in all discussions and decisions made at the roundtable, and their presence is represented with a sign or symbol. Participants are asked to contribute what they feel represent the No Voice reaction to the issue at-hand. The No Voice reactions are part of the information that is assessed in decision-making. In the

event of a stand-off on a particular issue, the “no voice” contribution become a critical factor in the final decision.

Knowledge Stream Tree

The parable of the Knowledge Stream Tree is a story of how two knowledge systems and worldviews could function collaboratively side-by-side, without one trying to dominate the other. The watershed framework of the stream tree consists of tributaries (branches) that allow life-giving water (knowledge) to flow into the main waterway (trunk). As water is life knowledge is sacred, and should be shared with care and respect. The area between the waterway banks, above the water, is the sacred space needed for meaningful dialogue to take place. A mountain stream with long ago people’s knowledge on one side, and Western knowledge on the other side, respect each other’s system. As one travels upstream, there will be certain places where crossing is possible. At these narrows, collaborative knowledge could be shared. When Western Science speaks of “sustainable development,” Long-Ago People say “Take care of the land; the land takes care of you; and take only what you need.” As these two systems support sustainable development, “sustainability” could become a fundamental collaborative law.

The story emphasizes the importance of how the two knowledge systems respect each other’s differences and collaborate on common principles. By sharing their strengths and weaknesses on each point of interest, experts could decide which knowledge system would be best utilized when dealing with that particular issue. The Model allows for the rediscovery and rebuilding of cultures rather than merging concepts. The Model encourages participants to look for commonality within different knowledge systems, then use the strength of interconnection to resolve issues.

Rules of Engagement

Purpose of the model is to allow issues to be resolved through collaborative planning and consensus building. Participants of the roundtable are responsible for developing their rules of engagement that include the following requirements:

- Show respect for each other, affected parties and the land;
- Feel as much as you think;
- Listen to understand what is being said;
- Clarify what you say and hear; and
- Have patience.

Long Ago Peoples Way state that knowledge and land should not be damaged because both belong to the grandchildren and future generations. Indigenous Way of Life say Indigenous

traditional knowledge requires the Knowledge Holder to have experienced the knowledge through indigenous traditional lifestyle to be fully understood. It is important to recognize and respect that some people communicate thorough storytelling and animation, while others verbalize and record. Participation may be non-verbal. Participants using the model should always be aware of culture shock when delving deep into the multiple knowledge systems.

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