

INDIGENOUS WATERSHEDS INITIATIVE
FINAL IMPACT REPORT

APRIL 2026



**INDIGENOUS
WATERSHEDS
INITIATIVE**

Cover

Upper Fraser Fisheries Conservation Alliance (UFFCA)

Ben Hazel



RECOGNITION & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Indigenous Watersheds Initiative wouldn't be possible without the hard work and dedication of community-led project teams across the province. We also acknowledge the invaluable support from the Initiative's delivery partners – who include the Indigenous Advisory Committee, MakeWay Foundation and Watersheds BC. Funding was provided from the Province of British Columbia.



We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Province of British Columbia through the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy. IWI was made possible through a \$15 million provincial investment.



MakeWay is a national charity and public foundation with a goal to enable nature and communities to thrive together. MakeWay does this by building partnerships, providing funding, operational tools and other services for the charitable sector across the country. As a grant maker, MakeWay has supported Indigenous-led stewardship, watershed health, governance and community-led change across British Columbia for over 20 years.



Watersheds BC is a capacity-strengthening organization dedicated to enhancing watershed security across BC. Their mission is to equip Indigenous groups, local communities, and decision-makers with the training, knowledge, and networks needed to restore and protect their watersheds. They take a collaborative, community-driven approach, focusing on building local and Indigenous capacity through training, tools, and peer-to-peer support.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This publication is based on a technical, independent analysis undertaken by Reciprocal Consulting - an award-winning team grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and being. The firm is a leader in culturally responsive evaluation, research, mentoring, project management and training. They are committed to a strengths-based approach in their work with communities and organizations.

Reciprocal Consulting drew on both qualitative and quantitative assessment practices. This included an extensive review of project reports and independent interviews with grantees and the Indigenous Advisors. Their technical analysis captured the Initiative's outcomes, feedback, and recommendations. In most cases, quotes are not attributed to individuals or projects to ensure participants could speak candidly about their experiences with IWI. The findings are summarized in the pages that follow.

Indigenous Advisors

The Indigenous Advisors are a group of Indigenous leaders whose collective knowledge and experiences guide IWI in the areas of meaningful engagement, community governance, and natural resource management practices. Their knowledge and experience were invaluable to development and decision-making in the grant application and review process.



Chase White



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LETTER FROM INDIGENOUS ADVISORS

Investing in Indigenous communities to lead projects focused on watershed health, governance, and climate resilience delivers transformative benefits, not only for lands and waters but for the communities who maintain deep, enduring relationships with them. By supporting First Nations as they honour their responsibilities, we have witnessed powerful expressions of inherent rights and stewardship rooted in Indigenous laws, values, and knowledge systems.

The breadth of the work supported by the Indigenous Watersheds Initiative (IWI) reflects generations of governance, knowledge, and care. From water monitoring and food sovereignty programs to climate resilience planning and community-driven watershed restoration, these initiatives enabled First Nations communities to address historic damages to watersheds and repair ecological harms that have degraded watersheds over time.

A defining strength of Indigenous-led watershed stewardship is its holistic approach. Projects address the health of entire watersheds while recognizing the vital social and cultural dimensions of water. They create opportunities for community members to reconnect with their lands and waters, share stories and be in ceremony, and build skills and knowledge rooted in place. In doing so, these initiatives enhance community well-being, support intergenerational learning, and honor the reciprocal relationships that individuals and communities have with their watersheds.

By supporting Indigenous communities to lead this work, IWI not only advances environmental restoration, but we are also investing in Indigenous governance, cultural resurgence, community capacity, and climate resilience. Weaving together social, ecological, and governance values, these efforts contribute to healthier ecosystems, empowered communities, and a more sustainable future for all.

We hold our hands up to the First Nation communities on the leading edge of protecting and caretaking their watersheds.

Indigenous Advisors to the Indigenous Watersheds Initiative

[Kris Archie](#), [Lydia Hwitsum](#), [Lana Lowe](#), [Deana Machin](#), [Tara Marsden](#), [Gordon Sterritt](#), [Aaron Sumexheltza](#), [Mavis Underwood](#), and [Chief Roger William](#)

INTRODUCTION

Water is life. It sustains every aspect of our existence—our health, cultures, economies, and the ecosystems upon which we all depend. Watersheds and waterways are more than landscapes: they are ceremonial spaces, sites of learning, routes of travel, and places of connection. Watersheds are the places we call home, to which we have shared responsibilities.

First Nations and Indigenous communities understand these responsibilities deeply. For many Indigenous peoples in Canada and around the world, water is kin—a relationship to be cared for with distinct obligations to do so—rather than a resource to be extracted or exploited for profit.

However, through over 150 years of colonization in Canada, watersheds have experienced extensive degradation as a result of unbalanced industrial activity, rapid development, and, more recently, accelerating climate emergencies. These cumulative impacts have significantly threatened watershed security in British Columbia (BC). First Nations communities have borne a disproportionate share of these impacts, experiencing degraded water quality, loss of culturally significant waterways and resources, and heightened exposure to floods, droughts, and ecosystem decline.

The United Nations defines watershed security as “the capacity of a population to safeguard sustainable access to adequate quantities of acceptable quality water for sustaining livelihoods, human well-being, and socio-economic development; for ensuring protection against water-borne pollution and water-related disasters; and for preserving ecosystems in a climate of peace and political stability” (UN-Water, 2013). In a rapidly changing climate, ensuring that watersheds are resilient, healthy, and well cared for has never been more vital.

As rights-holders, knowledge holders, and long-term stewards of the land and water, First Nations’ leadership and wisdom are fundamental to advancing watershed security in the province. At the same time, Nations have historically had limited access to sustained, flexible funding to advance their own visions for watershed security.

IWI was a three-year, \$15-million initiative launched in 2022 from a \$30-million investment from the Province of BC dedicated to improving BC’s watershed security. IWI was created to fund and support First Nations communities in BC working to advance their visions of watershed health and security.





Chase White

IWI supported a model of watershed security rooted in long term resilience, local values, and Indigenous rights and title. The Initiative was delivered under the guidance and partnership of nine Indigenous Advisors.

The successes that have been witnessed and reported as a result of IWI's funding investments are significant. Across BC, project teams have advanced watershed restoration efforts, reconstructed salmon habitats, removed invasive species, and created new wetlands. Projects supported community employment, invested in local economies, and built skills and capacities. Youth were empowered with cultural knowledge, community connections, and mentorship opportunities. These are just a few of the many positive outcomes of this work.

Project outcomes underscore the critical role that First Nations and Indigenous leadership play in achieving watershed security. This Initiative has demonstrated that, when Nations are resourced to lead, tangible and far-reaching outcomes follow. As rights-holders and stewards with legal, cultural, and ethical responsibilities to water, First Nations communities are protecting watersheds for all future generations. Support for this work also provided a meaningful pathway to activate Canada and BC's commitments to the United Nations Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

Despite these successes, there is significantly more work to be done. IWI opened a funding pathway for work to be catalyzed, but the ongoing need remains and is growing. Sustained, well-designed investments are needed in order to carry this work forward. Without additional funding investments, communities risk losing hard-won capacity, momentum, and results.

The objective of this report is to summarize and share these impacts and help inform future funding investments. A complementary 'IWI Fund Learnings Report' will serve as a companion document and provides further details on how the Initiative was designed, structural learnings, and recommendations for how to shape future funding programs.

As staff, we are exceptionally grateful to have supported project teams throughout the duration of this Initiative and look forward to continuing to carry our learnings forward.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Over \$11.5 million granted

Over \$22 million in total requests received

49 distinct projects funded

44 First Nations and organizations Supported

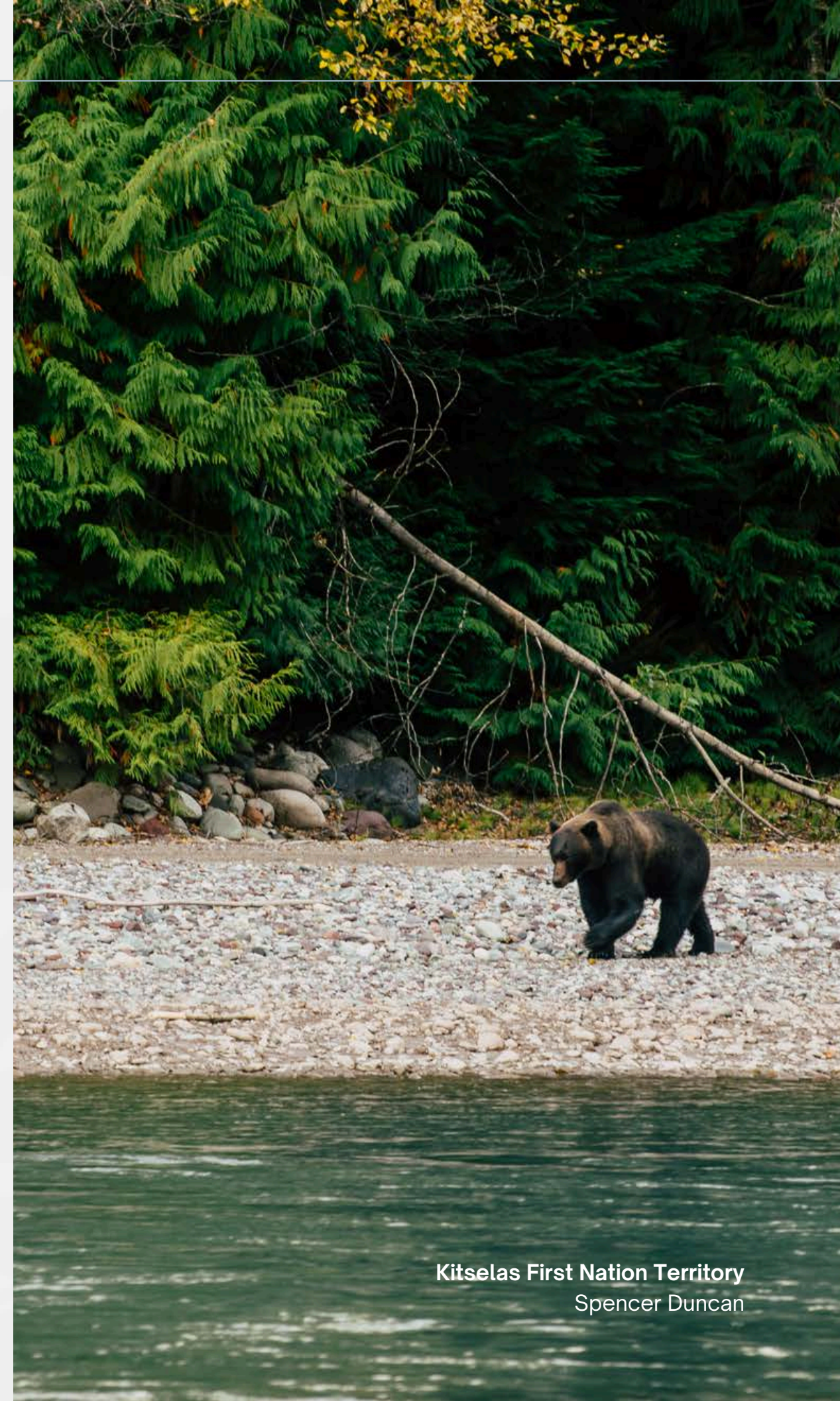
History

IWI was established in 2022 through a wider \$30 million provincial investment dedicated to improving BC’s watershed security. Half of the funding (\$15 million) was committed to supporting First Nations-led work and was administered via MakeWay Foundation in partnership with Watersheds BC. This \$15 million contribution catalyzed the creation of IWI. The other \$15 million was distributed among six non-Indigenous led environmental non-government organizations (ENGOS) to undertake restoration and watershed resilience work that were catalyzed through prior funding programs.

IWI built upon the groundwork laid by the previous provincially funded Healthy Watersheds Initiative (HWI) (2020-2021). HWI’s Indigenous Leaders Advisory Circle developed resources and recommendations to inform future funding initiatives, including a report entitled ‘Principles & Criteria for Future Funding’.

Structure of IWI

IWI was administered with the guidance and leadership of a group of nine Indigenous Advisors, who shaped all elements of fund design and delivery. These Advisors had previously participated in HWI’s Indigenous Advisory Circle. The direct involvement of Indigenous leadership and decision-making was a critical feature of IWI, ensuring that funds could be applied in alignment with community needs and priorities.



Kitseelas First Nation Territory
Spencer Duncan

Funding Rounds

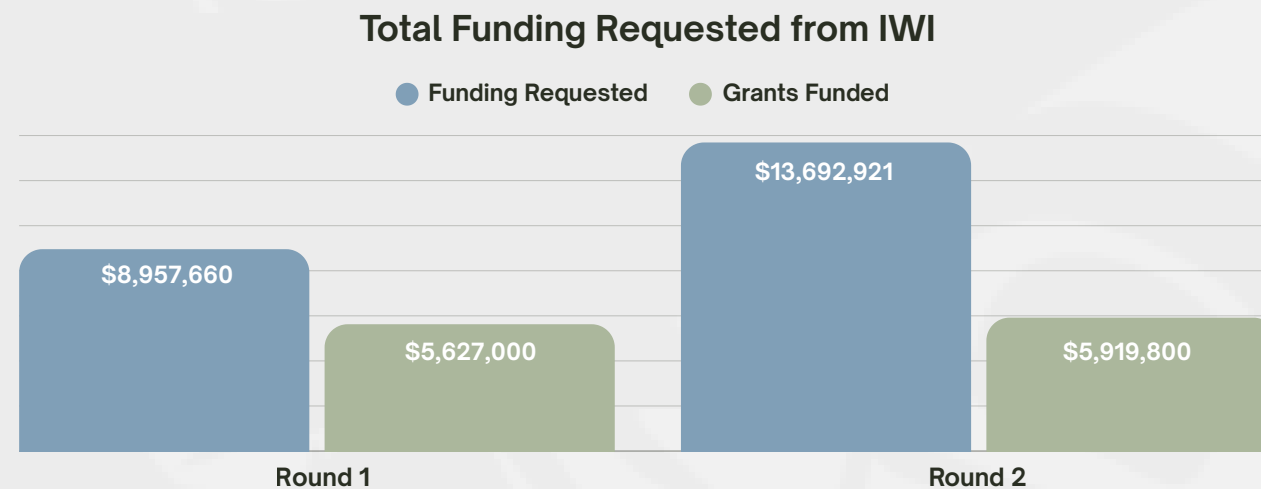
To expedite the distribution of funding at the outset of the initiative, the first call for IWI funding was limited to applications from Indigenous-led and co-led projects that had been engaged through HWI, and grants were distributed as quickly as possible.

In the second round, IWI placed emphasis on supporting new applicants and watersheds that have historically received less funding. Funding in this round was largely deployed to the north of the province and underfunded watersheds. The call for proposals in the second round involved directly contacting First Nations and First Nations-led organizations that had not received previous funding. Staff undertook outreach to Fisheries, Lands and Resources Departments; stewardship networks; and diverse First Nations leaders, reaching 469 distinct contacts. Staff developed a streamlined application form for this open call.

In total, \$12 million was spent on programming. This included \$11,546,800 in multi-year grants flowing to 49 distinct projects led by 44 Nations and First Nation-led organizations across B.C.

Across both funding rounds, demand for IWI grants far exceeded the resources available. Significant opportunities to advance important work continues to be limited by a lack of resourcing for watershed security.

Applicants were eligible to submit up to two applications with a maximum of \$300,000 each. In total, 88 applicants requested \$22.6 million, and this figure would likely have been significantly higher without application limits. In addition to the core grants, a smaller number of projects also received small communications grants to support storytelling and film work.



SUMMARY OF FUNDING PROCESSES			
	Round One	Round Two	Communication Grants
Allocated Funds	Over \$5.6 million	Over \$5.9 million	Over \$44,000
# of Funded Projects	21	28	5
Eligibility	First Nations-led projects and communities who had previously been funded through, or partnered on, the Healthy Watersheds Initiative. Included hereditary/traditional governance entities	All First Nations organizations, communities and/or governing entities in B.C. Included hereditary/traditional governance. Prioritized regions where few or no projects were supported through previous funding programs.	Existing grantee teams (Round 1 + Round 2)
Application	Expression of Interest + Budget Template	Streamlined Application Template + Budget Template	Flexible. Project descriptions + budgets accepted orally, via email or through other means at the discretion of the grantee
Decision-Making	IWI staff made granting decisions, guided from recommendations from the Healthy Watersheds Initiative	Indigenous Advisory Committee, with support from IWI staff	Indigenous Advisory Committee, with support from IWI staff
Reporting	Streamlined interim + final reports (accepted orally, online or via Word Document).		Oral, video or written report in the grantee's format of choice

Learning Together

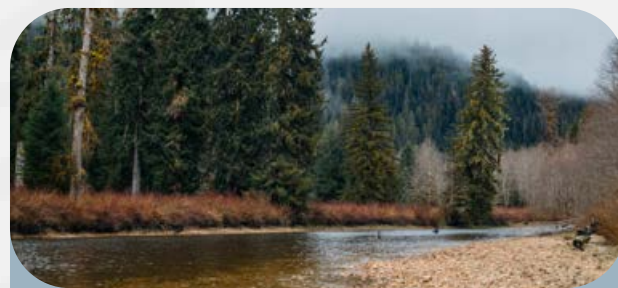
Beyond funding, IWI created spaces for project teams to learn from one another and strengthen relationships across communities. Through interactive webinars, peer gatherings, and a celebratory showcase of community-created films, IWI brought people together to share stories, lessons, and the lived experience behind their work.

Three regional in-person gatherings were held for grantees to come together, share more about their work, build relationships with other project teams, and reflect on successes and common challenges. Gatherings were held across three regional areas (on Vancouver Island, Northern BC, and Lower Mainland/Fraser) and brought together project teams working within the same regions. All gatherings included a day of peer connection and knowledge sharing, and a day of time on the land.



Three Regional Gatherings

The gatherings took place in Campbell River, Terrace, and Vancouver in 2024



Three Learning Webinars

Webinar covered project management, wildfires, & water management.

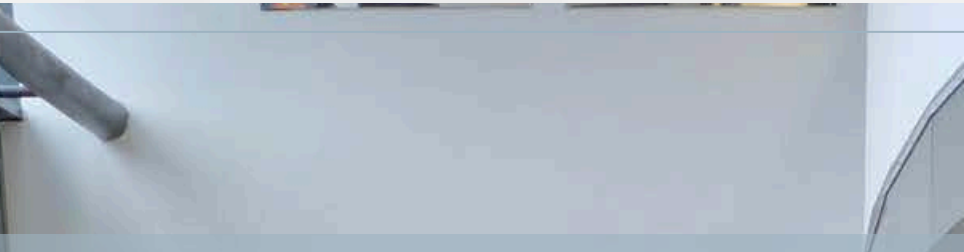


IWI Celebration Event

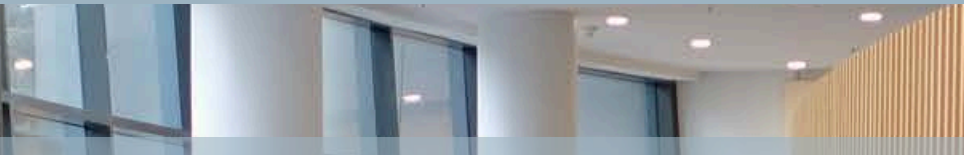
Watershed Reflections took place in February 2025 in Vancouver

Participant reflections indicated that the act of gathering with peers, particularly post COVID-19, was a value in itself. As a result of gathering, participants strengthened relationships and indicated they felt more confident in their work. The graphic recordings are included at the back of this report.

In February 2025, IWI hosted a community celebration event — ‘Watershed Reflections’ — to acknowledge the work and project outcomes. The event showcased a handful of short films developed by project teams and premiered IWI’s ‘Our Waters’ short film, which tells the story of four IWI-funded projects. Below are some of the beautiful watercolours from the Watershed Reflections attendees.



“Being with others is good medicine and hopeful.”
Gathering Participant



“I feel strong when I enter these spaces.”
Gathering Participant



“I love that this was Indigenous focused.”
Gathering Participant



FIRESIDE CHAT



Gifts from the Watershed



What Was Funded

The majority of IWI funding was granted to First Nations governments, which was inclusive of organizations with a variety of elected and hereditary structures, such as First Nation Bands, Tribal Councils, individual lands and resource departments, and House or Family groups. First Nation-led NGOs and co-led projects were also recipients of IWI funding.

Early decisions to centre geographic equity and community-defined priorities were applied through a flexible and open-ended application process. More details on Initiative design are outlined in a forthcoming companion report, the IWI Fund Learnings Report.

IWI funding supported a range of initiatives and priorities identified by applicants themselves. The diversity of work done by the 49 funded projects can be grouped among five thematic areas that were identified with input and review from the project teams. Much like elements of a watershed, the themes are interconnected and interdependent; many communities are addressing multiple thematic areas.

The nature of the projects resulted in diverse outcomes with co-benefits across funding themes. Most of the projects featured elements that centred the health of land and people, and building climate adaptation and resiliency. Further details on these impacts are the subject of this report. As Indigenous-led initiatives, all projects were also centred in upholding First Nations rights and title, affirming the community's inherent connection to the land.



WATERSHED RESTORATION & PROTECTION

Watersheds are vital to Indigenous culture, foods, and medicines. Resource extraction and climate change have profoundly impacted them and communities. Projects restore watershed health, rehabilitate waterways, and support climate adaptation, community rights, health, and safety.



FISHERIES & FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

Wild salmon and freshwater fish species are culturally significant and provide a key food source for First Nations communities. Projects include activities dedicated to caretaking of fish and their habitats, sustainable fisheries management, and accessing traditional foods and harvesting practices.



INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGES & LAND-BASED LEARNING

Water is sacred for many Indigenous Peoples. It is an essential part of Indigenous cultures, histories, and knowledges, and this kinship shapes community relationships with water. Projects include land-based learning, intergenerational knowledge sharing, and revitalizing Indigenous laws.



WATERSHED PLANNING & GOVERNANCE

Watershed planning and governance is essential to First Nations self-determination. This critical work helps inform decision-making, and helps ensure watershed resiliency. Projects include data collection, research, partnerships, strategies, and policies to sustainably manage watersheds in line with Indigenous knowledges.



WATERSHED MONITORING & ASSESSMENT

Gathering and managing data and information is necessary for First Nations sovereignty, governance, and informed decisions relating to their watersheds. Projects include activities such as collecting and analyzing water-related data and employing diverse monitoring techniques, tools, and methodologies.





Note: Project locations were estimated by IWI staff and do not necessarily represent the locations of ongoing work or project teams.

BREATHING LIFE INTO UNDRIP

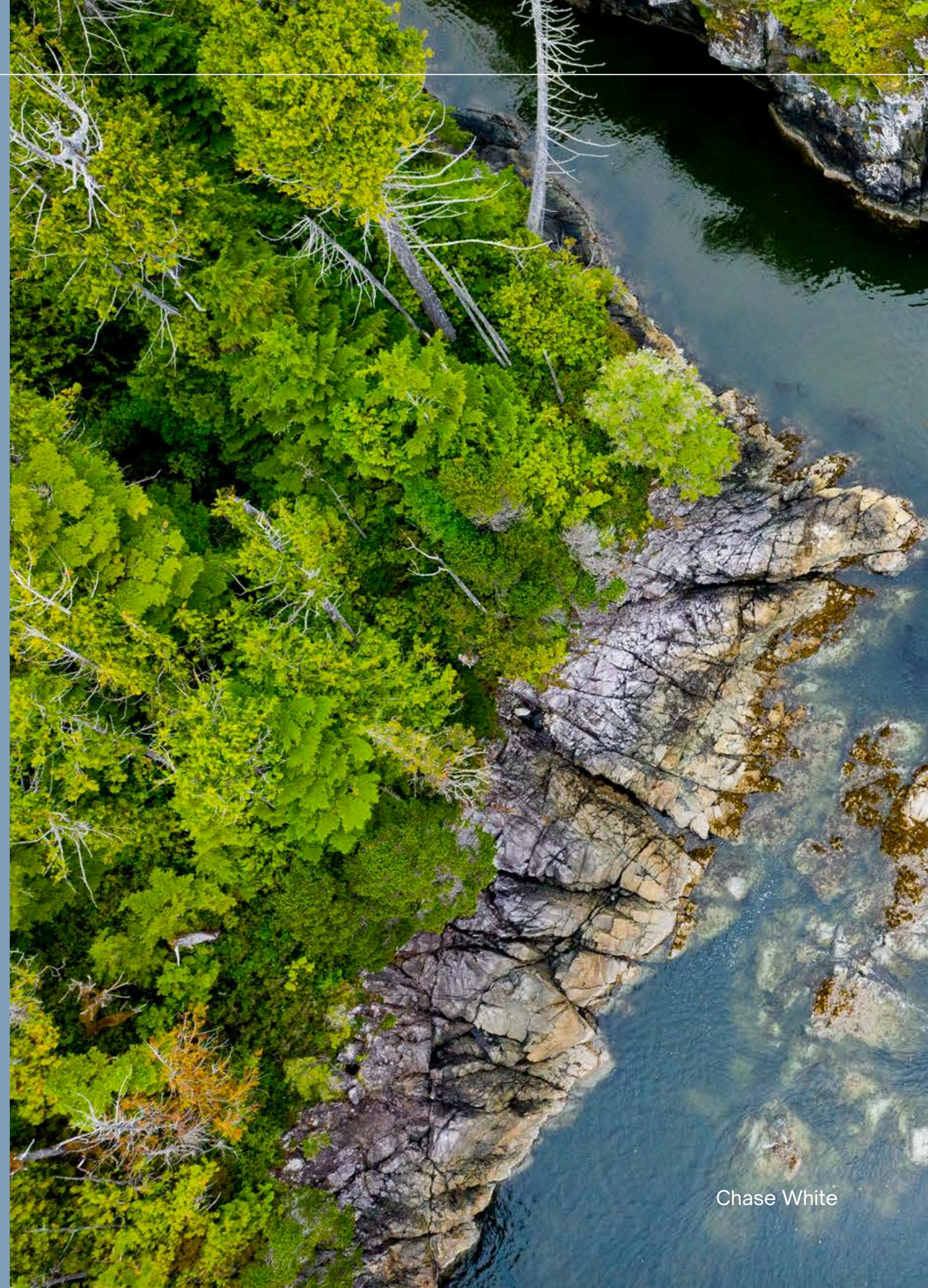
A key objective of IWI was to ensure that the Initiative upheld the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). UNDRIP is an international framework that was developed between Indigenous peoples from around the world and the member States of the United Nations. It is meant to affirm, enshrine and safeguard the rights of Indigenous peoples globally. It consists of 46 Articles outlining rights for all Indigenous peoples. The framework was adopted by the United Nations in 2007 by 144 countries; Canada was one of four countries that voted against the Declaration. This objection was withdrawn in 2016. In 2019, BC became the first province to commit to aligning all provincial laws with UNDRIP by passing the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (BC DRIPA). The Act was passed with unanimous support of all members of BC's legislature.

Accordingly, IWI sought to advance the commitments that both BC and Canada have made to implementing this framework. Moreover, MakeWay and Watersheds BC — as partners to and administrators of provincial funding — had a similar responsibility to activate UNDRIP through IWI's structure and implementation.

Grantees and Advisors were asked to share whether they felt that IWI processes and funding helped meaningfully advance UNDRIP. Reporting and feedback processes indicate that UNDRIP principles were honoured through both through the work undertaken by project teams and through the way that IWI was designed and deployed. Examples of project activation, including connections to specific UNDRIP Articles, are woven throughout this report.

“Low barrier funding models are key... [which] allowed communities to put forward their own priorities and initiatives.”
- **Indigenous Advisor**

The IWI team also sought to directly integrate UNDRIP into evaluation and decision-making structures. Articles from UNDRIP were used as reference points for grant decision making, helping ensure that the Initiative's processes were grounded in Indigenous rights. Further details related to initiative design and deployment — including successes and challenges — are found in our IWI Fund Learning companion report.



Chase White

Grantee feedback was organized around four overarching principles related to UNDRIP:

1 Indigenous Participation, Engagement, & Decision Making

- Strengthened Indigenous led stewardship and governance, enabling Nations to lead watershed governance on their own terms.
- Community members provided input to inform the project and/or the project was community-led (i.e., community members gave cultural or contextual information, provided recommendations on priority areas or important watersheds).
- Supported communities to set their own priorities, assert jurisdiction, and embed Indigenous values and laws into how land and water are managed.
- Advanced Nation-to-Nation governance principles and improving the visibility and leadership of Indigenous women in stewardship roles.
- Community members were invited to meetings to receive information about the project, including updates and findings.

2 Supporting Free, Prior and Informed Consent through Data Sovereignty

- Project teams conducted and collected their own watershed data, managed infrastructure development and led decision-making.
- Land and water data was managed by communities and applied to governance processes.
- Data was collected alongside Indigenous values, helping to improve understandings of baseline conditions.

3 Collaborations & Partnerships

- Project teams helped strengthen relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities through partnerships with all levels of government, NGO organizations, and community volunteers.
- Projects engaged in collaborative partnerships to undertake field work.

4 Respecting and Honouring Cultural & Traditional Integrity

- Over 72% of projects collected information by interviewing Elders and youth. Oral stories and cultural knowledge shared by Elders and knowledge keepers that helped inform the design and decisions of the work.
- Projects upheld Indigenous knowledge systems through community embedded learning.
- Regular knowledge sharing was embedded into grantee programming.
- Indigenous youth and community members were employed, trained, and provided with cultural skills and mentorship from cultural knowledge holders. This created a groundswell of local leadership.
- Community members were engaged to integrate Indigenous language into their work.

“When members have an active role in management and the development of sustainable management strategies for their traditional lands and waters, they take control of how those resources are utilized by themselves and others. This process allows them to be able to use and negotiate with proponents, government and other users and potential policies make them know how they govern their territory and provides them with a concrete way to ensure that they are provided with the rights in UNDRIP and BC DRIPA which includes self-governance of their lands and resources.”

As this report will further highlight, funding investments into IWI and Indigenous-led watershed work more broadly can offer meaningful pathways for funding partners to breathe life into UNDRIP commitments.

FUNDING OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS

Holistic benefits for watersheds,
communities, and the economy.



Quatsino First Nation
Ben Hazel

- 🍃 **375 JOBS SUPPORTED**, INCLUDING 144 NEWLY CREATED POSITIONS
- 🍃 FOSTERED **SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER**
- 🍃 STRENGTHENED **CLIMATE RESILIENCE**
- 🍃 **4,800 HECTARES OF WATERSHEDS RESTORED**
- 🍃 SUPPORTED **CULTURAL RESURGENCE AND REVITALIZATION WORK**
- 🍃 **STRENGTHENED DECISION-MAKING** WITHIN WATERSHEDS
- 🍃 **\$3.3 MILLION** IN ADDITIONAL PROJECT FUNDS LEVERAGED TO COMPLETE PROJECT WORK
- 🍃 IMPROVED PARTICIPANT **MENTAL HEALTH**

IWI funding helped drive significant positive outcomes across BC. Across the province, project teams have advanced watershed restoration efforts, reconstructed salmon habitats, invested in local small businesses, and built skills and capacities. Youth were empowered through mentorship, communities strengthened their connections and climate resilience was strengthened. These are just a few of the many positive outcomes of this work.

The work undertaken advanced tangible benefits not just for First Nations communities, but for all British Columbians.

The outcomes detailed in the following sections underscore the critical role that First Nations and Indigenous leadership play in achieving watershed security. When Nations are resourced to lead, tangible and far-reaching benefits follow.

These impacts are also just the beginning. The successes that grantees report provide insight into what funding helped enable between the period of 2022-2025. With continued investment, these benefits will continue to be felt and expand.

“The creek had been heavily influenced by human infrastructure and needed an updated assessment to balance the needs of the community and their drinking water, with the stream system’s need for downstream flows and habitat connectivity, particularly during periods of drought. Checking this balance in the system is needed regularly through time as conditions of our climate change, to ensure that the stream remains on a healthy trajectory and the communities can maintain a sustainable drinking water source.”

“It’s not about a marsh It’s about re-establishing peoples understanding of water and human as one.”



‘Our Waters’ An IWI Film

WATERSHED OUTCOMES

Strengthened climate resilience

Restored habitats across 58 sites

Expanded data collection to better inform resource and emergency management processes

Supported watershed governance and management processes

Improved overall decision-making within watersheds

Watershed Protection & Restoration

Aligned UNDRIP Articles

- **Article 26:** Indigenous peoples have the right to the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired.
- **Article 29:** Indigenous peoples have the right to the conservation and protection of the environment and the productive capacity of their lands or territories and resources. States shall establish and implement assistance programmes for indigenous peoples for such conservation and protection, without discrimination.
- **Article 32:** Indigenous peoples have the right to determine and develop priorities and strategies for the development or use of their lands or territories and other resources.

At the heart of many IWI-funded projects were community objectives to protect and restore watersheds. Nearly 40% of IWI grantees actively conducted restoration work, and the vast majority of grantees reported undertaking planning work for future restoration (56.41%) and/or activities that protect overall watershed health (93.48%).

Many of the activities carried out through IWI projects responded to cumulative effects and damage inherited from decades of industrial activity, infrastructure development, and colonial disruption. Damages to watersheds have been caused by forestry roads, pipelines, railways, open-pit mines, tailing ponds, and other developments that caused sedimentation, erosion, water contamination and barriers to fish passage. While most of these impacts were driven by industry, the costs of cleanup are largely covered through public dollars, and they only continue to rise. A lack of historical investment into restoration work compounds and increases the cost of restoring watershed health.

IWI projects restored ecosystems across more than 4,800 hectares and over 58 sites — revegetating riparian zones, removing invasive species, and revitalizing salmon habitats. Numerous grantees focused on addressing blocked fish passages. Another team worked to restore a former sawmill industrial site back to a natural condition, which will support birds, fish and other wildlife. Two teams removed invasive species from the local waterways and another removed landslide debris. One team focused on collecting, incubating, hatching, then releasing salmon eggs into the watershed.

Protecting safe, clean water was addressed in several projects focused on removing contaminants or preserving habitats. This included removing garbage, removing creosote and hydrocarbon contaminated soils, and adding marsh to help with water filtration and carbon sequestration. This also included the restoration of the cultural and biological features of the waters. Water sampling was central to determine if old sources of drinking water were still safe and several projects undertook ongoing monitoring to identify and resolve new issues arising.

“Through the funding provided by [the Indigenous Watersheds Initiative], significant Pacific salmon habitat restoration has been completed on [two creeks]. Tree planting, fish passage restoration, sediment source mapping, and invasive plant management were completed.”

Through IWI, communities addressed the legacies of decommissioned industrial sites and orphaned mines, contamination, as well as illegal or damaged roads. In some areas, invasive species and fragmented riparian zones have stressed local ecosystems, while climate change is intensifying these impacts through shifting water flows and temperature extremes. Additionally, colonial policies — such as the forced removal of families from their lands and the suppression of Indigenous stewardship practices — created a disconnection between people and place. Restoration efforts are therefore not only ecological, but also cultural acts of renewal as communities work to heal the lands and waters for which they have long cared for.

TYPES OF RESTORATION UNDERTAKEN

Building wetlands and associated habitat	Restoring riparian areas
Removal of invasive species	Restoring an ancient village
Restoring ditch and stream edges	Restoring salmon fence counting deck and cabins
Repairing streams and access trails	Removing rocks and soil debris
Decommissioning of an unauthorized road	Revegetating a marsh estuary habitat
Restoring beaver dams and creating dam analogues	

SOURCES OF WATERSHED DAMAGES

Watershed Impact	Details
Obstructive infrastructure	Pipelines, forestry roads, and rail infrastructure causing sedimentation, slides, and barriers to fish passage
Resource development & extraction	Forestry, aquaculture, mining, urban expansion, and logging roads leading to erosion, loss of habitat, and/or altered flows
Decommissioned lands/infrastructure	Abandoned or decommissioned industrial sites and roads, orphaned mines, and sawmills resulting in contaminated soils or waters
Invasive species/populations	Current and past logging or agriculture operations changing or fragmenting riparian ecosystems, altering migratory access, removal of native plant species, allowing for invasive species to be established (flora or fauna)
Climate change impacts	Increases in severity and frequency of both floods and drought, shifts in volume and timing of water flow, and increases to water temperature can all affect salmon migration and mortality, wetland water retention, and contribute to watershed conditions that raise wildfire risk
Overharvesting	Overharvesting of salmon and overfishing in general resulting in decline of fish population
Colonial practices & policies	Colonial policies (e.g., the Indian Act and residential schools) resulting in displacement of families from the land and suppressions of traditional laws and stewardship practices

Fort Nelson First Nation
Ryan Dickie



Strengthening and Expanding Watershed Monitoring

Aligned UNDRIP Articles

- **Article 32:** Indigenous peoples have the right to determine and develop priorities and strategies for the development or use of their lands or territories and other resources.

Monitoring watershed conditions and having access to watershed data are critical activities that inform and shape what happens within a watershed. Watershed data provides communities with insights into the overall state of watershed health, drinking water quality, habitat conditions, species abundance, and much more. This knowledge helps inform decision-making around what happens within lands and waters, and when.

Water monitoring and research work was undertaken by 93.48% of the IWI projects. Active monitoring enables communities to collect, manage, and use water data in ways that directly align with their governance priorities. This work helps communities understand current watershed conditions, inform future restoration and risk mitigation strategies, and ensure the long-term health of their waters. When asked how their monitoring and research work was being applied within their communities, most grant recipients reported that they were establishing baselines and conducting ongoing monitoring to manage environmental impacts. Examples included assessing salmon spawning and abundance, monitoring forestry impacts on streams and fish habitats, identifying risks to salmon and trout populations, and tracking water quality, temperature, and toxicity in local lakes.

Importantly, the data generated through IWI funding was used to inform real-time decision-making—helping communities and government partners respond quickly to environmental changes such as rising stream temperatures that affect fish health. Access to this data has become even more critical in the face of climate change, as ecosystem conditions rapidly change. For instance, data and monitoring efforts are helping inform emergency responses to wildfire events.

Projects also expanded the overall scale of monitoring work across BC. One grant recipient noted their project was collecting data on fish and plant composition in waterways that have never been monitored before, while others focused on collecting water quality, water flows, and shoreline erosion data to assess the health of the waters. Several projects also identified that they were monitoring salmon populations or upgrading existing monitoring equipment and stations.

“All of these stations are in small streams and lakes. Water Survey of Canada and BC focus on large systems only, but small systems experience more immediate and more severe impacts of high temperatures and drought conditions than large systems.”

The data and insights collected through monitoring span a variety of critical areas and species. This information helps strengthen understandings of species resilience, health and abundance. The types of data collected was often guided by community priorities and specific watershed needs. Moreover, much of this data is helping with planning for future restoration. More than half of the project teams (56%) said that they are conducting or plan to conduct restoration work.

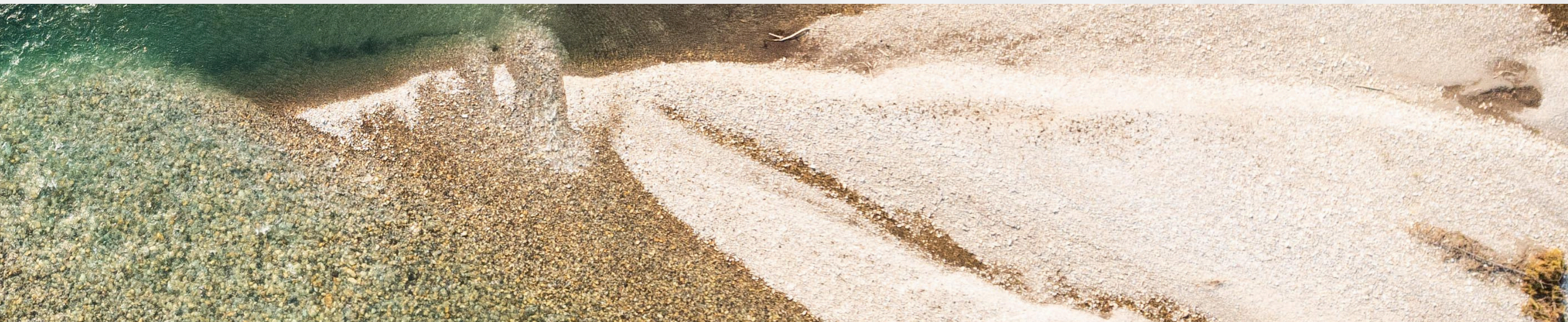
As a developing area, grantees noted that impacts from fire and construction have influenced priority monitoring areas. “We’re seeing that areas which have intact forests have more fish, and places that aren’t, don’t...those sorts of patterns would help feed into potential restoration [plans],” shared one grantee. Grantees said that they would require continued funding and strong partnerships to do this well.



Data and monitoring are also ultimately helping to uphold Indigenous self-determination and rights, by equipping Nations with data that are applied to a variety of decision-making contexts. Oftentimes, data collected by industry is proprietary, and government data sources can be incomplete, or not account for Indigenous values. Access to relevant data therefore helps Nations make values-aligned and independent decisions within their territories.

"Understanding the history of these streams allows the crew to see the streams in a more holistic way, not only in the current time. Here is one that I can put into words. When the crew arrived on site, they no longer go straight to taking measurements as they would have in the beginning. They stop and observe first. This is something they have learned from the elders. In doing this, they notice and record changes that they would not have seen before. They reflect on the system as a whole, not only the pool the instruments are in."

Summary of Project Monitoring Work	
Monitoring Application	What is Being Monitored
Sustainable Fisheries and Food Harvest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presence, health and abundance of fish species • Water flow and quality • Fish passage • Presence of keystone foods and medicines
Drinking Water Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water quality (turbidity, pH, temperature, etc.) • Presence of heavy metals, hydrocarbons, nutrients • Algae monitoring • State of water table
Habitat and Species Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presence of flora, fish, and wildlife species • Water quality and temperature • Vegetation establishment • Presence of invasive species • Foreshore mapping
Climate Health and Impacts of Climate Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carbon sequestration • Vegetation inventory • Glacial input to creeks • Shoreline erosion and forest cover • Impacts of nature-based solutions
Future Restoration Efforts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water flow and quality • Species abundance • Presence of invasive species • Damages to forests and foreshores • Fish barriers and passage



STORIES FROM THE WATERSHED

Wuikinuxv Lake Restoration Project

The Wuikinuxv Nation has been pursuing a restoration vision that not only restores the physical health of wild salmon populations, but also restores the community's rights and responsibilities as salmon stewards.

The dual legacies of residential schools and industrial logging have had lasting impacts on the health of Wuikinuxv lands, waters, and people. "Places were 'left' when families moved off the territory to be closer to [their] kids in residential schools," shared a project staff member. "The clearing of people from lands meant industrial extraction could come in..."

The decades of logging activities that followed resulted in significant negative impacts to salmon-bearing streams and rivers. Compounding this, decades of fisheries mismanagement further contributed to the decline of wild salmon populations that Wuikinuxv peoples have long depended on. In Wuikinuxv Lake, log booms left by the forestry industry created artificial habitats for predator species, contributing to an overpopulation of seals and reduced oxygen levels in this critical salmon and trout-bearing lake.



Wuikinuxv staff, Elders, and youth set out not just to clean up the lake, but also to revitalize connections to waterways and traditional stewardship practices. Culture camps have become a central part of Wuikinuxv's approach to restoration.

While crews removed logs from the water, youth participated in hands-on learning experiences—visiting salmon spawning streams, learning harvesting practices, and spending time on the land and water. The seal harvest, in particular, became an important teaching opportunity - providing an opportunity for youth to learn directly about this traditional food source in a hands-on way. “We had language teachers alongside the culture camps, which was great...We [leveraged] funding to also have staff from the health department as well as youth from the school district,” shared one staff member. “Seeing youth change their social media profile pictures to pictures of the lake after being up there was especially heartwarming. They were so excited.”

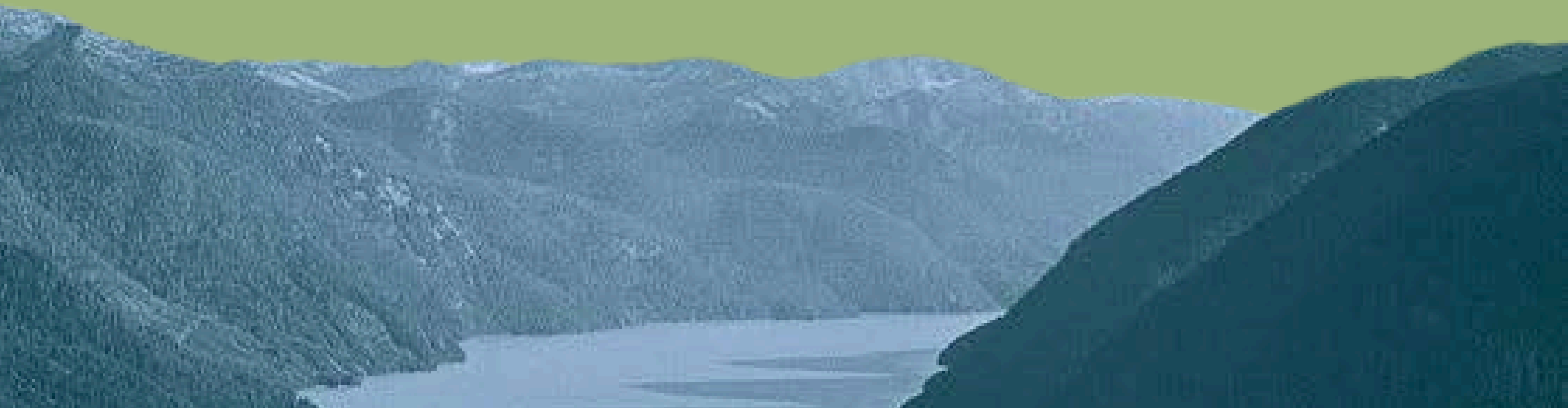
Camps have now been happening for two-years in a row - focusing on everything from traditional medicines to language, song and dance. “[We] explored how these cultural aspects connect us to our surrounding lands and waters.” said staff. Collaborations across the Nation have also enabled staff to offer hunting camps and community harvest trips throughout the year.

The materials removed from the lake are also being put to good use to minimize waste. Logs have been repurposed as firewood for the community and will be used at the community mill. The harvest of seals has also helped stock community freezers while supporting the transfer of knowledge about traditional foods.

Infrastructure investments have played a critical enabling role. Last year, the Nation outfitted its community boat with a new, more reliable motor - enabling safer, more frequent access to remote reaches of their territory.

Since starting the Lake restoration project, crews are already seeing a decrease in seal populations, and the data they are collecting on juvenile salmon smolts is helping to better understand how productive the lake is for current and future sockeye salmon populations. Monitoring has also expanded to include trout populations, enabling even more community participation. This work will continue to guide ongoing restoration efforts.

“By using this funding to help families reconnect to their watersheds that they have rights and responsibilities to, we're planting the seeds for those long-term responsibilities to be reactivated and acted upon—and that's going to have long-lasting effects.”



Advancing Watershed Planning and Governance

Aligned UNDRIP Articles

- **Article 19:** Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, as well as to maintain and develop their own indigenous decision-making institutions.
- **Article 32:** Indigenous peoples have the right to determine and develop priorities and strategies for the development or use of their lands or territories and other resources.

Watersheds play vital roles in the lives of all British Columbians. Decades of industrial damage and poor management practices, combined with a changing climate, have bolstered the need for watersheds to be managed and stewarded differently in order to ensure watershed security and resilience for all. Accordingly, ecosystem management policies and overall governance approaches need to shift and adapt. Work undertaken through IWI is playing a significant role in helping improve how watersheds are managed and stewarded — be it through ensuring Indigenous knowledge and values inform and drive management, through collaborative governance tables, or through developing watershed plans. When Nations can fully engage in decision-making processes and make culturally grounded decisions, this helps improve watershed management approaches that benefit all British Columbians.

Eighty-five percent of projects reported that their work directly contributed to various policy and planning efforts. Planning efforts helped guide the management of fisheries, land-use and water allocations. Several projects informed municipal and provincial policy development, and others strengthened co-governance models and climate resilience strategies.

One grant recipient spoke about how their project “developed a methodology for the Nation that proponents will have to implement in watersheds before loggings activities are allowed (i.e., future forestry development in these key watersheds will now need to address risk to fish and fish habitat in the context of climate adaptation and mitigation).”

“Data from this program is shared with all the Nations in the Nechako watershed and used in numerous decision-making processes.”

Other grant recipients explained that their projects’ monitoring work was informing the establishment and refinement of improved forestry standards (e.g. through riparian management, sediment/erosion control) or are being integrated into a protection plan. In other cases, research and data collected is helping guide where mining can reasonably occur within a watershed, without adversely impacting salmon and other species.

The following table summarizes the ways in which project research and monitoring contributed to planning and policy.

WATERSHED PLANNING AND POLICY APPLICATIONS	
Planning and Policy Area	Examples
Watershed and aquatic restoration	Prioritizing restoration areas, juvenile salmon recovery, erosion control, fish habitat monitoring
Fisheries management	Informing weir operations, DFO collaborations, chinook and sockeye recovery, internal fisheries planning
Land use and forestry planning	Informing land management standards, guidelines for resource development, forestry erosion/sediment controls
Governance and Indigenous legal orders	Using Gitksan laws to guide territorial stewardship,, development of Indigenous land protocols, BC DRIPA implementation
Water allocation	Streamflow monitoring, municipal water decisions, post-weir conditions
Municipal or provincial policy influence	Municipal bylaws, provincial water legislation, environmental regulators
Strategic planning and decision tools	Strategic plan development, decision-making tools, guiding elected council actions
Adapting to climate change and future conditions	Monitoring glacial retreat, created resilience frameworks, documenting potential climate-fisheries overlap
Co-governance and shared management processes	Incorporating data into leadership in governance processes and plans (e.g. siwłkʷ Responsibility Action Plan, Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nation ‘Salmon Park’ implementation)
Biodiversity and land stewardship	Planning for cultural and prescribed fires, informing beaver-led restoration, off-site cattle watering policies, revegetation with native plants



Quatsino First Nation
Ben Hazel

Work undertaken is also helping restore traditional laws and knowledge around land and water stewardship. Some grant recipients further explained that their projects are based on and guided by their Nation's traditional governance practices; one grantee shared that the ancestral governance office within the Nation advised on the initiative on how territories were governed historically and traditionally. Another shared that Hereditary house groups were involved in the direct planning and delivery of the initiative. Others shared that the project followed Hereditary laws in gaining approvals to proceed with their plans.

Aligned UNDRIP Articles

- **Article 20:** Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and develop their political, economic and social systems or institutions, to be secure in the enjoyment of their own means of subsistence and development, and to engage freely in all their traditional and other economic activities.

One grant recipient shared that there was “pride and excitement about looking after lands and preserving abundance of tlunam (elk), muwach (deer), and salmon in the territories.” Another explained, “Community members were pleased to find that there were lots of resources in these traditional harvesting areas which many had abandoned due to the perception of loss. Providing them with an understanding of the entire area's abundance allows them to ensure sustainable harvest. Many members stated they would be going back to these areas with plans to manage and govern them as per cultural protocols to ensure what is present is sustainably managed by the Nation.”

“We're seeing more and more communities standing up for their water laws and their own management of resources within their territories.”

In sum, the work undertaken by grantees is helping shape better decision-making and stewardship within watersheds and helping to ensure those decisions are aligned with Indigenous values and laws.

“In Fall 2024, coho salmon accessed spawning habitat within the higher reaches of [the creek] for the first time in many years! Removing beaver dams and installing a fish-friendly culvert (part of a different restoration project) increased access to spawning and rearing habitat in [the creek].”





Improving Fisheries Management and the Abundance of Food Fish

Efforts to promote more sustainable fisheries was a particular area of focus amongst projects. Wild salmon and freshwater fish species, such as trout, are culturally significant and are key food sources for communities. Projects undertook activities related to the monitoring and caretaking of fish and their habitats, with an eye to ensuring that fisheries can be sustainably managed. This involved collecting and mapping fish habitat, assessing stock abundance, and applying this data to fisheries management decisions.

“[Two] Creeks historically produced the largest amount of food fish for the Nation. Now in most years [one creek] supports less than 1,000 spawners, in some years it is almost nil. [This creek] which traditionally was the largest producer of sockeye is now decreasing relative to [another notable waterway], which is still doing well because it still has glaciers remaining. These are predicted to be gone within 50 years. Right now, we’re coming off of several years of really good sockeye returns and that can falsely lead people to believe the systems are doing fine. However, with the work we are doing it’s clear that the whole system is on borrowed time, and we need to start preparing now for climate change impacts that seem to be getting noticeably worse annually and are predicted to continue for decades if not longer.”

Multiple restoration and monitoring projects also specifically targeted improving conditions for salmon and other fish species. Project teams established strategic hydrometric stations to monitor flow conditions during fish migration and spawning periods, and restoration efforts directly helped enable the return of wild salmon populations.

“Fall 2024, coho salmon accessed spawning habitat within the higher reaches of [the creek] for the first time in many years! Removing beaver dams and installing a fish-friendly culvert (part of a different restoration project) increased access to spawning and rearing habitat in [the creek].”



Protecting and Mitigating Against Climate Change

Nearly all of the projects that IWI supported could be described as helping to improve climate resilience. IWI-funded projects advanced climate change mitigation and adaptation through diverse, community-led strategies grounded in both scientific and Indigenous knowledge systems. Additionally, adapting to changing climate conditions and responding to these impacts was a theme embedded through most, if not all, projects. Many projects focused on collecting environmental data to establish ecological baseline conditions, which in turn allows teams to monitor subsequent changes and intervene when necessary. This included collecting data related to warming indicators, habitat conditions, fish survival, and identifying areas most vulnerable to climate impacts such as drought. In a changing climate, this data guides decisions such as managing fish harvest and designing adaptive water infrastructure.

“Monitoring and restoring prompted our team to consider the evolving needs of the stream and its inhabitants in response to climate change and drought. As dry months approached, habitat connectivity became crucial, particularly due to the significant presence of beavers and the disconnection of the stream from the River. We learned firsthand the vital role of beavers (Ts’imilix) as natural architects in adapting streams to drought conditions. While we couldn’t maintain continuous habitat connectivity year-round, we established strong relationships with Ts’imilix and gained insights into the importance of preserving deep pools and extensive wetted areas to protect wildlife during droughts.”

Projects also undertook restoration to protect communities and species from the negative impacts of climate change. For example, project teams implemented nature-based infrastructure (e.g., weirs, fishways, berms, and tidal marsh terraces) to stabilize ecosystems and support species affected by changing water conditions. These interventions help protect against drought, erosion, and flooding while maintaining salmon and trout populations. Others revitalized clam gardens — an ancestral form of Indigenous aquaculture that supports food security, biodiversity, and shoreline stabilization. Another grantee explained that they built a tidal marsh terrace with native plants to stabilize shorelines and installed raised berms to stop water from reaching inland areas.

Activating and documenting Indigenous knowledge and traditional practices was another way that project teams sought to tackle the effects of climate change.

Maintaining place-based knowledge, stories, and harvesting methods ensures that sustainable stewardship practices continue for future generations, while also strengthening local food systems and reducing reliance on external resources.

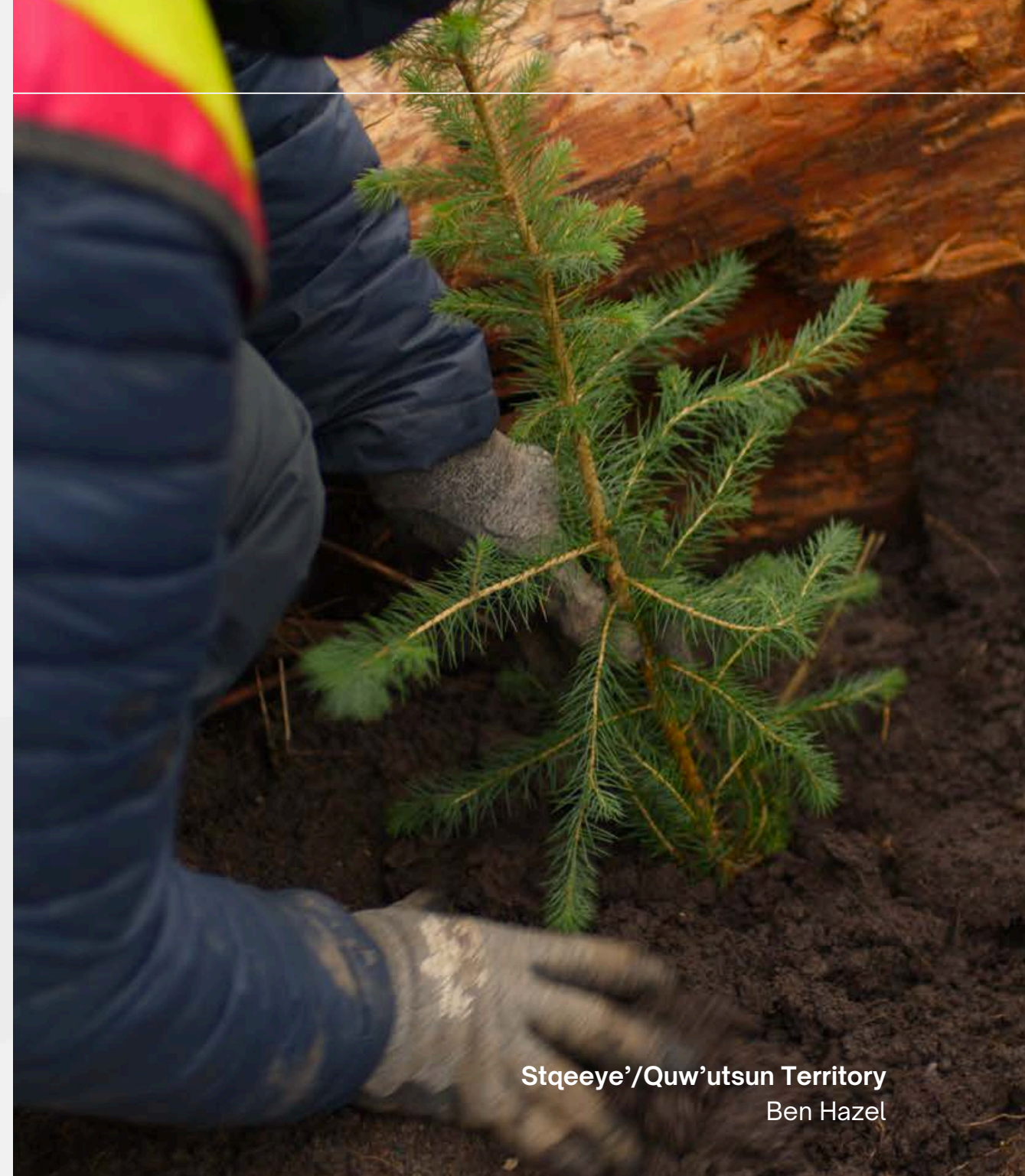


Hesquiaht First Nation
Ben Hazel



Kitsumkalum Territory
Julia Bendtsen

“Encouraging traditional practices and harvesting methods contributes to climate change resilience by prioritizing sustainable resource use and reducing dependency on store-bought, processed foods. Increased presence on the land allowed for direct observations of climate impacts, contributing to local knowledge about adapting to changes.”



Stqeeye’/Quw’utsun Territory
Ben Hazel

“The creek has been heavily influenced by human infrastructure and needed an updated assessment to balance the needs of the community and their drinking water, with the stream system’s need for downstream flows and habitat connectivity, particularly during periods of drought. Checking this balance in the system is needed regularly through time as conditions of our climate change, to ensure that the stream remains on a healthy trajectory and the communities can maintain a sustainable drinking water source.”



Stqeeye'/Quw'utsun Territory
Ben Hazel

COMMUNITY OUTCOMES

- 🌲 IWI helped build **community wealth** — creating jobs and keeping dollars invested locally
- 🌲 **Training and mentorship** provided is helping decrease the need for external consultants, keeping capacities and skills within communities
- 🌲 **Food security** was strengthened through the transmission of **traditional hunting and harvest practices** and increased access to traditional foods
- 🌲 **Indigenous values, laws, and knowledge systems** were embedded into nearly all projects — advancing cultural resurgence and revitalization efforts
- 🌲 Relationships were strengthened between **Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities** through collaborative partnerships and volunteer opportunities
- 🌲 Strengthened **physical, social, emotional, and mental health** outcomes amongst participants
- 🌲 **Intergenerational knowledge transfer** was enabled between Elders, knowledge holders and youth

Building Community Wealth

IWI funded projects helped build community wealth across the province. This wealth building took various forms. IWI project teams supported local jobs and redistributed wealth within their communities, ensuring that economic benefits from this funding were activated close to home. Funding investments created meaningful and well-paying jobs, supported local businesses, and offered community members training and skill strengthening opportunities. Community wealth was not just built in a monetary sense. It was also expressed more fully in-terms of benefits to cultures and languages; the ability to harvest medicines and food; the well-being of plants and animal kin; individual and community well-being, and much more.

“Success is defined in the environment that we live in. Our teachings tell us that if the land and waters are sick so will we be. Hish-uk-ish Ts' walk is a core principle for the people. It means that all is one and everything is connected. Unfortunately, [this] First Nation's Territory is sick and it having an effect on [the] First Nations people. [This] First Nation is one of the most heavily displaced communities in Canada. The benefits that have been delivered through the [project] gave economic opportunity to [the] people doing the work, [which] is a priority to all Hesquiaht people. IWI allowed [the] First Nation the financial capacity to work with its partners to bring economic opportunity, capacity building, training, communication, and teachings to the community on IR#5 and to the larger community of First Nations people living off reserve. [The project] is a catalyst for a restoration economy in [this] Territory that [the community] strives to make a reality...‘Why can't we create an economy around giving back to the land instead of always taking from? What we need to do is pay the...people to fix the territory and build an economy around that.’ The [project] has achieved the vision of [the Nation's] ancestral ways and is a stepping stone to realizing [the Nation's] vision of a thriving restoration economy in the future.”

Creating Meaningful Work

In total, funding from IWI supported 375 jobs, with over 144 positions (38%) created as a result of the funding investment into IWI. The majority of these roles (277) were filled by local community members and project teams were encouraged to provide staff with good paying, living wages through the application process.

Moreover, numerous people employed through this funding highlighted that their positions were more than just jobs; they constituted meaningful career paths with holistic benefits by centering dignity, equity, and sustainability. Multiple staff employed through these funds experienced positive mental and physical health outcomes. Further details are discussed later on in this report.

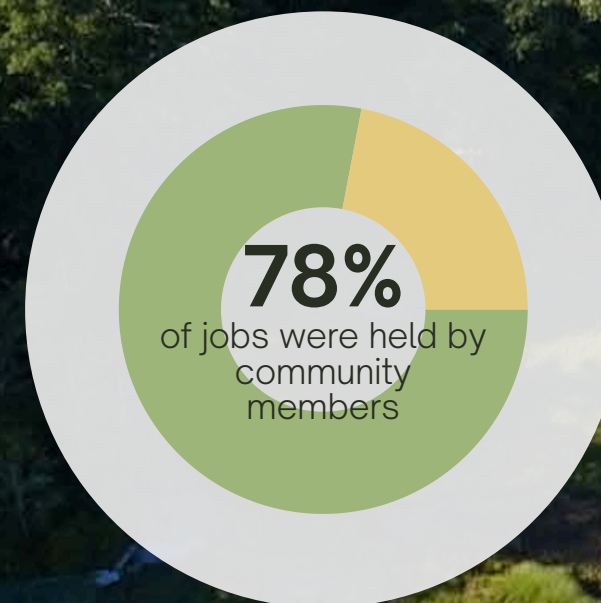
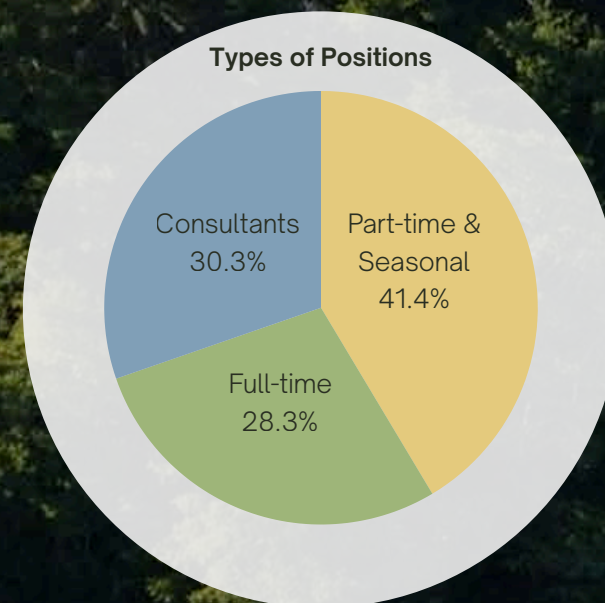
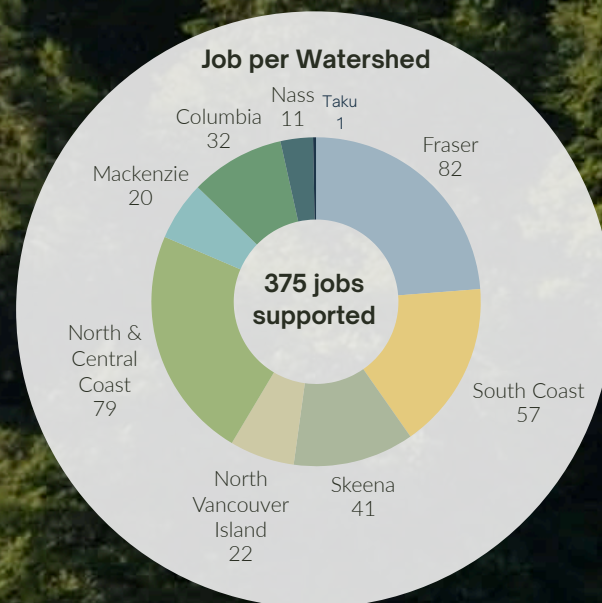
Notably, over 40% of IWI funded project teams said they would not be able to sustain project-based positions once IWI funding ends, and another 8% indicated that the jobs created through programming will need to shift due to a lack of funding.

Project teams also reflected how the uncertain nature of short-term funding programs negatively impacts community members and overall employment outcomes. Ongoing funding is needed to transition short-term, project-based positions to long-term employment and job security. Unstable employment can contribute to feelings of discouragement and negative mental health outcomes. In many scenarios, community members will avoid applying for jobs altogether. These impacts underpin the urgent need for additional investments in order to sustain and build upon the momentum created.

Keeping Investments in Local Watershed Economies

In addition to providing good, meaningful jobs, IWI funded projects spent their dollars locally and leveraged additional resources, creating an economic spin-off effect that redistributed funding into local small businesses and services.

Across 37 projects at the time of reporting, projects raised an additional \$3.3 million dollars on top of their IWI grants, bolstering this provincial investment through a 1:0.42 match (42%).



Eighty-three percent of projects also hired local contractors or sourced local materials from small businesses. These findings indicate that when funding is invested into communities, it often stays there and drives hyper-local benefits.

Project investments spanned a wide range of services, from revegetation experts, field biologists, and engineers to local transportation companies, filmmakers, and knowledge holders. Several projects reported that all their contractors, consultants, and staff were local.

Grant recipients procured native seeds, trees, and plants from nearby nurseries, sourced field gear and solar equipment from local suppliers, and obtained wood, mulch, and rock from companies in the area. Caterers, artists, and printers were hired to provide food and event supplies. One project alone purchased 10,000 native wetland plants and \$15,000 worth of native seeds — both sourced locally.

EXAMPLES OF LOCAL INVESTMENTS

Expert consultants in various fields	Knowledge holders
Transportation companies	Education consultant
Scientists and laboratories	Mapping / GIS services
Construction companies	Advertising company
Logging, gravel companies and nurseries	Local lodging
Filmmakers and videographers	Catering company



Cluxewe Estuary/Kwakiutl First Nation
Ben Hazel

“There are no permanent settler communities in the area, so the spin-off effects remained very local. This put a lot of money into the pockets of local people. There isn’t often much work during the winter, but we’ve been able to keep people working. Healthier, wealthier Indigenous Peoples mean healthier, wealthier land.”

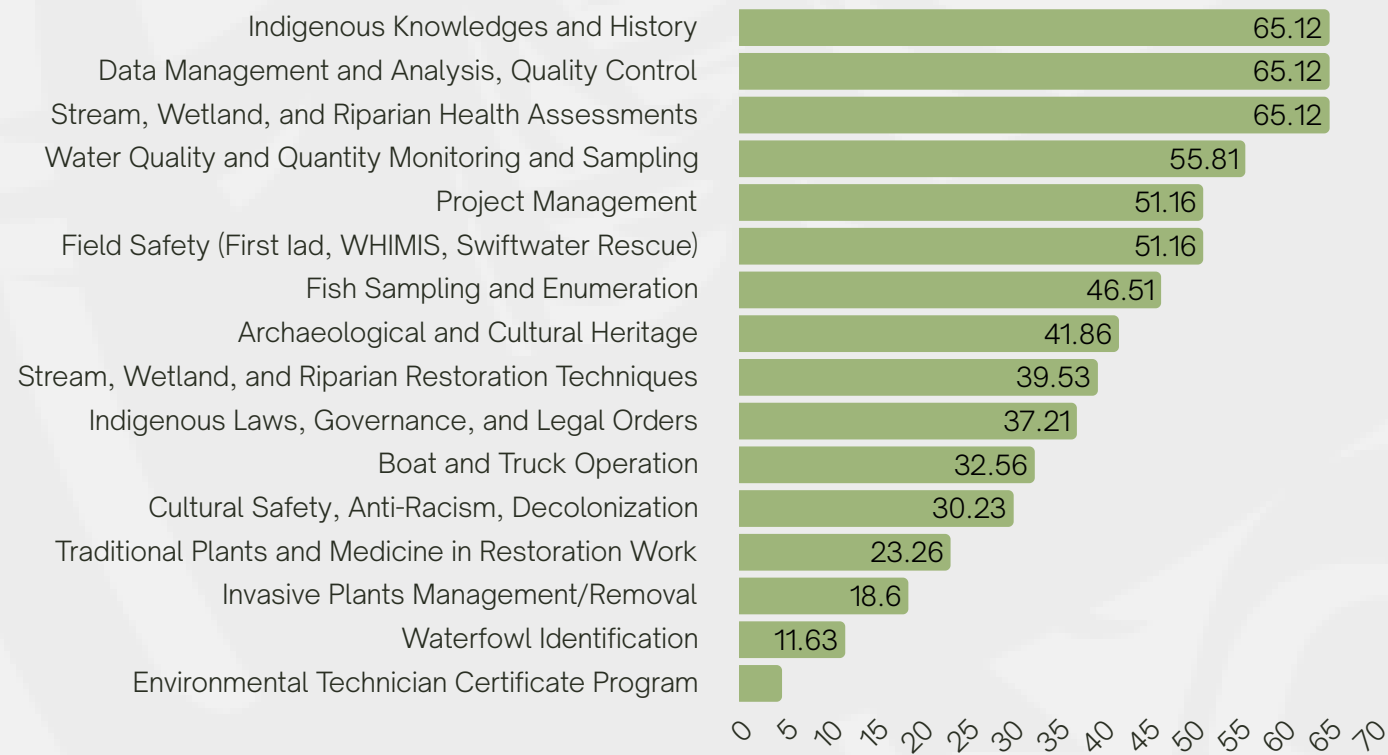
Investing in Skills, Training and Mentorship

Aligned UNDRIP Articles

- **Article 21:** Indigenous peoples have the right, without discrimination, to the improvement of their economic and social conditions, including in the areas of education, employment, vocational training and retraining, housing, sanitation, health and social security.

Funding investments also provided various training and skills development opportunities for project teams and community members, ensuring that ongoing capacity was built to continue the work and that it remains within communities. Training included meaningful mentorship opportunities that helped build skills, confidence, and enthusiasm for watershed stewardship amongst youth.

“Youth and membership were trained to map and understand the cultural and environmental health of the territory and were able to identify streams and waterways that have been impacted by industry in the territory. They also learned how to map cultural heritage sites, impacted streams and rivers, and became more knowledgeable about the land and water that sustains us”



Training Provided by Project Teams

“The return of mentees as next year’s mentors and the growth of staff into new positions and roles has been a gift to get to witness through this work and will continue to benefit our communities in many ways.”

Training and skills development spanned a variety of areas — ranging from technical skills and western science training, to land-based skills and traditional knowledge transfer. The training and skillsets needed to undertake watershed work are also increasingly dynamic. The duties associated with watershed stewardship can be both technical and policy facing, involving project and financial management as well as overseeing personnel. Many positions are required to engage with decision-makers, interpret regulations/policies, and liaise with the public. Consistent, hands-on training and mentorships are therefore critical.

“We have noticed that the employees see the land and waterways and water crossing differently than they used to. Due to their training, they are constantly looking for impacts by industry to water and the broader environment.”

Project teams cited that, as a result of their ongoing work, there was no longer the need to fly in expensive consultants. Keeping employment within community also allowed for initiatives to better integrate traditional ways and knowledge into their projects.

“We want to continue this work! Short-term funding doesn’t align with this traditional knowledge approach to restoration and monitoring. We want long-term funding to follow through; to monitor the spawning grounds in the springtime, monitor the lake year after year. We want to continue activating community members to be out on the land and on the water.”



Upper Fraser Fisheries Conservation Alliance (UFFCA)
Ben Hazel

Upholding Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Laws and Values

Aligned UNDRIP Articles

- **Article 13:** Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.
- **Article 19:** Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, as well as to maintain and develop their own indigenous decision-making institutions.
- **Article 24:** Indigenous peoples have the right to their traditional medicines and to maintain their health practices, including the conservation of their vital medicinal plants, animals and minerals...

Indigenous communities have fundamental and inherent rights to practice and uphold their knowledge systems, laws, and cultures. These systems, laws, and practices not only help guide communities in how to be well with the natural world and each other, but they also play a fundamental role in knowing oneself. Nearly all grant recipients (94.74%) indicated that the knowledge systems and languages of their communities played a part in their project.

Colonization in Canada and the implementation of assimilationist policies such as the Potlatch Ban and the residential school system sought to eradicate Indigenous legal, cultural, and spiritual knowledges, and connections to Land. The creation of the ‘Indian Reserve’ system controlled Indigenous peoples’ access to their own territories — forcing communities off their traditional territories and into government-established tracts (“reserves”). This ongoing history has resulted in profoundly negative impacts for communities and ecosystems. Efforts that revitalize and uphold Indigenous laws, knowledge, and values-systems are thus critical to upholding the fundamental rights of Indigenous peoples, Canada’s commitments to meaningful reconciliation, and to restoring ecosystem balance.

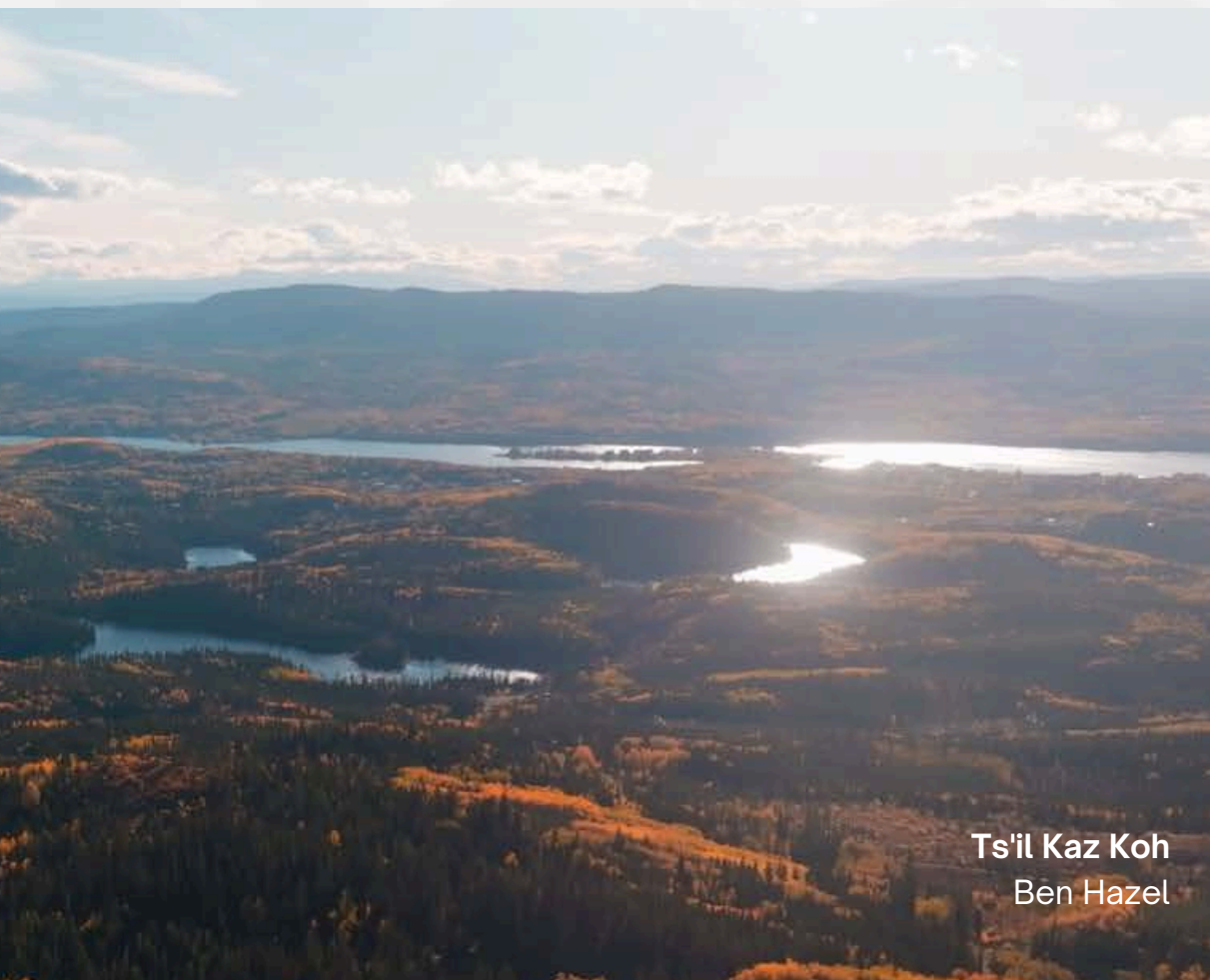
IWI projects integrated Indigenous languages, oral histories, and traditional teachings to foster stewardship, identity, re-connection to Land/Water, and cultural continuity. Grant recipients frequently reported how their projects and priorities were designed or carried out as a result of Indigenous knowledge and values, or as a means of upholding their Nation’s laws. For instance, grant recipients explained that Chiefs, matriarchs, Elders, knowledge holders, and elected leaders all provided guidance on priorities and the need to address specific concerns (e.g., overharvesting salmon). “Guidance from hereditary leaders provided the permissions and directions needed to implement the project in a successful and respectful manner,” shared one grantee.

Teachings such as ‘respect for all life’ were cited as being applied through the entirety of one project – whether through handling fish, stewarding lands, or interacting with community members. Other teams spoke about integrating Indigenous knowledge and values into data collection. One grantee shared that this practice was applied by ensuring that all parts of the animal/fish were used when data samples were taken, for instance.





Ts'il Kaz Koh First Nation
Ben Hazel



Ts'il Kaz Koh
Ben Hazel

Traditional knowledge systems were also upheld through ensuring that community voices shaped project design and implementation. Community members such as Elders, knowledge keepers, Hereditary leaders, family groups, youth, and wider membership were engaged in meetings, interviews, and planning processes to shape project priorities and activities. Specific sites were selected due to areas of interest among Nations, and the knowledge and stories community members shared also helped identify the priorities and species of concern (e.g., western painted turtle). This practice helped ensure that project teams were delivering work that was directly relevant and reflective of community priorities.

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND LAWS	
Advancing Indigenous Laws	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honouring and adhering to the Nation's governance system, emphasizing relationships with the land and taking direction from Hereditary Chiefs and the traditional governance and practices. • Ensuring watershed work in the territory follows standards set by the Nations. • Identifying and mapping culturally sensitive areas that are culturally protected and disturbances would violate the Nation's laws. • Creating a history of water rights resources rooted in the local Nation and territory. • Working with the Nation's legal team to catalogue and securely store archival materials for the community.
Advancing Indigenous Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with language holders to include Indigenous language and Indigenous species names in the project. Engaging community members in the project to identify and select sites and share their interests (i.e., drinking water, traditional foods). • Adding project data to community databases where all community members have access.

Revitalizing Indigenous Languages

The integration of Indigenous languages into project work was another outcome. Across BC, all Indigenous languages are critically endangered, and some languages have fewer than two fluent speakers remaining. Some project teams therefore made intentional efforts to ensure language was incorporated into their work or were guided by the knowledge systems contained within their language.

Two project teams integrated Indigenous languages through the inclusion of language and traditional place names on site signage. For instance, in one project, artists worked with Elders to create an art piece to use on signage that would be installed along a creek trail as part of a wider restoration effort. In another project, knowledge keepers and language speakers shared traditional place names for signs that were installed in three waterways.

“Our language is used as a way to give you a mental map of our Territories and watersheds. You can tell exactly where we are at any given time and place in a watershed. The different names of our micro settlements located in the watersheds also tell of the past, present and future forest garden sites. The understanding of the rhythm of all beings is crucial in our language.”

Spencer Duncan

Advancing Food Sovereignty

Aligned UNDRIP Articles

- **Article 25:** Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard.
- **Article 24:** Indigenous peoples have the right to their traditional medicines and to maintain their health practices, including the conservation of their vital medicinal plants, animals and minerals...

The health of land and water is foundational to the health of Indigenous food systems, which rely on watershed ecosystems for sustenance and support. Watersheds sustain traditional foods and medicines such as salmon, berries, and moose, which go on to sustain communities both physically and spiritually. Through their efforts to steward, protect, and restore watersheds, project teams helped advance food security and sovereignty within their communities.

IWI initiatives protected culturally and spiritually important species, restored food harvesting areas, and promoted more sustainable food systems. Projects enhanced salmon runs, preserved native plant seeds and medicines, and revived traditional harvesting knowledge.

One important way that teams are restoring and strengthening healthy food systems is through traditional hunting and harvesting. Multiple project teams taught sustainable harvesting practices in accordance with their Nation's laws and cultural values to ensure sustainable access for future generations. Participants also gained invaluable knowledge, such as where to harvest food seasonally and when. One grant recipient noted how their project paired teachers with learners to ensure the continuity of this knowledge. Another project provided information to the community on where and how much fish was available to harvest.

These and other on-the-land activities were also ways that projects helped increase access and community confidence around ancestral harvesting, hunting, and fishing grounds. For instance, one grant recipient shared that project staff were able to identify several harvesting grounds that their ancestors used and were able to go back to those sites to harvest medicines and foods. This is just one example of how project teams are actively advancing cultural resurgence.

Collectively, these efforts are helping ensure that communities and future generations have access to healthy, traditional food sources.

“Many community members harvest different species of fish as part of their cultural practices, and they harvest different plant species for traditional medicines, ceremonies, and foods. Being able to provide community members information on what species is located where and at what abundance will allow for members to be able to access the species they require for traditional harvests but armed with an understanding of the overall stocks in the area will ensure sustainable harvest and sustainable management of resources for the future.”

“Restoring fish values here and removing barriers to migration for adult coho and resident trout species supports locals’ ability to fish here and utilize the water source for ongoing garden and hydroponics initiatives within the village.”



Tsilhqot'in Territory
Julia Bendtsen

Weaving Community, Social, and Health Outcomes

Aligned UNDRIP Articles

- **Article 19:** Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, as well as to maintain and develop their own indigenous decision-making institutions.

IWI funded project teams demonstrated that when initiatives are rooted in cultural values, relationships, and community priorities, their impacts extend far beyond project deliverables. By ensuring strong community engagement and placing intergenerational knowledge transfer at the center, project teams ultimately ensured that the work undertaken was meaningful and durable. Staff who engaged in the work also reported important social, personal and health benefits—including strengthened social bonds, enhanced sense of purpose, and improved overall well-being—which further reinforced their commitment to the initiatives. Together, these elements not only enhanced the quality of the work but help secure the long-term durability of the projects themselves.

Nourishing Community Connections & Relationships

IWI projects undertook extensive engagement within their communities, making sure that community voices shaped project design and implementation. Community members expressed increased connections and interest in land and water work after hearing about the work that project teams were doing.

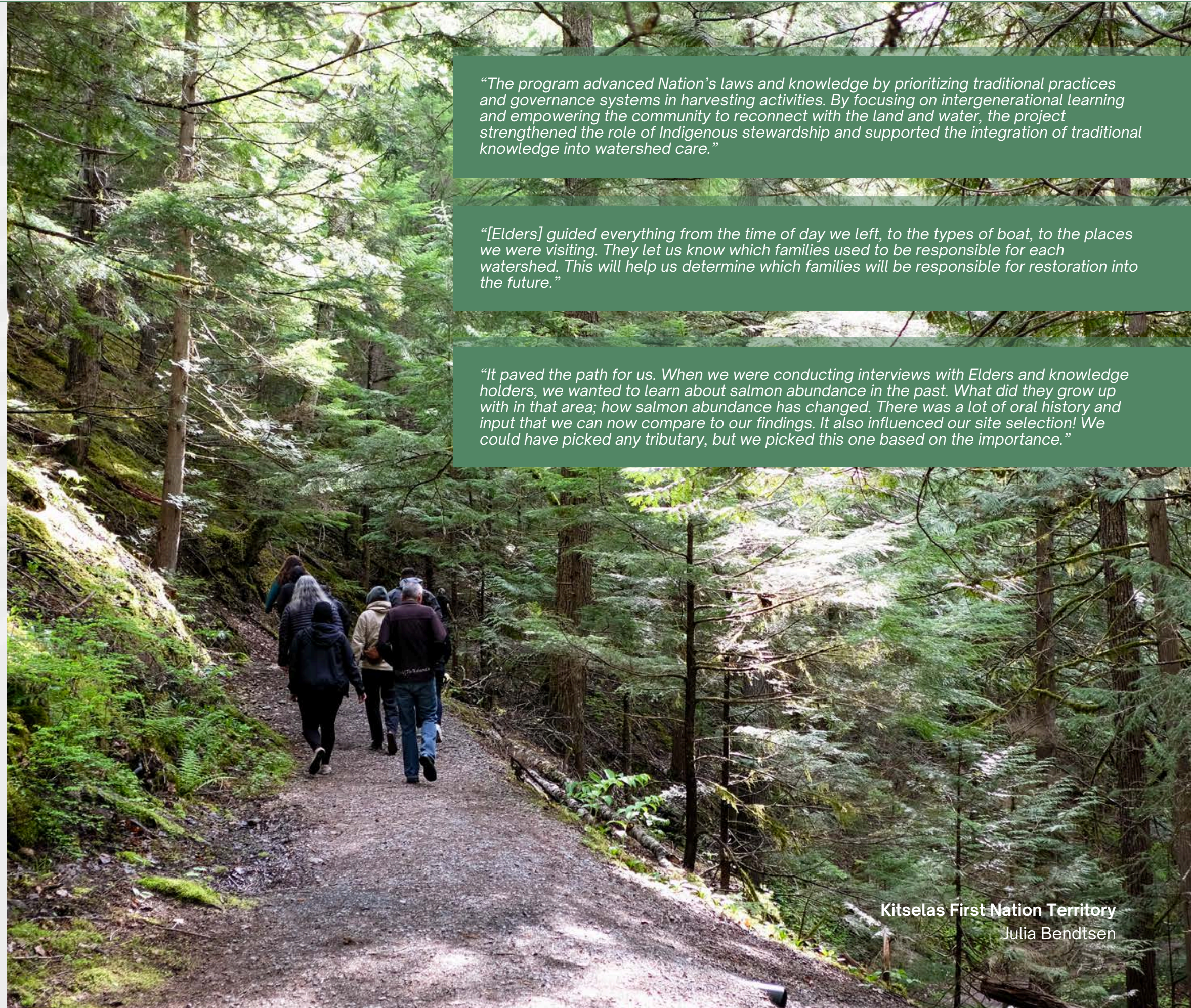
Projects not only ensured that their own community's priorities shaped the work undertaken, but project work also helped strengthen and improve relationships with the rest of the public and external partners.

Relationship and partnership building occurred between Nations and with non-Nation partners, such as with BC Parks, contractors, as well as with universities, colleges, and local school districts. Grant recipients talked about extensive planning with partners; signing memorandum of agreements (MOAs); establishing shared interests; and creating, strengthening, and sustaining relationships. Building strong and trusting relationships are critical to moving this work and the wider work of advancing meaningful reconciliation, forward.





Kitseelas First Nation Territory
Julia Bendtsen



“The program advanced Nation’s laws and knowledge by prioritizing traditional practices and governance systems in harvesting activities. By focusing on intergenerational learning and empowering the community to reconnect with the land and water, the project strengthened the role of Indigenous stewardship and supported the integration of traditional knowledge into watershed care.”

“[Elders] guided everything from the time of day we left, to the types of boat, to the places we were visiting. They let us know which families used to be responsible for each watershed. This will help us determine which families will be responsible for restoration into the future.”

“It paved the path for us. When we were conducting interviews with Elders and knowledge holders, we wanted to learn about salmon abundance in the past. What did they grow up with in that area; how salmon abundance has changed. There was a lot of oral history and input that we can now compare to our findings. It also influenced our site selection! We could have picked any tributary, but we picked this one based on the importance.”

Kitseelas First Nation Territory
Julia Bendtsen



Quw'utsun Tribes
Cheyenne Williams

Intergenerational Learning and Leadership

Empowering future generations of community leaders and watershed stewards was a common thread across IWI-funded projects. Multiple teams highlighted the important role youth played in this work, citing that funding helped foster future watershed stewards and champions by providing young people with critical knowledge and skills. The meaningful engagement of youth not only helped foster connections to land, water, and culture — but also helps with project the durability.

One project shared that technicians and biologists mentored youth during several days of training. In other cases, critical cultural knowledge and history was transmitted by building intergenerational connections between youth and Elders, and pairing knowledge holders with learners to share traditional harvest and stewardship knowledge. Many project teams catalyzed opportunities for youth to spend summers on the land and water — learning about the intersection of waters and culture — which fostered their connection with the watershed.

“Two groups [of] youth were taken out [on the land] and taught how to make medicines ... They learned about spawning streams, berry picking, [and did] lots of swimming. The one seal we harvested was during a camp, and they got to try it, which was so exciting! Many Elders have also been brought out on the land to explore the territory ... We’ve been able to build up our knowledge and experience out on the land (the whole restoration crew) ... IWI funding was integral to getting our restoration program off the ground.”

Engaging youth not only provided meaningful training and cultural learning opportunities, but it also helped mobilize youth as future stewardship leaders through inspiring interest in watershed stewardship work. For two other grantees, youth participants were supported in becoming paid staff of the initiative.

Many grantees shared feedback and stories of positive individual impacts as a result of engaging in project work. Participants described experiencing personal and interpersonal growth while spending time on the watershed or through taking part in project activities.

“Other tangible successes or changes can be observed through the growth of the youth and mentors involved in this project. The return of mentees as next year’s mentors and the growth of staff into new positions and roles has been a gift to get to witness through this work and will continue to benefit our communities in many ways.”

Improved Emotional, Physical, and Spiritual Health

Aligned UNDRIP Articles

- **Article 24.2:** Indigenous individuals have an equal right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. States shall take the necessary steps with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of this right.
- **Article 25:** Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard.

Being outside, working alongside others to steward and care for lands and waters fosters a great sense of personal healing and grounding. Numerous project teams highlighted the health and wellness benefits of the work they undertook. One grant recipient shared about the healing and recovery of guardians involved in their work.

“Two full-time guardians are now in determined sobriety and building/supporting their families and children in healthy ways. Their recovery journey in this project is/was witnessed by their families and communities and will [be] a huge influence on their close friends and relatives, especially [for those] who are still in struggle ... the new guardians’ mental health and rehabilitation [came] with future motivation of hope and pride during the watershed restoration project in their homeland.”

Other personal impacts included the presence of more positive relationships and partnerships, increased skills and knowledge among community members, as well as intergenerational learning, mentorship, and connections built amongst youth, Elders, knowledge holders and learners.

Through IWI project work, several First Nations Elders and youth reconnected with their ancestral territories; in one case, several Elders who had not “touched the land and water since they were children” visited a restored village site in their watershed. Experiences such as this can greatly contribute to personal and community wellbeing journeys. Grantees also reflected on the positive impacts of having youth and Elders spend time together. Numerous studies re-affirm the health and wellness benefits across all age groups that arise from a sense of social connectedness.

“When the land is healthy and the Nations are stewarding it, that actually impacts community and individual well-being.”



Lheidli T'enneh First Nation
Chelton Van Geloven

FUNDING FUTURE WORK

- ☀ There has been an **80% drop in public funding** for watershed work
- ☀ **Demands** for resourcing **outscales available funding**
- ☀ **Additional investments are needed** in order to secure project durability and continue to drive impacts
- ☀ **Staffing is a core funding need** - more funding for watershed work will enable job security in this sector
- ☀ **Flexible funding processes** were a key strength of IWI and helped enable project-driven impact

The diverse achievements of IWI funded project teams highlight how Indigenous-led watershed security work delivers strong, multi-faceted outcomes. The \$15 million provincial investment that established IWI also helped unlock additional resources that advanced work across all corners of the province. Critically, the flexible nature of IWI funds proved essential for meeting real-time needs and ensuring teams could respond to the day-to-day realities of watershed work.

IWI's flexible approach was an important design strength that was highlighted by grantees and Advisors. In other words, the way that IWI funding was deployed was an important enabling factor for project teams. Limitations and restrictions enforced in many traditional funding programs can prevent grantees from undertaking the work needed to foster durability and meaningful outcomes. Unwillingness to make modest investments into expenses such as capital/infrastructure costs can also severely limit project success, or force staff to spend valuable time seeking other funds, rather than implementing work on-the-ground. IWI grantees demonstrated that even a relatively modest provincial investment can yield substantial value and impact.

We know that the scale of funding needed to continue this work is significant and increasing. Delaying action and investment significantly drives up the financial, ecological, and social costs of repair. Early, proactive measures to safeguard watershed security significantly reduce long-term expenditures. The following sections summarize how project teams deployed their funds, offering valuable insights for future funding initiatives.



Spencer Duncan



Project Costs

Grantees were invited to apply for the resources that they needed, and eligible expense categories were flexible. Teams were further encouraged to budget for living wages, compensation for Elders/knowledge holders, and costs associated with ceremonies and cultural protocols, where needed. IWI staff trusted that project teams would apply for what they needed to effectively undertake work.

- Project budgets ranged from **\$10,000 to \$1.6 million per project**
- **Maximum IWI contribution was \$400,000**
- The **average cost of a project was \$324,939.72** (median of \$285,544)
- The **average IWI funding contribution was \$184,740.49** (median of \$203,652)
- **Staffing** was the most common and costly expense

Staffing Costs

Staffing costs were the most common and costly expense, accounting for roughly a third of all project spending. Staffing was the largest spending area overall. Staff costs averaged \$107,000 per project, with IWI covering about 70% of those costs; the remaining 30% was covered through funding leveraged by project teams. On average, for every \$1 of provincial investment into staffing, project teams brought an additional \$0.43 (1:0.43 match).

Many projects used their funds to create new local jobs and employ community members. However, without sustained, multi-year investments, newly created jobs are at risk of being lost and retention is a significant challenge.

Restoration Costs

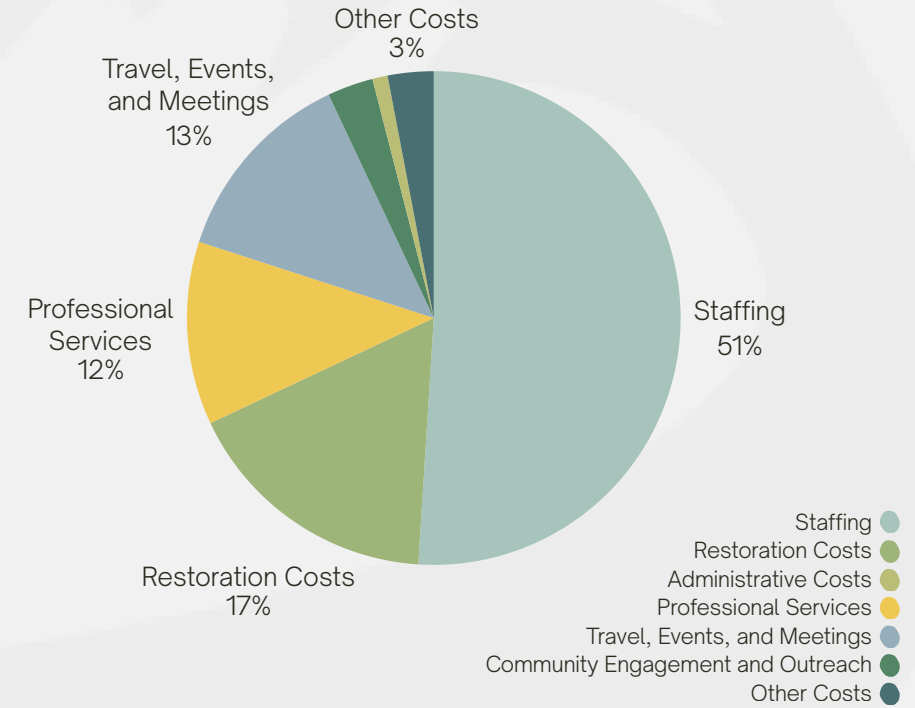
Restoration expenses were the second highest spending area. Projects invested heavily in on-the-ground restoration (\$2.5 million total), with an average per project cost of \$93,827.10. Restoration costs included costs associated with scientific equipment, purchase of vehicles, clothing and gear, as well as other materials. Spending on professional services (\$2.9 million total) was closely associated with restoration costs — accounting for the hiring of biologists, engineers, and restoration specialists.

Despite the scale of many of the projects, administration and outreach costs were modest, averaging under \$20,000 and \$9,500 per project, respectively. There was an emphasis on direct environmental and employment outcomes, even as projects managed the complex logistics of community engagement, reporting, and coordination.

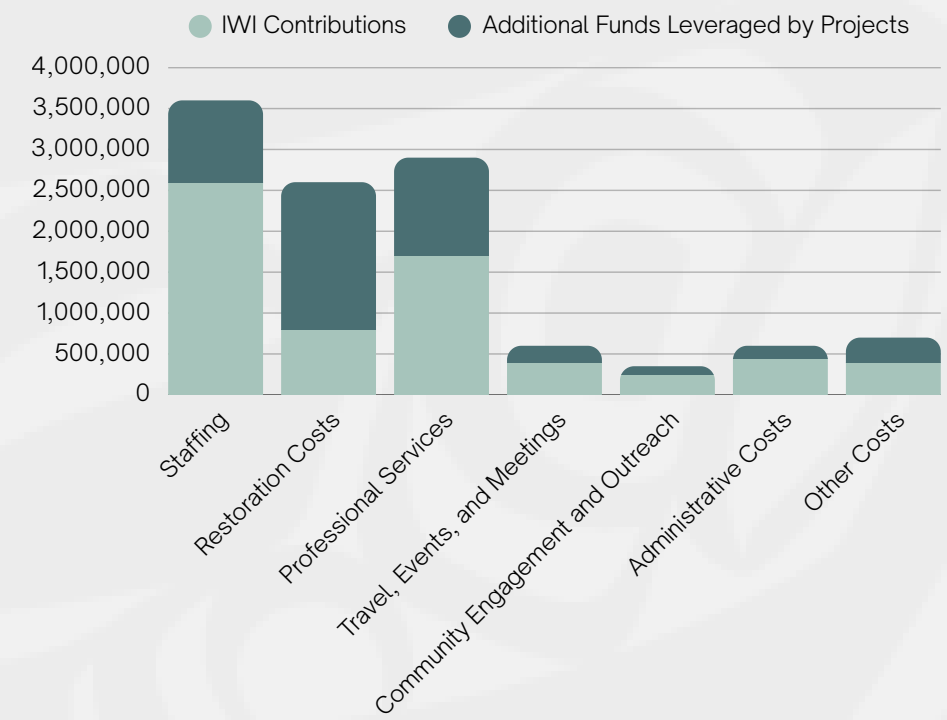
Infrastructure and Capital Costs

Infrastructure and capital purchase costs, while relatively limited, were an important budget area. Projects were permitted to apply for capital costs to a maximum of 20% of their total project budget. Feedback from project teams indicated that this was an important expenses area that is often restricted in public and private funding programs. Capital expenses — such as the purchase of a boat — were critical to enabling many project teams to safely access their watersheds. Many watershed reaches can only be accessed via boat, proper vehicles, or flights. Without budgets available for these areas, much of the work undertaken would have been inaccessible.

Funding Allocation by Expense Category



Approximate Breakdown of Leveraged Funds



Challenges Experienced by Project Teams

The work undertaken by project teams was not without challenges. Funding and cost pressures were a significant and reoccurring theme. The short-term nature of many funding programs makes it difficult for project teams to plan for and sustain what is inherently long-term work.

“We have experienced significant impacts from the overall increase in construction and fuel costs in 2022-2023. The general increases in cost have led to slowed restoration progress as original budget estimates and acquired funding are no longer sufficient to complete the project.”

“A challenge with the project has been the revegetation cost. Revegetation is a critical component of the project to improve the health of the wetland systems and aid invasive plant management efforts. Investing in revegetation is a priority; however, the cost was greater than initially budgeted.”

Additionally, decades of industrial damages have compounded into significant restoration needs. The accelerating impacts of climate change, coupled with modern regulatory frameworks and the increased cost of living more broadly, are further driving up costs. For example, more than one project experienced inflating costs due to delayed permitting and regulatory approvals. Project teams cited the irony of restoration work being held to the same regulatory standards as industrial activities, which present far more ecological risk. Preventing watershed damage in the first place — whether through watershed planning, co-governance, or protection — is significantly more cost-effective than the cost of repairing damages later.

“The profound impacts of colonialism on the community necessitate a holistic, culturally safe model for engagement. Implementing such a framework requires navigating existing legislative and societal systems, posing ongoing challenges.”

“Short term funding makes it challenging to plan into the future. 2.5 years has been a big improvement over single-year funding opportunities, but it still makes it difficult to develop plans that serve long-term objectives. These watersheds require protection over the long term.”



Fort Nelson First Nation
Ryan Dickie



At the individual project level, grant recipients reported a range of challenges throughout their projects, summarized below. These included logistical, environmental, financial, and systemic barriers:

Equipment & Transportation: Issues with broken or inadequate equipment, and difficulty accessing sites during winter due to harsh conditions.

Staffing: Hiring delays, coordination issues, staff turnover, and retention challenges.

Climate: Drought, flooding, and wildfires caused delays and damaged watersheds.

COVID-19: A 2023 outbreak in a field crew limited community participation in sampling activities.

Rural Context: Scarce office space on reserve and high costs accessing remote sites.

Cost Pressures: Rising fuel, construction, and revegetation costs exceeding budgets.

Collaboration Barriers: Challenges working with landowners, BC Parks, and under colonial legislation; lack of authority for guardians; limited partner capacity.

Sociopolitical & Regulatory Delays: Federal election and shifting regulations caused project delays.

Short-Term Funding: Lack of multi-year funding hindered long-term planning.

Community Loss: Loss of Elders and knowledge holders.

Technology Delays: Slow development of digital tools.

Epistemic Racism: Industry dismissal of oral knowledge.

Recommendations for Funding Future Work

Investments from the Indigenous Watersheds Initiative (IWI) helped enable transformational work that benefits First Nations communities and all British Columbians. This funding marked the first multi-year, provincial investment in watershed planning, stewardship, and recovery that has been seen in a generation. At the time of establishment, it was also one of the few public funds of this scale where First Nations leaders drove the funding direction and decisions.

Being in genuine relationship with water is fundamental to being a good caretaker — yet this relational understanding is largely absent from dominant government and industry approaches to water stewardship. Many Indigenous communities, by contrast, see water as kin. As a result, investments grounded in this relational approach achieve not only watershed security outcomes, but also positive impacts for people, employment, health, and future generations.

The need to invest in watershed security is only growing. In 2021, at the onset of IWI, BC experienced catastrophic flooding that cost homeowners, business, and communities \$675 million in insured damages¹. As we write this report in 2025, unprecedented flooding has unfortunately reoccurred, and the cost of responding continues to compound.

In this era of global climate crises, reconciliation, and the need to transition towards more sustainable economies, First Nations' visions for their watersheds — driven by Indigenous worldviews — provide a pathway forward. The leadership of project teams offers BC a roadmap to watershed recovery and security. Continued funding and collaboration across various jurisdictions, industries, and sectors is required to sustain this momentum.

The following recommendations build on the work of previous funding programs and have been developed based on reflections from grantees, Advisors, and collaborators in this work.

1

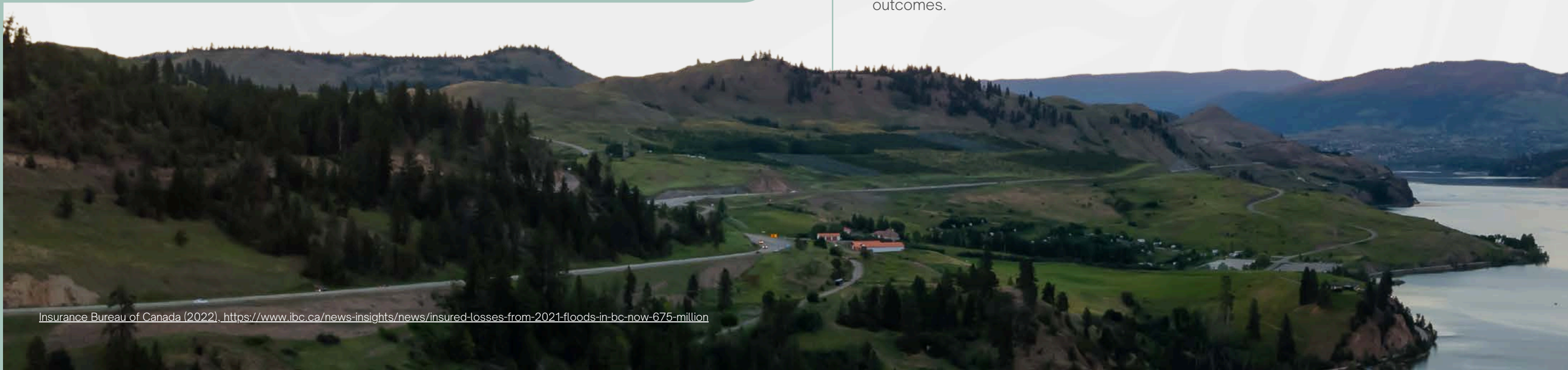
Scale and stabilize long-term funding for watershed security in BC.

Watersheds across BC have suffered greatly as a result of decades of compounding industrial damages, chronic underfunding, and now, climate change. First Nations communities experience the weight of this most severely, with impacts to all areas of community and personal well-being.

As climate change accelerates, the material cost of restoration is only increasing. Upfront, stable funding is required in order to address past damages and futureproof watersheds and watershed communities from impacts. Moreover, proactive investments into watershed restoration, planning, management, and communities offers opportunities to achieve more systemic solutions rather than short-term fixes. Investments into the restoration economy offer multi-faceted benefits for people and the environment.

Investments through IWI played a critical catalytic role — enabling First Nations and their partners to initiate watershed security work, build early momentum, and demonstrate the value of First Nations-led stewardship and governance.

However, without a sustained, long-term continuum of funding, this momentum is at risk of being lost. Short-term, start/stop funding cycles undermine the ability to achieve durable watershed outcomes, particularly for work that is inherently long-term, relational, and place-based. Project teams consistently reported how short-term funding cycles undermine their ability to retain skilled staff, maintain institutional knowledge, and build the organizational and technical capacity required to advance complex watershed initiatives. Uncertainty about future funding also diverts limited time and energy toward securing new resources rather than delivering on-the-ground outcomes.



Longer-term and coordinated investments are essential to achieving the full benefits of provincial investment into IWI. The challenges that watershed ecosystems are experiencing did not develop overnight, nor will the solutions. Long-term funds that endure beyond short-term electoral or political cycles, are required.

The BC Watershed Security Fund is one existing, co-developed and co-managed funding structure that offers an opportunity to learn from and build upon the experiences of IWI. The Province of BC initially invested \$100 million into this permanently endowed fund — however, this renders only approximately \$5 million available for granting each year. Since 2022, there has been an 80% drop in total provincial funding allocated towards local watershed priorities. There is an urgent need to grow liquid investments to at least \$100 million annually, to ensure there is adequate annual resourcing available for community-led work.

Additional funds for watershed security and restoration work in BC — including through federal investments and industrial contributions — can be leveraged into this fund to improve administrative efficiencies, streamline funding for grantees, and ensure that additional investments build upon past work. Additional pathways, including environmental damages funds and direct government to government-mechanisms, should also be leveraged.

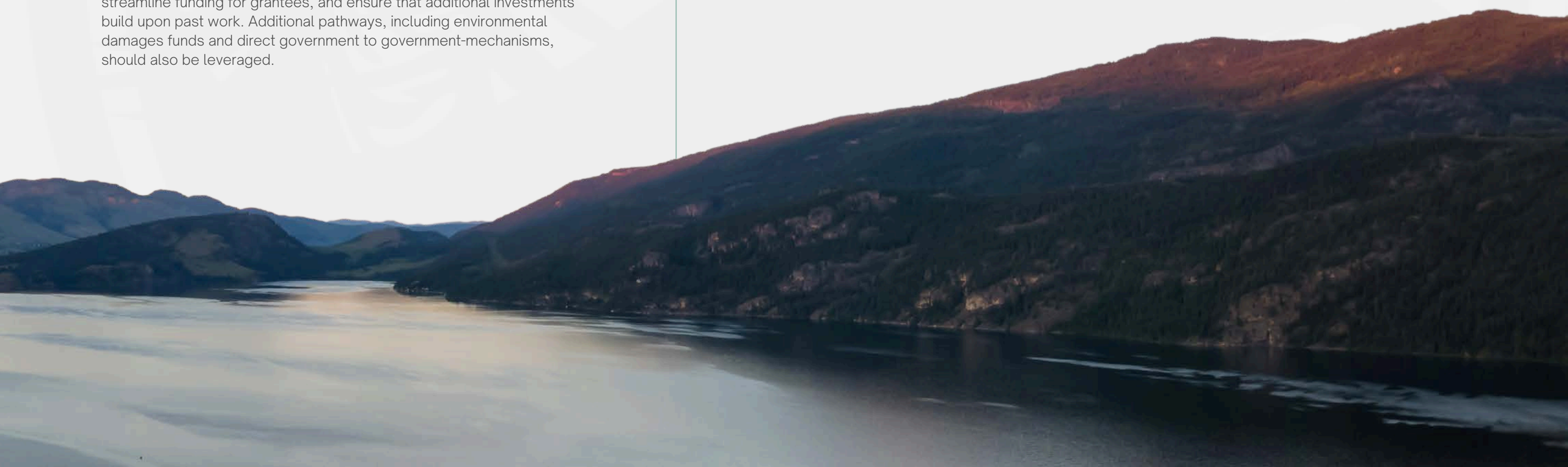
2

Invest in First Nations and local watershed priorities, and enable local communities to lead

Now more than ever, Canadians recognize the need to invest in local capacities and solutions. First Nations communities are on the frontlines of nearly every watershed security issue in Canada — from flooding, to wildfire, to climate, to a lack of clean drinking water. It is therefore imperative that the focus of future funds both reflect and are flexible to First Nations and local watershed priorities.

Investing in local monitoring, knowledge building, and capacity-strengthening initiatives are important enabling requirements for effective decision-making. Sound watershed management decisions require accurate and relevant data. When asked what their next steps or next priorities were for their watershed work, grantee recipients frequently spoke about the need to continue to collect and apply data to guide overall decisions and actions within watersheds. Stable funding for lands and water monitoring work — including First Nations led Guardian programs — are a critical component of this. Many IWI-funded projects were led by established Guardian program teams. Ongoing investments into such programs are imperative to sustain capacity and good governance.

Investments into First Nations and local watershed security work also presents tangible pathways towards sustainable economic transitions, particularly in rural and small communities. Keeping jobs local is a critical factor in building local resilience and benefits overall community health and well-being. Investments should thus prioritize supporting local expertise and ongoing training opportunities. Ongoing support for youth training and roles is a critical component of this.



3

Centre and support Indigenous leadership and worldviews in future funding program design and delivery

Centring Indigenous leadership from diverse regions in fund decision-making and delivery was a key feature of IWI that helped enable communities to self-determine priorities and ensure that decisions were made through a lens of lived experience and context.

The leadership of Indigenous Advisors and staff also helped to ensure more culturally relevant, holistic and impactful granting decisions. Embedding Indigenous knowledge and worldviews in the funding process was also seen to improve watershed outcomes themselves. Using a lens of long-term decision making helped prioritize enduring impacts, over quick results. The lived experiences of Advisors and staff shaped proposal evaluation and decisions through bringing a clear sense of practical barriers, implementation needs, and regional realities.

By embedding Indigenous voices, values, and knowledge systems into decision-making, Indigenous Advisors supported the disruption of colonial norms and helped to build a more relational, values-based approach to investment. Indigenous advisors described that this shift involved grounding decisions in Indigenous worldviews, responsibility, and care; honouring commitments to UNDRIP; and rethinking the role of Indigenous Nations and non-Indigenous institutions within this work.

Future funds should ensure Indigenous leadership is supported in all elements of fund design and delivery. Challenging the colonial status quo within granting systems through promoting Indigenous-led leadership roles and working to address structural racism within institutions is critical to this. Our companion Fund Learnings report offers further reflections and learnings on how to practically support this work.

“The advisors brought with them something that non-Indigenous managers don’t have— context for knowing how communities work.”
- IWI Advisor

4

Ensure industry is paying their fair share to ensure watershed security and restoration

Over the past 150 years, colonial policies and poor industrial practices have impacted and degraded watersheds across BC. This has resulted in profound losses for First Nations communities, spiritually, culturally, and economically. Across BC, all communities now also experience the impacts of disasters like increased flooding, wildfires, and risks of running out of drinking water. This has pushed BC into an era of water insecurity.

Many of our current water challenges can be directly linked to historic or ongoing industrial practices, such as over-allocation and poorly planned industrial land-use and monitoring. Yet the costs associated with addressing these issues have largely been paid for through public funds and taxpayer resources. Today, the 10 largest industrial water users in B.C. pay less than \$900,000 to access over 500 billion litres of water annually. Moreover, what happens in one watershed has downstream effects that impact watershed communities across a much wider scale.

This situation has created a legacy of cumulative impacts that requires resources for collaborative solutions that may cross jurisdictional boundaries, including First Nations. As watershed pressures and the cost of repair rises, it is imperative that industries pay their fair share for their use of public resources.

One immediate pathway for this is modernizing and increasing the province’s outdated industrial water rental rate scheme, and reinvesting revenues into First Nations communities and the BC Watershed Security Fund. Industries must be paying a fair share for their use of our most vital public good – and it is vital that these resources flow directly back into First Nations and community-led water security work.

Ensure funding is provided alongside a wider breadth of supports, including policy change and co-governance with First Nations

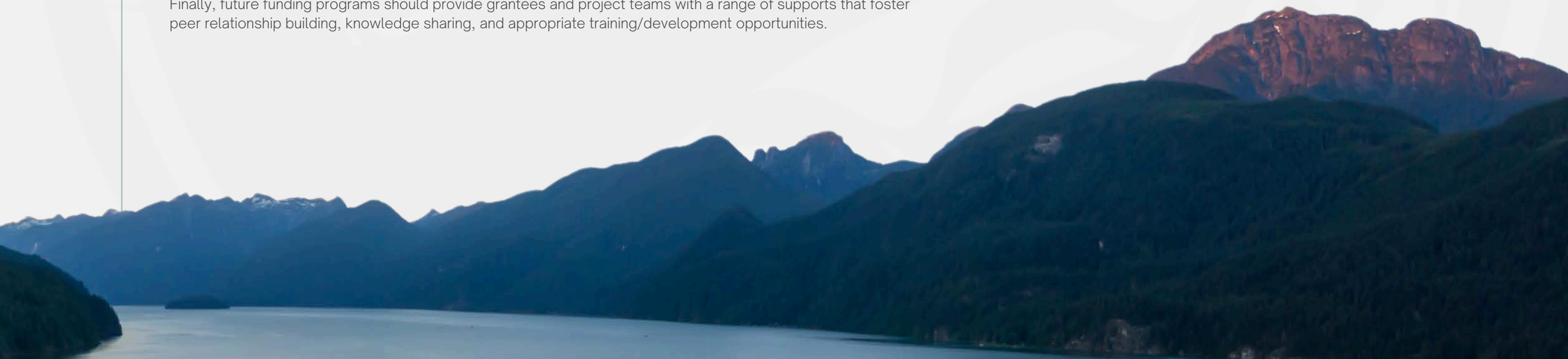
IWI supported communities with critical resources to advance local visions of watershed security, while also achieving a whole range of diverse holistic outcomes. However, funding on its own will not solve the challenges we see today.

Changes to the way we govern, manage, allocate, and regulate watersheds are urgently needed. Deforestation, wetland loss, the removal of riparian buffer zones, poor fisheries management, and contaminant pollution has degraded water quality and ecosystems — resulting in compounding losses and risks.

A whole of systems approach to watershed security is needed, and as rights and titleholders, First Nations must be meaningfully engaged in this process. Upholding and implementing UNDRIP and the BC Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (BC DRIPA) is a fundamental step towards ensuring this. Despite what recent fear-based narratives around the role of BC DRIPA purport, Indigenous communities have inherent rights to their territories and to ongoing cultural practices that rely on healthy watersheds. These rights are not a matter of public opinion; they exist inherently. Aligning Crown policies with UNDRIP not only helps enable certainty and avoid costly legal battles, but, as has been demonstrated throughout this report, it also helps achieve better outcomes for watersheds. There is no true watershed security without effective collaboration with First Nations communities.

A shift towards watershed co-governance and management with Nations offers a pathway to advance watershed security, which ultimately benefits all British Columbians. Co-governance and management models help to build relationships, enable clarity, and offer spaces to establish shared watershed values and long-term visions. Collaborative forums, such as the [Cowichan Watershed Board](#), are models that could be scaled alongside immediate amendments to existing regulatory regimes — such as the Forest Range and Practices Act.

Finally, future funding programs should provide grantees and project teams with a range of supports that foster peer relationship building, knowledge sharing, and appropriate training/development opportunities.



A Case for Action

IWI supported 49 projects that collectively drove meaningful, catalytic, and multi-faceted outcomes for water and watershed communities that will endure into the future. Through these investments, communities improved watershed health, created meaningful jobs, strengthened food security, supported cultural resurgence, and so much more. Investments also advanced BC and Canada's legal and policy obligations to Indigenous rights and reconciliation, while ensuring that First Nations are the ones determining how to implement these commitments in a meaningful way.

These investments have also reinforced that investing in Indigenous-led watershed work is a meaningful pathway to invest in a range of holistic issue areas that positively impact not just First Nations communities, but all British Columbians. As a result of IWI funding, watersheds across the province are more climate resilient, better monitored, and healthier.

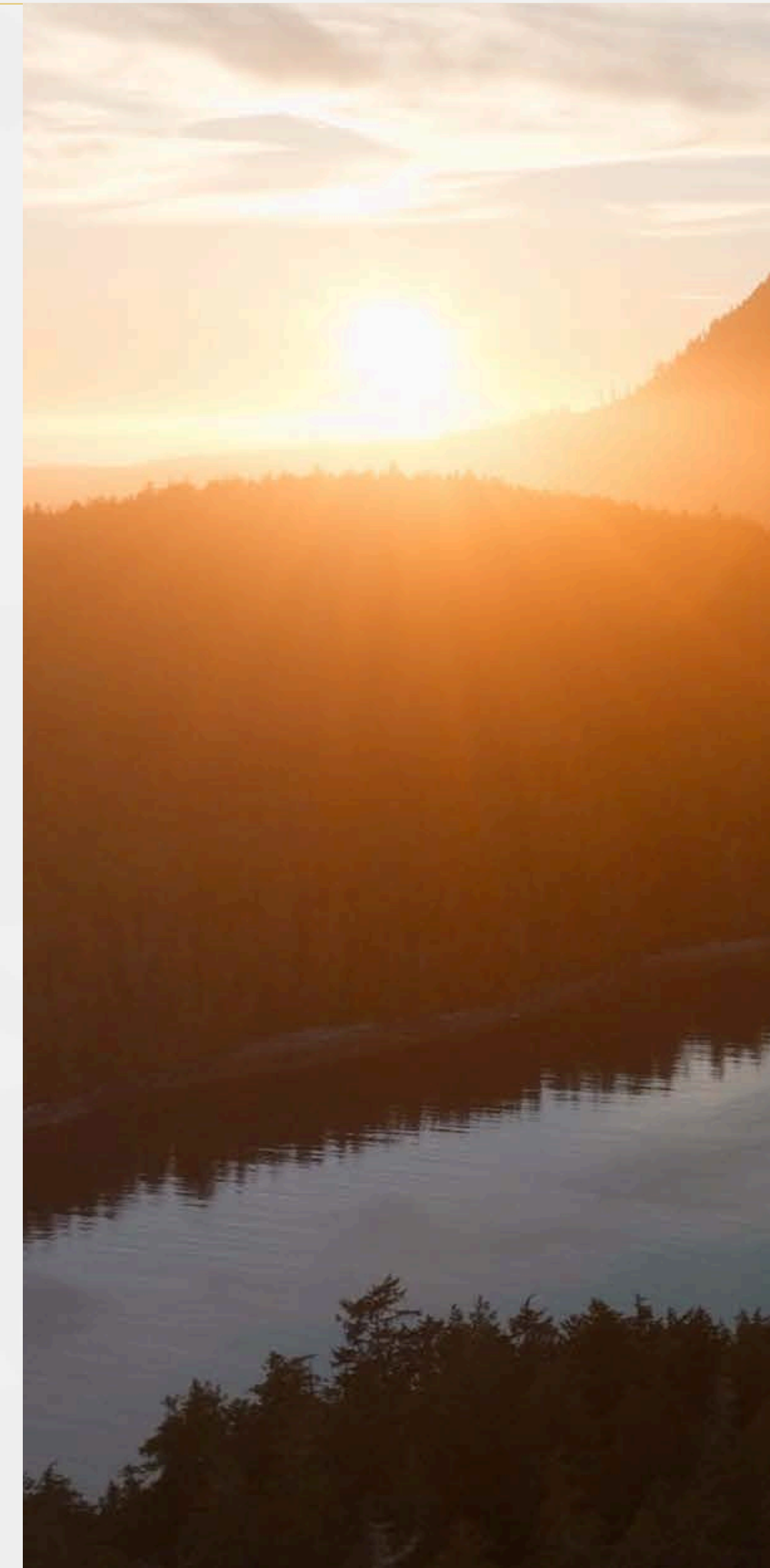
The way that IWI was structured and operated was a critical enabling feature. Indigenous Advisors guided overall initiative design and decision-making, which guaranteed that funding could effectively respond to community needs and priorities. The presence of low-barrier administrative processes supported this. Grantees cited flexible budgets, intake and reporting processes, community-defined focus areas, and relational approaches to grant administration as significant contributors to project success.

At the same time, IWI highlighted structural barriers that continue to limit Nations' ability to undertake work on their territories, including short-term funding cycles and the ongoing impacts of colonial policies. Watershed stewardship is a continuous practice of governance and relationships, not a time-limited project. Sustained funding is essential to honour this reality and build on the partnerships and capacities IWI helped strengthen.

Within the vast history of Indigenous-led water stewardship, IWI was only a small part of a much longer story of kinship and responsibility to water. IWI ultimately supported a range of projects that opened the door to future work, highlighting how much more resourcing is still required. A refrain heard repeatedly from project teams is that they completed only a fraction of what could be done. Project teams and Advisors described IWI as a "proof of concept" demonstrating that Indigenous laws and values and ways of working are not supplementary to watershed management — they are foundational to it.

Scaling investments into the co-developed BC Watershed Security Fund offer one vital pathway to continuing with the momentum built through IWI. Since 2021, public investment in watershed security has declined by 80%. The risk to momentum is not abstract — it is immediate and compounding: stalled projects, lost expertise, weakened partnerships, and increased vulnerability of the very watersheds that sustain communities, ecosystems and our economy. The BC Watershed Security Fund was created to meet this moment. Continued investment is urgently needed to safeguard the outcomes already achieved, prevent backsliding, and create the long-term stability required for watershed stewardship to endure. This is a pivotal opportunity to leverage investments into generational watershed resilience.

Like water itself, the power of this work ripples outwards. The work undertaken by project teams will have lasting impacts for individuals, communities and ecosystems. Through their work, project teams demonstrated the holistic benefits of investing in water and Indigenous-led solutions. These outcomes are not coincidental; they reflect Indigenous leadership, knowledge, and stewardship orientations in action. IWI's staff team and delivery partners express profound gratitude to all of the project teams, Advisors and partners involved in this Initiative. As a result of their work, benefits will flow across BC for generations to come.





Quw'utsun Territory
Ben Hazel



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Lift Up this Work



Gifts from the Watershed

MANY EMOTIONS of hope, sadness, & Joy watching each Film

Continue this Momentum

Salmon Parks

FISH STOCKS have changed. River water levels LOW...

WILD SALMON have better genetics HATCHERIES essential



SALMON PARKS WILL HELP them SURVIVE



Critical Old Growth Habitat

Xáat Resiliency
A STORY OF CHANGE & HOPE FOR SALMON & PEOPLE

Glacier Feeding Taku River is Receding VERY RAPIDLY

The TAKU RIVER & Salmon are the HEART of our NATION

TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE + Quantitative Data TRACKING SALMON & HABITAT

HELP THEM RETURN



Take it to the Water

Sinixt Relationships with the Water and Yourself; to Become a Human Being

Water needs Love & Prayer, too...

SPEAK to the WATER

Connect to the WATER



Water is Life
Nibi

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS on the Watershed Industry IMPACTS

INDIGENOUS LED & Treaty Rights Lens IT'S A LOSS when Indigenous Knowledge isn't included in Studies...

Pathways to Watershed Leadership

WORK FOR MY COMMUNITY = Opportunity to WORK on the LAND

Mentoring & Encouragement

UNIVERSITY Education as a Biologist

Bring YOUTH to the LAND

Unveiling Bull Trout

Genetics are IMPORTANT SAMPLES taken from WILD FISH & Put in DATABASE

Critical PICTURE for ONGOING monitoring AND CONSERVATION



Homecoming: A Salmon Restoration Story

"EVERY LITTLE THING WE CAN DO WILL HELP THE SALMON"

BLUE CREEK restoration for Chinook Salmon spawning grounds

Climate change (Pollution, Plastic Flooding, Dykes)

Kitasu Bay Marine Protected Area
a Sanctuary for OUR PEOPLE

Stewardship Responsibility



Sik-E-Dakh Creek Youth Mentoring & Restoration

Sense of HOPE for the FUTURE

THIS IS CALLED STEWARDSHIP OF the LAND

We Care for the LAND

getting onto the LAND



VANCOUVER ISLAND REGIONAL WATERSHED

gathering

MARCH 5 & 6, 2024

We respectfully acknowledge the beautiful and unceded traditional territory of the **Ligwitda'xw People**; the We Wai Kai, Wei Wai Kum, and Kwiaka First Nations.

Thank you to our Elder Sharon Maksymetz for welcoming us

SHARED LEARNING WORKING IN WATERSHEDS

- WE NEED TO BRING MORE AWARENESS TO THE SECTOR
- RETENTION = MULTI-YEAR FUNDING
- WE SHARE THE BURDEN OF COMPLEXITIES OF JURISDICTION
- GRATITUDE FOR I.W.I. SUPPORT
- OUR KIDS NEED CONTEXT TO SEE THEMSELVES IN THIS WORK
- PROVIDE SNACKS!
- THE GRANTING CYCLE & REPORTING CYCLE MEANS ALWAYS BEING IN THE PROCESS

- BE REALISTIC IN HOW YOU ENGAGE YOUTH
- BRING IN CULTURE!
- PROVIDE TRANSPORTATION!
- HOW DO WE REACH OUR YOUTH IN MEANINGFUL WAYS THAT CONNECTS US TO OUR YOUTHFUL SELVES?
- HOW DO WE ADDRESS RACISM IN THE WORK?
- HOW DO WE PROTECT SACRED SITES WITHOUT DRAWING THE WRONG KIND OF ATTENTION TO THOSE SITES?
- HOW DO WE STOP TRANSACTIONAL AND EXTRACTIVE RELATIONSHIP PRACTICES?
- HOW IS YOUR WORK CHANGING AND ADAPTING TO CLIMATE CHANGE?

STORYTELLING in COMMUNITY

INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING



BUILDING A NETWORK

- WE ARE STRONGER TOGETHER
- WE ARE THE MEDICINE
- WE ARE NOT ALONE

COMING TOGETHER

Knowledge Sharing

our youth can be our greatest teachers

"we move at the Speed of Trust"

STRENGTHENING RIGHTS and RESPONSIBILITY

MENTORSHIP

"THE MORE EYES AND EARS ON THE TERRITORY... THE BETTER WE CAN TAKE CARE OF IT!"

PROTECTION RESTORATION BIODIVERSITY

STEWARDSHIP



is food sovereignty is healing the land is HEALING COMMUNITY

IWI
REGIONAL

WATERSHED GATHERING

TERRACE

SUSTAINABLE HARVESTS

FISHERIES and FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

- community building
- connection to the land
- "A river red and thick with fish"

WE ARE FAMILY

FROM THE WATER TO THE AIR

OUR ORIGIN'S SHOW US THE WAY

THE STORIES

OF COMMUNITIES
PHOTOS and VIDEOS HELP TELL THESE STORIES

THE HEALTH OF THE *land* IS THE HEALTH OF THE *people*

GROWING

FUNDING

BRIDGING GAPS

- Longterm
- Flexible
- Secure
- Equitable
- Community priority
- Holistic
- Partnerships

COMMUNICATION ACCOUNTABILITY

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE
LAND BASED HEALING

SUSTAINABLE



IWI
REGIONAL

WATERSHED GATHERING TERRACE

THE LOVE
STORY
OF US
AND THE
LAND

LONGEVITY
TO THIS WORK
(FUNDING)

THE LAND IS WHAT
WE FIGHT FOR

EMPOWERING



YOUTH

- They want to be seen and heard
- They are our future
- Mentorship
- Capacity Building
- Data management ; Sovereignty



Bringing people
together on the
LAND

Indigenous
Knowledge,
Western Science,
Practical
Solutions



mapping culturally
significant areas

ensuring data can be visualized
spending money on root
causes not symptoms

STORYTELLING

Restoration

Trust

Values

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY
this is our medicine

CONNECTIONS

ENGAGEMENT
ADVOCACY

RELATIONSHIP
BUILDING

OUR
FUTURE
IS IN OUR
PAST



IWI
REGIONAL

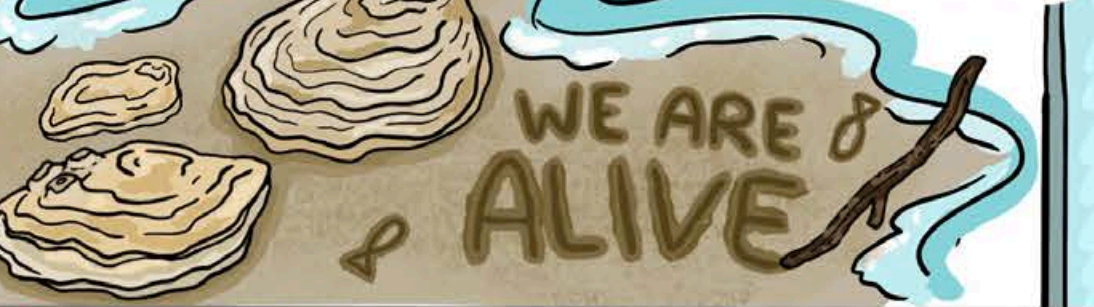
WATERSHED GATHERING

VANCOUVER

STEWARDING the
FUTURE of the
WATERSHED

- Commitment for long-term funding
- Governance; Policy
- Caretaking Watersheds
- Collaborative Partnerships
- Our work is for all creatures

BEING BY THE WATER IS LIKE A
HOMECOMING



INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY
LIFTING UP INDIGENOUS VOICES

- RESTORATION
- RELATIONSHIP BUILDING
- COMMUNICATION

EVEN IN THE CITY THERE IS
MEDICINE



flowing together



HOLISTIC
NUTS 'A' MAAT
INTERCONNECTEDNESS
RESPECT

Telling the stories of
change

Sharing lived experiences

DATA MANAGEMENT AND SOVEREIGNTY

- Building knowledge for responsible decision-making
- Indigenous priorities; values
- Stable quality data
- Reliable

OVERCOMING BARRIERS
ENGAGEMENT • ADVOCACY
INSPIRE • SUPPORT

- capacity building
- creating careers
- intergenerational learning
- peer to peer
- community driven



INDIGENOUS WATERSHED INITIATIVE VANCOUVER GATHERING JUNE 18/19 2024

GISGHAAST RECORDING
ELENA STERRITT





