

Speak **Truth** to Power

Youth Defenders
for Human Rights





Autumn Peltier

Water Walker

*“I like to share that water is really sacred. Water is life.
Mother Earth doesn’t need us, we need her.”*

INTRODUCTION

Canada is a country rich in the natural resource of water, yet we have many polluted lakes and rivers which need our attention. While many Canadians living in urban and rural settings can turn on a tap and get clean drinking water, there are many Indigenous people in First Nations communities who do not have ready access to clean and safe drinking water. Inequitable access to clean water is just one of the many injustices which finds their roots in the *Indian Act*. Some students may be shocked or angry to learn about the ramifications of the *Indian Act*. Some may be saddened to see the living conditions in many First Nations communities and become upset when learning about the water crisis. Some may not believe that this injustice has been allowed to happen. We can all work to undo the inequity that has been percolating for 200 years. Students will learn through the activism and advocacy of Autumn Peltier that we must address how we have poisoned the water. We must remember that clean water and clean air are inherent rights of us all. Helping youth learn the reality of the water crisis in First Nation communities, the cause and effect of water pollution, and the importance of protecting water will inspire them to be part of a better way forward.

BACKGROUND ON ISSUES

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed in 1948. This founding document, in response to the events of World War II, established the idea that all people, in all nations, have the same inherent rights. Since its inception, the United Nations has further elaborated on human rights, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), adopted in 2007, which is an acknowledgement of the discrimination faced worldwide by Indigenous peoples. By 2010, after much debate and deliberation, the Canadian government signed onto this agreement.¹ In 2015, the United Nations released 17 Sustainable Development Goals to propose that united, we could create a world where people live in peace and prosperity. Goal # 6 envisions access to clean and safe water.² So, how can it be that in 2022, some people living in Canada do not have access to clean and safe drinking water? How can we have communities where they have had to boil drinking water for 25 years?

The roots of the water crisis in First Nations communities begin with the *Indian Act*, established in 1876. It is fair to say that the *Indian Act* aimed to eliminate First Nations culture, promoting assimilation through discriminatory practices. And even before that brutal document was tabled, the colonial government had established treaties with many nations across the Dominion of Canada. With each treaty an understanding was reached on how the land would be shared; however, the problem with these treaties is more than a miscommunication based on language differences. The problem originates in a fundamental difference on the concept of land ownership and was compounded by the colonial mindset. There is evidence that the representatives of the government at the time never intended to share the land as equal nations with equal access to land, resources, education, health care, and housing. The growing settler population needed land and the land was already occupied. The treaties were about getting that land. When we pull on the threads of this narrative, we can begin to understand the nuance behind the question: How did we get to a place where a citizen living on this land that we call Canada cannot turn on a tap and get access to clean and safe drinking water?

Lack of access to clean drinking water is a health issue. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) released 94 Calls to Action (2015). These calls were recommendations for actions that Canada must undertake to move forward on its journey towards reconciliation. Call # 19 specifically addresses the gap in health:

We call upon the federal government, in consultation with Aboriginal peoples, to establish measurable goals to identify and close the gaps in health outcomes between

¹ Hanson, "Erin, U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous Foundations." University of British Columbia https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/un_declaration_on_the_rights_of_indigenous_peoples. Retrieved March 24, 2022.

² United Nations, *The 17 Goals*. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>. Retrieved March 23, 2022.

*Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, and to publish annual progress reports and assess long-term trends. Such efforts would focus on indicators such as: infant mortality, maternal health, suicide, mental health, addictions, life expectancy, birth rates, infant and child health issues, chronic diseases, illness and injury incidence, and the availability of appropriate health services.*³

When Prime Minister Trudeau and the Liberal government were first elected in 2015, they pledged to end all boil-water advisories by March 2021. With the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, this goal was not met. As of March 2022, 131 long term boil advisories had been lifted but a review of the Indigenous Services Canada website revealed recurring water problems. In March 2022, there remained 34 drinking water advisories in 29 communities.⁴

Resolving water problems in First Nations communities is complex.⁵ First and foremost is the complication of various levels of responsibility. The federal government provides funding and advice on water systems. Health Canada sets water standards and the Chiefs and Councils manage the day-to-day water and wastewater systems. Depending on the location of the communities, the provincial or territorial government may also be involved in ensuring safe drinking water.⁶ But the various levels of government and the various individuals responsible for water regulation elements may not coordinate their efforts and expertise. In addition, there are a variety of issues at the water level such as the land geography and the water source itself. A water treatment plan in one community may not be the solution for another community, so there needs to be an individualization on how to create an effective treatment system. Water pollution and pipeline leaks can create further contamination.

We must move with alacrity. Health issues linked to water-borne illnesses are prevalent in communities with poor water quality.⁷ Skin conditions, stomach illnesses, cancer, and birth defects can all be attributed to poor water. The University of Saskatchewan conducted a review of studies of First Nations health between 2000 and 2015. Lori Bradford, one of the researchers, added that there can also be mental health effects because of the ongoing harm of living with unsafe water.⁸ In this land we call Canada, the clear infringement of the basic human right for clean water is not acceptable. It will cost a lot of money to fix the problem without doubt. Incremental changes are being made to resolve the water crisis in First Nations communities, but the pace of change is not fast enough if you are living in a community where accessing clean and safe drinking water is a laborious and stressful process.

³ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to action*.

⁴ Ending Long-Term Drinking Water Advisories, Indigenous Services Canada. <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1506514143353/133317130660>. Retrieved March 24, 2022.

⁵ Gulli, Cathy. "Why can't we get clean water to First Nation reserves?" *Maclean's*. October 7, 2015.

⁶ Roles and Responsibilities. Water in First Nation Communities. Indigenous Services Canada. <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1314034319353/1533665196191>. Retrieved March 25, 2022.

⁷ Goldfinger, Daina. "An ongoing symbol of colonization: How bad water affects First Nations' health". September 30, 2021. Global News. Posted September 30, 2021. Retrieved March 25, 2022.

⁸ Bradford, L. E., Bharadwaj, L. A., Okpalauwaekwe, U., & Waldner, C. L. (2016). "Drinking water quality in Indigenous communities in Canada and health outcomes: a scoping review". *International journal of circumpolar health*, 75(1),32336.

BIOGRAPHY



In 2016, at the age of 12, Autumn Peltier met the Prime Minister when she was selected to present a ceremonial copper water bowl to him at a ceremony in Ottawa. However instead of passing the bowl to him in silence, Autumn raised her voice along with the vessel. She seized the opportunity to challenge the Prime Minister on his environmental record. Autumn told Prime Minister Trudeau, through tears, that she was disappointed in him and his government. The Prime Minister responded to her that he would protect the water. That was 6 years ago, and Autumn has not stopped holding him accountable to his yet unfulfilled promise.

Autumn follows in the footsteps of her great-aunt Josephine Mandamin who was a renowned water rights activist and the Anishinabek Nation Chief Water Commissioner until her death in 2019.⁹ Autumn grew up learning about the importance of the environment from her elders in northern Ontario's Wikwemikong unceded territory. She says, "I began speaking up about access to clean water when I was 8 years old and realized that children younger than me didn't know what drinking clean water from a tap was. It was at that moment that I felt water and land needed a voice to try and protect them from further pollution and damage so we can have clean water for our future."¹⁰ Autumn is an ardent activist in her quest to bring safe drinking water to all First Nations communities. She spoke at the Children's Climate Conference in Sweden in 2015, and has twice addressed the United Nations General Assembly, in New York in 2018 and 2019.¹¹ In 2019, at age 14, she was named the Anishinabek Nation Chief Water Commissioner.¹² This is not an honorary title; it is a role that Autumn takes seriously. She travels around the globe to promote awareness about the water issues in First Nations communities and to teach about the global water crisis. Autumn has received many accolades for her work: among these, she has been nominated three times for the International Children's Peace Prize¹³, and she was recognized in 2022 with the Emerging Leader in Canada Award.¹⁴ Autumn reminds us all that we need the Earth more than she needs us. She shows us that we have the power to move the government toward resolving the water crisis in communities on this land by raising our voices along with hers.

⁹ Gallant, D. (2020). Josephine Mandamin. In *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. <https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/josephine-mandamin>. Retrieved March 22, 2022.

¹⁰ Peltier, Autumn (@autumn.peltier). February 2, 2022. Water is Sacred. Water is Alive. Water has a spirit. <https://www.instagram.com>. Retrieved March 22, 2022.

¹¹ <https://www.womenofinfluence.ca/2019/11/05/meet-autumn-peltier-14-year-old-internationally-recognized-clean-water-advocate-and-the-anishinabek-nation-chief-water-commissioner/>

¹² "Autumn Peltier named chief water commissioner by Anishinabek Nation". CBC Radio Canada. April 25, 2019. Retrieved March 22, 2022.

¹³ Erskine, Michael (September 21, 2019) "Manitoulin Island Water Warrior Autumn Peltier named for international honour". Sudbury.com. Retrieved March 22, 2022.

¹⁴ Johnson, Rhiannon (October 5, 2017). "Anishinaabe teen only Canadian up for International Children's Peace Prize". *CBC News*. Retrieved March 22, 2022.



On National Child Day, meet clean water activist Autumn Peltier | CBC Kids News

You know something's wrong when a child speaks up. That's how Autumn Peltier, a 16-year-old from Wiikwemkoong First Nation in Ontario, framed her fight for clean drinking water in Canada's Indigenous communities. The teen, who's originally from Manitoulin Island but currently living in Ottawa, told CBC Kids News she'd rather spend her free time doing normal kid stuff. Instead, she's making speeches on the international stage about the fact that some Canadians don't have access to clean water.

[Watch Autumn tell her story in her own words](#)

INTRODUCTION TO LESSON FORMAT

The CTF/FCE is committed to further Truth and Reconciliation with the Indigenous Peoples of Canada. This resource has been developed based on a desire to use reflective, experiential, and relational tasks to build on the interconnectedness of all living things. This resource respectfully seeks to support the Calls to Action #62 – 65 (2015) which are directed towards the education sector. Call #62ii. states: “To integrate indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms.”¹⁵ As a step, we have built these lessons around the principle of “two-eyed seeing”, the work of Elder Albert Marshall, of Eskasoni community in Unama’ki – Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, and we have embraced the four-domain framework as developed by Dr. Marcella LaFever rather than using Bloom’s Taxonomy as the learning framework. A summary of each strategy is provided in the Resources section.

¹⁵ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to action*.

Guiding Questions

- How did we let water, an essential resource, become polluted?
- What is water insecurity?
- What factors hinder access to safe water in First Nations communities?
- How can water protectors, water keepers, and engineers solve real life problems for people without clean water?
- Can youth make a difference to take action to interrupt or stop things that are hurting our environment?
- From children of the future: What did you do to remedy the problem? What actions did you take?

Learning Targets

During this lesson, students will:

- Use two-eyed seeing as a transformative principle to mitigate damage to Mother Earth;
- Consider the factors of inadequate access to clean and safe drinking water;
- Recognize their inherent responsibilities to look after the natural world;
- Ask themselves if it's okay that Indigenous people don't have access to clean water, with the question: "Why are we comfortable with that?";
- Be attentive to their own inner reaction as they learn about the situation in First Nations communities;
- Collaborate with others on a team project;
- Practice skills that encourage partners or team members.

Skills Development

After this lesson, students will have improved the following skills:

- Seeking out resources to examine the water crisis in Canada.
- Respectfully acknowledging the opinions of others through the format of a talking circle discussion.
- Thinking critically about the world by exploring a variety of perspectives, values, and ideas.
- Relating to two or more perspectives on a situation using a "Compare and Contrast Two" chart.
- Exploring their interests and passions and connect this to the wider community with a desire to contribute to change.
- Recognizing that they have agency and are able to make a difference in the world.

Suggested lessons, ideas, activities, and tasks for promoting learning and growth

**Honouring
Valuing
Connecting
Empowering
Self-Actualizing**

Honouring: to consider, to be aware, to listen, to observe

(Gr. K–12) Students are introduced to the role of a water protector and see Autumn Peltier fight for clean water as an Indigenous rights activist, through the following videos and resources:

- CBC documentary about Autumn: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xqdE_7OZaqE
- *The Water Walker* – a documentary about Autumn Peltier by Seeing Red6Nations, available on Crave.
- Recent article in *Macleans*'s magazine: [Autumn Peltier on youth activism, challenging Trudeau, and a future in politics – Macleans.ca](#)
- [Autumn Peltier: The Water Warrior | Brut](#)

Students can listen to the video on “CBC Kids’ News” or watch the following:

- [13-Year-Old Advocate Autumn Peltier is Devoted to Protecting the World’s Water On National Child Day, meet clean water activist Autumn Peltier | CBC Kids News](#)

(Gr. K–9) Learn about the water issues in First Nations communities by using read-alouds. Listen to their stories and have students consider all the ways that water is important in their lives.

- *We are Water Protectors*, by Carole Lindstrom.
- (Gr. K–9) *Water Walker*, by Joanne Robertson, about Autumn’s aunt Josephine.
- (Gr. K–9) Read *Nibi’s Water Song*, written by Sunshine Tenasco and illustrated by Chief Lady Bird (Scholastic). It is a story about a little girl named Nibi who is thirsty and can’t find clean water to drink. Nibi is also the name of Tenasco’s 13-year-old daughter. In the book, with no luck from her tap, or the nearby river, Nibi heads to the next town and starts knocking on doors looking for a safe source of drinking water.
- (Gr. 4–9) *Water Walkers: Walking Lake Superior*, by Carole Ann Trembath.
- (Gr. 10–12) *Whose Water Is It Anyway? Taking Water Protection into Public Hands?* Written by Maude Barlow. Maude Barlow is a water activist and has written numerous books around water protection. A non-fiction book study could be undertaken, allowing students choose their focus.

Notes:

Valuing: empathize, recognize, respect, acknowledge

(Gr. K–12) Students reflect via class discussion and journal writing how they recognize the importance of clean water.

(Gr. 4–12) Have students observe themselves for 24 hours, and their dependence on clean water:

- Part I: Students keep a water journal for 24 hours. How much water do they use in a day? Have students measure the water that they use in everyday tasks. Share some journal entries with the class. You can create a data management activity based on this activity.
- Part II: Watch the documentary about Six Nations. Ask students to complete a reflective writing assignment on the questions: If they were under boil water advisory, how would their daily water use be affected? [Water at Six Nations of the Grand River | CBC.ca](#)

(Gr. 4–12) Students can create a three-panel comic book, either by hand or by using digital tools, which centers on the importance of clean drinking water.

Notes:

Connecting: to work with, to relate to, to participate, to develop

(Gr. 4–12) Watch the short report that CBC did on how people in Six Nations of Grand River have to live without clean water. [Water at Six Nations of the Grand River | CBC.ca](#)

(Gr. 4–12) The Water Brothers documentary series covers many issues about respecting water as a resource. There is an episode that highlights the crisis in First Nation communities: [Water Everywhere but Not a Drop to Drink | TVO.org](#) (aired March 9, 2022)

Create a chart in which the students compare their access to clean water in comparison to a youth in a First Nations community.

(Gr. 10-12) Students read various articles or listen to reports which were part of the [Tainted Water](#) series produced in 2022.

- The series is the result of a year-long joint investigation by a consortium of universities (Carleton University, Concordia University, First Nations University of Canada, Humber College, University of Regina, MacEwan University, Mount Royal University, Université du Québec à Montréal [UQAM], University of British Columbia, and University of King’s College) and media organizations including Global News, the Toronto Star, Canada’s National Observer, APTN News, and the Institute for Investigative Journalism, which reveals that allegations of flawed and incomplete work being done and a lack of federal oversight are part of the problem.
- [“In our culture, water is so much more. It’s sacred.” New wave of Indigenous operators look to tackle drinking-water woes](#)
- https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/clean-water-for-first-nations-critical-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-activists/article_37dbae2e-3bd3-5bac-817b-c7e21d50e687.html
- <https://globalnews.ca/news/8199988/first-nations-water-crisis-health-effects>

(Gr. 4-12) After investigating and learning about the current water crisis, students participate in a talking circle in which they share their knowledge, and thoughts about this.

Notes:

Empowering: to work with, to relate to, to participate, to develop

(Gr. 7–12) The call for a changed relationship with the First Nations who live in Canada is on the lips of many who call this land home. Engaging students in this conversation empowers them to be part of a better way forward. Students can participate in Project of Heart, an inquiry-based, hands-on project that seeks to teach about the history and legacy of the Indian Residential School system: [Project of Heart](#)

(Gr. K–12) Place the words “truth, justice, and reconciliation” on the blackboard. Have students discuss these terms and apply them to what they have learned in this unit. Have the class brainstorm these questions: *How can youth be part of reconciliation? What do you want to do about it? As a follow-up, they can watch this short video from TVO/Radio-Canada. Have your thoughts changed? What would you add?*

- [What is reconciliation? Indigenous educators have their say | TVO.org](#)

(Gr. K–12) You can host Earth Day activities in the school to highlight the importance of looking after Mother Earth.

(Gr. 10–12) For those students on Instagram, recommend they follow @autumpeltier and remain connected to the issue. Please see the resource on the use of social media in the classroom for a suggested protocol.

(Gr. K–12) Invite an Indigenous Knowledge Keeper to the classroom to share wisdom about looking after water resources. (Please consult your local school board protocols.)

Notes:

Extension Activities for Exploration – Want to See / Hear / Read More?

- An illustrated version of the Declaration of Human Rights is available on the United Nations website: <https://www.un.org/en/udhrbook/#3>
- [We Are Water Protectors Activity Kit | Macmillan](#)
- [Eight facts about water in Canada | Canadian Geographic](#)
- Boat Harbor documentary: [Weekend video. A'se'k, the other room - Nova Scotia Advocate](#)
- Water misuse: [The water you eat | Canadian Geographic](#)
- Ocean Bridge Diaries: [Ocean Bridge Diaries: Alex Ritz | Canadian Geographic](#)
- <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/secretlifeofcanada/meet-autumn-peltier-teen-water-warrior-1.5237845>



COMMUNITY DEFENDERS



Dr. Andrea Reid: Speaking up for Water

Dr. Andrea Reid grew up in Prince Edward Island where she lived with her non-Indigenous mother. She grew up knowing about her native heritage and ancestry on her father’s side through stories. Her father had lost contact with his community, language, and culture, in part through the legacy of the Indian Residential School and Sixties Scoop, and by proxy, she did not have access to this either. She came back to the community in her adulthood and discovered lost family members. She is a citizen of the Nisga’a Nation. Her research is based on reciprocity where she involves community members to be part of her projects. She is passionate about involving youth in the natural world. She leads science camps that embody the notion of two-eyed seeing. Andrea hopes to encourage youth to be the stewards of fish and fisheries in our oceans. She is currently an Assistant Professor at the University of British Columbia’s Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries, and Principal Investigator and Chair of the Indigenous Fisheries Research Unit. She is leading research on culturally significant fish and fisheries in British Columbia. Dr. Reid is the co-founder of Riparia along with the other co-founders Dr. Dalal Hanna and Mikayla Wujec. Riparia is a not-for-profit organization which centres on connecting youth with science on the water.

- [Riparia : Riparia Alumni & Community — Water Rangers](#)



Melina Laboucan-Massimo

Melina Laboucan-Massimo is the founder of Sacred Earth Solar and co-founder and Senior Director of Indigenous Climate Action. She says the only way that humans can survive on this planet is to respect their sacred connection to Mother Earth. “It’s incredibly important to do the work for future generations, taking equity into account,” she says. “All people have the right to breathe clean air and drink clean water.”



Leah Creaser

Mi’kmaw student, Leah Creaser, created a lab at Acadia University to share traditional knowledge with future scientists. This lab is now a requirement for all first-year biology students at Acadia University.

- [Mi’kmaw student creates lab at Acadia to share traditional knowledge with future scientists | CBC News](#)

FOR SUPPORT

- **Kids Help Phone:** 1-800-668-6868
- **Hope for Wellness Helpline:** 1-855-242-3310
- **Mental Health Crisis Line:** 613-722-6914 (within Ottawa) or 1-866-996-0991 (outside of Ottawa)
- **KUU-US Crisis Line Society:** 1-800-588-8717 (for BC residents)
- [Mental Health Resources for Indigenous Peoples – Firelight](#)

