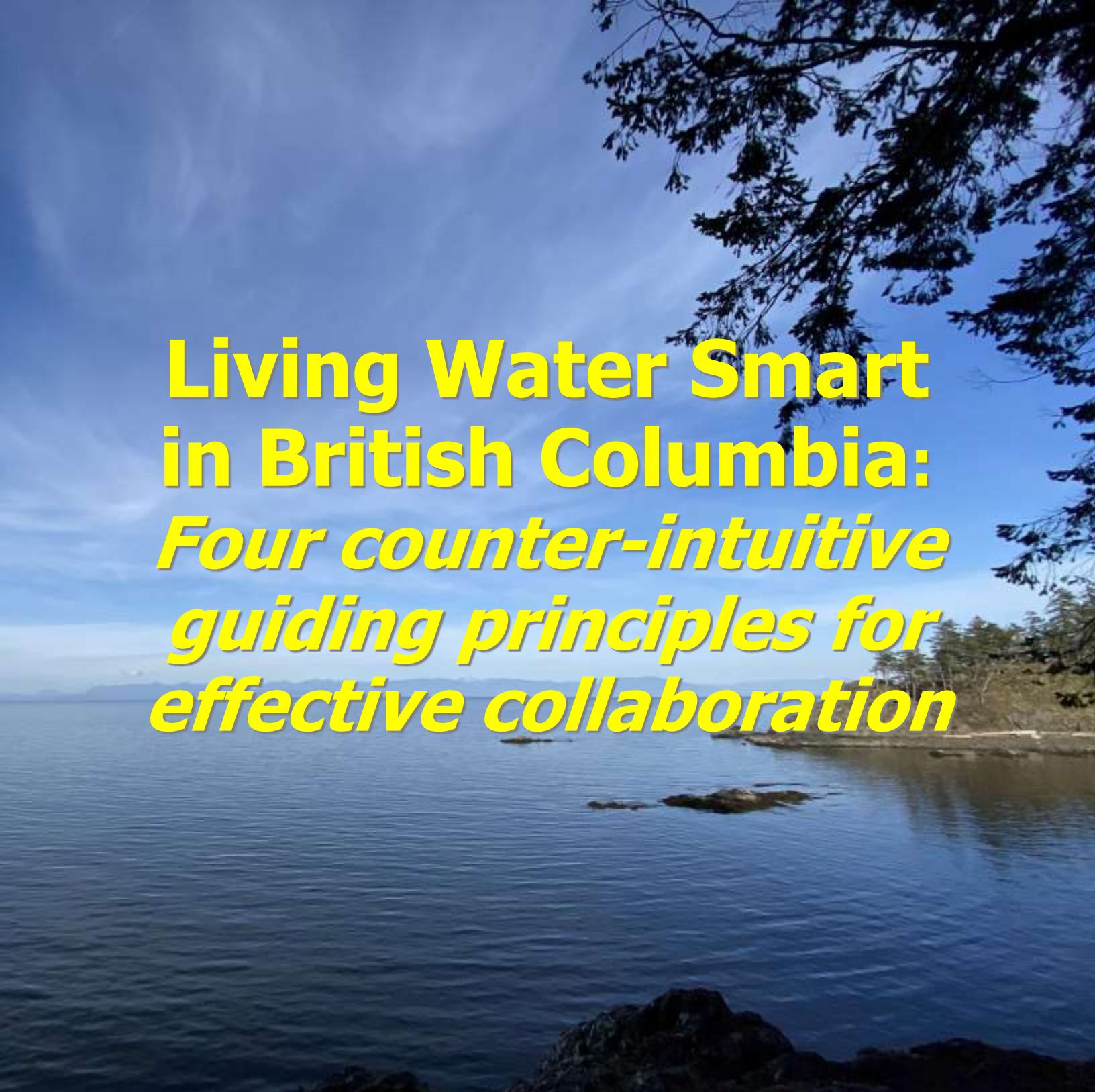




the partnership  
for water sustainability in bc

Waterbucket eNews on May 24, 2022

<https://waterbucket.ca/wscblog/>



# Living Water Smart in British Columbia: *Four counter-intuitive guiding principles for effective collaboration*

## Note to Reader:

Waterbucket eNews<sup>1</sup> celebrates the leadership of individuals and organizations who are guided by the vision for Living Water Smart in British Columbia<sup>2</sup>.

The edition published on May 24, 2022 featured Dr. Jane Wei-Skillern, Senior Fellow with the Haas Business School at the University of California Berkeley. Based on her case study research into the modus operandi of organizations in the nonprofit sector, she has identified four counter-intuitive guiding principles for growing effective networks.

The umbrella for Partnership initiatives and programs is the Water Sustainability Action Plan for British Columbia<sup>3</sup>. In turn, the Action Plan is nested within Living Water Smart, British Columbia's Water Plan.



**Cover Image Credit:** photo by David Mackenzie,  
a *Lifetime Member* of the Partnership for Water Sustainability

<sup>1</sup> <https://waterbucket.ca/wscblog/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://waterbucket.ca/wcp/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2017/11/livingwatersmart\\_book.pdf](https://waterbucket.ca/wcp/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2017/11/livingwatersmart_book.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.waterbucket.ca/cfa/sites/wbccfa/documents/media/81.pdf>

## Editor's Perspective

The late, great Erik Karlsen (1945-2020), a former Director in the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and a Past-Chair (2005-2010) of the Agricultural Land Commission, was one of the architects of the network-based model that drives the "**convening for action**" mission of the Partnership for Water Sustainability. Erik was a "change agent" in every sense of the word, made his mark on so many fronts, and was respected throughout.

It was Erik Karlsen who first observed that we were building a "**management architecture for collaboration**" and that our approach was entirely intuitive. Ergo, he said, an essential element of the mission is to explore the research in sociology and psychology to find precedents that would help us explain what we do intuitively. This is our context for reaching out to Dr. Jane Wei-Skillern.

Guided by Erik Karlsen's wisdom, Mike Tanner discovered the work of "Dr. Jane". As an academic and researcher, she is a true gem and is an inspiration to the Partnership. Jane Wei-Skillern is passionate about her research, so much so that she has taken a leave of absence from teaching to focus her time and efforts on the "**practitioner space**", as she describes it.

Dr. Jane builds bridges to network leaders. She champions and supports what they do because she believes in the value of what they do. When you have a conversation with Jane, her enthusiasm and commitment leave an indelible impression. This will be evident to the reader once you scroll down and read testimonials from several British Columbians.

### **Collaborative leadership is commitment to something bigger**

If the Partnership for Water Sustainability is to be successful in facilitating changes in practice over the long-term, then the hard work must be done by our partners. This means the work of the Partnership must be aligned with and support their organizational aspirations and objectives.

The network is the ultimate source of strength of the Partnership. The network also holds the key to intergenerational collaboration. It is how we build bridges of understanding and pass the baton from the past to the present and future.

Collaborative leadership uses the power of influence rather than positional authority to engage and align individuals and organizations within a network and deliver results across organizational boundaries.



Kim A. Stephens, MEng, PEng,

Executive Director

Partnership for Water Sustainability in BC

May 2022



## Counter-Intuitive Principles for Effective Collaboration

From the outset, the Partnership for Water Sustainability has vowed never to fall into the trap of concentrating our energies on building an organization and thus losing sight of "the mission". This view of the world reflects the Partnership's inter-governmental genesis and history of success as a "**convening for action**" roundtable.

**Stay true to the mission:** The Partnership mission is to grow the Living Water Smart Network, promote consistent application of science-informed understanding to improve land use and infrastructure servicing practices, and help BC communities align efforts around a vision for "**settlement, economy and ecology in balance**".

Members of the Partnership leadership team are often asked, why the singular focus on "the network" in the context of collaborative leadership? We are fortunate to have connected with Dr. Jane Wei-Skillern. Her groundbreaking research into the concept of "networked nonprofits" shines light on why we do what we do. She has provided us with a framework to explain what is intuitive and therefore a leap of faith for the Partnership.

It was a year ago that we first introduced readers of Waterbucket eNews to "Dr. Jane" and her four **Counter-Intuitive Principles for Effective Networks**.

In this edition, we report out on a follow-up conversation with Dr. Jane. View it as the "story behind the story" because Dr. Jane explains her passion, and why her personal mission is to champion and support network leaders like the Partnership for Water Sustainability.

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*It was a year ago (on June 1, 2021) that the Partnership first introduced readers of Waterbucket eNews to "Dr. Jane" and her four counter-intuitive principles for effective networks when we published *Living Water Smart in British Columbia: The Power of Collaborative Leadership*.*

*The story featured a conversation between Derek Richmond and Mike Tanner, two Partnership Directors. They reflected on the four principles as measures of success.*

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DR. JANE'S MISSION STATEMENT:  
*TO CHAMPION NETWORK  
LEADERS, AND THE NETWORKS  
THAT THEY SERVE, TO NURTURE  
CHANGE ON THE CHALLENGES  
THAT DWARF US ALL.*

<https://newnetworkleader.org/>

## About Dr. Jane's four counter-intuitive guiding principles for growing effective networks

**Focus on mission before organization.** Effective network leaders build strategies that advance the mission even when it does not result in direct benefits to their organization.

**Build partnerships based on trust, not control.** Leaders depend upon shared values and trust rather than top-down controls and accountability systems.

**Promote others rather than yourself.** Network leaders exhibit a strong norm of humility above all else, sharing credit and foregoing opportunities for individual advancement and institutional growth and brand building.

**Build constellations rather than lone stars.** Leaders who catalyze successful networks acknowledge their weaknesses as readily as their strengths. The goal is to build the larger system that is necessary for delivering on the mission, not to become the “market leader”.

“In the early 2000s, when I was on the faculty at the Harvard Business School, I began my research into the concept of a networked approach that is more focused on network-building and trust-based relationships, and less about building an organization to get to your mission impact.”

Dr. Jane Wei-Skillern, Haas Business School, University of California Berkeley  
Co-author of the groundbreaking **“The Networked Nonprofit”** (2008)

## **Excerpts from a conversation with Dr. Jane Wei-Skillern: *The "story behind the story" of four Counter-Intuitive Principles***



"Conversations with Dr. Jane Wei-Skillern have been enlightening and gratifying to realize that we have been doing it right! Partnership success in leadership has been through intuition, not prescription. It is been about 'the network', not the individual in recognizing that intergenerational knowledge exchange and timely but gentle mentoring can be powerful and effective tools that can lead to otherwise unattainable success."

Derek Richmond, M.Eng., P.Eng.  
Founding Director & Secretary  
Chair, Ambassadors Program  
Partnership for Water Sustainability in BC

### **Collaborative leadership is commitment to something bigger**

#### ***The Power of Collaborative Leadership***

*"Growing the network is all about a culture change. Advancing this agenda in the social impact space requires a different mindset, a different way of working, and most importantly, a commitment to something bigger than ourselves and our organizations."*

- Dr. Jane Wei-Skillern

To open the conversation with Dr. Jane Wei-Skillern, Derek Richmond stated that, "We needed to find some research that says what we are doing has been done before. We found you, Jane!"

Mike Tanner built on Derek's statement with this observation, "After reading your paper and reflecting on my lifetime of experience with professional associations and nonprofits, it strikes me that so many organizations have been around a long time but are doing it wrong."

"With our mission-centric focus, we believe the Partnership is doing it right," added Derek Richmond. "But now our challenge is to sustain the momentum through a succession process within the network. We are looking to you, Jane, for inspiration that will guide us through the next phase in the Partnership's evolution."

**"The four counter-intuitive principles are the common norms that effective networks have in common"**

## The impact of the network's collective work is dramatically greater than the sum of the individual parts

Derek and Mike's comments prompted this response from Dr. Jane: "I am always eager to find others who are working in this way and support them in any way that I can. Every so often I check to find out what is going on in the network space and saw the Partnership's great work and how you are getting great impacts through the Living Water Smart Network."

"When I reached out to the Partnership, I thought I am thrilled to see that they are using my work. And maybe I can support them in their efforts because I love to see people doing this – because I know it works."

"The frustration for me is that there aren't more people doing it. You have figured it out yourselves. In fact, all the cases that I have used in my research, people were doing it for years if not decades before I came along to study it."

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### *On Doing It Right:*

*"I have been studying people who have done this well and gotten great impacts because of it; and documented the patterns and themes from their work. So, it is no surprise that other people who are doing it right are doing it similar to how the Partnership is doing it and are getting positive results."*

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"The network emerges around a common goal, rather than a particular program or organizational model. The community mobilizes the resources from throughout the network and based on existing relationships in the community."

"It was exciting to hear about the work of the British Columbia Partnership for Water Sustainability and how their approach has exemplified network leadership as I have conceptualized it."

Dr. Jane Wei-Skillern, University of California Berkeley  
Co-author of the groundbreaking "The Networked Non-profit" (2008)

**Knock down barriers:** "I find that many people who are network leaders are often swimming upstream, struggling, and fighting an uphill battle. That is such a waste of time and energy. They are the unsung heroes, who should be free to catalyze and build the network to get the work done without so many senseless barriers getting in of the way."

"Much of the work that I am doing is with an eye toward how we remove those barriers that are keeping people from building thriving networks."

## Build a network to get to your mission impact

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"Because I studied sociology and psychology as a doctoral student, I had some background in network theory. Then, when I was looking for a research topic as a junior faculty member at the Harvard Business School in the early 2000s, there was so much interest in how we grow nonprofits."

"How do we engage in social entrepreneurship; how do we grow new innovations to scale? That was the focus, and all the faculty were excited about these questions. A common approach was to take what we understood about the private sector, tweak it a little, and apply it to the nonprofit sector."

"At the same time, all these organizations that were struggling to grow were not really getting to anything more than incremental gains. So, even if you were a highly successful social entrepreneur, had an innovation and were growing, the scale of the problem dwarfed any resources they brought to the table – no matter how large or successful they were."

### Early case studies highlighted a different way

"I was teaching an MBA elective on social entrepreneurship, was doing some case writing, and came across [Guide Dogs for the Blind Association](#). Geraldine Peacock, the CEO, did all of these counter-intuitive things in order to get her organization's impact bigger."

"But it was by decreasing their own organizational footprint, investing in their peers and former competitors, and focusing more narrowly on their core business, that enabled them to leverage their resources more broadly and create greater and more sustainable impact in the entire field."

"They had historically spread into all these different activities. The money was there. The opportunity was there. The mission said just keep doing new things because it was just assumed that whatever advanced the organization would advance the mission."

"Geraldine Peacock was visionary and saw that there was a different way. That caught my interest. There were several others working in this way, notably [Habitat for Humanity International](#). This began my research into the concept of a networked approach that was more focused on network-building and trust-based relationships, and less about building an organization to get to your mission impact."

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### *Two case studies inspired Dr. Jane*

*What she learned from the [Guide Dogs for the Blind](#) and [Habitat for Humanity](#) case studies led Jane Wei-Skillern to pursue research into the concept of a networked approach that is more focused on network-building and trust-based relationships, and less about building an organization to get to the mission.*

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“Dr. Jane Wei-Skillern’s research so wonderfully states what four decades of experience has taught me. If more people were aware of her research, more people would succeed at their roles and a lot more would get done.”

**Joe McGowan**  
Director of Public Works (retired)  
City of Cranbrook



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### **The business mindset is very limited when the focus is on macro-level issues and impacts**

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"The engine for change in the social space is different. It is not institutional-focused but more about investing outside your organization to get there."

"After a few years of focusing on these kinds of cases, the pattern became apparent. The case study organizations were quite different. But when I met and talked with the network leaders, I saw that their approaches were largely the same. Networking is highly visionary and ambitious."



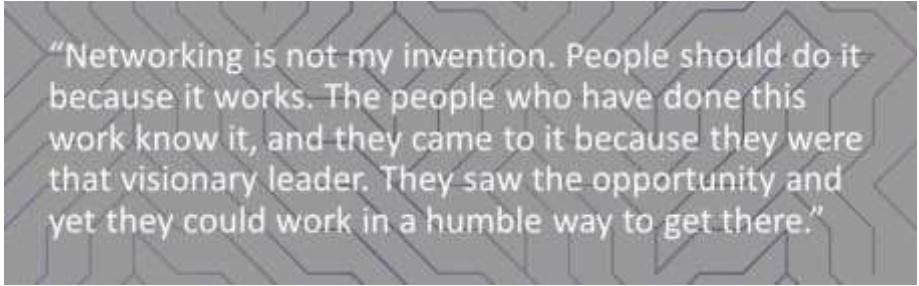
**“When you work in the social impact space, it is not a matter of taking private sector expertise and just applying it blindly to the social impact problem.”**

## **The networked approach is advancing a culture change in the "social impact space"**

"The leaders work in this way are really competent in what they do. They have really great people skills, they are good organisational managers, and they are good at seeing the big picture and identifying where they need to engage others and build the network to solve the problem."

"My research became an obsession, a focus, and a passion. Yet most of my colleagues did not think this was interesting or relevant – because it was very different from what they were doing. I did not get a whole lot of support, but I just kept doing it."

"To follow my passion, I have taken a leave from teaching and focused on the practitioner space. I have seen tremendous interest from practitioners like the Partnership who are doing the work this way and appreciate having a framework to articulate what they are doing. It is also a way for them to be more mindful about their work because many of the people who lead in this way have done it intuitively."



**"Networking is not my invention. People should do it because it works. The people who have done this work know it, and they came to it because they were that visionary leader. They saw the opportunity and yet they could work in a humble way to get there."**

**Reflections on the Counter-Intuitive Principles:** "So, to have a more systematic framework for thinking about it, albeit simple, because once you see the four principles you say, oh my gosh they are so basic."

"At times, I have wondered whether they are so obvious that '*there is no there, there*'. Maybe, I have thought, I should not be focusing on this area of research because it is just apparent."

"But I have become very aware that the world, and the context of social impact work, the incentives and structures that exist come largely from a business mindset. This is very institutional focused and is limited in the way in which they think about broad, macro-level issues and impacts."

**A Look Ahead:** “That is where I think I can contribute. To help people understand that, when you work in the social impact space, it is not a matter of taking private sector expertise and just applying it blindly to the social impact problem.”

“But this too is an uphill battle because I am convincing people who are used to having control and power, that maybe you are not the expert and not all-knowing.”

“In fact, you need to let go of some control and listen to others who might be closer to the problem, might have a better understanding of how to address the problem, and learn and engage with them as equals, not as the powerbroker who has the resources and forces people with carrots and sticks.”

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## A commitment to the mission

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“So, really, I have embarked on a culture change in the social impact space. Not on my own. That is why I am always trying to network with others who are of like mind, to try to move this forward – because I truly believe this is the way we as human beings will change the world. We have to let go of traditional models of working.”

“Networking is not my invention. People should do it because it works. The people who have done this work know it, and they came to it because they were that visionary leader. They saw the opportunity and yet they could work in a humble way to get there.”

“That is my personal story on how I have gotten to focus on this and why I am such a believer in it. I have surrounded myself with network leaders to help with the culture change agenda to move this forward. It is such a huge opportunity. The beauty of it is that it does not necessarily require more network resources.

“Advancing this agenda requires a different mindset, a different way of working, and most importantly, a commitment to something bigger than ourselves and our organizations.”

“For some people, this is difficult to understand. For many people, this is naturally how they work. I really want to champion and support those who get it or are inclined to work that way, but do not yet have the tools to do it,” concludes Jane Wei-Skillern.

## A closing testimonial

"Dr. Jane Wei-Skillern provided timely advice as I shape the nascent Blue Ecology Institute Foundation. She helped me focus on creating meaningful social impact, by creating a new node in a network of collaborative institutions hoping to address climate change."

Michael Blackstock  
(aka Ama Goodim Gyet)  
Independent Indigenous Scholar,  
former member of UNESCO Expert Panel,  
and founder of Blue Ecology Institute



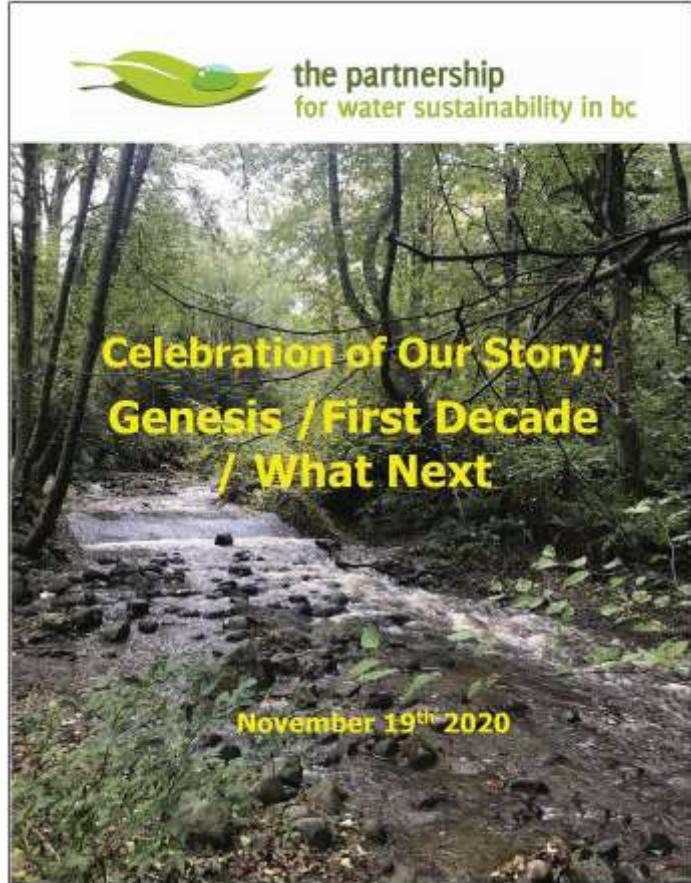
## The New Network Leader

Dr. Jane Wei-Skillern has created the New Network Leader website at <https://newnetworkleader.org/>.

"It's an interesting story of how we came to create this website together. In early 2016, I had the opportunity to work with Children and Nature Network to share my research. Through this project, I got to know Amy Pertschuk who found the ideas so compelling that she offered her services pro bono to help develop this website," recalls Jane.

"Initially, Amy asked if we should create a domain name focused on me and my research. I immediately realized that that would be too limiting. In order to achieve leveraged and scalable impact through this website, I absolutely needed to practice what I preach and make this website much less about me and much more about championing network leaders and the networks of which they are a part."

"It also made sense to reach out to some of my most inspiring and trusted colleagues who have deep experience leading, developing, and writing about networks themselves to develop the website jointly. These Resources have been collected and curated by a community of practitioners and network supporters working to increase the impact of social sector leaders and organizations by promoting the principles of successful networks."



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**TO LEARN MORE, VISIT:**  
<https://waterbucket.ca/about-us/>

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## About the Partnership for Water Sustainability in British Columbia

Incorporation of the Partnership for Water Sustainability in British Columbia as a not-for-profit society on November 19, 2010 was a milestone moment. Incorporation signified a bold leap forward.

Over two decades, the Partnership had evolved from a technical committee in the 1990s, to a “water roundtable” in the first decade of the 2000s, and then to a legal entity. The Partnership has its roots in government – local, provincial, federal.

The Partnership has a primary goal, to **build bridges of understanding** and pass the baton from the past to the present and future. To achieve the goal, the Partnership is growing a network in the local government setting. This network embraces collaborative leadership and **inter-generational collaboration**.

The Partnership believes that when each generation is receptive to accepting the inter-generational baton and embracing the wisdom that goes with it, the decisions of successive generations will benefit from and build upon the experience of those who went before them.



**the partnership**  
**for water sustainability in bc**