



the partnership
for water sustainability in bc

Waterbucket eNews on February 4, 2025
<https://waterbucket.ca/wscblog/>



**Living Water Smart
in British Columbia:**

**Counterbalance Artificial
Intelligence with
Natural Intelligence!**

Note to Reader:

Waterbucket eNews¹ celebrates the leadership of individuals and organizations who are guided by the vision for [Living Water Smart in British Columbia](#)².

The edition published on February 4, 2025 features Michael Blackstock, independent Indigenous scholar and creator of the Blue Ecology ecological philosophy. He provides historical context for core beliefs that shape our contemporaneous view of water. And he draws attention to the unintended consequences of going down the Artificial Intelligence rabbit hole. Because AI disconnects people from the natural world, Michael Blackstock presents Blue Ecology as a Natural Intelligence approach that counterbalances the AI hype.

The umbrella for Partnership initiatives and programs is the [Water Sustainability Action Plan for British Columbia](#)³. In turn, the Action Plan is nested within [Living Water Smart, British Columbia's Water Plan](#).



Cover Image Credit: photo by Cameron Stephens

¹ <https://waterbucket.ca/wscblog/>

² https://waterbucket.ca/wcp/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2017/11/livingwatersmart_book.pdf

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

One-Minute Takeaway

"I am worried about youth because they are going into these artificial worlds and may never experience the natural world." –

Michael Blackstock, independent Indigenous scholar and co-founder of the Blue Ecology Institute, and ambassador of the Partnership for Water Sustainability in BC



"The promotion of AI as the greatest thing since sliced bread is constant and we really must counterbalance that."

"A consequence of the AI drumbeat is the loss of our connection to the natural world."

Michael Blackstock

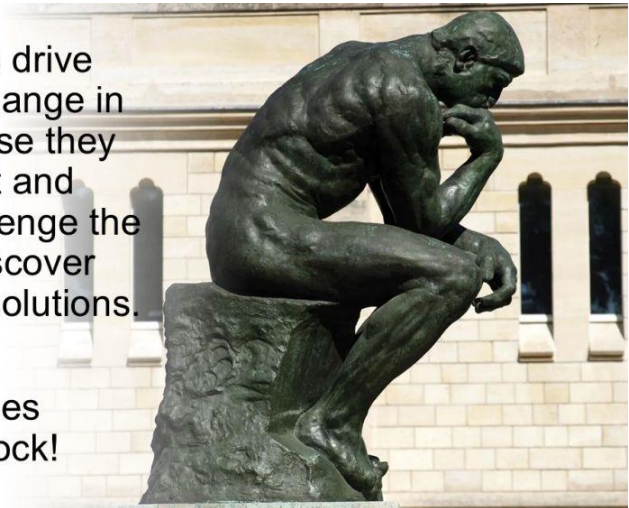
Counterbalance Artificial Intelligence with Natural Intelligence

The three ways of thinking come together in Michael Blackstock's Blue Ecology, a holistic environmental approach that interweaves Indigenous wisdom with scientific knowledge. Blue Ecology points the way forward to **Water Reconciliation**.

Michael Blackstock is a rarity because he is an original thinker who bridges two worlds...Indigenous and Western. A third dimension adds to his mix of attributes. His 35-year career in government as a negotiator and mediator gave him frontline experience in conflict resolution.

Original thinkers drive creativity and change in the world because they are independent and unafraid to challenge the status quo to discover new ideas and solutions.

That definition certainly describes Michael Blackstock!

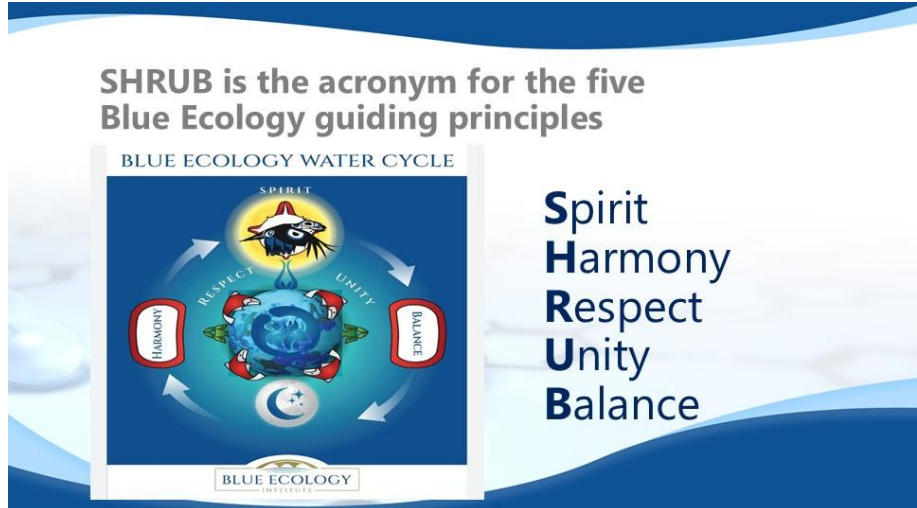


"My keynote presentation at the Asset Management BC annual conference in November 2024 was my first opportunity to judge a live audience response to the idea that we must counterbalance Artificial Intelligence with Natural Intelligence. The reaction was positive. And that is when I realized that I was onto something," states Michael Blackstock.

THE BIG IDEA: Indigenous wisdom reflects knowledge of Natural Intelligence

"Natural Intelligence is an idea that resonates because it is intuitively obvious. I believe it is that simple. Coming out of the Asset Management BC conference, I realized that I must be explicit in defining what Natural Intelligence means in an ecosystem context."

"Natural Intelligence is another angle on interweaving Western science and Indigenous knowledge because it explores what Indigenous knowledge is based on. Blue Ecology is a Natural Intelligence approach. Natural Intelligence is a form of Indigenous wisdom...which is knowledge of Natural Intelligence and how to live with it and how to be harmonious with it."



"Basically, Blue Ecology started with water. But the five principles of Blue Ecology apply to everything in nature. Blue Ecology is broadening out from water and flowing out to all of nature. So I have been thinking more broadly than water. What I have learned from water can be applied to all of nature," foreshadows Michael Blackstock.

Editor's Perspective by Kim A Stephens

The Partnership for Water Sustainability is all-in with our support for Michael Blackstock and Blue Ecology. In fact, our collaboration with Michael is living proof of what it means to walk the talk and lead by example when it comes to interweaving Indigenous and Western views of water.

Natural Intelligence defined

The Partnership for Water Sustainability is therefore excited to announce that this edition of Waterbucket eNews is the "publication of record" for unveiling Michael Blackstock's definition of Natural Intelligence:

“Avoid getting caught up in only looking to AI to solve your problems. There is this vast amount of wisdom out there that Indigenous peoples have seen forever...and that is Natural Intelligence.”
– Michael Blackstock



“**NATURAL INTELLIGENCE (NI)** is defined here as the theory and development of systems able to perform tasks that require the intelligence in Nature, such as the ability to adapt to changing environments, self-regulate life processes, and to collaborate with the ecosystem web in a sustainable way.”

“Natural Intelligence is the inherent wisdom and adaptability exhibited by Nature’s ecosystems, enabling water to sustain life, maintain its purity, and flow in rhythm with Earth’s natural cycles.”

“This form of intelligence is characterized by a deep understanding of natural laws, patterns, and the relationships between beings, with water acting as the unifier in the web of life.” – Michael Blackstock, 2024

Blue Ecology in the Cowichan initiative

Leading by example is playing out in the Cowichan Valley Regional District. The Regional Board has designated the Partnership for Water Sustainability as a Strategic Partner for the purposes of the Cowichan region's Drinking Water and Watershed Protection Program (DWWP).



The umbrella for our current collaboration with the regional district is the Blue Ecology in the Cowichan initiative. Building bridges between two cultures is about a mind-set change. To quote Michael Blackstock, "it costs zero dollars to change one's attitude."

Blue Ecology restores the human dimension to our understanding of how natural water systems function naturally

Watershed Moments is an inter-regional initiative to advance Blue Ecology. The Cowichan Valley has participated since inception in 2018. What Blue Ecology offers local government is a foundation, and starting point, that has both Indigenous and non-Indigenous buy-in.

In 2023, the Watershed Moments team produced a video documentary titled: **Blue Ecology: A Pathway to Water Reconciliation and Resilience at the Local Scale**. It was broadcast across BC by Shaw Spotlight on their community channels.

The next evolution in the Watershed Moments series of symposia and videos is the proposed **Cowichan Blue Ecology Circle Tour** of Indigenous communities for staff and/or elected officials to learn of Indigenous watershed stewardship firsthand.

The **Cowichan Region Climate Gathering** held in December is the springboard to Step One of the Cowichan Blue Ecology Circle Tour. Stay tuned for a Waterbucket eNews story about this amazing event, Michael Blackstock's role, and the historical parallels with the *Our River, Our Future Symposium* which was a milestone moment for the Georgia Basin Initiative in June 1995.

STORY BEHIND THE STORY:

Counterbalance Artificial Intelligence with Natural Intelligence - a conversation with Michael Blackstock

"There is untapped intelligence out there in nature. It is on our doorstep, but we have not tapped into it. And we are tapping it even less because we are so focused on artificial intelligence."



"During the day I listen to the stock market channel on the radio. The talk is constant now about AI. Companies are embracing it because it is viewed as the greatest thing since sliced bread. My observation is that we are being *firehosed*."

Michael Blackstock

"AI, AI, AI. The radio chatter is non-stop about how we have to invest in AI; how companies are signing energy agreements to power these big AI data centres; and how they are using water to cool the data centres because they are using so much electricity. Frankly, it is a bit too much hearing all these CEOs stating that AI is so important," states Michael Blackstock.

"It just seems that humans are going down this artificial rabbit hole where business believes technology is going to solve everything; and it is happening with no apparent awareness of unintended consequences."

Michael Blackstock

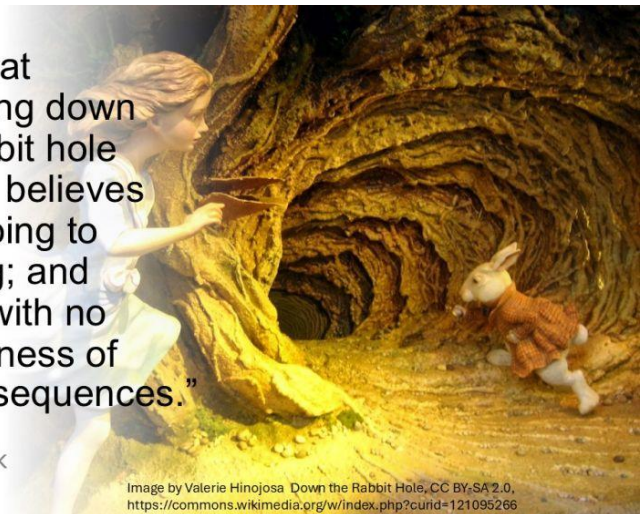


Image by Valerie Hinojosa. Down the Rabbit Hole, CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=121095266>

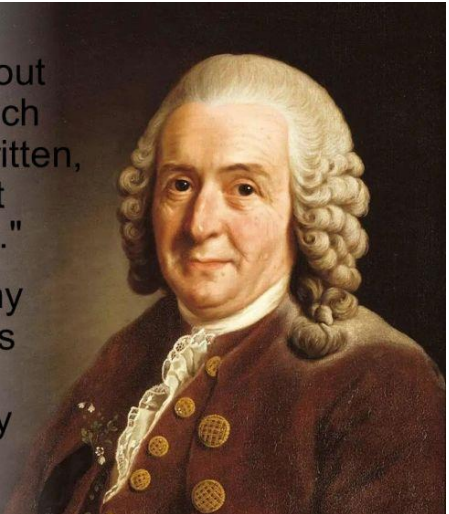
"Because we humans are losing more and more of our connection to the natural world, I am worried about our youth. They are going into these artificial worlds and may never experience the natural world. We need to counterbalance that. So, I thought, what is the opposite of AI? Well, it is Natural Intelligence! All my recent reading and thinking has flowed from that epiphany."

PART ONE: Michael Blackstock delves into the past to understand contemporary beliefs

"For a long time, I have been thinking about Carl Linnaeus, an 18th century biologist and physician who was born in 1707. He is known as the father of taxonomy because the Linnaean system has transformed into a system of modern biological classification intended to reflect the evolutionary relationships among organisms, both living and extinct."

"Although I have written about Carl Linnaeus minorly in each of the papers that I have written, only recently did I figure out what has long bothered me."

"Water is not in his taxonomy classification system. Why is that, I have wondered. I found an answer in the story of Georges-Louis Leclerc."



"Water never got on the list of the living world. Instead, it was put in the abiotic or non-living world. The chapter that I am writing for the Bloomsbury Handbook to the Blue Humanities has helped me dig more deeply and read more so that I can solidify my thinking around the consequences of classifying the natural world the way the Linnaeus did."



“When I was researching Linnaeus, I learned about Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon. He too was born in 1707.”

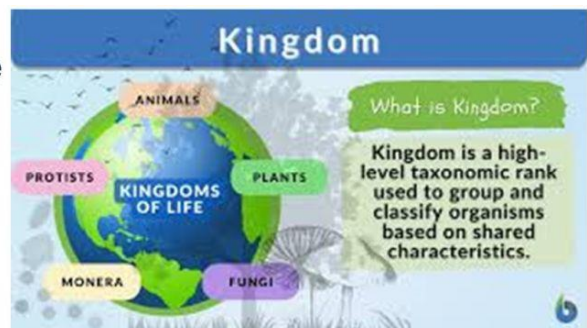
“Credited with being one of the first naturalists to recognize ecological succession, he was later forced to recant his theories.”

“The takeaway is that three centuries ago Carl Linnaeus and his classification system prevailed over the work of Comte de Buffon and that changed history. Although de Buffon was philosophically more aligned with the Indigenous view of nature, that critical understanding is lost in the mists of history.”

PART TWO: Michael Blackstock asks audiences to reconsider...what is water, really?

"Carl Linnaeus developed a classification system for living things that has five kingdoms. We all know that water is life. Yet water did not make his list and has yet to be added. How was that possible? It is a question that begs an answer."

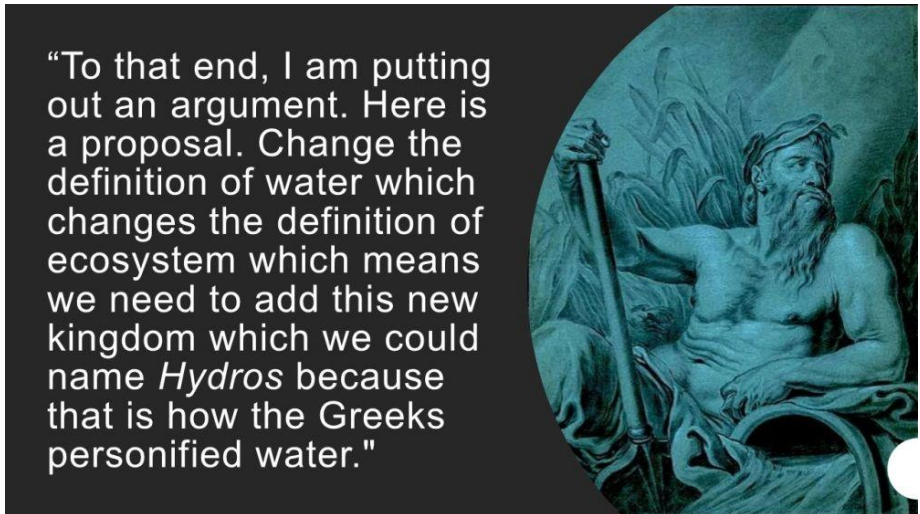
“Linnaeus's system of classification is the basis for how plants and animals are classified today. This influenced the development of the theory of evolution.”



"At the Asset Management BC Conference, I seeded the idea for a sixth kingdom which I propose to call Hydros. The idea is a work-in-progress because I have yet to think through the details as I have done for Natural Intelligence."

Failure to recognize that everything in a system is connected...can have unintended consequences

"The medical profession talks about brain health resting on heart health, and that is a relevant comparison. It is about being in balance, and that is what is missing in the hype about AI."



"in general, we pay lip service to systems thinking. It is not our current reality. It rarely is. Too often we fall into the trap of looking at things in isolation. That is why so many actions have unintended consequences. And that is why I am so concerned about the hype around AI."

What if de Buffon had changed history by embedding an Indigenous perspective in science in the 1700s?

"What if things had turned out differently and de Buffon had not been forced by the church to recant his theories? Well, we would be having a different conversation in 2025 because the definition of water would be different."

"In the 2000s, when I was a member of **the UNESCO-IHP Expert Panel on Water and Cultural Diversity**, I pushed hard to get agreement on redefining water. And we did. The whole group did that definition. It was a negotiation."

What is Water?

A deceptively simple question...

Instead of the Western Science definition...

Water is a chemical compound consisting of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom

Why not adopt the UNESCO definition...

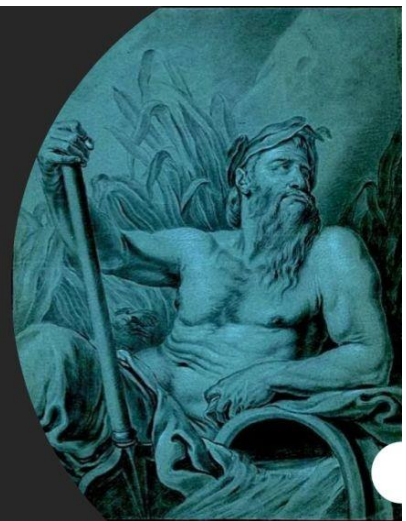
Water is the essential lifeblood of our planet, with the power to generate, sustain, receive and ultimately unify life

PART THREE: Michael Blackstock believes a change in the water definition would be a bold leap forward for Indigenous reconciliation

"If we collectively open our minds to look at water with fresh eyes, it is basically a progression. If we redefine water to align with the UNESCO definition, that affects the definition of an ecosystem."

"We should also repair the definition of the Linnaean classification system, by adding the kingdom **Hydros**. In my mind, it comes down to how we reframe the conversation to counterbalance Artificial Intelligence with Natural Intelligence."

"To that end, I am putting out an argument. Here is a proposal. Change the definition of water which changes the definition of ecosystem which means we need to add this new kingdom which we could name *Hydros* because that is how the Greeks personified water."



Change is a building blocks process: reframe the conversation, educate and inspire with bold thinking

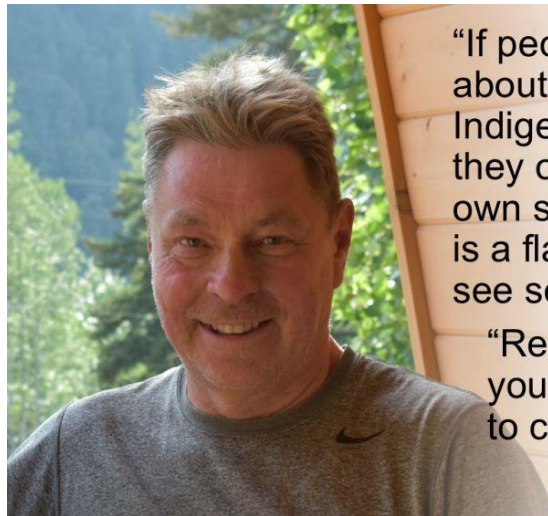


"We invited Michael Blackstock to contribute a chapter on Blue Ecology because we think Michael is well-positioned to help us achieve an ambitious goal," explains Dr. Serpil Opperman, Director of the Environmental Humanities Center at Cappadocia University (Turkey).

Serpil is one of four Bloomsbury Handbook co-editors and a catalyst in the discussions behind the scenes. Her mission is to be a bridge between the humanities and science studies.

"We intend this handbook to represent the state of the art in Blue Humanities thinking across different disciplines, regions, theories, and methods."

"It was around 2002 that I wrote my first paper proposing a new definition of water. The first building block in the change process was getting buy-in for the UNESCO definition as of 2008. The Bloomsbury Handbook is the next major milestone in the building blocks process."



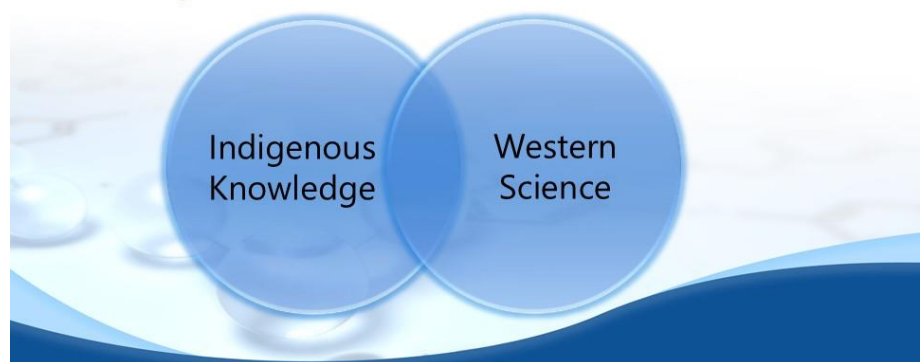
"If people are truly genuine about reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, are they open to changing their own systems when there is a flaw? I am saying, we see some flaws."

"Reconciliation means you are humble enough to change your system."

Michael Blackstock

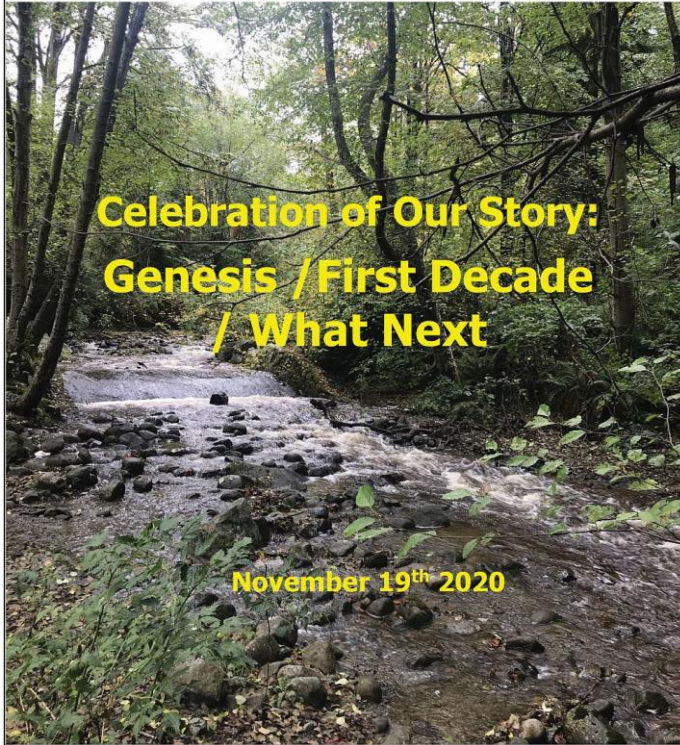
"In 2025, publication of the Bloomsbury Handbook will elevate the Natural Intelligence idea within academia. If all goes according to plan, the handbook will start a global conversation about the definition of water that trickles down and triggers a re-think. It sure would be great if that influences policy and practice the way Carl Linnaeus did three centuries ago," concludes Michael Blackstock.

**Interweaving is equals working in tandem
and requires Western Science to be humble**





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TO LEARN MORE, VISIT:

<https://waterbucket.ca/about-us/>

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.



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