



the partnership
for water sustainability in bc

Waterbucket eNews on February 25, 2025
<https://waterbucket.ca/wscblog/>



**Living Water Smart
in British Columbia:**

**Network of networks
in Cowichan Region is
like a forest ecosystem**

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 25, 2025 featured a remarkable cross-sector planning team that organized and delivered *Cowichan Region Climate Gathering* on December 9-10, 2024 on Vancouver Island. Keith Lawrence of the Cowichan Valley Regional District is the narrator for this story of a seminal moment in a 30-year journey for water reconciliation and climate action.

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 David Mackenzie,
a *Lifetime Member* of the Partnership for Water Sustainability

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

"The network of networks within the Cowichan region is like a forest ecosystem in a way. There are connections happening in these networks that are beyond what we can fully characterize."

Keith Lawrence, regional district lead and co-moderator of the Cowichan Region Climate Gathering in December 2024

"I see myself as merely a narrator speaking about a shared experience that we all had in planning the Cowichan Region Climate Gathering. We just know that ultimately, the network of networks can help us to work together towards a common vision."

Keith Lawrence, First Nations Relations,
Cowichan Valley Regional District



Cowichan Region Climate Gathering: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

The Cowichan Region on Vancouver Island is in the forefront of striving to learn from Elders and Indigenous leaders and community members. And a seminal moment in a 30-plus-year journey in pursuit of a Watershed Security Strategy is the Cowichan Region Climate Gathering held in December 2024.

This flagship event brought together champions from three worlds --- local government, stewardship groups, and First Nations communities --- to learn from each other, unite and build relationships through a network of networks.

Grounded in the cultural ways of the Indigenous partners, the event originated as an outreach initiative of the Cowichan Valley Regional District's [Drinking Water and Watershed Protection](#) (DWWP) Program. It morphed into something much, much bigger.

"Starting in May 2024, we reached out to local First Nations staff and Chiefs and Councils. We met with elders, youth and community members. To listen to indigenous voices for this Climate Gathering idea," Keith Lawrence recounts.

"It was recognized from the beginning how important it would be to ground the event in the traditional ways of the local First Nations communities and people in the region."



The concept of a "network of networks" emerged

"In our meetings with each community, we gathered their ideas on what the event should look like and how it should happen. Different suggestions that came forward ultimately became part of the overall experience of the event."

"And we recognized that we needed to have this big space discussion about climate action to connect a **network of networks** within the Cowichan region."



Story behind the story is about the team that delivered the Climate Gathering

"It was the coming together of a dedicated planning team that is the story behind the story. We become so much more when we are working as a team. We became the greater whole and this influences everything that came before and will happen next."

THE CLIMATE GATHERING TEAM (from left to right):

David Reay
Fernanda Gutierrez Matos
Katie Mosewich
Cindy Lise
Sandra Thomson
Keith Lawrence



"It is not just the set of cross-cutting mandates but also the capabilities that everybody brought forward to the planning team. That mix really did strengthen the process and made it possible for the Climate Gathering to be what it was in the end," concludes Keith Lawrence.

“Each of us on our own had significant work going on within our individual networks.”

“We realized it could be quite valuable for folks in each network to see how what they were doing might connect with what other networks were doing.”



"Partnerships are so important. They build trust and understanding, which can open closed doors."

Chief William Seymour
(1951-2024), past co-chair of the Cowichan Watershed Board which is a partnership of the Cowichan Tribes First Nation and the Cowichan Valley Regional District

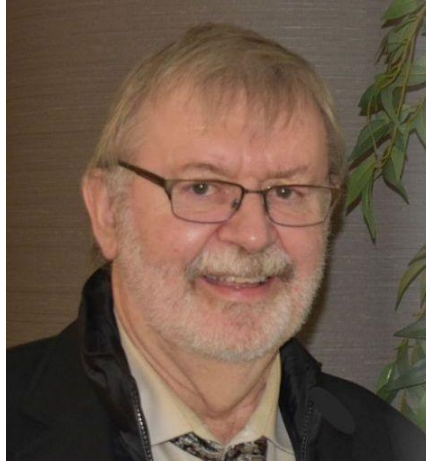


Editor's Perspective by Kim A Stephens

My history of collaboration with Cowichan Valley local governments goes back several decades. This provides me with a firsthand context for judging the historical significance of what Keith Lawrence and team accomplished at the Cowichan Region Climate Gathering in December.

The fact that Michael Blackstock, Paul Chapman and I tag-teamed to deliver a breakout session also gives me a participant's perspective.

Our breakout session was about the Blue Ecology in the Cowichan initiative which is a partnership with the regional district. Building bridges between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures is about a mind-set change. To quote Michael Blackstock, "it costs zero dollars to change one's attitude."



"The Cowichan planning team did an amazing job in delivering the Climate Gathering. They built a springboard to launch the vision for a NETWORK OF COWICHAN NETWORKS. This is a seminal moment in the spirit of the *Our River, Our Future Symposium* in June 1995."

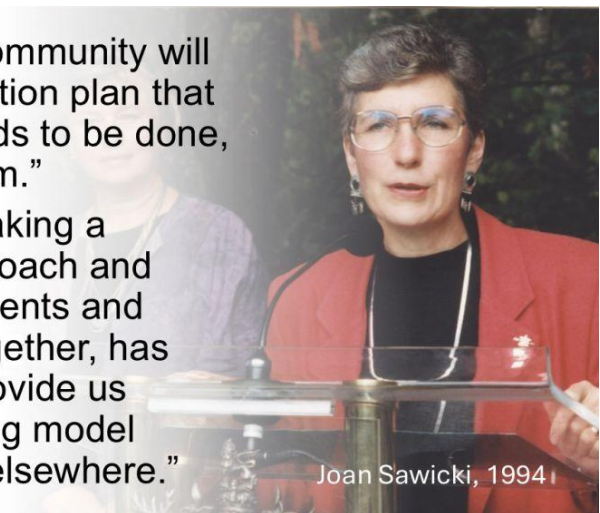
The people of the Cowichan Region are again taking the future into their own hands

The roots of the Climate Gathering are found in the "*Our River, Our Future Symposium*" which was a launch event for the Georgia Basin Initiative 30 years ago. The lead story in the premiere issue of the GBI newsletter in 1995 was the water situation in the Cowichan Valley.

The issues and concerns expressed then are still topical three decades later. Expressed another way, a reality is that change does not happen overnight, and it takes hard work and determination decade after decade to inspire change. The Honourable Joan Sawicki, who was the Parliamentary Secretary for the [Georgia Basin Initiative](#), foreshadowed the future when she wrote:

"From here, the community will put together an action plan that sets out what needs to be done, when and by whom."

"This project, by taking a sustainability approach and involving governments and the community together, has the potential to provide us with a solid working model that can be used elsewhere."



Joan Sawicki, 1994

Network of networks is like an ecosystem and is "transcalculational"

When I interviewed Keith Lawrence for the story behind the story, he introduced me to the word *transcalculational*. What does that mean and is your use an original application of the idea, I asked Keith.

"I cannot take credit for the term. Just the application," replied Keith Lawrence. The earliest reference to it that I can find in the literature is the chapter contributed by Richard C Strohmman to a book published in 1993."

Counterbalancing AI with an understanding of molecular and cell biology

Once Keith explained what **transcalculational** meant, it struck me that there is an intuitive linkage to what Michael Blackstock advocates when he says [Counterbalance Artificial Intelligence with Natural Intelligence!](#).

"There is this vast amount of wisdom out there that Indigenous peoples have seen forever...and that is Natural Intelligence...NI."

"Avoid getting caught up in only looking to AI, artificial intelligence, to solve your problems."

Michael Blackstock
Blue Ecology Institute



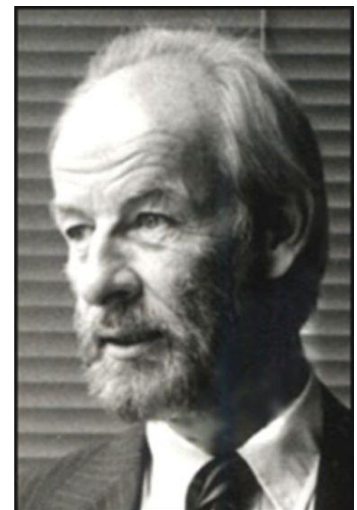
"Essentially transcalculational refers to systems that are so complex that they cannot be fully characterized by our existing understanding, tools and methods. What I find intriguing is that Strohmman uses the term in relation to the connections between the physical dimensions of our human selves (genes and proteins) and the environmental signals we receive." - Keith Lawrence.

So, we decided to draw attention to Keith's inspired application of the *transcalculational* concept and see whether and how readers respond.

"*Transcalculational* is a term coined by Richard Stroham that has been used in cell biology in relation to networks of genes, proteins and environmental signals," notes Keith Lawrence.

"Couldn't the term also refer to the complexity of the influences we have on our environment and on each other?"

Dr, Richard C Strohmman (1927-2009), an American cell biologist who taught at the University of California, Berkeley



STORY BEHIND THE STORY:

Network of networks in Cowichan Region is like a forest ecosystem - conversations with Keith Lawrence and Cindy Lise

The story behind the story is structured in four parts. In Part One, Keith Lawrence provides an overarching context. In Part Two, he then delves into how the Climate Gathering came about. Centre-stage is an emphasis on building relationships with First Nations communities.

In Part Three, Cindy Lise presents the storyline for the "day of the event" as a photo essay. This visual approach brings key themes to life for readers.

In Part Four, Keith Lawrence paints a picture of WHAT NEXT for the ecosystem of networks in the Cowichan Region.



PART ONE: Context for Water Reconciliation and Climate Action Work in the Cowichan Region

"Across the region we have collaborative networks that are each focused on a particular set of actions that support climate resilience," explains Keith Lawrence. "For example, stewardship groups for a particular watershed, airshed protection roundtable, energy reduction champions and climate action planning leaders."



"The gathering brought these networks from across the region together for further relationship building and identification of opportunities to work together."

Keith Lawrence

"The desired outcome in convening for action at the Climate Gathering is to enhance the collective impact of the network of networks in caring for people, land and water. These diverse partners are engaged in, and committed to, water reconciliation and climate action work in the Cowichan."

Mechanisms for collective impact

"Viewed through a local government lens, the Cowichan Valley Regional District has two primary mechanisms for watershed protection partnerships that build relationships and trust over time."

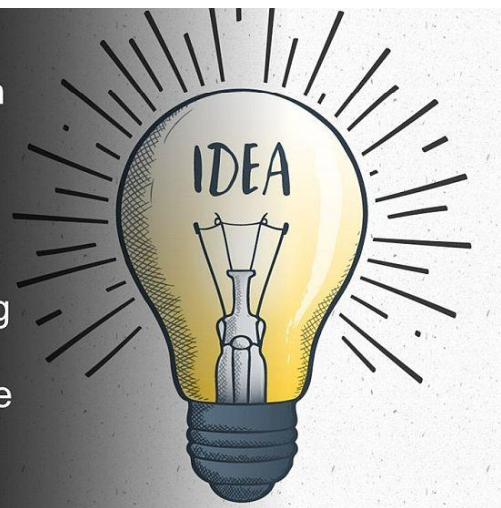
"One is the regional district's [Drinking Water and Watershed Protection \(DWWP\) Program](#). The other mechanism is the [Cowichan Watershed Board](#), which is a partnership of the Cowichan Valley Regional District and the Cowichan Tribes First Nation."

PART TWO: Genesis for concept of a "network of networks" in the Cowichan Region

"Our outreach for the Climate Gathering idea started in May 2024, continued right through 2024, and culminated with the actual event in December. Along the way we recognized the need to have this big space discussion," continues Keith Lawrence.

"The idea in many ways came through from the Vancouver island-wide forum in January 2024 on Making Connections for Climate Action. That forum was co-hosted by Island Health and the Snuneymuxw First Nation and held in Nanaimo."

"Cindy Lise and I both had light bulbs go off. Hey, we could do this here! And there is a need to do it because so much work is being done across all areas of climate action in the Cowichan Region."



"It really was collective enthusiasm and energy. Cindy and I fed off each other's enthusiasm. It snowballed from there. Essentially she and I realized that what was being done on an island-wide scale could be done within our region."

"This is another example of inter-regional learning being something that could be applied regionally."

Peer-based sharing and learning

"In that regard, I was able to apply the insights that I gained over the years through my participation in the [Georgia Basin Inter-Regional Educational Initiative](#). Insights into how we gather and what would be important to share."

"All those Georgia Basin IREI forums were foundational to understanding the common threads that local governments in five region districts were working on. But also, the differences in place that we need to be aware of as well."



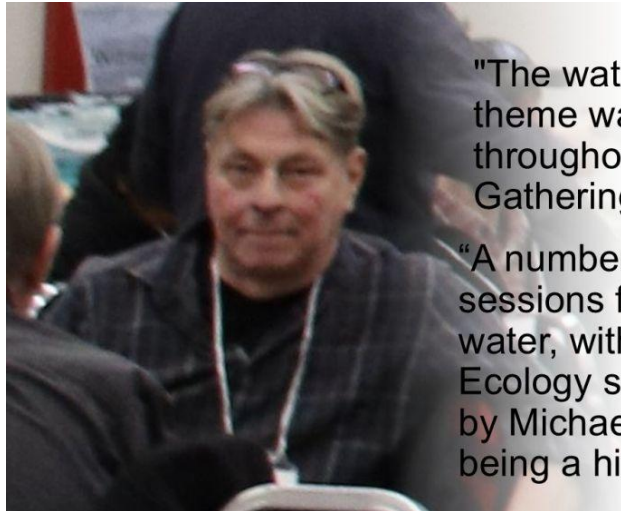
"One of the primary thrusts of the Climate Gathering was to celebrate work that is ongoing in the Cowichan Region. And I wish to really underline the word celebrate because so much is happening by so many folks."

"The Climate Gathering was an opportunity to acknowledge community members, organizations, and in particular volunteer stewards who have been carrying so much work forward. The Cowichan Stewardship Roundtable is one example. It is chaired by volunteers who give so much."

Climate Gathering supports the 10-year goals of the Drinking Water & Watershed Protection Program

"Each group working on climate action in the Cowichan Region has its own network. We realized it could be quite valuable for folks in each network to see how what they were doing might connect with what other networks were doing."

*"Now that Michael Blackstock has connected with Indigenous elders who participated in the Climate Gathering, the Partnership's Watershed Moments team has a conversation starter in each of the First Nations communities about the concept for the **Blue Ecology Circle Tour.**"*



"The watershed protection theme was fairly central throughout the Climate Gathering event."

"A number of breakout sessions focused on water, with the Blue Ecology session headlined by Michael Blackstock being a highlight."

"Increasing awareness of Indigenous wisdom related to water and climate change supports the 10-year goals of the Cowichan Region Drinking Water and Watershed Protection program. "

Learning and relationship-building is an ongoing cycle in the Cowichan Region

"When I reflect on my time with CVRD, I see a cycle of learning and relationship-building over decades. I think, for example, of the various folks who began relationship-building though the [Cowichan Stewardship Roundtable](#) back in 2003. And that really is just one point in time. It was happening prior to my involvement."

"When I joined CVRD in mid-2013, I had a strong sense that this would be a place where I could work in a more collaborative setting. There was a willingness to foster a collaborative framework between partnering organizations so that together we can respond to climate threats to our water resources."

"My first major assignment was the *Regional Surface Water and Groundwater Management and Governance Study*. We did a series a workshops with our partners."



Outreach experience from watershed governance study process completed in 2015 carries forward to today

"We went and met with First Nations chiefs and council members and staff in their communities where they lived. That led to important discussions and understanding their interests and priorities for watershed management. I feel honoured to have had that opportunity to be part of those meetings."

"In the end, all that work supported establishment of the watershed protection function by referendum in 2018. And through the Climate Gathering, that set us up to showcase a tremendous amount of work being done across the region."

Relationships, relationships, relationships

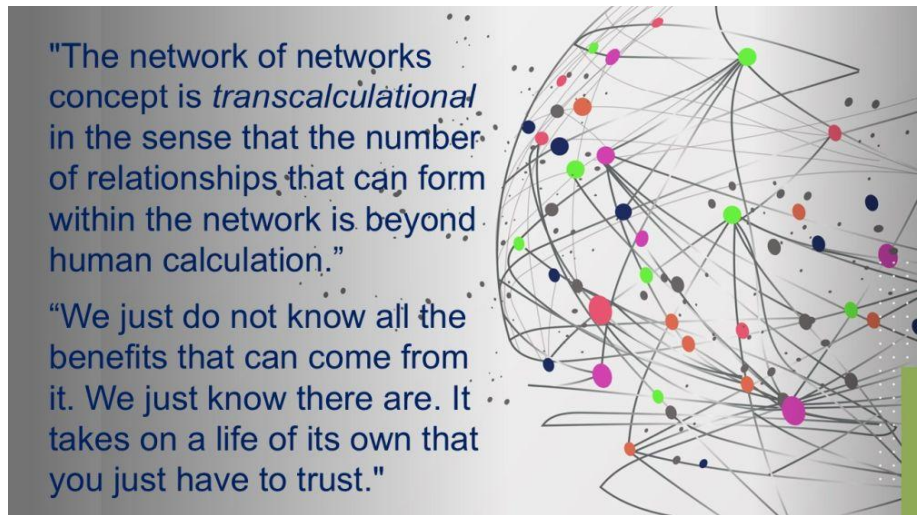
"And so, it does come back to relationships that were started through the watershed governance process. The outreach we did a decade ago carries forward."



"When we have relationships, we can have more effective, more deliberate, and more focused discussions about areas of overlapping opportunities. We are then able to address those issues that are of importance to our partners."

Ecosystem of relationships is beyond human calculation

"The network of networks within the Cowichan region is like an ecosystem. There are connections happening in these networks that are beyond what we can characterize. We just know that ultimately, they can help us to work together towards a common vision."



"The network of networks concept is *transcalculational* in the sense that the number of relationships that can form within the network is beyond human calculation."

"We just do not know all the benefits that can come from it. We just know there are. It takes on a life of its own that you just have to trust."

PART THREE: Framework for water reconciliation and climate action in the Cowichan Region

"The Cowichan Region Climate Gathering was an opportunity for us to celebrate the incredible climate action work in the Cowichan Valley Region," states Cindy Lise, Regional Facilitator / Executive Director with the [Our Cowichan Community Health Network](#) and co-lead for the Climate Gathering.

"There are many benefits to sharing, coordinating and collaborating in our own region, and the Cultural ways of being teach us that there is so much more that we could be doing." Cindy Lise

"The planning team aimed to strengthen the important relationships that allow us to build a stronger and more aligned collective approach to caring for our environment and increasing our resiliency to the changing world."

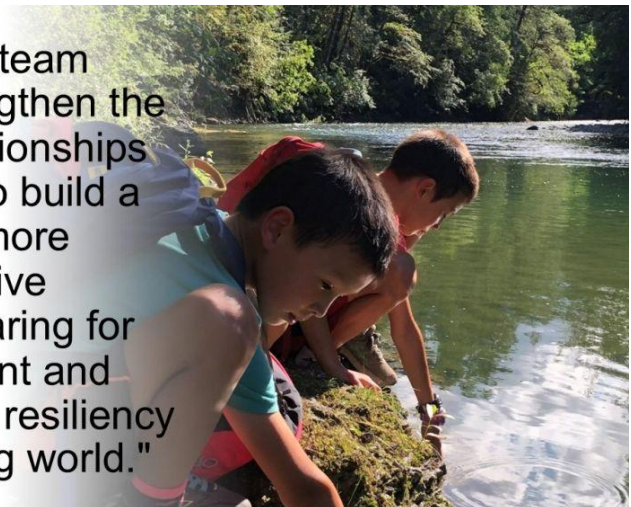


Photo essay captures the spirit of the event

"Throughout the two days, I took photographs to record the moment. After the event, when I looked at the photos and added captions, I tried to capture the essence of what it was that we wanted to accomplish at the Climate Gathering."



"We had a fabulous team, and we were able to make a dream vision a reality and added layers of detail to make the Climate Gathering a success."

Cindy Lise
Our Cowichan Health Network

Planning Team	Organization	Role
Keith Lawrence	Cowichan Valley Regional District	team leader & event co-moderator
Cindy Lise	Our Cowichan Communities Health Network	facilitation of community planning meetings & event co-moderator
Katies Mosewich	Cowichan Valley Regional District	the glue behind the scenes
Fernanda Gutierrez Matos	Vancouver Island Health Authority	event brochure
Sandra Thompson	Social Planning Cowichan	elder support and engagement
David Reay	community advocate for Thetis Island climate action	hands on event support in 100 different ways

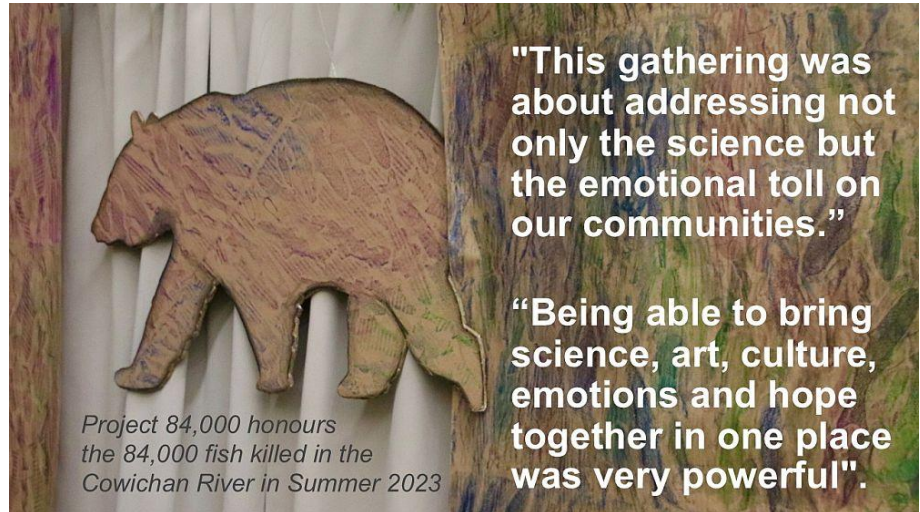
"Fernanda Gutierrez Matos did a wonderful job in creating the two program booklets and compiling a synopsis of the Climate Gathering. As well, she brought through many of the insights from a community health perspective." Cindy Lise



"This was the first-ever large-scale climate gathering for the Cowichan Region. It was our dream to host a two-day session, and we did."

"We also had the privilege to welcome Michael Blackstock from Blue Ecology."

FERNANDA GUTIERREZ MATOS



"This gathering was about addressing not only the science but the emotional toll on our communities."

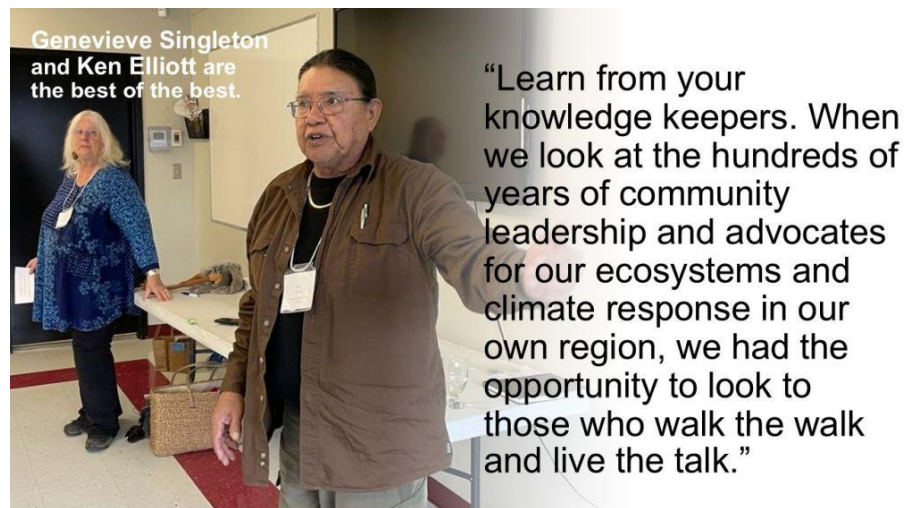
"Being able to bring science, art, culture, emotions and hope together in one place was very powerful".

Project 84,000 honours the 84,000 fish killed in the Cowichan River in Summer 2023



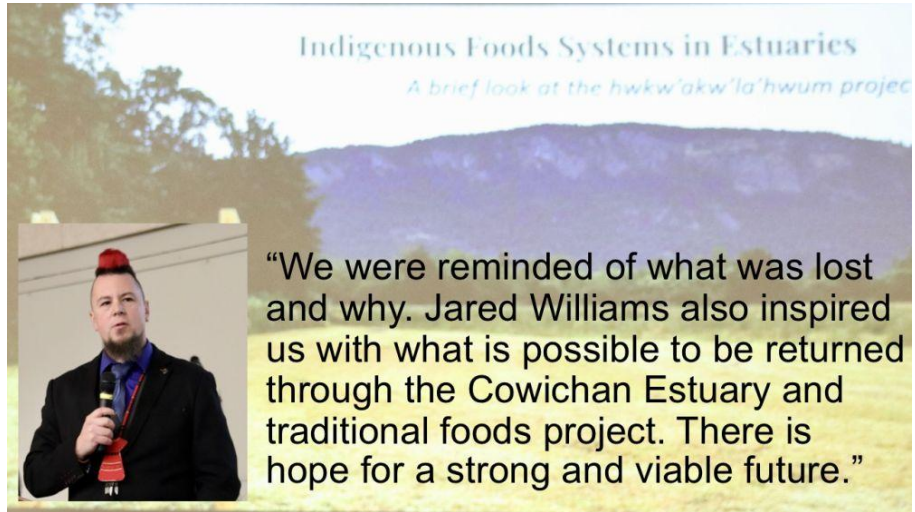
"Change cannot take place without great leadership. This gathering brought together leaders in government, health and community."

Duncan Mayor Michelle Staples and Medical Health Officer Stephanie Trepanier



Genevieve Singleton and Ken Elliott are the best of the best.

"Learn from your knowledge keepers. When we look at the hundreds of years of community leadership and advocates for our ecosystems and climate response in our own region, we had the opportunity to look to those who walk the walk and live the talk."



“X’Pey (cedar) and the water is our life. Without them we are lost. The *Climate Gathering* team found every opportunity to bring the two together.”

photo of the table centre



“Our young people are the ones to carry this work forward. Learning from our elders and transferring knowledge and culture through the heart was evident throughout the gathering with youth and elders coming together in meaningful ways.”

PART FOUR: **What Next - Climate Gathering is a springboard for the "network of networks"**

"Yes, there is the story of the development of the gathering which is something in itself. But the story behind the story is everything that comes before and goes on afterwards. We have already started meeting to decide what we will do next," reports Keith Lawrence.

"The Climate Gathering was successful because each member of the planning team brought their unique perspective from their organization and place. We worked at building relationships among ourselves."

"Grounding the event with the cultural ways of our local First Nations people was foundational to the event."



Narrator role for shared experience

"I see myself as merely a narrator speaking about a shared experience that we all had in planning the Cowichan Region Climate Gathering. I have that role because I was involved in the earlier stages. And so, I hold that and I carry that with me as an obligation or responsibility to be able to share that story. Our whole planning team very much lived that experience of coming together and it becoming a lived experience for all 150 participants who were present on those two days."



"Success has set us up for discussions that can lead to stewarding of the lands in ways that were done for thousands of years in the Cowichan Region since time immemorial."

"Connections coming out of the Climate Gathering will lead to more connections."

There will be a "next something"

"The planning team has been reflecting on what happened last December 9th and 10th, what was heard, what folks experienced, and where we go from here. There is a nexus. It is still to be determined what it looks like. BUT THERE WILL BE A NEXT SOMETHING!"

"There is lots of energy and enthusiasm, even just within the CVRD organization, to move forward and go out into the community and build relationships. It is still very early days for getting planning done for the coming year. But we are getting there."

"Lots of ideas are coming together which is exciting. The planning team anticipates that there will be another incremental shift in the coming months when that something takes shape."

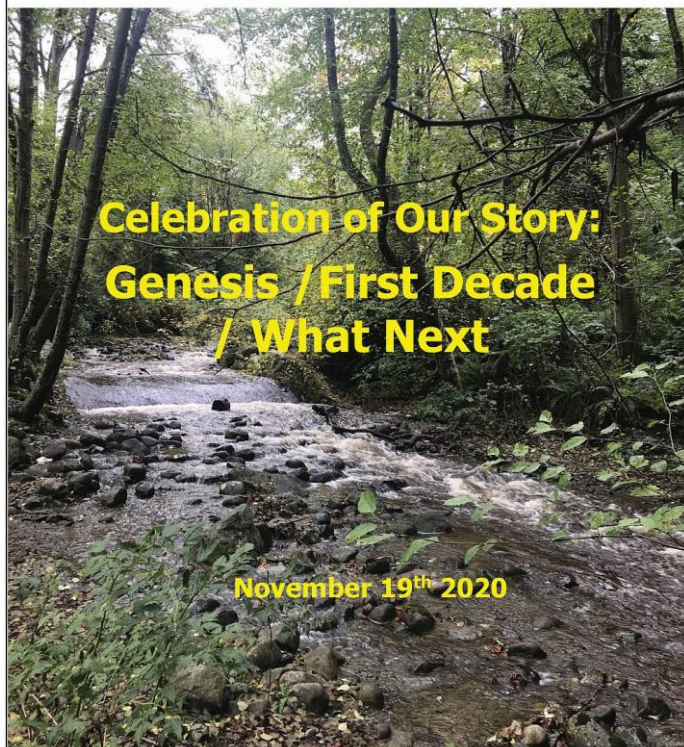


“This will be another dimension of connection to all this *climate gathering* work in a big way,” concludes Keith Lawrence.





the partnership
for water sustainability in bc



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.



the partnership
for water sustainability in bc