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Editor in Chief Commentary: Water - Recognizing the Indigenous Perspective

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Editor in Chief Commentary: Water - Recognizing the Indigenous Perspective

Abstract

Indigenous peoples have, since time immemorial, understood that water is central to the cycles of life. Yet, as many of the articles in this special issue on water in Indigenous communities point out, Indigenous peoples have real problems accessing safe water. Why?

Indigenous peoples have always cared for the water and followed practices that, depending on their geography, varied by season to protect and conserve fresh safe water. They have celebrated it as witnessed by the ceremony and language used. Colonial practices have disrupted the care and knowledge passing in Indigenous communities.

Cost-effective technology exists to deliver safe water to Indigenous communities. The issue is that *utilization of technology* and *environmental sustainability* rest on the social determinants of safe water. From a policy perspective, this means we have to look outside of Western technological solutions and come to listen to the other 'story' - the one that emanates from Indigenous Traditional Knowledge.

Keywords

water, colonialism, social determinants, traditional knowledge, policy

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Welcome to the *International Indigenous Policy Journal*. We are very pleased to publish this special edition of the journal on *Water and Indigenous Peoples*.

Normally, I would not write a special editorial, but I believe this is a very important issue that goes to the heart of the impact of colonialism on Indigenous peoples and their territories. The articles contained here make many important observations and draw our attention to many important policy questions. However, that said, I want to shed light on an aspect of this issue that is only partially covered.

The Impact of Colonialism on Indigenous Safe Water

When we talk to elders in many different Indigenous communities around the globe, we find a strikingly similar story. Indigenous peoples have, since time immemorial, understood that water is central to the cycles of life. We are created and grow in water. It is water that signals birth is about to take place. Each day of our lives, we must seek and consume water. Our thought processes, bodily functions, and growing of food and more are tied to having water. It truly is, as traditional Indigenous knowledge points out, central to our life cycle.

Yet, as many of the following articles point out, Indigenous peoples have real problems accessing safe water. Why? We have multiple articles on Canada in this issue and, in countries like Canada, there is an abundance of fresh water so why the problems for Indigenous peoples?

I can't deal adequately here with this question (the articles in this volume contribute to that understanding). But briefly put: Indigenous peoples have always cared for the water and followed the practices that, depending on their geography, varied by season to protect and conserve fresh safe water. They have celebrated it, as witnessed by the ceremony and language used. Colonial practices have disrupted the care and passing of knowledge in Indigenous communities. Whether losing lands that were part of the water systems or residential schools breaking the bonds and cycles between grandmothers and granddaughters, elders and youth, water keepers and apprentices, the bonds and practices that allowed transfer of knowledge and the care of water were snapped.

If we tried to understand this in Western science terms, we can come to a similar conclusion. We might draw on social capital theory to explain it. The bridging and linking forms of social capital get broken when the bonding family-based social capital networks are disrupted (see Robinson & Williams, 2001; White, 2003; Woolcock, 2001).

Regardless of whose 'story' we use to explain it, the impacts of colonial practises remain part of the explanation. Recently, I had the pleasure of speaking to an executive of one of the world's leading water and wastewater treatment companies. She was their scientific director and she said: "We could deliver safe water to every First Nation household in Canada for less than the cost of a color TV."

What should be clear to any who look is that it is not technology that stands in the way of solutions! The issue is that *utilization of technology* and *environmental sustainability* rest on the social determinants of safe water. From a policy perspective, this means we have to look outside of Western technological solutions and come to listen to the other 'story' - the one that emanates from Indigenous Traditional Knowledge. Recently, this point was driven home to me at Western University in London, Canada. At the university's Summer Institute on Indigenous Community-Based Research Methods, one of the Indigenous mentors made the point: "If we see water as sacred, how can you expect us to put chemicals in it and shake it to make it pure and safe? That makes no sense."

Policy becomes complicated, but it appears that the way forward will be to meaningfully engage Indigenous peoples in the process of rectifying the situation. Moving to more sovereignty over water supplies, allowing traditional knowledge to flourish, and, where feasible, blend the Western and Traditional ways to move out of the problems we now face. Control must shift, but that shift requires that the resources needed to cope with the system be guaranteed.

This goal could be accomplished with the creation of Indigenous peoples water commissions, for example, or in other ways appropriate to the regions. *How problems are approached* and the building of lasting and meaningful partnerships will be important in determining how successful we are in solving the problems associated with ensuring safe water.

We sincerely hope you enjoy this issue.

Jerry P. White

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