LIVING WITH THE RIVER: LIVED EXPERIENCES IN THE NORTH SASKATCHEWAN RIVER WATERSHED

BACKGROUND

The North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance is one of eleven Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils in Alberta. As a non-profit society, it works with partners to share knowledge about the watershed and guide in watershed management. It is led by a 20-member Board representing stakeholders from many backgrounds.

Pe Metawe Consulting is an Indigenous-led consulting firm with particular expertise in public engagement.

This report is a complementary chapter to a greater technical study undertaken by the North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance (NSWA) for release in 2025. While the technical study reflects quantitative data around water level and quality to show both change over time in the watershed and to give a reading of the current state of the watershed, the numbers cannot depict the complex relationship that people have with water. That is, the deep importance of clean water, of access to water, and the connection to water that people within the North Saskatchewan River watershed have.

To share a sampling of lived experiences, the NSWA partnered with Pe Metawe Consulting to conduct interviews with Albertans connected to the North Saskatchewan River watershed and write an accompanying report. All interviews were captured in Spring 2025. Interviews were recorded and will be made available through the NSWA YouTube channel.

Interviews completed May & June 2025





The NSWA and Pe Metawe Consulting want to express our deep gratitude to the interviewees who took the time to share their valuable experiences with this project.

Our thanks go to:

- Dan Moore, Director of Environment with the Alberta Forest Parks Association.
 Also sits on the Alberta Water Council and is the president of the Athabasca Watershed Council.
- Miles Wowk, fourth generation rancher south of Bow Valley, Alberta. Involved with the North Saskatchewan Water Alliance, Alberta Beef Producers, the Canadian Cattle Association, and the Western Stock Growers' Association.
- Jordan Reves, member of the Papaschase First Nation and the Métis Nation of Alberta. Raised in Lac St. Anne, Alberta.
- Michael Martineau, Department of Emergency Management lead with the Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations and a member of Frog Lake First Nation.
- Elder Fernie Marty, member of the Papaschase First Nation, originally from Cold Lake, Alberta but now in Edmonton.
- Norine Littlechild Saddleback, member of Samson Cree Nation, Maskwacis, Alberta.
- Delores Rain, member of Paul First Nation.

INTRODUCTION

In an effort to show the meaning and impact of water, this report gathers a sampling of human stories from a range of voices who live and work within the North Saskatchewan River watershed. Effective watershed management understands the need to plan for the very long term, as water will always play an important part in the ability for communities to thrive. Sustainable water management practices are an important tool to achieve this goal. Interviews focused on voices of Indigenous peoples, who have some of the deepest connections to the lands and waters and who hold valuable traditional knowledge of sustainable methods to live in relationship with the environment. The bulk of interviews are with members of First Nations and Métis communities from the NSR watershed. Of industrial stakeholders, the forestry and agricultural industries, in particular, rely on a healthy watershed for their continued existence. Representative voices from both of these industries were also interviewed.

In conducting these interviews, we heard many things. We heard about the sacred nature of water to Indigenous peoples and its spiritual role in traditions.

We heard about the many uses for water:

- as a highway for traditional travel,
- as a source of clean drinking and washing water,
- as a source of life for plants, traditional medicines, and wildlife,
- as vital habitat for wildlife,
- as a place for recreation,
- and as a place to create memories.

Interviewees spoke of water's use as a tool in industries, particularly the manufacturing and oil & gas industries, and they worried about the abuse of water when it is used as a place for waste and pollution. But more than that, we heard about the dangers of invasive species and the careless harm caused by recreationists. There is more recreational use of the waters partly due to the ballooning human population within the watershed, which is placing a corresponding pressure on water supply as demand for water increases. We heard how this climbing demand comes as the visible signs of the impacts of climate change grow. Interviewees sounded the alarm on the need for immediate, considered stewardship of the watershed, combined with calls for greater public education on water issues and calls for government action to ensure resources are equitably shared. Additionally, interviewees called for leadership and the inclusion of varied voices in all discussions and planning around water.

Traditional Indigenous Connection to Water

The Indigenous understanding of water holds that water is sacred. Norine Littlechild explained that the Cree word for water is nîpîy and it is literally translated as "I am life." Jordan Reves and Elder Fernie Marty also stressed that water is life. Elder Fernie Marty said, "You know, all of us as human beings, when we're in our mother's womb we're surrounded by water, water being very sacred to all of Indigenous peoples." Water is not only sacred to Indigenous peoples for its giving life to humans, but, as Elder Marty said, "Everything that's alive needs water."

Elder Marty pointed out that water is used by Indigenous peoples for ceremonial purposes, and that, "It's the women who are the caretakers of the water." As one of those women, Littlechild explained,

I was brought up from my grandmother and I was taught things such as, as a woman how important water is, that nothing will survive without water and that the women are the keepers of the water. So much so, it's validated through natural law, and that natural law is when the child is born [...] creation gave us that natural baptism of our children. So that's why we, as life givers, it's so important to advocate for clean, safe, healthy and sustainable drinking water.

Indigenous women are also holding water ceremonies, as part of their caretaking. Littlechild spoke of the pipe ceremony honouring water and the connections to water in the Cree creation story. She said,

[T]here's so many connections to water in the creation story that even our first man and our first woman were moulded with water and okâwîmâw askîy, Earth. Then we were warmed up, our bodies were warmed up with a piece of the sun. That's that spark that will travel beyond when we leave the physical element of the earth here and now, and then that breath and life we call wind, yôtin. Those four key elements make up our creation as Nehiyaw, the four bodies that Nehiyaw means.

Through an Indigenous lens, not only is water sacred, but there is a responsibility to it. Every two or three years, Jordan Reves canoes from Fort Edmonton to Victoria Settlement, stopping in areas with historical ties to his family and camping out. He both enjoys traveling the North Saskatchewan River and feels a duty to do so. He said,

As we know, the North Saskatchewan is a highway of our people, but it's also a corridor and highway for our animals as well and to preserve that nature is something in my heart to do, so that's why I use it to this day. If we don't use it, we'll lose it is how I've been taught by Elders and so I continue to practice my traditions [...]

The North Saskatchewan River is unlike any concrete highway. Reves said, "[T]o this day we just continually use the river for [...] fishing, harvesting plants, animals, things like that."

For Reves, part of taking care of the water means also being involved with environmental studies: taking soil samples, taking Environmental DNA samples, doing water testing, and watching for invasive species. As he put it, "Water is life and I'm very passionate about protecting that water while still allowing people to use it." Littlechild also spoke of the work her community of Maskwacis is doing in monitoring, sampling, tracking, and reporting on water quality to the government of Canada.

Reves further mentioned that traditional camping along the river system involved digging latrine holes away from water sources and then burying the human waste. This practice was to preserve the cleanliness of the water. Reves is concerned that there are current sewer cisterns that are pumping out into rivers without first cleaning the released outflow. Even when water is properly treated at a water treatment plant before being released into a river, Reves observed "significant effects on our water quality" from the difference in temperature between the release and the river water as well as from the chemicals used by the treatment plant.

"Everything that's alive needs water."

Elder Fernie Marty, Papaschase First Nation member

Access to clean water for Indigenous Communities

Access to clean water has historically been, and continues to be, an issue for Indigenous communities. Reves brought up Alexis First Nation and Whitefish First Nation as examples of Indigenous communities that finally do have clean water which is coming from Edmonton, while acknowledging that many Nations are still without. Martineau, in his role as Department of Emergency Management lead with the Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations, is focused on seeing Nations achieve access to clean water. Speaking from Edmonton, he said,

[W]e have nations right outside the city that should have clean water and should have always had clean water just because they're within 60 kilometers of the city, yet they've been on boil water advisories for years or they've had legal action and now people are getting buy outs from the government for what they just call dirty water money because there's now this longstanding health impacts from decades of having dirty water and having pollutants in the water, things like that.

Through the lens of emergency management, Martineau works to "maintain life safety" and the continuance of communities. As he put it,

[I]f all the water is poisoned and they can't live there and they move, then there's no community so then that's an emergency.

Martineau shared that, in speaking with colleagues who live on the Nations, there are communities where members used to play in the water, clean in the water, and fish in the water, but where they can no longer do so. Sometimes the water source has become too polluted and sometimes the water has dried up. As he said,

[A]II their cultural practices have had to move away from those areas and to another water source, and so that area is just left alone now. And so, it's just we're seeing that some communities actually have to abandon where they are in favour of clean water in another area.

While there may be another area to shift to once or twice, this is not a sustainable outcome of losing a water source. As Martineau pointed out,

[T]he reality is they have to move, their traditional practices, just have to move further out into more traditional lands that they may have been saving for other things, that may be for hunting or something else but now they have to go there for other activities. And that becomes an issue when what happens when all the traditional lands run out?

The amount of water one is allowed to draw is managed in Alberta by the issuing of water licenses. Different uses are given different priorities. When compared to agriculture, First Nations communities, which may have hundreds of people or more, are placed at a lower priority than industry. There is a concern that as greater pressure is placed on water supplies, that First Nations communities will be left behind. As Martineau said,

[A]s far as agriculture goes, [...] we just worry about, 'Are we gonna have our water diverted to go ensure this guy's crops continue?' but our people can't turn on the tap.

Personal memories of water

Many interviewees have fond memories of spending time on and around the water. For example, Dan Moore has many treasured memories of canoeing and fishing. He highlighted his love of canoeing and its ability to bring people to the water and to bond through shared experiences. As a member of the Canadian Voyageur Canoe Society, Moore has helped run three brigades of 25-foot boats.

Moore shared his experience of connection to water, "[W]hen I'm on the water in a boat and there's that certain serenity when you're there. It is like a spiritual experience to be on the water, to see the birds, see the fish, hear the water."

As a fourth-generation rancher, Miles Wowk hopes to pass the ranch on to his grandkids and is aware of how important water is to being able to do so. He said, "[T]he watersheds mean a lot to us in every way, shape or form." Looking at his own childhood, he said, "Even the Vermillion River, I remember when I was a child, we would have picnics and wiener roasts and go out and fish in the river."

Michael Martineau remembered growing up on the edge of Cold Lake. He said,

We used to, for fun, we'd climb under the dock and try to hook fish with dental floss and fish hooks and stuff like that and so grew up playing in the lake all the time and by water all the time.

Industry perspectives

Moore, as Director of Environment with the Alberta Forest Parks Association, has observed that industrial and societal attitudes towards the environment have shifted from what was common in the 50's-70's. Moore noted that in more recent decades, industry sectors as well as municipalities have developed plans considering water usage, which was uncommon decades ago. These plans were developed through the Alberta Water Council's Water Conservation, Efficiency and Productivity project begun in 2011. Moore observed that industry's thinking is changing to better include Indigenous voices. He said,

We continue to learn in industry that we need to, when we're working on plans, that we need to consider Indigenous communities, Indigenous perspectives. It's [...] important to recognize that not only is industry using water for their own purposes, but we need to do it in a way to make sure that we're not impeding treaty rights, that we're respecting all users in the water basin, all communities, all people. You know, what we may use we need to ensure that we're not causing harm.

Moore acknowledged that approaches that lack insight from Indigenous experiences are incomplete. He said,

When we're working on things like an integrated watershed management plan, let's say, or state of the watershed reporting, western science isn't enough to say this is what's been changing or this is how we should manage something.

As a rancher, Miles Wowk is concerned about the quality of the water in the nearby rivers. He said, "A lot of cattle won't even drink out of the river, either the North Saskatchewan or the Vermillion River." Wowk spoke confidently that farmers and ranchers care greatly about water quality and are taking steps to preserve riverbanks. For example, he cited the use of solar water pump systems to fill troughs for cattle to drink from and keep the cattle away from the riverbanks. He said, "[W]e're really trying to look after the riparian areas in around the rivers, of course."

Wowk also mentioned drought mitigation efforts, such as widening dugouts to hold more water and using rotational grazing to both keep moisture in the soil and cool the soil so that rhizomes and microbes can flourish. He described drilling down 225-260 feet for groundwater wells. Comparing today to the drought of the 1930's, he said:

So, we're all very, very conscious about what we do with our water and how we manage it, how we manage our grass because we know you just never know what's going to happen or how things are going to work.

Speaking as a landowner, Wowk said, "[W]e all want to do the best we can for the environment as well."

Signs of Change

Many of the interviewees spoke to the changes they've seen in the watershed's rivers and waters that they've experienced in their own lifetimes and across the watershed. The ability to use the river waters has changed since Littlechild was young. She shared,

When I was a little girl, the Battle River was actually so deep I wasn't allowed near it. But I could see all the teenaged kids flying off ropes into the Battle River, having a great old time. But we were too little because it was so fast, and we were told to stay away because it came right through the Sundance area. In fact, we used to just get a pail of water at the Battle, take it up, and kokum would make her soup, and we'd drink from the Battle River. Won't do that today.

Littlechild also spoke of changes at Onion Lake. She said, "You can't even go swimming where we used to go swimming, it's just receded so much." Rain, in particular, has seen drastic changes both in water quality and access to water in her lifetime. Rain recalled frequent camping trips as a child growing up. She said,

[W]e did a lot of camping and, you know, living off the land when we were young, growing up. And our water used to be drawn from springs. Like, you know, the springs that I can remember, like, we can't go there and expect to get water because it's gone.

Speaking of Wabamun Lake, Rain pointed out the decline in water quality. She revealed,

When I was a kid growing up, it was okay to drink it. [...] But now we can't even swim in it. That's, like, 30 years.

As an adult, Rain has recent experience with losing access to clean water. She shared,

[W]e were on a drilled well for our water usage, our water, like, for our need for water, and recently that well went dry. So the drilling, they drilled deeper but there was still no draw of water, so they put us onto that Wild Water line, mainline. So that's how we get our water now.

Elder Marty spends every summer traveling and harvesting traditional plants. He spoke of returning to Cold Lake and seeing that they no longer allow swimming in the lake due to the bacteria count and water pollution. He remembered being able to drink the lake water from the shore as a child.

Moore mentioned changes in water flow and water availability in Alberta's water basins, as well as the shrinking of glaciers and changes to weather patterns. When it comes to drought, Moore noted that drought, while familiar to southern Alberta, in northern Alberta has caught industry off guard. Moore stated,

We've seen drought recently in 2023, 2024, and just not in southern Alberta, we've seen drought in northern Alberta as well, which is not something that most people would've expected, say, ten years ago.

Additional changes are also being seen with an increased presence of nonnative and invasive species along waterways. Reves has experience in
mitigating invasive and non-native species in riparian areas. He pointed to a
City of Edmonton Vegetation Management project he worked on. Within the
North Saskatchewan River Valley and next to a golf course, non-native shrubs
have grown along the riverbank to be larger than average native trees. These
shrubs crowd out native plants. Simply removing the shrubs and their root
systems causes considerable damage to the shoreline. Reves admitted that
those shrubs, "will never be gone, they're massive." The next best alternative,
despite involving chemicals, has been to chemically stunt leaf growth on these
shrubs spraying up two feet from the root system. This creates space for native
species to gain a foothold. Reves said, "We've seen some of those native plants,
like poplar, birch, spruce, coming back in there."

After high school, Martineau worked in the oil and gas industry for nine years, north of Cold Lake. He saw a noticeable difference in the land and water over that time. He said.

I worked in the oil and gas for nine years and saw the difference, I went out on the bombing range north of Cold Lake, the difference on the land that the oil and gas industry has played, from it being all lush muskeg and swampland and wetlands to then just being, like, choked out and the only thing that can survive there is scavengers.

He went on to say,

I would sit there day in, day out and you would see them, the vac trucks come in and suck up a bunch of fresh water and then bring that to go so they could do fracking and directional drilling and then pour that down and then it's just taking it from one area and putting it back in the water table filthy and dirty with pollutants from, just so they can get more oil.

Elder Marty also sees health effects of polluted water. He said, "People gotta drink water, people gotta have a shower, and people are breaking out in different types of skin diseases." Elder Marty also remembered growing up and getting four to five feet of snow in the winter but hasn't seen that in a long time.

Sources of Change/Warnings

Population Growth

Several interviewees pointed out that the human population within the North Saskatchewan Watershed has expanded rapidly in the last few decades and is predicted to continue growing. The presence of more people places greater strain on the watershed as the demand for water climbs. Moore warned of economic consequences of failing to take steps to conserve water. With significant predicted population growth, there needs to be sufficient supporting resources. Moore noted, "[Y]ou don't want to start picking winners and losers in terms of who's going to have the water and who isn't."

Population growth is also pushing more people to live along the rivers. Reves has seen unhoused people living both along the banks and in canoes.

Additionally, growth is spurring the development of land that are traditional Indigenous camping sites. Reves said,

I found a lot of sites going down river that we used to always go, and now people are living there, so it impacts our historical sites, our riverbanks, [...]

Elder Marty pointed to tourism and the lack of care some tourists show as contributing to the deterioration of Cold Lake. Reves, speaking of the North Saskatchewan River, sees the damage to the waterways done by increased boating and even visitors walking the shoreline and finds it deeply sad. He said,

[B]irds come to lay their eggs in the spring, and these boats come in there and wash them into the river, and it's terrible, it's actually really sad. It hurts my heart, to be honest with you [...]

Littlechild also spoke of the damage being done by recreational activities taking place in environmentally sensitive areas. She said, "Those social, recreational activities and the UTVs that are in and around the North Saskatchewan need to stop."

Rain fears that the damage to the environment that she's seen is permanent. She shared, "I don't think anything is going to go back to its natural state. There's too much development, there's too much growth."

<u>Climate Change</u>

Littlechild spoke of how climate change is part of the reason she participated in these interviews. She said,

You know, these are the things I'm hoping we respond to in sharing these interviews because climate change is here, climate change is deadly and it's getting worse. It's not going to get better. As scientific data reports show, the indicators are that it will be hotter, it will be windier, and in what has become known as tornado alley from Red Deer to Olds is shifting up to us, that far north.

Moore fears that impacts of climate change may be unavoidable. Moore pondered,

Drought's a tricky thing because the climate, no matter what humans do, the climate runs the risk of running you out of water despite all of your best efforts. So, how do you help communities shift to a reality where despite all of society's best efforts to, let's say, ensure there's water in a river or that wetland is kept whole that you can't win that because of climate change?

Martineau spoke of conversations with Indigenous Elders,

[E]very Elder that I've talked to about it has talked about how, just general affects of climate change. Like, we used to get rain a lot more, it used to be much more predictable, now we don't seem to get anywhere near as much rain and when we do it's all at once, it's like big rainstorms and then everything dries up again. Like, just the lack of a cycle, the lack of any sort of pattern anymore, that's pretty much been the main thing that they've noted.

The outcomes of this are felt in many ways, even for berry picking. As Martineau explained,

It's becoming more scarce across the board, even if it's just, like, berries, like, medicine, food, everything and it's the on-running joke that people are getting more and more territorial about where they go to pick, where they won't tell anybody, they won't even bring family members to go pick with them now, they'll go and do it just themselves, or bring, like, one or two people they know really well because they don't want to give away their best spots because there's less and less out there [...].

And it isn't just in the North Saskatchewan River Watershed. Martineau warns of climate refugees. He said,

[W]e're starting to see places in the world along the Equator that are hitting that wet bulb threshold, where people can't live there anymore, and so I picture 10, 20 years from now we'll start seeing more climate refugees coming up and then that's definitely going to impact us, not just from the influx in people but because those temperatures are also going to reach us. Like, we're already in a multiyear drought right now that's not going to get any better. And so we're going to see the impacts more and more.

<u>Pollution</u>

Miles Wowk cited water pollution as a concern. He said, "[T]here's still a lot of communities, a lot of cities, that dump effluent into the river. Maybe it's treated, some of these smaller communities, maybe not." Manufacturing industry practices also concern Wowk. He said, "There are businesses, of course, that are using it to cool, you know, their manufacturing process and they've got to be careful at what temperature they put that back in the river."

Both the direct actions of individuals and climate warming are factors contributing to the spread of non-native and invasive species. Reves said,

There's a lot more different invasive species in there now, right? As it warms up, things move in, right? It's different, not-native species a lot of the time moving in there because people are bringing things, letting them go, and then things are growing, right? And same with invasive plants.

Oil and Gas Industry

Martineau and Elder Marty pointed to the oil and gas industry as being major polluters of water. Elder Marty, speaking on what's left once the oil companies are done, said

So who's left with the clean up? Canadians. Who foots the bill? Canadians. Who suffers as a result? Canadians. You know? Most of these oil companies are from the United States and other parts of the world. We don't get anything out of that. You know? And they're taking billions of dollars, and yet what are they doing to the environment? You know, some of that money has to stay here to maintain [...] the water. I think companies, from now on, should be made to put a deposit toward just maintaining good, healthy water.

Call for education

Moore noted the goal is to try to "do the same or try to do more with less water." Moore sees education as a key component in learning to conserve more water. Moore advised:

It's happening, it's probably going to continue to happen, where we're going to have decreased resources, and we need to learn as a society to live with less water. And so I think that we need more public relations campaigns and informing the public that, you know, drought is here.

Rain is very concerned about the lack of awareness in her community around the precarity of their continued access to water. She said,

I don't believe that there's any awareness. Everybody is, like, you know, not even thinking about tomorrow. We're in such trauma state right now so, I mean, like, if... I cannot speak for the whole community, but in my view, if their water was turned off today we'd be in such trouble because we don't even have the thought of tomorrow, in terms of water.

Reves wants to see more awareness training on water issues. Reves mentioned both training in schools, from elementary onwards, and public awareness commercials. He said,

Having more commercials about our water, just putting it out there, [...], saying the effects of putting Tylenol in the water or gasoline in the water, what does that do.

But Reves stressed that education on water is tied to education on Indigenous history and Canadian commitments. Before colonization, the Blackfoot, the Cree, the Saulteaux, the Dene, and the Métis would gather at a winter camp in what is now Blackfoot Provincial Park and they would work out the seasonal harvesting of animals. As Reves said, "[B]y the end of it, we'd all go home with something." Once the Canadian government arrived, they broke up this yearly arrangement. Treaties were signed between Indigenous peoples and the government of Canada. Reves said,

Those treaties were meant to be for us to have partnership with the newcomers where we weren't going to be struggling with our livelihood and our traditional ways. But for them to come here, use the land, use things, but us be compensated for what we're not able to use anymore. [...] It was made by your government that you wanted to move to, so that's something between you, the government, and us, but we have to all be together because we live together, we use the water together.

As Reves noted, "It'll take time, but we have to start somewhere." Reves mentioned,

We bleed together, we cry together, we eat together, and I think we need to bring that back, and so like I said, it's just been more awareness. The more awareness we can do, I think the more we can do more for the river and the water bodies.

Martineau repeatedly spoke of how the reality of the water situation has not been broadly realized. For instance, speaking of a particular lack of awareness in the oil and gas industry, he said,

But if every time you pull that water out you put it back in dirty, you're not going to have clean water, and I don't think that really, fully sinks in with people.

Martineau also pointed out how knowledge of the lack of clean water on Indigenous Nations is largely unknown in urban centres. He said,

I don't think it's seen as an emergency in cities because, especially in the city, because we have water treatment plants, we have, the availability is there, but because there is no capacity on these nations, on a lot of our nations, or minimal capacity, in the city they don't necessarily see that they're already at risk, they're already at a crisis point, and so anything that would tip them over makes it a disaster. And I don't think that's felt in the city and I don't think people fully grasp that.

Littlechild also called for more education for the next generation. She said,

I know who I am. I am a waterkeeper. I am a protector, I am an advocate. And you know what, I need to do better as a responsible citizen of my nation. So, if we can create that kind of environment for our youth [...] I think they'd do better than looking towards drugs and alcohol [...]

Cultural shift

Martineau sees the need for a cultural shift in both industry and in the general public. He calls on industry to focus less on industrial growth at the cost of everything else. Alternatively, levels of industry could be maintained but they would need to shift away from focusing on the maximization of profits to instead support the environment and water tables with sustainability-focused decisions. He said,

And just being somewhat conscious of every time you, leave your [...] sprinkler on, that might mean that outside of the city there's somebody who turns on their tap, there's an Elder who has no water and they go to go draw from their well and it's empty and now they're worried about how they're going to survive and that community has to put out emergency alerts on and they have to go door to door to drop water off to people and to check on them to make sure they're okay. Because that is the reality of what we're already facing, never mind in five years from now.

Elder Marty pointed to the Indigenous concept of being caretakers of land and not owners of it. He said, "[W]e're only the caretakers of this land, we don't own this land, we just caretake it."

Several interviewees also object to the commodification of water. For example, Elder Marty was one of several Indigenous interviewees who heard warnings from their parents or grandparents about how society was shifting to assigning a dollar value to water. Elder Marty shared,

[Y]ou know my grandparents and my mothers and all my people I know growing up as a young kid, a young boy, traditional people said, 'You know, in the future you're gonna see where you're going to have to buy water to drink.' And I thought, 'Yeah right.' Well, then I looked today and said, 'Yeah, they're exactly what they said is happening.'

Rain spoke plainly,

I don't agree with selling water. My dad always said that, 'There's gonna come a day when you're gonna have to buy your water,' and it's coming to that day. Because we do pay for that water that's released through that system that we're currently... It's not a good thing.

Call for government

The role of government in watershed management is important, but interviewees said government could be doing more to support the environment and remote communities while also ensuring businesses behave in a sustainable way. Wowk said, "Politically, I hope that the whole climate, the political climate is something that doesn't push back on the environment."

Moore is concerned for smaller communities and their exposure to climate risk. He said,

[T]he government needs to ensure that there's resources that can be made available to help remote communities, whether that's through wildfire mitigation or that's through water supply, water treatment.

Elder Marty is troubled by companies that are doing business locally, generating significant wealth, but are then walking away without remediating environmental damage they've caused. He wants to see government impose strict regulations and penalties on such behaviour. Referring to large natural resource-based companies, he said,

[T]hey're going to be made to [...] clean their own mess before they even leave here, and if they don't, be fined, penalized. Big time. Be made to clean up... If they don't, injunction against them where they never can come back here again to do anything because of what that mess they left behind. Very severe, very severe. They have to. They just can't let them get away with stuff the way they have been. That's not business, that's not good business, you know? You think about it, that's poor business. Because who pays in the long run? Canadians, not only just Alberta here. You've gotta think about the ripple effects throughout Canada. One province suffers, we all suffer.

Call for involvement

Interviewees see the need for their voices to be part of the planning conversations for water management. For Indigenous communities, involvement, whether with industry or others, is vital to ensuring their observations are included, that their traditional knowledge is respectfully integrated, and that impacts to them are planned for. As Littlechild said,

We need to do better. We can build, but we need to be cognizant of how and where Indigenous people are in that building of infrastructure. Because we'll always be there to be the reminder, you know, we were here first and we do not want to be left behind.

Rain said,

[A]s an Indigenous leader, I think that industry needs to really engage especially our Elders, our women, our waterkeepers and just, you know, really pay attention and have respect because that's what's gonna maybe replenish, is that respect for Mother Earth.

When it comes to planning in watersheds through organizations such as the North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance, Wowk noted that there is a lack of representation from the agricultural industry. He stressed, "We need a voice. We are a voice." He attributed a lack of time and a lack of awareness to the dearth of these voices but reiterated, "[Y]ou're either at the table or you're on the menu."

"We bleed together, we cry together, we eat together, and I think we need to bring that back...The more awareness we can do, I think the more we can do more for the river and the water bodies."

Jordan Reves,

Metis Nation of Alberta & Papaschase First Nation member

Closing

The interviewees agree that effective watershed management is essential to the future of communities within the North Saskatchewan River watershed. It is clear that the relationship between people and water is vital and multifaceted. As was repeatedly pointed out, water is life. There is a deep dependence on access to unpolluted water for basic survival but also for a multitude of purposes from power generation to spiritual renewal. This dependence comes with a corresponding responsibility and duty to steward water management to the benefit of all. Effective stewardship will rely on extensive planning, inclusive practices, education, and leadership. And the time for this stewardship is now, as access to water is already a challenge for some communities and there are widespread signs that water is under threat.

Again, the North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance and Pe Metawe Consulting offer our deepest gratitude to our interviewees who made time for this project, who shared personal experiences, and contributed valuable insights into the realities of living and working within the North Saskatchewan River watershed. While connected to a specific geographic area, their words hold wisdom for a much wider audience.

In closing, the words of Jordan Reves offer a summation.

And like I said before, if you don't use it, you'll lose it, but while you're using it, please don't abuse it. Because we all use that waterway. Farmers use it for agriculture, the power plants use it for our city power, we use it for recreational [purposes] and [as a] food source. It's just used all around, in every area, where people don't realize that because they're sitting inside, turning on a tap, and they don't realize that's that water.