



## VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Welcome to [\*Voices from the Field\*](#), a podcast produced by the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health (NCCAHA), which focuses on innovative research and community-based initiatives promoting the health and well-being of First Nation, Inuit and Metis peoples in Canada.

This episode was produced by NCCAHA in conjunction with the National Collaborating Centre for Infectious Diseases ([NCCID](#)) and the National Collaborating Centre for Environmental Health ([NCCEH](#)).

## EPISODE 6

### **Water: Our First Relative, Our First Responsibility**

This episode is based on a [keynote presentation delivered by Dr. Priscilla Settee](#) at the fourth annual [“Create H2O” First Nations Water Research Conference](#), organized by the [University of Manitoba’s Centre for Human Rights Research](#) (June 1-2, 2017). Grounded in a human rights perspective, Dr. Settee referred to a number of organizations and reports focused on water crises, including unresolved drinking water advisories and the resulting social and health impacts experienced by First Nations communities across Canada. These include:

David Suzuki Foundation and the Council of Canadians (2017). *Glass half empty? Year 1 progress toward resolving drinking water advisories in nine First Nations in Ontario* [Rep.]. (2017, February). Retrieved from <https://davidsuzuki.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/REPORT-progress-resolving-drinking-water-advisories-first-nations-ontario.pdf>

Make it Safe. (2017, June 06). Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis>

Mitchell, K. (2017, February 24). Drinking water crisis in First Nations communities violates human rights [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://www.ecojustice.ca/drinking-water-crisis-first-nations-communities-violates-human-rights/>

She raised specific alarm on the ongoing stress to waterways caused by fracking, oil production, and mining. Data presented by Dr. Settee showed that contamination to waterways invariably impacts human health and

well-being. As a result, there has been a groundswell of resistance from those who are most affected by water contamination. In particular, she noted the work of the [Water Walkers who have circled the Great Lakes](#) to draw awareness to the sacredness of water. Dr. Settee concluded her presentation by asking that conference participants to draft a living and organic declaration for the future of water.



## BIO

[Dr. Priscilla Settee](#) is a faculty member in both [Indigenous studies](#) and [Women's and Gender Studies](#) at the University of Saskatchewan, and a member of Cumberland House Cree Nation. She shares her expertise in Indigenous science knowledge, including about traditional foods, with people around the world. In 2013, Settee was awarded the Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee award for her contributions to Canada.

## TRANSCRIPT

**Voice Over:** Welcome to *Voices from the Field*, a podcast produced by the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health. This series focuses on innovative research and community based initiatives promoting the health and wellbeing of First Nation, Inuit and Métis peoples in Canada.

In this episode, we hear from Dr. Priscilla Settee, a faculty member in Indigenous Studies as well as Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Saskatchewan.

What follows is an edited version of her keynote at the 4<sup>th</sup> annual "*Create H2O*" *First Nations Water Research Conference*, organized by the University of Manitoba's Centre for Human Rights Research.

Her talk is entitled, "Water: Our First Relative, Our First Responsibility". In it, she argues that Indigenous access to drinking water faces threats from the toxic by-products associated with activities of the fracking, oil and mining industries, activities which occur in the vicinity of literally hundreds of Indigenous communities.

**Priscilla Settee:** Good morning, everybody. I'm going to be reporting on a number of reports and organizations addressing the water crises, issues that affect water quality (including legal implications), and policy questions.

In her book, *Boiling Point: Government Neglect, Corporate Abuse and Canada's Water Crises*, Maude Barlow states: "Water will teach us how to live together. We need a strong national plan of action based on a new water ethic that puts water protection and water justice at the heart of all our policies and laws. Generations have dumped what we wanted into water, over-extracted it for chemical-laden food production, and diverted it from where it was needed to sustain a healthy ecosystem to where it was convenient for industry and urban populations. Water protection regulations across the country are uneven and generally inadequate, changing from province to province. And federal rules are almost non-existent, which has a huge impact on federally jurisdictional areas of First Nations reserves and communities."

Now I want to point to a few situations across Canada in First Nations communities. Neskantaga First Nation in Ontario has had to boil water since 1995. And I quote: "We're over twenty years where our people haven't been able to get the water they need to drink from their taps or to bathe themselves without getting rashes."

The chief, Wayne Moonias, told CBC in 2015 their water issues have yet to be resolved. They are not alone. As of winter in 2016, and many of you are aware, that there are 163 drinking water advisories in place in 119 First Nations communities in Canada. More than a hundred are routinely in effect, some for years and decades. And waterborne diseases such as dysentery and shigellosis are common.

In the environment, contaminants such as mercury—we hear stories about Grassy Narrows, Whitedog, it's been in the news for 40, going on 50 years. And the poisons have not disappeared, they've sunk to the bottom of the water, but they are still impacting the people of the region. PCB's, toxaphene and pesticides stalk our community.

And I want to spend a few minutes talking about reports that substantiate First Nations water crises. And a lot of the reports are academic, but a lot of them are also known as grey literature.

You know, Human Rights Watch, it conducted research in First Nations communities in the province of Ontario to understand the human impacts of crises and to understand why the problem persists around water and sanitation. This study found that the Canadian government has violated a range of international human rights obligations toward First Nations persons and communities by failing to remedy the severe water crises. Their research found that while the most severe public health concerns, waterborne illnesses and related deaths, have mostly been avoided through the water advisories, the social costs and human rights impacts of the crises are considerable.

In communities like Neskantaga and Shoal Lake 40 First Nations, where advisories have existed for approximately twenty years, a whole generation of children grew up unable to drink the water from the taps. Individuals from this generation are starting to have their own children and to despair.

And I'm going to describe some of the daily hardship of living under a water advisory for years. It means that some people become frustrated and drink it with, drink the water, without boiling or otherwise treating it, risking exposure to contaminants. Others use tainted water for bathing or for household tasks, such as washing dishes or clothes. Some avoid the water at all costs, but do not have sufficient safe water to meet their daily needs. Many households surveyed by Human Rights Watch reported problems related to skin infections, eczema, psoriasis and other skin problems, which they believe were associated with water conditions in their homes.

Debora C., a woman in Grassy Narrows First Nations, explains how difficult it was to manage her nine year old son's recurrent rash. And I quote: "I kept taking him to the clinic and they kept saying it was eczema. His belly and buttocks got really red, oozy and it spread. The ointment they gave me didn't work. I took him again." Finally, her son was diagnosed with a skin disease that resists most antibiotics. And I was just talking to my colleague here about her really important work in how this very fact is a daily reality for some people where some infections can no longer be treated by antibiotics.

She cannot bathe him in the tap water in her home and uses bottled water in large jugs. "I sponge him with bottled water from the jugs, clean him that way. My son has scarring now from where the rash broke out. It's not inflamed now, but he will have an inflammation once in a while. It won't go away totally, because of the water. But now we know how to control the infection." So these are some of the stories of every-day life for women trying to keep their family safe.

The David Suzuki Foundation and Council of Canadians have published a report card rating governments progress on meeting its commitment in nine First Nations in Ontario, which has the highest number of water advisories in Canada.

So they've produced this report called *[The Glass Half Empty](#)* and found advisories in three communities have been lifted, or will likely be lifted within five years. Efforts are under way in three other communities but uncertainty lingers about whether they'll succeed within the five-year period. Three others are unlikely to have advisories lifted within five years without reformed processes and procedures. And in one community that had its advisory lifted, new drinking water problems emerged, illustrating the need for sustainable, long-term solutions.

I want to now spend a few moments talking about fracking, oil exploration, mining. So those are three areas that have been identified by researchers as areas that are really a big source of the stress that water is facing.

So in terms of fracking, 170 square kilometres of tailings ponds leach 11 million litres of contaminated water every day; 8.32 million litres of water are used to frack a well, some use more. In March of 2015, the Government of Alberta released the “Tailings Management Framework for the Mineable Athabasca Oil Sands.” It found that the total volume of fluid tailings, a toxic by-product of Alberta tar sands, reached 1.18 trillion litres in 2015.

And I want to just talk about Saskatchewan’s poor safety record and why I as one citizen have deep concerns. In 1999, Enbridge Line 3 Pilot Butte spill, there was a spill of 3,180,000 litres. And because it was right adjacent to a First Nations Nakota reserve, it really didn’t get the media coverage it deserved. And, in talking to the people in the community, it still has not been dealt with accordingly. We had 8,000 industrial spills in Saskatchewan since 2006, 17 per cent of these were from Husky Oil, Saskatchewan’s biggest producer, and inspection records for Husky’s pipeline spill still have not been made public. So lack of transparency is a really fundamental issue.

Mining is the second largest industrial user of water after power generation. Ecojustice, the Canadian non-profit environmental law organization, reported that between 2006 to 2009 approximately two million tons of pollutants, including lead, sulphuric acid and carcinogens such as arsenic, nickel and chromium, were released in Canada by mines, into tailings and waste rock dumps.

Acutely lethal seepage into water, and knowing about leakage since at least 1997, Ontario now ranks highest for environmental liability in the mining sector, with 4,412 active and abandoned mine sites and 5,000 recorded mine hazards.

So the point I am making in all of these numbers is that there are huge pockets of wealth that are either accorded carte blanche access to our precious water and are not paying the taxes due, but yet ordinary citizens are having to bathe their children in bottled water and where is the justice around that?

Finally—and this is a lot of, you know, fairly sad news or bad news—but the resistance that’s coming to all of this, in part with the support of our scientific researchers who are our allies, is really coming from the ground. People who have the courage to address these issues because we’re living with it, we’re living with the contamination.

And I want to just spend my last couple of minutes talking about the Water Walkers. Two Anishinaabe grandmothers, and a group of Anishinaabe women and men, have taken action by walking the perimeter of the Great Lakes and, really, in a very humble way, addressing the sacredness of water.

The first annual Women's Water Walk took place in April in 2003. And several women from different clans came together to raise awareness that our clean and clear water is being polluted by chemicals, vehicle emissions, motor boats, sewage disposal, agricultural pollution, leaking landfill sites and residential usage. And there is a current walk going on as we speak.

The anticipated outcome is to have all people aware of the importance of the water and support for annual walks throughout the region. It will entail support, recognition, awareness of the importance of keeping Great Lake waters clean and not just Great Lake waters but all waters.

Thank you for being such good listeners. Thanks.

**Voice Over:** For more information on [Dr. Priscilla Settee](#) and the [Create H2O First Nations Water Research Conference](#), or to hear more podcasts in this series, go to the "[Voices from the Field](#)" homepage. Find it on the website of the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health: [nccah.ca](http://nccah.ca).

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