



Cowichan Watershed Board



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THE COMPLETE WATER MAGAZINE



The Watersheds 2014 Forum Consensus

Watersheds 2014: Towards Watershed Governance in British Columbia and Beyond was held on Cowichan Tribes territory in Duncan, British Columbia from January 27th to 29th, 2014¹. This forum attracted nearly 200 delegates, plus an additional over 75 virtual participants via online satellite events across the country. The delegates came from a diversity of backgrounds—including watershed groups, researchers, professional resource managers, and decision-makers at all levels of government, including First Nations—who came together to re-envision the way we use, share, and respect our freshwater and watershed resources. This consensus represents the general spirit of common understanding of values, principles, and priorities by those at the forum and is supported by a number of organizations which were partners on the event.

Our Common Values

Water is life. Water is our relation. Water bonds us across time and place to our ancestors, to our descendants, and to our land. Water nourishes, replenishes, cleanses, and refreshes. It is the source of food, sustains our salmon, supports our rich environment, and powers our economy. It is critical to our community and economic prosperity.

Water cannot be owned as it is shared by all life on Earth. It is a public trust that provides a universal link between all cultures and species, requiring us to understand each other's experiences, histories, and identities. As such, we each have a duty of stewardship and share a mutual responsibility to ensure water is protected and stewarded to provide for its availability for the health and resilience of all life.

Towards a New Approach—Watershed Governance

Watershed governance is emerging as a viable approach to achieving long-term ecological and economic sustainability and better engagement of local communities, including both rights holders and stakeholders, in critical decisions that affect us all—upstream and down. A key factor for its success is improved collaboration and connections between citizens and decision-makers at the watershed scale. The approach has many benefits, including **building resilience** to adapt to change and enable innovation; **leveraging expertise** and a diverse range of resources; **clarifying roles and responsibilities**, thus increasing accountability; creating **opportunities for shared learning** and capacity building; and **reducing conflict** and increasing public confidence. It need not be yet another layer of government or bureaucracy. Rather, the overarching goal is to provide an alternative to current systems of governance and planning that focus too narrowly on single sectors, thereby isolating water and watershed resources from their broader interactions across communities and within ecosystems.

At the *Watersheds 2014* forum the following **key principles** were revealed that underpin watershed governance:

- **Water for Nature**—building resilience in ecosystems as the foundation of the economy
- **Connected Systems**—including surface and groundwater, land-water interactions, and cumulative impacts

¹ *Watersheds 2014* was organized by the POLIS Water Sustainability Project, situated at the Centre for Global Studies at the University of Victoria, the University of Victoria's Department of Geography, and Brock University's Environmental Sustainability Research Centre, with significant funding from the Canadian Water Network and the Real Estate Foundation of British Columbia, and with the support of numerous other partners and sponsors.

- **Transparency and Collaboration**—community engagement and deliberation with all key rights holders and stakeholders, involving public, non-profit, and private actors, ensures cross-sector perspectives and solutions
- **Clear Roles and Responsibilities**—involving nesting watershed organizations and institutions across scales
- **Knowledge of Watershed Health**—reliable, consistent monitoring and reporting of the function of local watersheds
- **Sustainable Financing and Capacity**—maintains longevity and ongoing capacity to respond to new and emergent issues
- **Accountability and Oversight**—ensures legitimacy in decision-making and is the foundation of good governance

The following **challenges** were also identified at the forum:

- **Inadequate Legal Framework**—to enable watershed organizations and local roles in decision-making to thrive
- **Difficulty in Delegation of Appropriate Powers**—to ensure those impacted have a say and that water is secured as a public trust for today and future generations
- **The Role of First Nations**—in formal watershed decision-making
- **Lack of Comprehensive Monitoring and Reporting**—of surface and groundwater use
- **Reconciliation of Aboriginal Rights and Title**—as a constitutional priority
- **Access to Sustainable Funding and Long-Term Capacity**—for science-informed and locally appropriate decision-making

These challenges can be overcome and, along with the principles identified, offer a genuine opportunity to move past the current logjam of inaction to ensure better governance, and ultimately the sustainability, of our home watersheds.

Priority Actions

Forum engagement and dialogue identified the following priority actions as essential for making progress towards watershed governance:

1. **Support of a new British Columbia *Water Sustainability Act***, including the development of its supporting regulations, that enables watershed governance, recognizes and respects aboriginal rights and title, strengthens oversight, and implements strong minimum standards to ensure watershed governance reflects upstream and downstream community interests to ensure basic ecological function.
2. Urgent need to **integrate resilience thinking in planning and governance processes** at all levels of government and community action.
3. **Ongoing commitment to, and participation in, a growing water movement**, including sharing experiences and knowledge to support innovation in governance and watershed stewardship.
4. **An annual forum of watershed-based groups and users from across B.C.** to build capacity and knowledge and exchange best practices and lessons on the ground.
5. **Improved public engagement and education** to build a common water culture and ensure active citizen participation in watershed governance.
6. **Research on and viable models for sustainable funding** of watershed governance entities.
7. **Identification and support for pilot initiatives** aimed at developing Water Sustainability Plans, as articulated in the new B.C. *Water Sustainability Act*.