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Released today! New research on Water Sustainability Plans in B.C.

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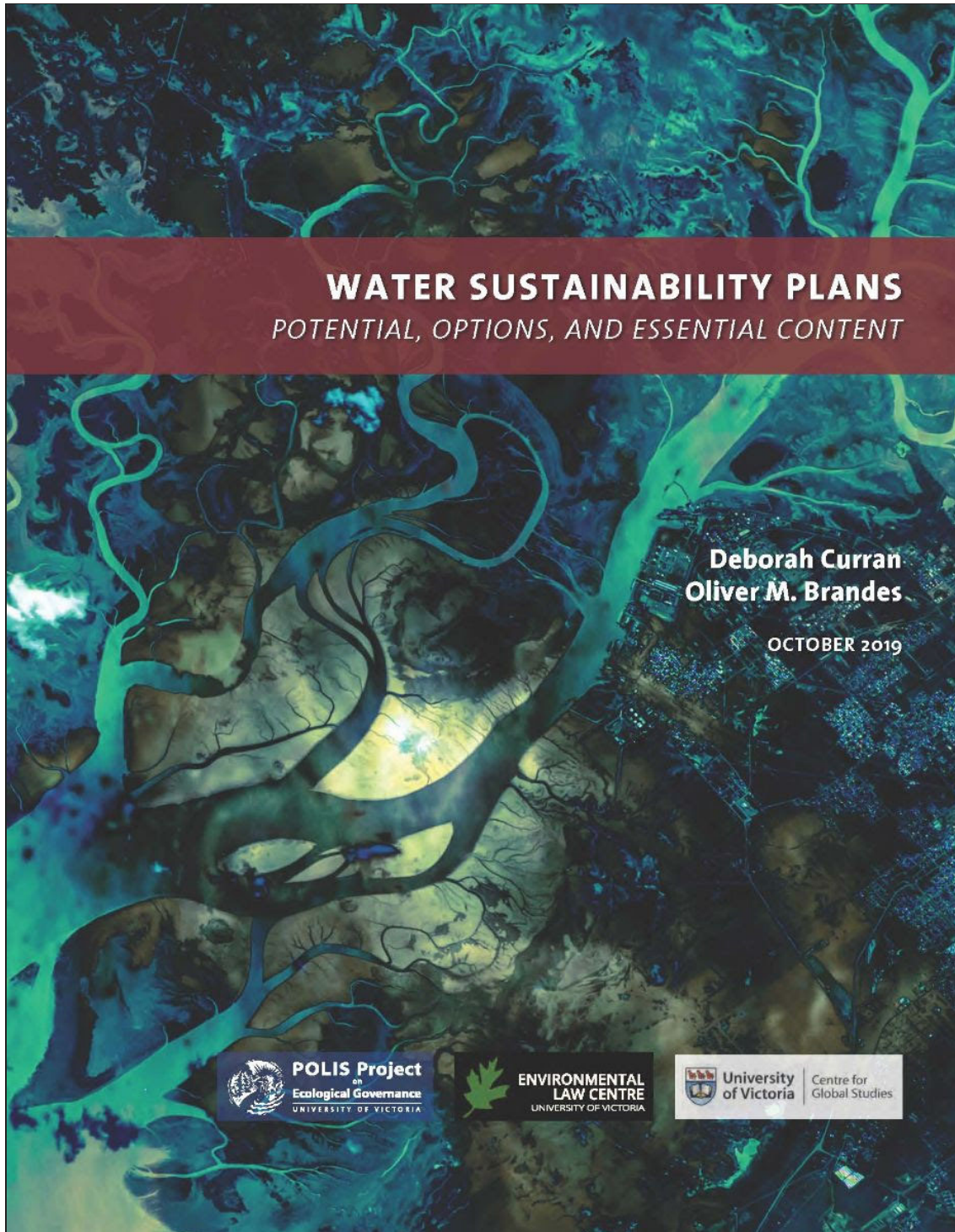


POLIS Project on Ecological Governance
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Released Today!

***Water Sustainability Plans:
Potential, Options, and Essential Content***



New research from POLIS Water Sustainability Project and Environmental Law Centre

Effective and sustainable freshwater management is an urgent priority for communities to maintain ecosystem health, sustain economic prosperity, and

advance reconciliation between state and Indigenous environmental management.

Released today, a new [Innovation Brief](#) from the University of Victoria's POLIS Water Sustainability Project and Environmental Law Centre investigates the myriad possibilities associated with Water Sustainability Plans, enabled by British Columbia's new *Water Sustainability Act*, to address the water challenges ahead and embed sustainability in B.C.

"Water Sustainability Plans are a powerful new legal tool with a lot of potential and flexibility to address local needs and priorities across the province," says co-author Deborah Curran, Executive Director of the Environmental Law Centre, University of Victoria. "They haven't yet been implemented anywhere in British Columbia, which creates an opportunity for us to really explore how they could be used to their fullest extent."

Understanding how Water Sustainability Plans can begin meeting the needs of communities and healthy functioning watersheds will be critical to building necessary watershed resilience and ensuring B.C.'s freshwater future. The Innovation Brief provides a comprehensive understanding of how Water Sustainability Plans can operate to enhance adaptive water management, improve water sustainability, and build new innovative governance relationships.

It includes a discussion on Water Sustainability Plans as a step towards reconciliation and the larger goal of Indigenous self-determination, a clear explanation of the necessary technical components of Water Sustainability Plans, their legal impact, and hypothetical scenarios to concretely demonstrate possible practical applications and the potential for water managers and communities in different watersheds across the province.

"Our goal with this brief is to support meaningful conversations concerning the essential content needed in Water Sustainability Plans," says co-author Oliver M. Brandes, Director at the POLIS Water Sustainability Project, University of Victoria. "We understand that a lot of creativity and resources are still needed to develop and fully implement these plans. We encourage communities and all levels of government to use the Innovation Brief as a starting point for engaging

in robust local processes to advance more sustainable approaches to water management and governance.”

[Download full report.](#)

[Download report summary.](#)

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Key insights and observations

- As an element in the modernized provincial water regime, WSPs are a promising tool that can enable and enhance adaptive water management and new governance relationships that express core elements of government-to-government relationships for water and watersheds, as well as address the challenges of environmental flows, sustainable groundwater management, drought planning and protecting and enhancing watershed health.
- WSPs can express government-to-government agreements and parallel governance structures between Indigenous nations and the provincial government. WSPs offer many possibilities that can complement and support the framework for Indigenous legal orders and aboriginal rights, and can assist in moving towards reconciliation and the larger goal of Indigenous self-determination.
- WSPs are intended to be long-term and create both a vision and governance processes for a watershed that rely on Indigenous and local governments, as well as other sectors and community interests to oversee and implement over time.
- A thorough understanding of the local context and “state of the watershed” is needed to support any watershed vision or WSP. This requires ongoing data collection and monitoring to ensure understanding as the local context changes, and must consider the future impacts of climate change.
- Watershed-specific performance-based objectives and environmental flow standards will establish the socio-ecological framework within which decision-making processes can operate.
- Taking a whole-of-watershed approach, WSPs can link land- and water-use decision-making. By regulation, impacts on water establish the parameters within which decisions about forestry, agriculture, and urban development are

made.

- WSPs can be adaptive. They have the potential to amend or change the existing allocation of water under licence, and can change water management priorities over time.
- WSPs can set out detailed and watershed-specific drought response strategies, such as protecting environmental and critical flows, promoting localized voluntary water sharing, and establishing water reserves for essential uses.
- WSPs can establish dispute resolution processes that are unique to a specific watershed, issue, or ecological concern, such as protecting (or restoring) drinking water sources, environmental flows, riparian areas, and watershed function.
- WSPs can contemplate their own adaptation by embedding regular review and amendment processes on, for example, a five-year cycle.



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