

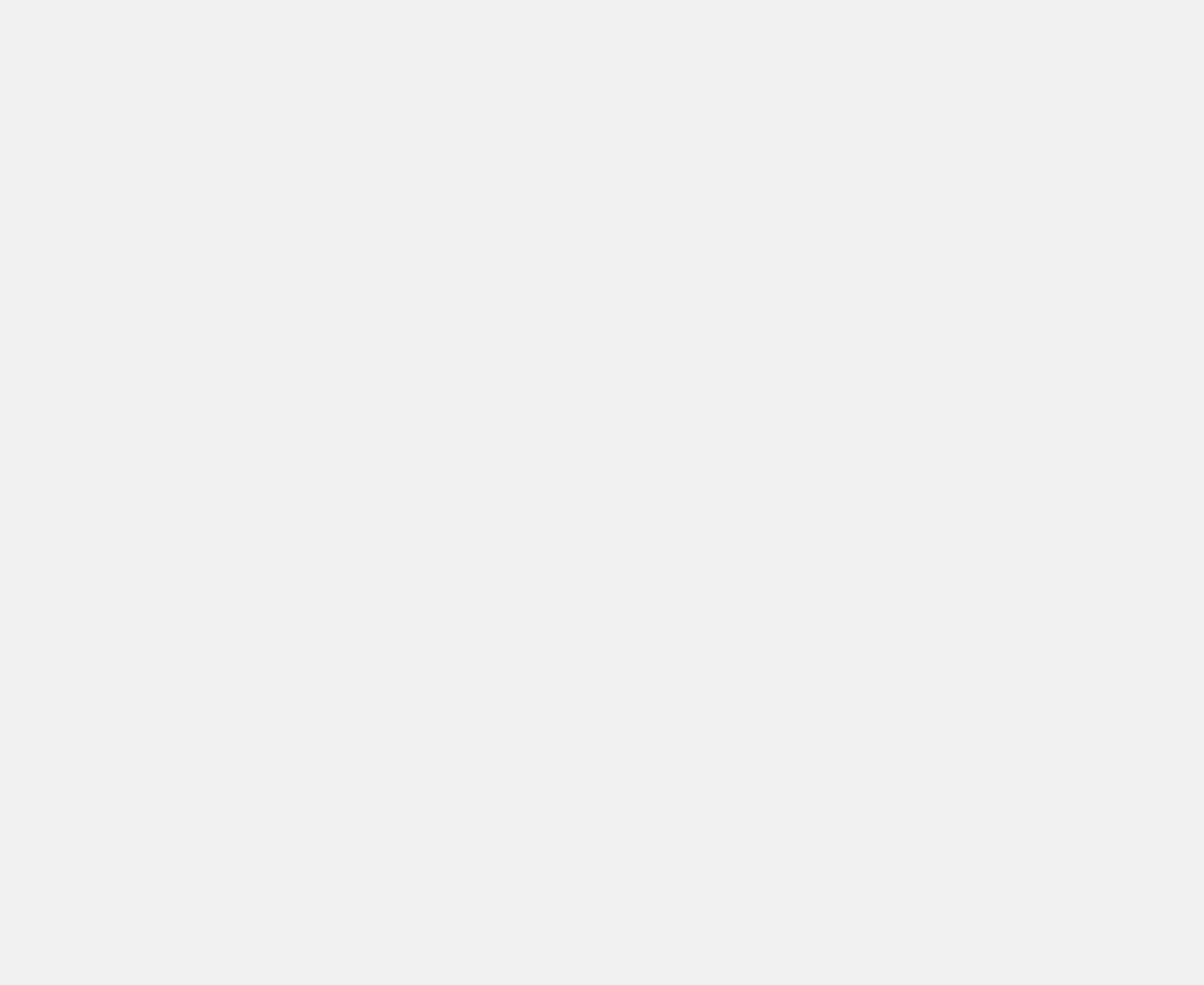


FEBRUARY 2024



**INDIGENOUS
WATERSHEDS
INITIATIVE**

INTERIM IMPACT REPORT





“We want the community to see themselves in the development and articulation of the principles and processes that will come out of this project.”

Fort Nelson First Nation Project Lead

Fort Nelson First Nation Guardians completing winter flow measurements for water monitoring program
Ryan Dickie

CONTENTS

Letter from IWI Indigenous Advisors	2
Letter from IWI Staff	5
Why Watersheds?	6
Partners	6
Background	7
Granting Approach and Program Design	8
Key Granting Learnings	10
Funding Themes	12
What Is Being Funded?	14
Our Impact to Date	16
Project Activities	18
Outcomes	20
Challenges	24
Learning and Connecting Together in IWI	26
Internal Learnings	28
Summary	30

LETTER FROM IWI INDIGENOUS ADVISORS

Honouring the Sacred Connection of Watersheds with First Nations Communities

As First Nation peoples from Nations with distinct languages, societies, and cultural practices, we learn from a very young age about the deep relationships between us and the lands and waters of our homelands and the kinship we share with the plants and animals in the natural world. Our societies, culture, laws, knowledge, and our communal wealth have been shaped by these lands and waters. We understand where our foods and medicine come from, where we go to hold our ceremonies and to nurture our spiritual and physical health and well-being, and where our communities have lived and thrived for millennia.

Watersheds have been altered significantly over the past 150 years after settlers moved into these lands and colonial governments forcibly assumed control. Colonial laws and policies have had significant, negative impacts to the societies and cultures of First Nation peoples and how they uphold their relationships and responsibilities to their lands and waters, those laws have also permitted the widespread degradation of watersheds throughout what is now known as British Columbia. The exploitation of natural resources, urbanization, and infrastructure development have disrupted the delicate balance of ecosystems, while more recently climate change has increased the frequency and intensity of floods, droughts, and wildfires. The collective and cumulative impacts of these issues pose threats not only to water quality and quantity, to the plants and animals that live in watersheds, but also to the human communities that depend on these ecosystems for their security and well-being.

As protectors and caretakers of land and water, First Nations recognize the interconnectedness within watersheds, how critical it is to restore natural habitats and watershed functions, and the necessity of preserving them for future generations. The health and resiliency of watersheds are not only environmental and economic concerns but also fundamental aspects of the health and well-being of First Nation peoples and the social and cultural preservation for First Nation communities. We believe that the pivotal role of First Nations' leadership and wisdom in fighting climate change and protecting watersheds cannot be overstated and we are honoured to support First Nation communities in their efforts to address the multitude of challenges facing watersheds.

This report serves as a powerful tool to shed light on the urgent need for Indigenous-led approaches to safeguarding vital ecosystems. The journey and lessons learned by the Indigenous Watersheds Initiative present an opportunity to contribute to broader discussions that support decolonised approaches to watershed protection, restoration, and governance and to the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

We hold our hands up to the First Nation communities on the leading edge of protecting and caretaking their watersheds.

Respectfully,

Indigenous Advisors to the Indigenous Watersheds Initiative

Kris Archie, Chief Lydia Hwitsum, Lana Lowe, Deana Machin, Tara Marsden,
Gordon Sterritt, Aaron Sumexheltza, Mavis Underwood, and Chief Roger William



INDIGENOUS WATERSHEDS INITIATIVE

WATERSHED
SECURITY
ROOTED IN
RESILIENCE, LOCAL
VALUES, AND
INDIGENOUS
STEWARDSHIP



Quw'utsun Environmental Technicians Training Certificate (Q-ETC)
Cowichan (Quw'utsun) Tribes
Cheyenne Williams

LETTER FROM IWI STAFF

The Indigenous Watersheds Initiative (IWI) is pleased to share an update on the work and impact of the initiative to date. We have developed this report to maintain accountability and transparency, and to share learnings. This report dives into IWI's approach to grant-making and gives a window into the impactful outcomes of the community-led initiatives it supports.

IWI is a three-year initiative (2022-2025) dedicated to supporting Indigenous-led visions for watershed security, and stewardship across British Columbia. Foundationally, it relies on the expertise of First Nations communities, who are actively upholding their duties as caretakers of the land and water. This knowledges and responsibility have been passed down through millennia and persist in spite of the systemic and traumatic impacts of colonialism and neocolonialism. First Nations communities continue to exercise their rights, responsibilities and stewardship of their watersheds – from which all British Columbians benefit.

IWI is delivered by MakeWay and Watersheds BC, with a \$15 million investment from the Province of B.C. The initiative ultimately supports Indigenous-led visions and work towards watershed resilience and security, the impacts of which are far reaching. Project teams are protecting and restoring critical watershed ecosystems, building community climate resiliency, supporting drinking water protections, and stewarding intergenerational connections. Other important outcomes include local employment and training, economic activities supporting the watershed sector, and human health benefits.

Our team is grateful for the continuing guidance of IWI Indigenous Advisors for their wisdom, perspective, and time. We look forward to sharing more about the impacts of IWI as the initiative moves ahead, and sharing our internal learnings and reflections with the wider watershed and funding communities.

With gratitude,

The IWI Team

Zita Botelho, Bridgitte Taylor, Deana Machin, Shannon Nickerson,
Natalie Ord, Claire Sauvage-Mar, and Julia Bendtsen

WHY WATERSHEDS?

Water is essential for life. For First Nations and Indigenous communities, it is not only the source of life-giving resources, but also holds enormous spiritual and cultural significance. Watersheds and waterways play a central role in Indigenous culture and livelihoods – connecting people to their ancestors and kin, in ceremonies, and as sources of stewardship responsibilities. They are important sources and sites of learning and transferring of intergenerational knowledge.

According to western science, a watershed is an area where water that falls or drains eventually flows to a common body of water, such as a river, lake, or ocean. Some seeps into the ground to feed aquifers. But this definition hardly describes the significance of watersheds on our shared planet. Watersheds are complex ecosystems that are integral to human, cultural, economic, and ecological well-being.

Watersheds are the frontlines of the climate and nature crises. Investing and supporting in Indigenous leadership for watershed security is critical to current and future generations.

The Indigenous Watersheds Initiative (IWI) is honoured to support community-led work to secure and protect these precious places.

PARTNERS

Watersheds BC focuses on developing capacity to catalyze, support, and strengthen local watershed governance and security. **MakeWay** is a national charity and public foundation with a goal to enable nature and communities to thrive together. Together, they are developing and implementing IWI, including grant making, reporting, and building connections among project teams and watersheds through peer learning and engagement opportunities.



Gitksan Watershed Authorities
Kali, Minnow Trapping
Alex Stoney



BACKGROUND: FROM HWI TO IWI

The Indigenous Watersheds Initiative (IWI) is building on the successes of the **Healthy Watersheds Initiative (HWI)**, a \$27 million investment in B.C.'s watersheds funded through the **Province of B.C.** Delivered by the **Real Estate Foundation of BC** with support from Watersheds BC, HWI supported 61 projects across 200 sites, creating thousands of jobs and positive outcomes for people, communities, and ecosystems. Projects took place between January 2021 and December 2022.

HWI was deliberate in its commitment to uplifting Indigenous voices and work; 31% of projects were funded through direct grants to Indigenous-led organizations. HWI included an **Indigenous Leaders Advisory Circle (ILAC)** and a Senior Indigenous Advisor, whose guidance created the foundation for HWI's approach to advancing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Recommendations from ILAC, and the detailed HWI UNDRIP report authored by the Senior Indigenous Advisor, were essential to the design of IWI granting and programming.

In the 2022 B.C. Budget, \$30 million was allocated to advancing watershed security. IWI was created through a partnership of MakeWay and Watersheds BC to steward \$15 million of this wider provincial investment. Funds are now flowing to communities across the province. The remaining \$15 million was given to six non-Indigenous organizations to support watershed restoration work throughout the province. The work done by communities through HWI and the leadership of ILAC provided a foundation for IWI to continue building momentum.



Chase White

GRANTING APPROACH AND PROGRAM DESIGN

IWI was established in April 2022, through a \$15 million investment from the Province of British Columbia. It is being delivered through a partnership between Watersheds BC and MakeWay Foundation.

To date, over \$11.5 million has been granted to 49 Indigenous-led and co-led projects. IWI builds on learnings and recommendations from programs like the Healthy Watersheds Initiative (HWI), and the wider granting experiences of MakeWay Foundation.

IWI relies on strong partnerships, effective funding processes, a willingness to be nimble and flexible, and a commitment to advancing UNDRIP. In recent months, IWI and our on-the-ground project partners have shown that sustained funding for Indigenous-led work has multi-faceted positive outcomes, and benefits all British Columbians.

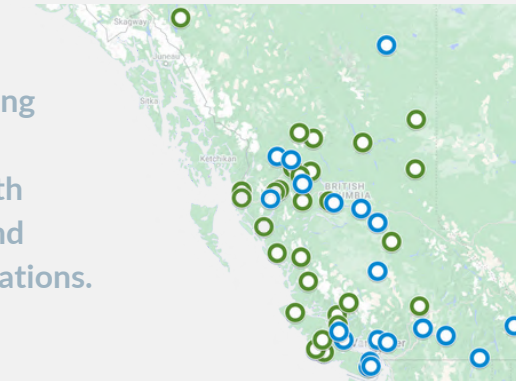
Funding Principles and Priorities

IWI has sought to support community-led priorities of watershed resilience and security. To do so, the program was intentionally designed and structured to be flexible and accessible.

The program has sought to apply the learnings and principles shared by HWI's Indigenous Leaders Advisory Circle (ILAC). Following guidance from ILAC, IWI prioritized the following funding areas, while encouraging applicants to propose initiatives that advance their community's watershed priorities:

- Stewarding watershed health through traditional practices, monitoring, and/or guardian programs.
- Securing safe and clean drinking water for all.
- Sustaining local and traditional food systems.
- Connecting communities to their watersheds.
- Protecting and mitigating against climate change.
- Advancing Indigenous laws and knowledge.

IWI funding is supporting 49 distinct projects across the province with 46 different Nations and Indigenous-led organizations.



Eligibility and Application Process

Indigenous led and/or co-led watershed projects were eligible to apply for IWI funding. Projects were able to apply for multi-year funds (to December 2024), and could apply for up to two projects per community.

In Round One, First Nation communities or organizations who had led or partnered on HWI projects were invited to submit an Expression of Interest and project budget. This expedited process upheld ILAC recommendations to swiftly deploy resources in time for the 2023 field season.

Round Two featured an open-call for applications, and prioritized geographic equity. First Nation communities or organizations who had not previously received funding through HWI or IWI completed a streamlined application. IWI staff hosted informational webinars on the application process and were available work with communities as needed to submit an application.

The application process itself sought to be flexible and accessible. Application templates were designed to be simple (2-pages), short, and asked open-ended questions – to allow applicants to share what was important to them and why.

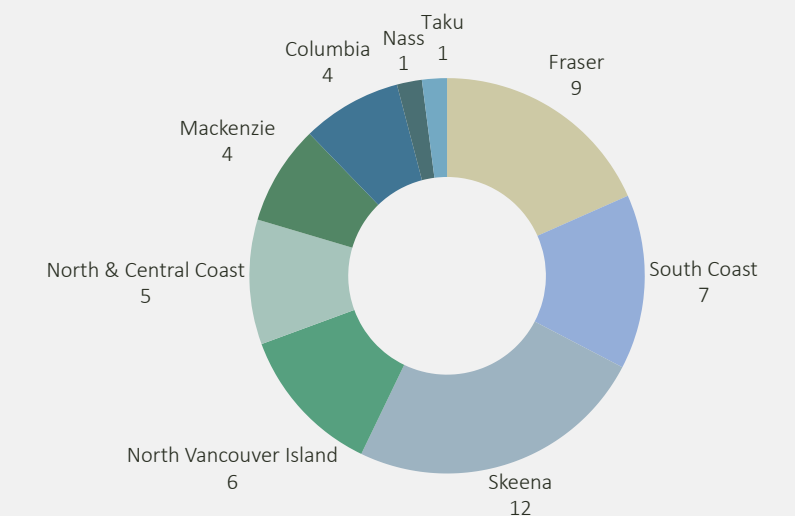
The program also put minimal limitations on eligible expenses, and encouraged applicants to budget for the elements required to accomplish their projects. Eligible costs therefore included support for expenses such as events, community engagement, equipment, capital, and staffing costs. Following the guidance of Indigenous Advisors, IWI encouraged the inclusion of honoraria and funding for youth, and also encouraged staff salaries at a living wage in project budgets. Parameters for project budgets were \$25,000-300,000.

Assessment Criteria and Decision Making

Fund assessment and decision-making included input and involvement from both IWI staff, and Indigenous Advisors. In an effort to expedite granting in Round One, applications were assessed and approved by program staff.

For Round Two, the Indigenous Advisors co-developed the grant process, shortlist review, assessment guidelines, and led decision-making. Applications were assessed on how they incorporated one or more of the following criteria:

- Supporting intergenerational learning, mentorship and the fostering of future watershed stewards and champions;
- Supporting the advancement of UNDRIP implementation;
- Incorporating Indigenous knowledge and laws;
- Building or strengthening partnerships;
- Connecting community members to their land, cultures, languages, food systems, and traditions;
- Restoring and rehabilitating watersheds;
- Supporting watershed stewardship such as data collection, ecosystem assessments, implementing traditional stewardship practices, training;
- Supporting watershed planning or mapping;
- Advancing climate adaptation and mitigation; and,
- Educating and engaging community on watershed health.



IWI-Supported Projects by Watershed

Based on these criteria, Indigenous Advisors asked staff to support with the shortlisting process. IWI staff created a shortlist of 33 applications for Advisors to review (from 65 received). Accompanying the shortlist was rationale for shortlisting, an interactive map, and all applications. Indigenous Advisors and staff collaborated closely on decisions – providing additional input where asked – arriving together at a final list of projects to be funded. Decisions were made via consensus.

Having Indigenous Advisors, actively engaged as leaders and decision-makers throughout the Initiative has been essential. Having Indigenous leaders actively involved and leading on funding decisions that ultimately impact Indigenous communities, has been a critical element for program success, and further reinforces the program’s holistic goals.

	ROUND ONE	ROUND TWO
TIMELINE	Launched April 2022, allowing for multi-year projects concluding by December 2024.	Launched April 2023, with multi-year work concluding by December 2024.
ALLOCATED FUNDS	Over \$5.6 million	Over \$5.9 million
NUMBER OF FUNDED PROJECTS	21	28
ELIGIBILITY	First Nation-led projects, with a call to First Nations organizations or communities who had previously been funded by HWI or been a partner on an HWI project.	All First Nation organizations or communities in B.C. prioritizing regions where few or no projects were supported by previous funding dockets.
APPLICATION	Expression of Interest and budget template.	New streamlined application and budget template.
DECISION-MAKING PROCESS	IWI staff made granting decisions.	IWI staff developed a shortlist of eligible applications for Indigenous Advisors to review. Advisors made final grant decisions with staff support.
REPORTING	Projects submitted a streamlined interim report in summer/fall 2023 and will complete a final report in December 2024.	Projects will complete a streamlined interim report in June 2024 and a final report in December 2024.

KEY GRANTING LEARNINGS

◆ INDIGENOUS AUTHORITY

Indigenous leadership is central to this work. As a primarily non-Indigenous staff team, including Indigenous expertise and guidance was critical in creating and delivering the initiative, and we continue to learn, reflect and refine. Notably, this critical component in IWI also required thoughtful engagement, humility, and good relationships. Allocating resources and time is fundamental and necessary to do this effectively.

◆ FUNDING FLEXIBILITY

Flexibility in both project eligibility and project expenses to meet proposed project plans is important. Projects often have a range of needs from general operations, capital expenses, equipment, materials, or infrastructure to staffing, training, and travel. Many project teams expressed the difficulty of getting funding for their diverse needs, particularly capital and infrastructure expenditures that are often required for accessing watersheds. Flexibility in project eligibility allowed applicants to prioritize their watershed needs, and catalyze projects that otherwise wouldn't have been undertaken.

Several key learnings have emerged from the IWI program to date. The program remains committed to observing and applying these learnings in real-time. In particular, these reflections may be applicable to future funding and grantmaking programs, especially where they seek to support Indigenous-led work. Key interim learnings include:

◆ CENTERING RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Developing meaningful relationships and holistic program outcomes takes time and trust-building. Balancing IWI’s short program timelines, combined with on-the-ground seasonal work constraints, regulatory requirements, and climate impacts, has been an ongoing challenge. Effective programming requires flexibility and responsiveness, and multi-year resourcing. IWI remains actively engaged with project teams, fostering reciprocal relationships, and offering flexibility and support whenever possible.

◆ ACCESSIBLE FUNDING DESIGN

Given multiple demands and pressures on First Nation communities and organizations, we prioritized making the funding process easy to navigate, recognizing the time and effort required to apply for funding. The IWI team worked with project teams to find solutions in support of their applications and reduce administrative requirements. IWI also piloted a process of granting to ‘non-qualified donees’, according to the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) guidelines.

Interim feedback indicates that the intentional design of IWI – and its flexibility – has helped to facilitate project success. While many programs have important goals and good intent, administrative and bureaucratic barriers often prevent communities from accessing the resources needed to undertake watershed work. The IWI team is committed to sharing more reflections on this topic through future resources.

◆ REGIONAL EQUITY

There continues to be significant regional inequity in funding watershed work, particularly in Indigenous communities. IWI’s goal of addressing regional inequities continues to be a challenge. Criteria in the program application explicitly prioritized geographic regions which were underrepresented in HWI. While we did see some improvement in regional distribution, this challenge highlights the importance of relationships and networks in broadening geographic reach, especially in the north and smaller communities.

◆ APPLYING A HOLISTIC LENS

Much like water itself, the activities that advance watershed security are fluid, holistic, and interconnected. Community-driven program development has made space for project teams to describe their priorities and needs, which reflect the overlapping nature of human, social, and ecological health.

All aspects of granting and reporting require this same responsiveness and consideration. For example, IWI is intentional in what questions are asked in reports, and accepts various forms of reporting. IWI has made efforts to design and conduct programming that deliver on projects are asking for, rather than the other way around.



Chase White



Spencer Duncan

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGES AND LAND-BASED LEARNING

For many Indigenous peoples, water is sacred. The relationship to water is an essential part of Indigenous cultures, histories, and knowledges, and this kinship shapes community relationships with water.

Projects include activities such as strengthening and practicing land-based learning, intergenerational knowledge sharing, and revitalizing Indigenous laws.

An example of a project in this category [Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nations Salmon Parks Relaw Project](#) (North Vancouver Island).



Shayla Auld

WATERSHED PLANNING AND GOVERNANCE

Watershed planning and governance is essential to First Nations self-determination. This critical work helps inform decision-making, and helps ensure watershed resiliency.

Projects include activities such as data collection and assessment, research, developing partnerships, strategies, and policies, to manage watersheds sustainably, and in accordance with Indigenous knowledge and legal orders.

An example is Sauteau and McCleod Lake's [Kinosew sîpîy / whutone gah saghé / Murray River Watershed Governance Establishment](#) (Mackenzie).



Spencer Duncan

FISHERIES AND FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

Wild salmon, freshwater fish, and coastal species are culturally significant and provide a key food source for First Nations communities.

Projects include activities dedicated to caretaking of fish and their habitats, sustainable fisheries management, and accessing traditional foods and harvesting practices.

An example is Nuxalk Nation's [Family Territorial Harvest + Community Harvest Mentorship Programs](#) (North & Central Coast)



Spencer Duncan

WATERSHED RESTORATION AND PROTECTION

Watersheds are a vital source of Indigenous culture, foods, and medicines. The impacts of resource extraction and accelerating climate change have had profound impacts on watersheds and communities.

Projects include activities such as protecting and restoring the health and resilience of watersheds, rehabilitating waterways, and restoring them to their natural state. In doing so, this work helps advance climate adaptation and uphold community rights, health, and safety.

An example is Tobacco Plains Indian Bands' [Yaqit ʔa-knuqʔi 'it Wetland Restoration project](#) (Columbia).



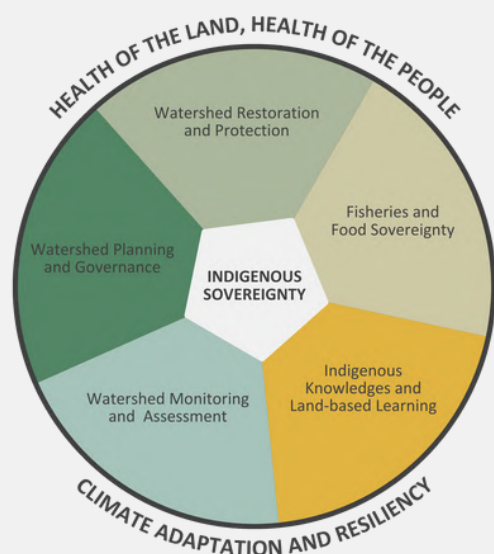
Crevenne Williams

WATERSHED MONITORING AND ASSESSMENT

Gathering and managing data and information is necessary for First Nations sovereignty, governance, and informed decisions relating to their watersheds.

Projects include activities such collecting and analyzing water-related data and employing diverse monitoring techniques, tools, and methodologies.

An example is Taku River Tlingit First Nation's [Furthering the Resilience of Salmon and People in the Taku Watershed project](#) (Taku).



FUNDING THEMES

IWI funding is being applied to a range of issue areas and priorities. The diversity of work being done by the 49 funded projects can be grouped among five thematic areas. Much like elements of a watershed, the themes are interconnected and interdependent; many projects are addressing multiple themes. The five themes, descriptions, and examples identified can be found on the right side of this page. They were developed with input and review from project teams.

Projects are driving diverse outcomes with co-benefits across the themes. All of the projects are advancing health of land and people, as well as climate adaptation and resiliency. The core of these Indigenous-led initiatives lies in the exercise of rights and title, affirming the community's inherent connection to the land.



James Michell gets into his gear to take the crew out on the boat Wet'suwet'en sockeye salmon rebuilding — Office of the Wet'suwet'en Cheyenne Bergenhegouwen

UFFCA technician using a van dorn to get discrete water samples Indigenous-led Endako Weir Effectiveness Monitoring Program Upper Fraser Fisheries Conservation Alliance (UFFCA)

WHAT IS BEING FUNDED?

In recent decades, securing funding for watershed initiatives has presented significant challenges, stemming from budget cuts initiated by both the B.C. and federal governments starting in the late 1990s. These cuts affected numerous funding programs crucial to supporting the watershed sector. Fortunately, there have been notable shifts in recent years. Even with these considerable and crucial investments by the B.C. government, they fall short as the resilience of watersheds continues to decrease due to the effects of land use and climate change.

The funding challenges for First Nations across B.C. to engage in water-related work are significant. Research conducted by the First Nations Fisheries Council of BC (FNFC) and the Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources (CIER) in 2016 and 2021 has helped to build a picture of the conditions, capacities, and

relationships that support First Nations to protect fresh water in their territories, while identifying gaps and challenges.

IWI's grant-making and programming aims to refine current understanding of the needs of First Nations communities for watershed management and governance. The findings in this section offer preliminary insights into funding requirements. As explained in the [Granting Approach](#) discussion, the flexibility of the the expense guidelines enabled project teams to focus on project requirements. IWI worked with teams to adjust budgets to accommodate their priorities. Project teams were able to apply for what they needed, with some limits given the scope of funds available.

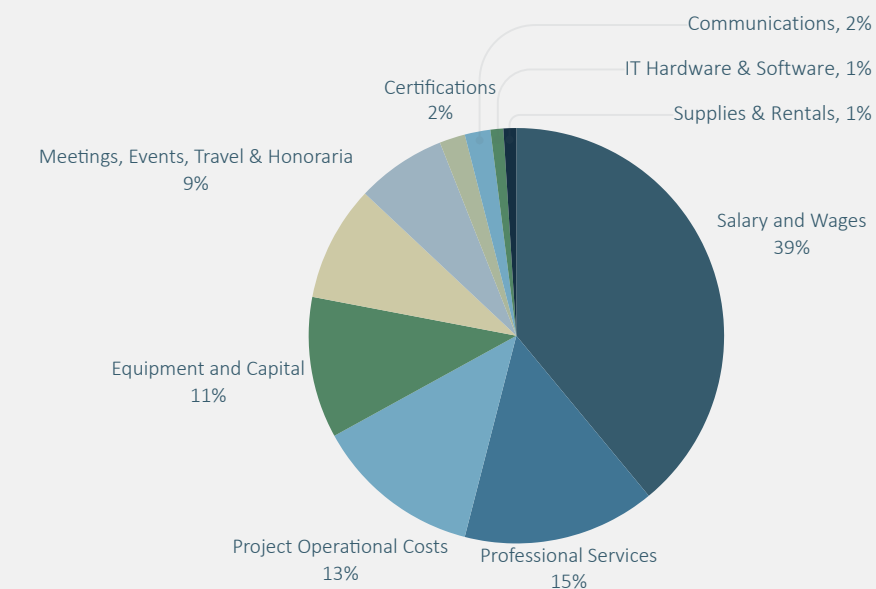
As project budgets and timelines are often subject to change, the distribution of expenses is based on anticipated expenditures expressed in applications. Most projects are multi-year, and therefore, funding is being deployed in two distributions (Year 1 and Year 2).

Based on all 49 projects, salary and wages constituted the majority of total project expenses (39%). Technical and specialized skills are often critical to this work, and professional services accounted for a further 15% of project expenses. Intergenerational learning is a fundamental element in many projects, and approximately 9% was allocated to honoraria for Elders' time, support for ceremonies and/or cultural protocols, as well as community meetings and engagement events.

The second highest expense allocation was related to project operational costs (13%). This is a broad category covering activities such as re-contouring and re-grading sites, landfill fees, fuel, and plants. Landfill and laboratory analysis fees also fall under this category.

Approximately 11% of total project costs went to equipment and capital purchases. Given discussions with applicants, we assume this figure would have been higher without IWI's suggested limit of capital costs to no more than 25% of the overall project budget. Capital and equipment expenses are ineligible in many grants, particularly among government programs, despite being crucial for on-the-ground work and project success. Items like monitoring equipment or tools directly impact grantees' ability to carry out restoration and monitoring work, and in many cases, capital purchases were necessary for project teams to access their watersheds and traditional homelands.

Several grantees highlighted the high cost of accessing watersheds across their territory. Since many territories of IWI-supported communities are only accessible by boat, plane or helicopter, funding for boat parts or contributing to acquiring or renting vessels were necessary to undertake stewardship activities. Facilitating community access to remote watersheds enables multiple objectives to be achieved, such as intergenerational learning and documenting Elders' knowledge through mapping and inventory. Community access and connection to traditional food sources and homelands support cultural and language learning, which are critical to upholding Indigenous rights and self-determination.



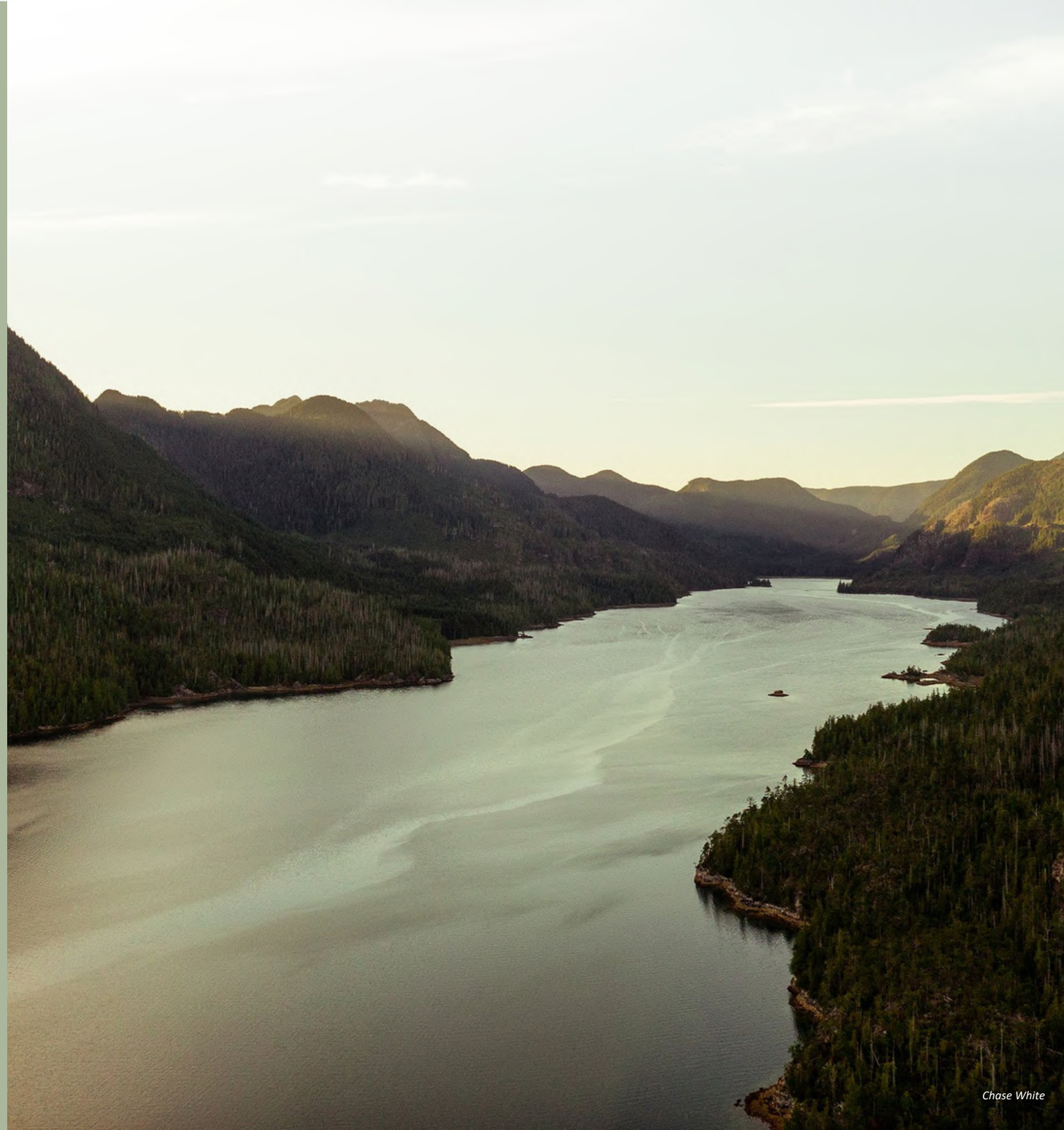
Project Expense Breakdown (Round One and Round Two)

A smaller but notable expense area that emerged is training and certifications, which accounts for roughly 2% of project spending. This relatively low figure may only encompass 'formal' or standardized training programs, such as the Canadian Aquatic Biomonitoring Network (CABIN) protocol for stream health assessments, and likely does not include mentorship, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and on-the-job training provided to workers hired for IWI-supported projects.

Overall, interim analysis reinforces that IWI funding is being applied to a diversity of activities. The project expense assessment reveals that the majority of projects required funding to employ staff and professional services, with 54% of total expenses being allocated to this area across both funding rounds. This demonstrates the need for multi-year funding for the people and teams who drive on-the-ground work.

OUR IMPACT TO DATE

Supporting and honouring Indigenous responsibilities to care for their watersheds



Chase White

Investments from IWI are already demonstrating significant outcomes, with various co-benefits in areas such as job creation, watershed restoration, food security, and ecosystem monitoring. As the work continues, we look forward to further engaging with project teams and sharing more about their good work and holistic impacts across watersheds and communities.

IWI REPORTING PROCESS

PROJECT BUDGETS AND WORKPLANS

Summer 2022 (Round One) and Summer 2023 (Round Two)



ROUND ONE INTERIM REPORTS

Summer - Fall 2023



IWI IMPACT UPDATE

Winter 2023/24



UNDRIP EVALUATION AND REPORTING FRAMEWORK

Spring - Summer 2024



ROUND TWO INTERIM REPORTS

Summer 2023



ALL PROJECT FINAL REPORTS

Winter 2024/25



FINAL IWI IMPACT REPORT

Spring - Summer 2025



LEARNING EVENTS, GATHERINGS, AND WEBINARS

In fall 2023, **Round One** projects (21) submitted interim reports. To date, 19 reports have been received and are the basis of our quantitative data and much of the qualitative data in this section. The 19 project reports span the breadth of IWI themes.

Funding Theme	Number of Interim Reports Received to Date
Indigenous Knowledges and Land-based Learning	4
Watershed Planning and Governance	3
Fisheries and Food Sovereignty	5
Watershed Restoration and Protection	4
Watershed Monitoring and Assessment	3
Total	19

PROJECT ACTIVITIES

Project teams are undertaking a variety of activities that help advance watershed security and resiliency in their communities, while also providing numerous co-benefits. The on-the-ground activities listed below are illustrative of the effort required to conduct watershed work.

Indigenous Knowledges and Land-based Learning

- Articulating traditional legal principles and researching methods of stewardship
- Bringing youth, school groups and Elders out on to the land and water
- Filming and interviewing projects, digitizing oral history recordings
- Hosting ceremonies and holding community gatherings

Watershed Planning and Governance

- Engaging neighboring governments and partners
- Developing decision-making tools and updating strategic plans
- Engaging with Provincial Government

Fisheries and Food Sovereignty

- Planning multi-year salmon ecosystem monitoring programs
- Updating engineering plans for better fish passage
- Replacing barriers to migration

Watershed Restoration and Protection

- Building, restoring and maintaining wetlands
- Maintaining access trails, restoring deactivated logging roads
- Managing beaver dams
- Organizing volunteer fieldwork days
- Planting activities: invasives, revegetating, fencing
- Restoring habitat: removing instream barriers, increasing spawning/rearing habitat
- Restoring urban watersheds impacted by camps used by urban underhoused community

Watershed Monitoring and Assessment

- Collecting and managing data and databases (water, carbon monitoring)
- Conducting wildlife and aquatic habitat counts
- Upgrading and installing monitoring stations

Other/all

- Hiring, training, and mentoring staff, including Guardians
- Publishing reports, creating webpages and video content
- Rental of vehicles, heavy machinery, boats, and helicopters
- Repairing equipment (boats, monitoring stations)
- Training staff and volunteers

Stqeeeye' land stewards between the Xwaaqw'um (Burgoyne Bay) Welcome Poles
Julia Bendtsen



Wei Wai Kum Guardian - Teaching Robron Centre students about Nunn's Estuary restoration
Greenways Land Trust

PROJECT HIGHLIGHT: STQEEYE' LEARNING SOCIETY

The [Stqeeeye' Learning Society](#) is an Indigenous-led non-profit organization based on Salt Spring Island, in the traditional territory of the Quw'utsun Peoples. Through their 'Hwial'asmut tu tumuhw (Taking Care of the Earth)' initiative, Stqeeeye' is undertaking holistic work to restore their watershed territories within the ancestral village of Xwaaqw'um (Burgoyne Bay).

"We are doing this to bring Indigenous food systems and biodiversity back to the land that has supported Quw'utsun peoples for generations," shared Rachel Bevington. "When we restore wetlands we are bringing back native species, helping build climate resiliency, store clean water and store carbon in the wetlands and forests."

All of the work being undertaken by Stqeeeye' is rooted in Hwial'asmut tu tumuhw, a Quw'utsun snuw uy ulh (sacred law). It is a law which reminds of responsibilities to the

land, ancestors, and people to always circle back to the ways of caring for the land that have been passed down since time immemorial.

Using traditional stewardship and historical knowledge, the project aims to reclaim and maintain ecosystems around Xwaaqw'um (Burgoyne Bay) post-industrial degradation. Activities include watershed monitoring, planting native species, restoring wetland, stream, and riparian habitats, creating an Indigenous youth guardian program, and building partnerships with local community and government partners. Stqeeeye's overall approach focuses on bringing community Elders and youth back to Xwaaqw'um.

WATERSHED:
SOUTH COAST

THEME:
INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGES AND
LAND-BASED LEARNING

PROJECT HIGHLIGHT: WEI WAI KUM

The [Wei Wai Kum Guardian Watchmen](#), in collaboration with [Greenways Land Trust](#) and [We Wai Kai Guardians](#), lead the Revitalizing Campbell River project to restore and protect natural areas within the Campbell River watershed while promoting community awareness.

Tangible progress includes removing around 1,500 kg of invasive plants and a similar amount of garbage from natural riparian areas. The collaborative effort involves the local volunteer community, inviting the public to assist in removing Himalayan blackberry near the Campbell River and Kingfisher Creek for future tree and shrub plantings. The project has also been working closely with secondary schools, engaging local youth through an education program at Robron Centre, Carihi Secondary School, and

Timberline Secondary School offering both in-class and field sessions. The program introduces students to the Guardians' ecological work, covering watershed concepts and stewardship, providing insights into their rewarding yet challenging activities. Field sessions enable hands-on participation, contributing to the Campbell River's revitalization.

WATERSHED:
SOUTH COAST

THEME:
WATERSHED RESTORATION
AND PROTECTION



OUTCOMES

Indigenous-led Endako Weir Effectiveness Monitoring Program
Upper Fraser Fisheries Conservation Alliance (UFFCA)

RESTORATION AND BIODIVERSITY

Over half of Round One funded projects include a restoration component. Interim results from 19 reports include:

- Watershed restoration across 29 sites
- More than 60 km (linear) restored plus 399 hectares
- 14,900 native plants, trees, and shrubs planted.

“The project is also contributing to the study and practice of beaver-led restoration, a relatively “new” field of ecological restoration for humans, though beaver have been practicing it for up to 20 million years, which is quickly emerging as a leading strategy for watershed scale ecological restoration.”

— **?Akisqnuq Project Lead**

Community-led watershed initiatives, supported by IWI, involve a variety of restoration activities. Some examples are breaching beaver dams or constructing beaver dam analogs (BDAs), controlling invasive species, planting culturally significant plants, exploring cultural burning practices, fencing for large animals, improving trails, decommissioning logging roads, organizing volunteer events, removing landslide debris, replacing fish migration barriers (perched culverts), restoring historical stream paths, willow staking, water management, and wetland construction.

JOB CREATION AND WORKFORCE

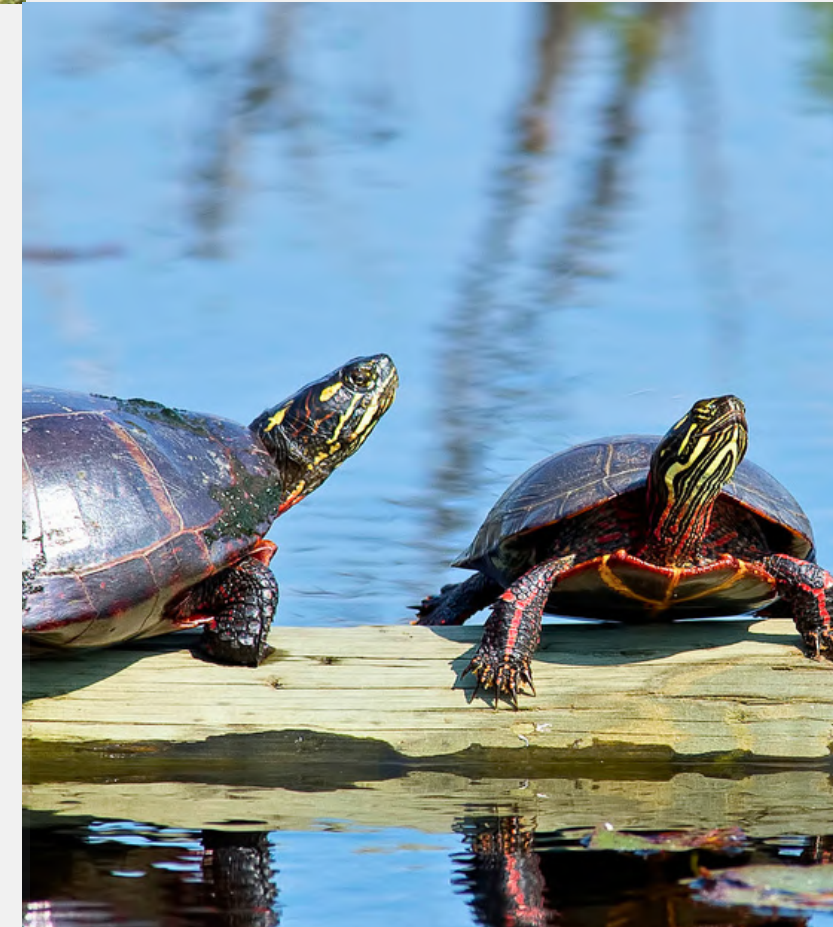
IWI funding has already helped support the creation of good, meaningful jobs that advance a watershed economy. To date, funding has supported community-led initiatives to create or support 167 jobs, and 277 volunteer positions (as reported in 19 project interim reports). These jobs, a mix of new and existing roles, include full-time and part-time employees as well as seasonal workers. Professional contractors and consultants, including technical advisors, are being employed through approximately half of IWI funded projects.

The majority of paid positions (61%) are being held by community members. Each project is supporting an average of eight paid jobs per project. This suggests an anticipated total of about 390 jobs positions to be supported over the course of IWI, with the

majority held by community members. The potential economic impact, known as the multiplier effect, resulting from IWI funds injected into the watershed economy or community spending, is still being assessed. IWI is actively exploring methods to measure the economic spinoffs of these grants.

“The training is categorical and quite comprehensive, but I do need to emphasize how crucial it has been to have youth of a wide age and experience range all from the same community, collaborating as equal partners on an initiative important to all of us. The youth that were participants will return in the following year as mentors and share what skills they have gained with the new cohort.”

— **Gitksan Watershed Authorities Project Lead**



REVEALING THE PROCESS: BUILDING A WETLAND AT TURTLE POND

The Yaqit ?a-knuqti'it First Nation (Tobacco Plains Indian Band) has been building wetlands on their reserve lands. Three sites were selected for wetland construction. Prior to construction, invasive plant management was conducted at the sites.

Wetland construction involved the use of an excavator to dig a depression at each site for the development of a future wetland. Once the depression was dug, a sturdy geotextile was laid out, followed by an aquatic-safe liner, and an additional geotextile layer.

Soil was placed overtop to protect the liner, and coarse woody debris was placed within and around each site. Surrounding the wetland, the ground was roughened and loosened, creating various microsites for vegetation growth.

The next step will be revegetation of the site in the spring and fall of 2024.





Cranberry River Hydrology Survey Engineer
Gitanyow Fisheries Authority
Mark Cleveland and Dustin Grey



Mentors/Mentees
Gitksan Watershed Authorities
Alex Stoney

WATER MONITORING

Watershed assessment and associated planning work are common activities among grantees. Assessments are essential before undertaking watershed restoration and stewardship, guiding what actions to take, what to measure, and why. We have heard from project teams that finding funding for the planning stages prior to “breaking ground” is challenging. This stage provides critical information necessary for effective planning and stewardship. For First Nations, having access to their own data and analysis tools can be crucial to ensuring equal footing in conversations or negotiations with other governments, organizations, and industry.

A key message shared in reporting from previous funding programs such as HWI was a need for First Nations to have resources to develop land-based databases for communities to house their own research and knowledge, in a way that upholds data sovereignty and integrity. Nations being able to acquire, store and analyze their own data is a critical part of exercising decision-making, and is identified as critical to advancing UNDRIP.

“The project in question is very important for Gitanyow because of its implications for wild Nass salmon survival, food security and overall Gitanyow involvement in fisheries management and protection / enhancement of their precious salmon resources.”

— **Gitanyow Huwilp Society Project Lead**

The types of monitoring being done by IWI supported projects in Round One include hydrological (e.g., ground and drone reconnaissance of water flows, temperature, pH), fish and wildlife (e.g., sockeye and other salmon migration activity and size). For some communities, monitoring initiated this year will serve as a baseline for the future work. We have heard from some teams that IWI funding has enabled them to begin monitoring in remote lakes that have no existing data. Some projects are actively investing and contributing to hydrometric monitoring across the province as they purchase and log water data in areas where other governments are not. This work builds our collective understanding of the rapid changes that climate is having on watersheds across B.C.

Monitoring results highlight challenges facing B.C.’s watersheds. The unprecedented droughts in 2023 caused record low flows, posing extreme challenges for fish and other fauna. Projects reported low bird and wildlife activities. More optimistically, remote sensing and ground reconnaissance have helped communities identify culturally significant areas.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

Community engagement, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and public education serve as foundational elements across all IWI-supported projects. It is a form of active reciprocity and the exercising of rights, deeply rooted in community accountability, with numerous projects striving to establish or maintain connections within their communities and territories.

At a glance, 1265 people have attended community engagement sessions hosted by Round One projects to date, with additional sessions planned for 2024. For many project teams, community work with Elders and youth is fundamental. This work helps pass down and share knowledge, while also supporting youth as future community leaders. For example, [Fort Nelson First Nation’s](#) project involves digitizing interviews that capture guidance from Elders on the community’s historical care for water. The ultimate objective is to strengthen the Nation’s governance and legal structures, ensuring the protection of their home watershed. Similarly, the [Stqeeye’ Learning Society](#) centers its work around a mission of bringing Elders and other community members back to live on the land they are restoring.

Community engagement functions as an accountability mechanism, an exercising of Indigenous governance, and as a practical necessity for informed decision-making. Project teams are reporting on the pivotal role of involving communities and partners, recognizing that sharing knowledge and collaborating are indispensable for current and future decisions about what is happening on their territories and shaping the future.

“For the new Collaborative Leadership Initiative (CLI), we interviewed 24 elected leaders (Chiefs, Mayors and Councillors) to gain a better understanding of their community priorities so we can find solutions to the Okanagan siwłkʷ (water) issues. On December 13, 2023, elected leaders from across the Okanagan region gathered for the inaugural CLI meeting to discuss the health of our siwłkʷ and klúšxnitkʷ (Okanagan Lake) Watershed. A series of future meetings are now being planned.”

— **Okanagan Nation Alliance Project Lead**



Wei Wai Kum, We Wai Kai, and Greenways Land
Trust Volunteer Event in Campbell River
Revitalizing the Campbell River Project



Skwelwil'em Squamish Estuary Chinook
Salmon Habitat Restoration Project
Squamish Nation

CHALLENGES

An important aspect of IWI is to continue learning about the conditions and situations that present challenges to this field of watershed security work. The most common challenges identified in interim reporting and discussed below.

Rising Economic Costs: Inflation and increasing construction/infrastructure costs persistently impact projects. Unanticipated project delays can result in significant changes in costs. This is compounded by precarity of grant funding programs and short-term funding timelines. Project teams often rely on grants, and funding programs that are inflexible and can't accommodate the ripple effects of changing costs puts significant stress on project teams. IWI has worked with project teams to accommodate budget and timeline changes as necessary.

“Some funding applications have been unsuccessful and new sources identified requiring some re-balancing of funds. Due to inflation, we have also seen increases in travel cost which have also required adjustments in implementation.”
— Katzie First Nation and World Wildlife Foundation (WWF)

Staff Capacity: Like many other sectors, finding and retaining skilled staff is challenging, particularly in remote and rural communities. This situation is exacerbated by the lack of sustainable funding for watershed work. Rising costs of living and wages, combined with short-term funding programs make it a challenge to train and retain new staff, though projects report they are strengthening capacity wherever possible. Many of the project teams are drawing on the capacity of existing staff – who are often balancing already heavy workloads, and various community priorities.

“Through this funding the crew has been able to grow their expertise and capacity through mentorship based and peer-to-peer training. We are able to use a tailored approach that limits the use of academic jargon, while teaching the highest standards of data collecting, data management and data dissemination.”
— Upper Fraser Fisheries Conservation Alliance Project Lead

Navigating Permits: The challenges here are twofold. Projects teams are working with time limited funding with most granting programs allowing about two years to complete work. The permitting process is labor intensive for project teams and often takes many months to secure the necessary permits. When the permitting process is delayed, this results in project teams having to risk manage costs associated with staff that have been hired, contractors that have been booked, and increasing costs of materials. To comply with regulations and seasonal conditions, restoration work often must be done within a short window of time in the year. If permitting is delayed, projects can completely miss the allowable work window. The incongruity between funding constraints and the existing permitting processes creates a challenging environment for restoration work.

Climate Change Impacts: Over the past year, many grantees faced extreme climate events like wildfires and droughts, which disrupt ecological conditions and lead to significant social, economic, and cultural disturbances. Numerous teams had to pause their work—either to shift focus to emergency response, or because working within a project site was not safe, effective, or both. In some projects, activities such as community engagement, restoration, monitoring, and assessments were postponed. Climate change impacts are also driving the nature work being funded by IWI. For example, the Taku River Tlingit First Nation is addressing rapid glacial melt in their territory, altering watershed conditions, and prompting the inclusion of expensive adaptive management models in their stewardship work.

The wildfire season [which is a prime example of a series of events made more severe by climate change] in the Skeena region has impacted some opportunities to visit sites during the field season.”
— Office of the Wet'suwet'en

Scale of Funding: The funding need for watershed security related work is immense. The type of work being undertaken through IWI funded projects is addressing a multitude of watershed security objectives that will result in improved climate resiliency, advancing First Nation's science and management approaches, and economic and community health. IWI calls for proposals resulted in submissions that were double the available funds. This sector has been under-resourced for decades and there is a need for significant investment that can accommodate multi-year project funding, to ensure sustainable funding for this work. The estimated need for a sustainable BC Watershed Security Fund is \$1 Billion.

As Indigenous peoples we are always expected to do more with less. While we are resourceful people, the scale of watershed work, compounded by ongoing climate crises and events means unprecedented need for resources for Indigenous-led watershed restoration, planning and monitoring. While the IWI funding is welcomed, it was very disappointing to see the same amount was granted to a small handful of non-Indigenous NGOs, and IWI was expected to support more than 200 First Nations
— Tara Marsden
Hlimoo Sustainable Solutions & IWI Indigenous Advisors

Accessing Watersheds: Many communities' traditional territories are remote or difficult to get to, with some sites only accessible via boat or helicopter. Funding for traveling and working in these targeted locations is critical but difficult to secure because of limits to capital spending in many funding programs. Once in these remote areas, there is often also a need to build critical infrastructure such as docks or shelters for staff be protected from weather impacts or conduct multi-day work in the locations.



Photo: Chase White

Chase White

LEARNING AND CONNECTING TOGETHER IN IWI

In addition to granting, IWI is supporting a variety of learning and connection among Indigenous-led and co-led projects. Building networks, relationships, and continuing momentum for watershed work is central to IWI activities for the remainder of the Initiative.

WILDFIRE WEBINAR

The first webinar, "**Wildfires: Watershed Impacts & Recovery**" took place on October 27th, 2023. Guest speakers Kevin Kriese (POLIS Wildfire Resilience Project) and Russell Myers Ross (Yunesit'in Fire Stewardship) shared insights on watershed conditions leading to wildfires, planning for watershed recovery post-fire, and cultural burning initiatives.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT WEBINAR

The second webinar, "**Project Management**," took place on December 7, 2023. Teams learned from Robin Annschild (Rewilding Water & Earth) about managing restoration projects, along with insights from Deana Machin, IWI's Senior Indigenous Advisor, and Claire Sauvage-Mar, IWI's Program Associate, on project administration and organization.

IN-PERSON GATHERINGS

In-person regional gatherings for project teams are planned for the **spring of 2024**, with the first scheduled on Vancouver Island in early March. Two additional gatherings, in the Interior and in the Skeena, are also planned for April and May. First Nations-only spaces are a design feature for all gatherings.

FUTURE ENGAGEMENTS

Upcoming webinars are currently in development, looking at topics including Annual Water Planning and Community Storytelling. The recordings from these sessions will be accessible to the public through our YouTube Channel.

Additionally, there is an exploration of a youth gathering for summer 2024.

INTERNAL LEARNINGS

The IWI staff team is committed to applying learnings and adapting practices in real time, and sharing these processes with the wider watershed community as the program continues. Some of these learnings have already been integrated into the contents of this interim report, while others continue to be refined for future resources.

As a primarily non-Indigenous staff team, IWI staff are dedicated to continual (un)learning and improving our practices, seeking better ways to work with First Nations, and supporting them to realize their watershed objectives. Our approach centers around being relational in supporting Indigenous-led visions for the health and security of their watersheds. It also entails being humble in what we don't know, acknowledging mistakes we may make along the way, and seeking to course correct in real time. Our role is to uplift community-led work and adapt program learnings to potential future funding opportunities.

IWI has built upon the learnings and best practices in the philanthropic sector, rather than building from scratch. In particular, HWI and members of the Indigenous Leaders Advisory Circle (ILAC) offered an immense amount of time, knowledge, and labour to the funding and watershed community. Vital learning resources included the [UNDRIP Evaluation](#) developed by Tara Marsden at [Hlimoo Sustainable Solutions](#), and the [Principles & Criteria for Future Funding](#) report developed by ILAC. These frameworks and recommendations delve into challenges, successes, and lessons learned from past funding initiatives. Continued learning about how IWI contributes to advancing UNDRIP is essential for guiding our ongoing efforts. As a team, we have an accountability to uphold these learnings and practices.

Our team is committed to implementing an inclusive and equitable program. As IWI continues, we look forward to sharing more in-depth learnings as a means of continual community accountability and to contribute to the collective knowledge of the watershed and philanthropic sectors. We also hope these internal learnings can inform strategic decision-making for future watershed funding.





SUMMARY

Watersheds BC and MakeWay Foundation are honoured and humbled to be stewarding the Indigenous Watersheds Initiative. The results of IWI work to date are inspiring and positive. The transition from HWI to IWI has shown that continuing the momentum of watershed funding focusing on Indigenous work strengthens watershed security across the province. Our connections with communities help us identify pressure points that are critical to share considering real-time developments in watershed security funding.

In IWI's final year, project teams will continue their dedicated on-the-ground activities. As we collaborate with teams to share findings, results, and stories, we will be able to magnify the impacts of their vital work.

Reflections and analysis from this interim report illuminate several overarching insights about funding program design, the strategic benefits of investing in watersheds, and the necessity of Indigenous leadership in watershed security.

Funding Program Design Matters. The design and overall operational approach of IWI has been an important factor for projects to achieve their goals. We know that program design is an important enabling factor in achieving holistic, meaningful results. Ensuring that IWI is responsive and flexible to community needs has been fundamental to achieving the impacts to date that we have shared in this report. Actively involving Indigenous leaders and perspectives in program design, direction, and decision-making on the issues that impact First Nation communities is critical. This helps uphold UNDRIP principles and actively improves overall programming and outcomes.

Investing in watersheds yields many co-benefits. Watersheds are both a spatial and metaphorical meeting place. They are where we can work at the confluence of social-ecological and economic conditions. Healthy watersheds are the basis for overall community health, they provide critical infrastructure to mitigate and adapt to climate change and support a wide variety of social, cultural, and economic values. Working towards watershed health at the local level, driven by community priorities, improves our understanding of the ecological conditions, risks to human health and wellbeing, and advances Indigenous rights and title. As this report demonstrates, the breadth of meaningful work being undertaken among the 49 IWI funded projects will improve watersheds and communities. These are smart investments that are proactive steps to building climate resiliency, potentially saving billions of dollars while strengthening local economies with good jobs and supporting healthier communities.

Investing in Indigenous-led watershed work supports Indigenous Rights, Self-Determination and Benefits all British Columbians. Water is essential to Indigenous rights, title and overall livelihoods. This is reaffirmed through international frameworks such as UNDRIP, which outlines the fundamental connections between the governance of lands and waters with cultural, spiritual, and linguistic rights. By investing in community leadership to address watershed security, resources are also supporting Indigenous rights, self-determination and actively advancing UNDRIP and reconciliation principles. The activities supported through IWI funded projects have direct impacts in First Nation communities, from documenting Indigenous water laws to expanding water monitoring systems, or restoring waterways to building collaborations among First Nations and other partners. The results to date demonstrate that the project work led by First Nations is advancing watershed health in ways that benefit all British Columbians.

We are deeply grateful to the project teams and collaborators who are playing a central role in advancing watershed security across the province. We extend thanks to the Province of B.C. who provided the funding to catalyze IWI. The commitment of the IWI Indigenous Advisors is exceptional and our team is indebted to them for guiding this work and making it better. We celebrate the communities and their efforts, and raise our hands in admiration and gratitude. By undertaking this work, they are helping advance a more resilient, healthy, and just future for their watersheds, and all future generations that rely upon them.

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RECOGNITION

The Indigenous Watersheds Initiative wouldn't be possible without the hard work and dedication of community-led project teams across the province. We also acknowledge the invaluable support from the MakeWay Foundation and Watersheds BC, along with funding from the Government of British Columbia.



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Logo created by Gitksan artist Timothy Foster

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