

WATER CANADA

THE COMPLETE WATER MAGAZINE

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Interview: Tim Morris on B.C.'s Water Movement

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The POLIS Water Sustainability Project's [first Creating a Blue Dialogue webinar of the year](#) will take place September 26. The series is supported by the Canadian Water Network. Hosted in partnership with the Canadian Freshwater Alliance, this edition features Angus McAllister and Tim Morris. Water Canada spoke with Morris, co-author of POLIS' recent [State of the Water Movement in British Columbia](#) report with Oliver M. Brandes.



Tim Morris. Photo: Roger Cullman for Water Canada

Water Canada: You use the term “freshwater movement” in your report on British Columbia’s water organizations. What does this term mean?

Tim Morris: What we found in our research is that there are over 230 organizations in British Columbia working towards the same common goals of improving freshwater health and sustainability, and many seek to achieve these goals through changing the way society perceives and governs our freshwater. I would say it can best be described at this time as a nascent movement, since it’s still pretty loosely connected and lacking sustained association at a broader scale. But the potential for a more visible and connected freshwater movement is definitely there. Based on the findings of our interviews and survey, the report makes a number of recommendations for the type of movement infrastructure that would help to support such an effort.

There is a wide variety water-focused organizations in the province, from small local groups to national bodies. What sort of relationship do these distinct types of organizations have, and how can they be improved?

At this time, there is limited communication and collaboration between the larger groups and the groups working at the grassroots. Understandably, the smaller groups, which are often volunteer-based, tend to focus on their own local regions and lack capacity to engage provincially, and especially nationally. For the larger groups, there's been a tendency to engage with the grassroots only when seeking broader public support for a particular campaign, as opposed to listening and learning from the expertise on the ground in a consistent way. This lack of 'connective tissue' between different types of organizations is a barrier to building a broad and sustained water movement. Local groups can benefit from engaging provincial or national groups through better understanding how regional or provincial policy can impact their local home waters. Larger groups can work with the grassroots to ensure their efforts are supporting practical changes that will have a real impact on the ground and that they are connecting with the values and concerns of the average British Columbian.

Your focus in the report was on non-profit, non-governmental organizations, but how important will cooperation between these groups and the different levels of government be moving forward?

It's clear that senior governments (provincial and federal) are not in a position to protect water on their own. They lack both the capacity and flexibility to solve increasingly complex water problems. The days of top-down solutions to water issues that are purely driven by centralized government are over. We are now looking at Government 2.0 (see "[Web Sense](#)") in the sense that we need to re-imagine how we manage our resources collectively as a society.

In our research, we found some very strong themes that indicated a real desire for much more local control over water management. In other words, experts and water groups feel that water governance works best when it is at the watershed scale informed by relevant local knowledge, and that gives communities in that watershed the greatest say in how to best protect their home waters. However, this does not mean that senior levels of government should be absolved of responsibility. The other clear theme from the research was that the provincial government needs to do much more to provide effective oversight, including setting and enforcing minimum legal standards, long-term water monitoring, and putting in place the frameworks and supportive policy instruments that enable local control, such as the creation and empowerment of watershed boards.

What are some of the biggest challenges along British Columbia's path to becoming a global leader in freshwater protection?

British Columbia's main challenges are also its main opportunities. The province has completely outdated water laws. Its primary water legislation, the *BC Water Act*, is over 100 years old. It's the only province that does not regulate groundwater. And there is no framework for formal watershed based authorities in the province. The Okanagan Basin Water Board (*related: "[Okanagan Basin Water Supply and Demand Project](#)"*) is really the only example of such an entity. There are also no legal standards defining how much water needs to be left in the rivers and lakes to support healthy ecosystems (sometimes called in-stream flow requirements). In other words, it is pretty far behind a lot of other jurisdictions right now.

But being a bit slow on the uptake also creates an opportunity. British Columbia can learn from the experience of others and leapfrog to the front. This will require political will, especially at the provincial scale, but what this report showed is that the provincial government doesn't have to do it alone. It can work with the capacity that exists in civil society and this emerging freshwater movement. There is also critical capacity and knowledge, as well as rights that need to be respected, with B.C.'s First Nations. And what we have seen from other jurisdictions is that local governments can and should play a much larger role in watershed governance than they currently do in British Columbia.

What are the most pressing steps to be taken by British Columbia's water community to further the freshwater movement? What are the immediate tasks at hand?

It's critical that the water community rally in support of a new BC Water Sustainability Act and provide the provincial government with the necessary social licence to make it a global example of cutting-edge water legislation. A new Water Act that enables local watershed governance and provides stronger legal oversight will help put some wind in the sails of the freshwater movement.

There are also a number of actions identified in the report where NGOs and funders can help support the development of the movement. These can best be understood as building movement infrastructure and include

1. A group or groups that provide some coordinating capacity to build the networks and connective tissue amongst different groups, and provide opportunities for peer learning and strategic alignment.
2. Regional networking events/workshops that culminate in an annual gathering of watershed groups from across the province.
3. Making the most of online technologies to connect organizations and share lessons, such as webinars, listservs, et cetera.
4. Development of training opportunities for effective community organizing and engagement.
5. Catalyzing some kind of coordinated provincial water campaign that meaningfully involves and engages the grassroots as well as larger organizations.

Clark Kingsbury is Water Canada's editorial assistant. Water Canada is proud to be Creating a Blue Dialogue's media partner for the third season.