

Water Day: the Myth of Abundance





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Today is World Water Day and in the Okanagan, everything revolves around water: whether there's going to be enough and whether we can keep it safe.

Despite that chain of deep lakes and rivers that snake along the bottom of the valley, the beaches, benches and hillsides on either side are serene and barren once the last of spring's rain and runoff has evaporated or run off into the big lake.

Although it is scarce in the semi-desert Okanagan, water is essential to life, whether as the liquid that makes up a large part of our bodies, and needs to be constantly replenished to cleanse them, or whether as habitat for the myriad of creatures to which it is their home.

So, careful management of the Okanagan's water is a task that has been undertaken by the Okanagan Basin Water Board, made up of directors from the three regional districts in the valley; and by the Okanagan Water Stewardship Council, which provides technical advice to the board.

Today, the council's efforts were recognized with the first Council of the Federation Excellence in Water Stewardship Award, presented by Steve Thomson, provincial minister of natural resource operations.

As a cabinet minister who grew up in Kelowna, Thomson admits that people in the Okanagan tend to take water for granted, yet he says the need to resolve the competing interests and needs for water will continue to grow as the population grows.

He said the award is quite an honour, with the OWSC out-competing the rest of a field of 16 nominees,. He's hopeful it will garner some recognition from the public for the behind-the-scenes work being done by the council.

Each province in the federation presented a water stewardship award for the first time this year.

Support letters for the OWSC repeatedly used the terms collaboration and innovation in water stewardship.

The OWSC is made up of realtors, foresters, anglers, biologists, farmers, scientists, public health staff, planners, hydrologists and natives from around the valley. Despite their diverse views, they all sit shoulder to shoulder around the table and talk about water issues.

Sometimes the talk is heated and this disparate group disagrees, but through discussion often there's a breakthrough and there's excitement as one element gains a sudden vision of clarity on another's viewpoint—and another step forward is taken.

For the last seven years, this unlikely group of volunteers—all of whom have a common interest in water—have made their way to Kelowna once every month to talk about such diverse topics as declining water levels in wells; links between groundwater and surface water; how much water is enough; what affects water quality and invasive aquatic species.

The OWSC is a unique body, providing expertise from the field on water issues and tapping scientific research to provide accurate answers to questions and the basis for recommendations to the OBWB, the decision-making board, made up of politicians who represent the public.

The Okanagan basin involves 19 government jurisdictions, is home to more than 315,000 people, double that in visitors, and a sometimes-endangered diversity of fish and wildlife—and all rely on a single source of water.

In 2008 the council produced the Okanagan Sustainable Water Strategy, complete with recommendations on policies and projects on water conservation, water economics, irrigation efficiency, water monitoring and reporting and water source protection.

It followed with the Okanagan Water Supply and Demand Project, the most detailed assessment of water supply and demand ever conducted in western Canada, which includes a framework of models and data on which to build future work.

They are now being used in regional growth strategies, liquid waste management plans, water master plans, dam safety studies, and hydrology research.

This project has won awards and been featured in reports and presentations across the country.

Along the way, the council also developed a groundwater bylaws toolkit for use by local governments and a water reporting tool for the valley's water utilities.

Anna Warwick Sears, executive-director of the OBWB, and nominator of the OWSC for the award noted the Okanagan is one of the most water-stressed regions in Canada: "a lovely, unique and very complex; fragile, semi-arid landscape that is rapidly urbanizing."

She noted it is a major challenge to meet all water needs, "with such competing uses, climate change, population growth and encroachment on Nature's ecological support system.

"How do you make sense of such complexity without broad agreement from across sectors?" she asks.

With such diversity on the council, often conflicts over water can be resolved, before they grow, she noted.

"Water wars occur when water supplies are short, so building these relationships and networks before wars can happen is really valuable," she commented.

She reiterated the OBWB mantra "One Valley, One Water," which describes the flow of water from higher elevations around the valley to the valley bottom, and from north to south, so whatever impacts water along the way is ultimately felt by those downstream.

"We have a mutual responsibility for our water; to respect it," she says.

"A water pollution problem in any community affects all Okanagan cities tourism-wise because the Okanagan is marketed and seen as one region by visitors," she noted.

The board and its council is involved every year in celebrating World Water Day, and tonight will be sponsoring a panel discussion with participants Sears, Maria Besso, speaking for Kalamalka Lake; Rick Simpson, for Wood Lake; Leon Louis, Syilx knowledge-holder on Okanagan Lake; Stu Wells, Osoyoos Mayor, for Osoyoos Lake; and Justin Hall on the theme of cooperation.

The panel discussion will take place at Summerhill Pyramid Winery. Events begin there at 5 p.m.

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