



Okanagan River has seen a revival of its sockeye salmon run over the last decade thanks to the efforts of the Okanagan Nation Alliance working in partnership with local environment and civic government agencies in both the B.C. and Washington. Photo: Contributed

Okanagan water conference builds connections

Experts gathered to discuss water and fisheries sustainability objectives

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How much water is needed for fish and to sustain our environment?

That was a central question subjected to two days of discussion as 250 environment, agriculture and water management experts gathered in Kelowna to listen, share and debate how to sustain our water supply in the face of conflicting needs and demands.

The Environmental Flow Needs Conference was hosted by the Okanagan Basin Water Board and the B.C. branch of the Canadian Water Resources Association at Kelowna's Coast Capri Hotel, in partnership with Okanagan Nation Alliance.

It brought together representatives from national and international organizations working in water management or research, including fisheries and water managers, First Nations, farmers, ranchers, regulators, policy-makers and academic researchers.

"This was largely about relationship building because EFNs are such a complicated issue," explained Nelson Jatel, OBWB's water stewardship director and conference co-chair. "We're working today not for us, but for our kids' kids, and there's no way to do that until we know our neighbours."

Determining EFNs (or in-stream flow needs) have long been a source of conflict, trying to parcel out what is needed for human vs. environmental needs for water.

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'In regions where significant demand or competition for water exists, such as the Okanagan, scientists, policy-makers, planners and regulators are developing methods to determine appropriate EFNs.

In part, this work is driven by the introduction of B.C.'s Water Sustainability Act in February 2016 which requires that EFNs be determined before granting any new licences for surface or groundwater extractions.

This requirement creates the need for better science and dialogue among all water users to reconcile their needs and interests.

For two days, participants focused on this conflict and used a collaborative process to meet the challenge, integrating Syilx/Okanagan traditions, such as the Four Food Chiefs, traditional knowledge and the dialogue process.

"Reconciliation is considered an abstract concept by many," added Jatel. "This week's conference was intended to bring Indigenous and non-Indigenous people together to understand each others' perspectives and build collective vision."

"I've attended, and MC'ed so many conferences," added Aaron Derickson, a Syilx community leader and one of three event facilitators.

"I was expecting just another conference to be honest, but what we got was such an incredible synergy of hope. For me, reconciliation is about healing the gap in understanding."

"Through this process, I witnessed people listening to each other. There was a respect for the four food chiefs and Indigenous knowledge, but also the knowledge of government officials, scientists and other stakeholders.

"I feel everyone felt safe to express their viewpoints on water and are excited about next steps."

Claudia Pahl-Wostl is a full professor for Resources Management at the Institute for Environmental Systems Research (USF) at the University of Osnabrück, Germany, and was one of several distinguished speakers at the conference.

According to Pahl-Wostl, it was the first conference of its kind that she has attended that integrated traditional Indigenous knowledge so prominently and effectively.

"I saw people open to speaking to new people, broadening their circle and perspective," she said. "I hope to see a new framework for how water is managed in the Okanagan. What happens here, moving forward, if it succeeds—or if it fails— can inform other parts of the world."

"What is clear is that addressing water concerns is not just a technical issue for hydrologists and engineers. It is also a governance issue and more importantly, we need to understand it as a social issue."

Jatel is hopeful, adding that a legacy document with a list of actions will be created to help agencies move forward and stay collectively accountable.

"I am excited about this being the start to some amazing work on the ground to protect water for fish, and for all," he said.

"I feel hopeful and a little healthy hesitation," added Derickson. "People attend conferences and a lot of good and positive things are said but then we go back to our lives, to our families, and it's a challenge to keep these issues at the forefront of our minds both politically and in our own lives."

"But, it starts with people and I feel that happened here at this conference."