What does it mean?

Implications of *Grand Expressions* for Canadian water managers

Elaine Ho

Research Summary Report

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SUMMARY REPORT
Grand Expressions Art Exhibit (Virtual Tour)

Elaine Ho, PhD Candidate

Introduction

The idea to engage the Six Nations of the Grand River community via the arts was conceived on July 3, 2018, during a discussion with then-Wildlife Manager Paul General. After a few months of ideation and high-level planning, Paul connected me with Chris McLeod, Creative Director for the Great Art for Great Lakes project, at the end of February 2019. The idea was to incorporate the art initiative as part of the larger, funded project (hosted by Waterlution), which engaged Canadian and Indigenous persons in dozens of 'creation' workshops (i.e., different artistic media) with the goal of implementing permanent, co-created art installations in various communities along the lower Grand River and Lake Erie.

It was at one of these workshops, on August 14, 2019, where I met Richelle Miller, Coordinator for Music of the Spirit & Indigenous Visual Arts. The program is an after-school cultural program for youth of Six Nations of the Grand River. Over the next month we discussed engaging with youth in the program to share stories and artwork to local Canadian communities and to water managers while contributing to my research. Soon after, from October 2019 until early March 2020, the youth worked hard creating their pieces. On January 20, 2020, photographer Ann Alimi visited Oshweken to provide a photojournalism workshop to interested youth of the program and their family members. I visited a few of the youth during regular program days to get to know them, build relationships with their parents (i.e., answer any questions), and to record the story of one youth whose preference was to share her story orally as would be tradition. In addition, we held a one-day art camp on February 15, 2020, where the youth came together to create their pieces, share their progress, and contribute to group creations.

The Grand Expressions art exhibit was originally scheduled to rotate between nine events at eight venues across five cities over six months, as follows:

- March 2-14: The Carolinian Café (Cayuga)
- March 20: World Water Day at the Ken Seiling Waterloo Region Museum (Kitchener)
- March 23-April 3: Cambridge Centre for the Arts (Cambridge) – including a public reception the evening of March 24, 2020
- April 6-17: Waterloo Indigenous Student Centre (Waterloo)
- April 20: private water manager's meeting at the Centre for International Governance Innovation (Waterloo)
- April 29-May 24: THEMUSEUM (Kitchener)
- May 26-28: annual Waterloo-Wellington Children's Groundwater Festival at Ken Seiling Waterloo Region Museum (Kitchener)

- June 2-29: University of Waterloo School of Environment, Resources and Sustainability (Waterloo)
- August (TBD): an on-reserve location, to be confirmed

However, due to closures resulting from COVID-19, the exhibit was launched only at its first location at The Carolinian Café. All venues shut down and the exhibit was promptly converted to a virtual tour made available via the research website. The first version was launched online on Monday March 2, 2020, followed by a second version on Monday August 3, 2020. This second version is viewable on a tablet on the third floor of THEMUSEUM in Kitchener until the end of January 2021.

What youth said in their stories

Figure 1 is a visual representation of the proportions of all stories coded under each top-level category. Top-level categories and their colors in the graph are as follows: (1) blue – values of water; (2) orange – culture, tradition, and knowledge; (3) grey – challenges to address; and (4) yellow – management and practice. Each of these categories is described in more detail below.

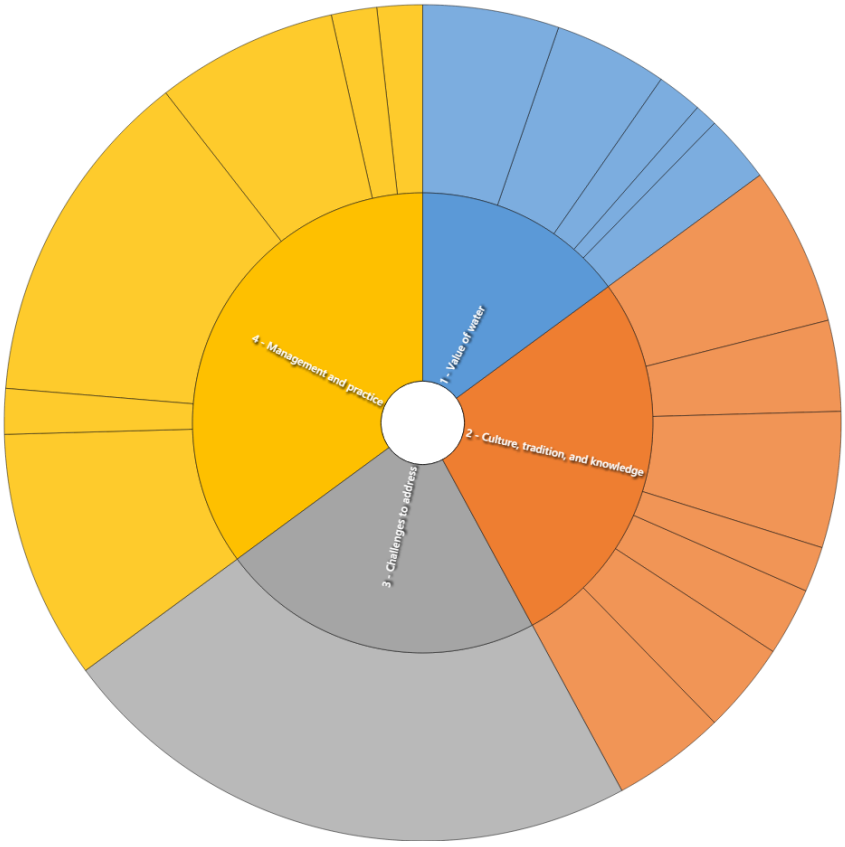

Figure 1. Sunburst diagram of the top-level hierarchies of codes from the Grand Expressions Exhibit.

Value of water

As we found with our survey Great Art for Great Lakes workshop participants, many strong and happy memories are created on or near the Grand River. The importance of water to the Six Nations youth was not understated, with many personal values and interpretations presented throughout the exhibit's artwork and stories. Although the Great Lakes (and their tributaries) are the largest source of surface freshwater in the world, the youth are concerned we are killing our most essential resource. In doing so, we are impacting our own quality of life. One reference to water's power to erode rock has a direct relevance to the urgent issue of shoreline erosion across Lakes Erie, Huron and Michigan, affecting the homes and livelihoods of thousands of people on both sides of the border. This reflection of how our treatment of water is reflected in the impacts we experience is reiterated throughout the exhibit and this report.

Several of the youth described the fundamental nature of water, stating "water is life" or describing its importance throughout our life cycles from birth to death. Many of the stories also described the interconnectedness of water – not just how it is important to all aspects of life, but how it is the connection between every living thing on earth. Everyone interprets these connections subjectively, but regardless of what specific connections are understood by each person there is a deep connection to water, to other resources, other living things. In addition to these connections, a youth acknowledged the differences in how time is perceived among different people and different organisms – an important consideration when monitoring potential change or impacts. As such, each person's values and perception of how everything is connected are unique and should be meaningfully and explicitly acknowledged.

One of the stories describes the universal family (all humanity, living things, planets, stars, etc.) as being made of and connected by a single "primordial energy" that "flows like air, water and fire (page 8)." In my understanding, this may be like viewing all sentient beings and their life support systems as being threads in a rope, all intertwined and made up of the same 'stuff' (i.e., energy, life force, however you interpret this) and of equal importance in our contributions to the collective thing that is life. The story, titled *Family: A story of healing*, states the following:

> "Each member plays a role in the family and the universe is just the same. My Haudenosaunee heritage brought me a greater understanding of how family works, that [this structure is not only] in how organisms live together but it goes farther beyond to a cosmic level (page 6)."

The youth describes one interpretation of this energy, an invisible force, between family members as love. However, as several youth expressed, this love should not be limited to those in our human family, but should be carried forward as careful and contemplative action for the protection and care of water, understood as a sentient being (i.e., a family member). In other words, we and our needs are not more important than that of the water and we should care for it as if it were a loved one (and, to many people, it is).

Although water is very personal to every living thing, there is a unique connection between water and women. Some stories described the reflection of how the wellbeing of water is reflected in the health and wellbeing of women, especially pregnant women whose womb is our first home (made primarily of water). Other stories described a less tangible connection in the responsibilities of women as voices of water and as water keepers – individuals with a spiritual responsibility to understand, care for and speak on behalf of the water. Further, the connection between the mistreatment of women and the mistreatment of water is also described in stories related to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls across Canada.

In these times of sickness, like with any other illness, love has proven to be a great medicine – especially when coupled with caring actions that facilitate healing. The youth call for love to be kept in our hearts for ourselves and for each other. As mentioned above, the love and care we mindfully practice for each other is translated into our love and care for our non-human family.

Culture, tradition, and knowledge

The Haudenosaunee culture has endured immense historical challenges due to the resilience of its people and the strength of its communities. This strength of community is the reason families and individuals can move forward in life despite experiencing violence (e.g., missing women and girls, historical efforts to assimilate these communities), according to the youth. The source of this strength is not just the family unit, but the understanding of the community of the family, as well as the broader understanding of the world and the universe as family, resulting in a natural care for each other when in need.

There is a parallel with the water, in that water flows and continues to provide despite obstacles and damage caused to it. It is the main physical make-up of our bodies, nourishing us when it is healthy but also making us ill when it is ill. Indigenous communities often experience an unfair burden of these challenges. For example, boil water advisories have been in place for decades, "impacting wellness and increasing health risks (page 40)." The prevalence of individuals and families without a clean, reliable drinking water supply is much higher in Indigenous communities than anywhere else in Canada.

In addition to the physical aspect, there are emotional and spiritual connections with water that is true for Indigenous and Canadian peoples alike. The youth express a sense of emotional well-being supported by the water, and its ability to cleanse the mind and body. One youth shared:

> "Very wise people have also told me the Creator gave us the gift of crying because the water cleanses our sadness. Even for people who cry when they are angry, it cleanses that anger (page 25)."

Further, the effects felt by aquatic organisms reflect our own wellbeing, whether conscious or not. One youth stated that phenomena like oil-covered birds and killing solely for fur or fins are outcomes of a caged society with caged minds, metaphorically speaking. We have created and

supported practices that are detrimental to all life on earth, including us. Recognizing this and pursuing fair changes are needed if we are to free ourselves from global economic systems that demands the unnecessary suffering of some organisms for the benefit of humans. As some teachings shared by the youth explain, freedom is an essential way of life.

There are also many examples in the exhibit of connections between water, other organisms, and intellectual wellbeing. Water can often provide us with a sense of meaning and place, evidenced by communities around the world having settled on or near water sources throughout humanity's history. One youth describes the wolf as a symbol of intellect, which fears distrust. Other stories that spoke of intellect spoke of it as various forms of knowledge. For example, the intergenerational passing of knowledge from wise and experienced elders to the younger generation is an important tenet of culture based on collective experiential learning. One youth stated the key to environmental sustainability is intergenerational protection of water. Intercultural knowledge is expressed as a goal of this exhibit: "I hope this exhibit can help those people who live in the region learn about and contribute to the health of the watershed (page 39)." Knowledge of many scales of society was also presented, from individual experiences to discussing the universal family. Incorporating diverse perspectives not just of current and past events, but of what may come to pass may be relevant to the ways in which we measure and predict trends and impacts (whether using models or not).

Challenges to address

The consensus represented by the collective stories in this exhibit is that we are killing or hurting the water and our environment at large, and in so doing we are killing or hurting ourselves. The youth expressed urgency in the matters they raised, stating that we are losing time to recover the health of the water, our environment, and ourselves. It seems we are teetering between experiencing the ripple effects of damage we have already done and the damage we have yet to cause if we continue down our current path. Challenges raised by the youth are as follows:

- Chemical spills – in the context of this exhibit, the youth is referring to the January 2020 chemical spill upstream on the Grand River (from where the community pulls its drinking water) in which a hydrocarbon chemical entered the waterway via storm sewer run-off from a private property in Brantford.
- Pollution in general – especially in the context of garbage/litter, plastics, and the environmental impacts of production and delivery of goods.
- Drinking water – the lack of safe, reliable drinking water on reserves across Canada, as well as the transportation of bottled water.
- Clear water – in the context used, restoration of clean, safe water for human and non-human use; the natural clarity of water changes in different areas of the watershed (i.e., the estuary is naturally 'murky' due to sediments and mixing with the lake).

- Unknown cumulative effects – one youth highlighted the lack of knowledge regarding how chemicals interact in the environment and what their cumulative impacts may be. This lack of knowledge is true for other challenges (i.e., not just chemicals) as well.
- The way we think – there are two mentalities raised here: first, we cannot afford to maintain the fallacy that the Great Lakes are large enough to mitigate much of what we add to it; second, we frequently distance ourselves (i.e., viewing humanity as external to nature) and focus on the easier small picture, rather than recognize ourselves as integrated with other organisms and the world that are all interconnected.

That the effects of these and other challenges (including historical challenges) impact certain demographics disproportionately cannot be understated. As mentioned above, short and long-term boil water advisories are experienced by Indigenous communities more than anywhere else in Canada. Within Indigenous communities, some families are more affected than others, as reflected upon by one youth: "even though we all as onkwehon:we people care deeply for water, some of our relatives live without clean drinking water and [we] must think about that all the time (page 39)." Indigenous women share a sacred connection with the spirit of water, and like water they are often abused at the whim of men and women both Indigenous and Canadian. The connection between women, water and abuse – including the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls – is described in more detail on pages 17-19. Finally, although youth are not necessarily impacted more than other demographics, they are frequently disenfranchised in processes to manage and resolve challenges that will impact their future as much as their present. Yet, youth have much to offer (as demonstrated throughout this exhibit) and have unique insights regarding their community's and their families' needs and values.

Management and practice

The youth recognize impacts they experience are shared with many communities, making improving upon the above challenges a shared goal. The youth also recognize there are ecological complexities that make management a challenge, such as the changing states of the water itself (i.e., different assimilative properties across seasons, different flow behaviours depending on weather, changing ecological interactions per species life cycles, etc.) and the circular nature of many cause-and-effect interaction (i.e., what we put in tends to come back to affect us, whether positive or negative). However, water is also able to self-heal if given the chance.

Collaboration with diverse communities, as well as diverse perspectives within these communities, is strongly encouraged. For example, managers should recognize the unique perspectives youth and women may bring to discussion as well as their unique positioning to implement behavioural changes at home. The youth view their responsibility as giving voice to anything in our world that cannot speak for itself, including the water. Regarding women's

connection to water, one youth highlighted their potential as community champions: “Among their roles, women across Canada are raising awareness to draw attention to the water crisis faced in Indigenous communities and Canada (page 21).”

Diverse perspectives are imperative to successfully track, manage, and implement changes needed to improve upon many challenges. For example, the youth called for accountability for the lack of constant, reliable drinking water on reserve not only in the Grand River Watershed, but across Canada. While this is within Federal jurisdiction, neighboring Canadian community members can play an important role in support of an equal quality of life across the country, for everyone. Too often is jurisdiction cited as a reason for no action by local parties. While the final decision may not lay with local communities and authorities, there are still opportunities to support shared goals and collaborate on difficult challenges should there be intent to do so.

In terms of management style, one youth suggested a precautionary approach in the context of water pollution (i.e., chemical), stating that prevention is easier than dealing with the potentially unknown effects of clean-up. For impacts we have already experienced, the youth called for action that surpasses an opening of dialogue, towards restoring ecosystem health. Regarding communication, one youth demonstrated a preference for positive framing in message delivery, stating the artwork was created to be beautiful enough to draw the viewer in while still delivering a lasting message.

While “Indigenous people are caretakers of mother earth and all its inhabitants (page 3),” teachings express it is the responsibility of all nations to protect our collective home and what it provides to us. While Western society often interprets this as a responsibility to manage resources, the perspectives shared by the youth demonstrate a different interpretation, to grow and to nurture instead. The roles expressed by the youth include humanity as protectors, keepers, and messengers, tasked with conserving what sustains us. Certain women, water keepers, are expected to protect and nurture. Similarly, men are expected to extend their role as family protectors to ensuring what the family needs (i.e., clean, reliable water) is provided. In other words, each member of the family has a role, and this extends to the global and universal family as well. In the teachings shared by the youth, men and women are equal in their unique roles, as are others regardless of race, nationality, or species. One youth summarizes this collective responsibility as follows:

> “To keep the [Grand] river and Lake Erie clean and healthy should be the priority of all those who have lived beside them and received their many gifts, not just Indigenous people. I hope this exhibit can help those people who live in the region learn about and contribute to the health of the watershed (page 39).”

Another youth asks us – Canadians in general, but especially water managers – to “stop, listen, act, prepare and join (page 21).”

Several youths raised the idea of operationalizing gratitude as important to consider. Four youth explicitly spoke about being thankful, including one story that spoke about a tradition for giving thanks to water (among other gifts) and one suggestion that all residents of the watershed who enjoy the water's many benefits/gifts should make riverine health (and that of the lake) a priority. The water's sentience should be recognized, recognizing its spirit is in pain, is "uneasy… angry, disappointed (page 33)." However, one youth summarized the collective hopes of all the artists as we look towards a potentially better future:

> "Each ripple as the stone skips across the water represents various perspectives of our future… Each generation fighting to save the next. That with one person, change is possible (pages 34-35)."

In summary

- Recognize the fundamental nature of water; we begin our lives in water, it nourishes us throughout our lives, and it provides sustenance for every other organism on the planet
- Recognize that impacts are shared by all, though not equally
- There is a unique connection between women and water; celebrate this and empower female champions of the community
- The interconnectedness of our world means what we put into the watershed returns to us in one form or another; we need to acknowledge this and act as if it matters
- We should not shy away from encouraging love and gratitude for each another and for the water, which we all depend on; we need to openly acknowledge that we are all sentient, equal and co-dependent in many ways
- We should celebrate the gifts we enjoy from the water, making gratitude a regular part of the way we think about the water
- There needs to be much more accountability for the lack of drinking water on reserves
- Challenges identified by the youth include chemical spills and other pollution, lack of drinking water on reserve, undrinkable surface water (Grand River), unknown cumulative effects, and two mentalities that need changing (dilution fallacy and removing ourselves from the 'big picture' interconnectedness of nature)
- While open dialogue is a great start, action must surpass this towards restoration and prevention; a proactive approach is preferred
- Managers should strive to measure and enhance community experiences as part of its assessment of watershed health
- Nation-to-nation histories must be openly acknowledged, and efforts made to reconcile (i.e., too many Grand River residents do not know what the Haldimand Tract is)
- Intercultural and intergenerational knowledge should be captured and shared
- Diverse perspectives are necessary to succeed with making our watershed healthy and equitable for all

- Managers and community members need to understand and accept the diverse relationships that exist between different peoples and the water (i.e., including spiritual, emotional, and physical)
- Precautionary management should be implemented, and positive framing may make the community more receptive to messages about riverine health
- More of us need to be engaged to collectively work together towards shared goals