



## Women Elder's Nibi/Mni Council

*(a website is being constructed at [www.nsaap.org](http://www.nsaap.org) with reports of current and previous meeting and calendar of events)*

**History:** In 2011, during discussions between the University of Minnesota and various tribal communities concerning manoomin (wild rice) genome research activities, people began to realize women's voices were being left out of these conversations, especially conversations on the water that accompanies manoomin. Women have always protected the nibi/mni through their prayers, songs, ceremonies, and the knowledge they've passed down through the generations. Because of this, people felt women elders needed to be involved in the deliberations. To avoid conflicts of interests, North Star AISES Alliance and Professional Chapter (NSAAP) were asked to take a lead in organizing a women elders' nibi/mni council.

With funding from a small InCommons grant from the Bush Foundation, NSAAP helped convene the first Women Elder' Nibi/Mni Council in March, 2013 in Mille Lacs MN. Approximately 15 women elders participated in the event that began a conversation about how women should be invited into discussions around creating tribally controlled water centers. In October of the same year, women elders – along with a larger audience – were invited to a symposium to continue those discussions which focused on tribally controlled water research centers.

Subsequently, NSAAP was awarded a second Bush Foundation Grant. This Community Innovations grant provides additional funds to help support women elders' Nibi/Mni conversations for the next two years.

The previous women elders' discussions have led us to focus our next discussions on helping women elders make a difference in their own communities.

### **Women Elder's Nibi/Mni Council Summary – August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2014**

Fourteen Native American women gathered at the Grand Casino (Mille Lacs) for a day of conversation and ceremony dedicated the living waters. They gathered from White Earth, Red Lake, Leech Lake, Mille Lacs, and Fond du Lac reservation communities – many were elders from their communities. Sharon Day (Ojibwe) and Dr. Wren Walker Robbins (Mohawk) co-facilitated the gathering. They led participants through small and large group discussions/activities to help participants identify a personal message [intentions or pledge] to carry back to the waters in their home communities. Participants then worked together to develop "action plans" to raise awareness and actions back in their home.

*INSERT COMMENTS FROM SHARON AND WREN HERE (DISCUSS HOW THE DAY WENT, HIGHLIGHT CONVERSATIONS AND ACTIVITIES, AND YOUR PERCEPTIONS OF THE DAY)*

#### **OVERVIEW OF OUR DAY TOGETHER**

***Bringing Nibi/Mni to Life Through Experiential Activity*** As Indigenous women, we have a long history of caring for the waters, and in doing so, we've cared for our families and communities. To recognize and honor this, we began our day with a tobacco offering ceremony that helped bring us to a place to do the work that reflects our traditional beliefs, attitudes and values. It was a good way to start.

Women were then invited to remember a body of water that is familiar and meaningful to them. It could be a river or a lake. It could be any body of water that holds a special meaning or connection. Importantly it is a body of water that shares an important relationship with them on a daily basis. They then drew or painted this body of water and stated their intentions – what they were willing to do to show gratitude and respect for this gift of that water, and what they were willing to do to help clean or restore this body of water to health. In this way, the women shared their images and later their intentions. (I'll send a couple of pictures of the images the women created.)

***Making Plans To Take Back To Our Home Communities.*** Once they had identified a particular body of water and stated their intentions for it, the women came together to identify three emerging areas for further work. They were: 1] developing resources for water, river, and lake education, 2] understanding local and global connections, and 3] ways to ignite community involvement. With these areas in mind they broke into three groups and worked on “*action plans*” to take back to their home communities.

***Coming Back To Ceremony.*** We ended our day, flowing like water in a cycle back to where we started in the morning, in ceremony. Leaving the casino we gathered in a circle by Mille Lacs lake where Sharon offered a water ceremony. We held tobacco in our hands, and spoke our words and prayers into it. Around the circle we shared a sips of water from the headwaters of the Mississippi, and sung songs. We gathered as women have always in gratitude and respect, and then we offered the tobacco to the lake.

## ASSESSMENTS

***End of Day Reflections*** An End of Day Reflection was given to participants just before the water ceremony to give the workshop organizers some insights about how the day went for participants. They were asked to answer the following four questions: 1] what do you have a greater understanding of today? 2] what is the most important thing you learned today? 3] What else would you like us to know? And 4] What name would you give this day? A selection that captures the “*flavor*” of women’s responses is reported below.

*What do you have a greater understanding of today?*

- “*Relationships: water, women, and the larger community and the natural world [animals, plants]. How we can go back to our communities and share.*”
- “*The importance of women gathering, talking, and sharing with each other. ...*”
- “*The Native view point is as valid as non-native. Native sovereignty provides the right to control our own water standards.*”

*What is the most important thing you learned today?*

- “*We are all connected. We are all teachers. We are all learners.?*”
- “*Don’t give up. Put aside shame-based teaching.*”
- “*Women’s views on engaging their communities in water protection.*”

*What else would you like us to know?*

- “*[Share] information on past meetings to see what’s already been spoken about.*”
- “*This session was helpful to me in my occupation. I work for DNR.*”
- “*I liked the balance of sharing and working together. Important to continue this work.*”

*What name would you give this day?*

- “*Niibi, Ikwe, Ceremony, Song.*”

- “A wonderful day to voice out loud what was sitting for sometime.”
- “Caring for Nibi: our responsibility, our actions.”

**Water Engagement Survey** A Likert-scale survey was given to participants to gauge their perception of their own engagement with water quality or management decisions in their home communities. Please see Figure below for survey questions and other details.

A majority of women who took the survey did not agree with its first three statements. This likely indicates that they are not engaging in water resource management decisions in their communities.

1. I’m currently involved in water quality or water resource management decisions in my community – only 3 of 12 agreed.
2. I’m confident that tribal agencies that manage water quality or water resources in my community value my opinions and my knowledge – only 4 of 12 agreed.
3. I’m confident that water quality and water resource management decisions in my community reflect traditional beliefs. – only 5 of 12 agreed.

However, their non-engagement in water resource decisions does not reflect their belief that is is not important as a majority of women agreed that all three statements were important (8 of 12, 7 of 12, and 11 of 12 respectively) reflecting their belief that being involved *is* important.

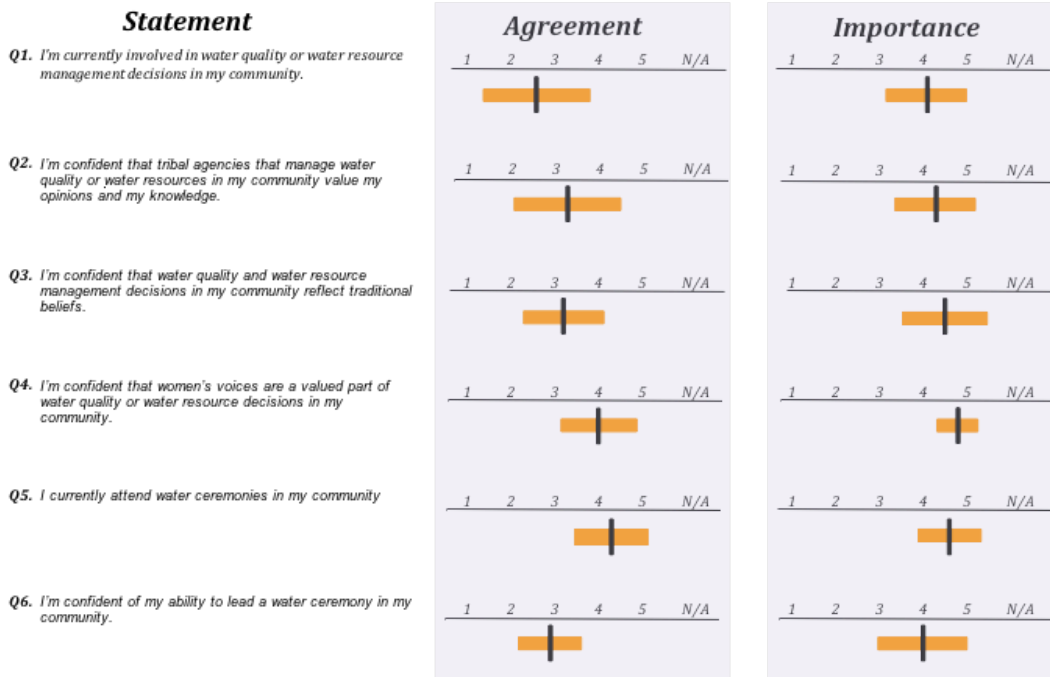
Also confusing was that while most didn’t feel confident their opinions and knowledge are valued by tribal agencies that manage water resources, they did feel that overall women’s voices were a valued part of water resource decisions made in their communities.

Taken together these results are interesting given that 1] this group’s ready interest in water and how its managed in their communities – as evident by their participation in the Nibi/Mni Council, 2] their belief that being involved *is* important – as evident by the importance they attributed to the three statements, and 3] the fact that many are seen as elders and leaders in the communities that have traditionally placed a high value in women’s voices in regards to water.

The results open what might be important lines of inquiry that need to be followed up on. Do Native women who have traditionally been seen as protectors and keepers of water feel empowered to contribute their knowledge and beliefs in a good way to water management decisions made in their communities? Are women’s voices welcomed in tribal agencies that manage water resources? Do women hold positions of authority in tribal communities such that their voices are heard and acted on? If not, what actions: ceremonial, educational, and/or community building are needed to empower them to contribute water management decisions?

The last two questions on the survey explores women’s ceremonial connections to water. The results seem to say that a majority of these women currently attend water ceremony in their community, and that they feel this is important. Interestingly, only 2 out of 12 women felt confident in their ability to lead a water ceremony

## Nibi/Mni Engagement Survey



**Women's Engagement In Nibi/Mni Quality and Management Decisions and Ceremony In Native Communities.** This survey was given to women from Native communities attending the Women Elders' Nibi/Mni Council held August 15th, 2014 at the Grand Casino Mille Lacs. It asked them to rate their agreement to statements [on the left], and how important they felt the statements were. The black lines represents the average responses on the survey. The gold bars are the standard deviations of the responses. Twelve women took the survey. The Likert scale used was: 1= Strongly Disagree; 2= Disagree; 3= Neutral; 4= Agree; 5= Strongly agree; N/A= Not Applicable.

rganizers utilized qualitative and quantitative measures to explore women's confidence, knowledge, and satisfaction with the meeting. Midway through the day's activities, participants were asked to complete a short Nibi/Mni Engagement survey. Although the women thought their personal involvement in water protection was important, they felt they did not do enough in their own communities to protect the water. They also suggested they were not confident of their ability to lead water ceremonies in the communities, but felt it was important to learn. The women had some confidence that their tribal leaders and their DNR offices considered women's opinions when making decisions impacting water.

## **End of day Reflections:**

### **What do you have a better understanding of today?**

- Scientific/Nat. Res. Intentions in their decision making/reasons.
- Responsibilities of women with H2O, ceremony, and community.
- The depth of commitment to the water, “their body of water.”
- How important it is to have and protect water sources.
- Relationship: water, women and the larger community and the natural world (plants and animals).
- Attendees who came here varied goals and ideologies.
- How can we go back to our communities – share.
- The importance of women gathering and talking, sharing with each other. I loved how everyone was seated around square tables as Sharon passed the sage to the women. Without being instructed, [the women] moved into a circle and stayed even when we were put in small groups.
- Change starts with myself. I need to take a more serious look at how I use water. Changing ways and passing it on to my family.
- That we were a community – does not matter if we are one or a million or more with a voice that counts.
- The importance of involving all life forms in H2O is essential for life. Issues need to be worked on to make H2O available to generation ahead of this meeting.
- Communications of basic knowledge of values and beliefs. Native viewpoints are as valid as non-native. Native sovereignty provides the right to control our own water standards.

### **What is the most important thing you learned today?**

- Women’s rights on engaging their own communities in water protection.
- To tell others about this meeting.
- That the voices of the young as well as the elders are needed.
- Water is so important. A lot of people like myself take water for granted. That way of thinking needs to change. More awareness and education like today. It was great.
- I learned – again – how much I dislike this process of “brain drain” – gathering folks to accumulate their “best thinking.” May be my own particular dissatisfaction.
- I like the individual morning activities. Thing we can and will do. Empowering and responsibility.
- We are not alone in protecting our water and concern for its sacredness.
- ... including different views is important / not excluding one group.
- About my commitment that I made – voiced it for the first time.
- What needs to happen in various communities.
- Don’t give up – put aside shame based education.
- We are all connected. We are all teachers. We are all learners.

### **What else would you like us to know?**

- Need to be included – not just upper politicians – but ikwe, traditional women.

- I thought the process worked well.
- Information on previous meetings – to see what has already been spoken.
- Discussion time was great to voice individual concerns, although we have smaller values and ideas, each of our communities have fairly different issues / current events.
- This session was helpful to me in my occupation – I work for the DNR.
- I liked the balance of sharing and working together – Important to continue this work.
- I want to be more involved in this council meetings – I want to start changes on my rez .
- We are all in this together.

**What name would you give to this day?**

- Women's Nibi/Mni gathering.
- Empowering Anishanaabe Ikwe on Nibi.
- Caring for Nibi: Our responsibility, our actions.
- Take care of our water (niibii) .
- ... it will never be gone.
- Conversations about Nibi/Mni.
- For me \*A wonderful day for voicing out loud what was sitting for sometime.
- Bodies of water.
- Niibii, Ikwe, ceremony, song.