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Tackling water myths Canadians hold dear

Limitless supply? Not on your life: Wildsight reports from a national conference

Columbia Basin, B.C. — Canadians hold a major myth about water, and experts from across the country met in Montreal recently to do more than debunk it: they set out to replace it with a strategy.

The experts were gathered at *Canadian Water: Towards a New Strategy*, hosted by the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada.

“Canadians have a myth of abundance when it comes to water,” said Heather Leschied, Wildsight’s Water Stewardship program manager, who attended the McGill conference with Development Director Kat Hartwig. “We assume we have more, so we use more—more per capita than nearly every other developed country.”

“We are among the world’s great water wasters and polluters,” affirmed Bob Sandford, the Chair of the Canadian Partnership Initiative of the United Nations “Water for Life Decade, who’s working with Wildsight and other groups to further water stewardship efforts in Canada. “Nor do we have as much water as we think. If we do not dispel the myth of limitless water abundance in Canada, we will continue to make public policy choices based on false assumptions of how much water we have.”

But how can grassroots groups help shape public policy about water?

That’s what Leschied and Hartwig delved into at the conference. “We gained knowledge on current policy challenges and future policy changes,” Leschied said. “We learned how community organizations can help strengthen water policy to protect the viability of this precious resource.”

For example, the Lake Windermere Ambassadors — with members from a cross-section of community stakeholders — is helping implement recommendations set out during the five-year Lake Windermere Project, a water quality and community education program. The Ambassadors were singled out by Environment Canada as an example of community stewardship at its best.

On the down side, delegates discussed how very little policy is in place to protect Canada’s water resources — and how the issue needs more attention from the public.

And, as Dr. Schindler, from the University of Alberta, explained, “Canada needs a more rational approach to governing water — and how new forms of law can take us in new directions with new values associated with the management of water.”

“Currently, the Province of B.C. is modernizing its antiquated Water Act,” Leschied said. “There was an intense amount of public interest after a series of workshops held across the province,

which confirms a national poll showing that Canadians value water higher than our oil or gas resources.”

The conference left Leschied hopeful for the future water in the Columbia Basin. “Thanks to the Columbia Basin Environmental Education Network, I attended this conference and learned that the future of water in Canada not settled by any means,” she said. “As a nation, we still have time and prosperity on our side. In the Columbia Basin, we are working as effectively as we can to educate the public and to share our knowledge resources with other educators so we can help secure healthy water resources for the future.”

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About Wildsight • www.Wildsight.ca

Wildsight works locally, regionally and globally to protect biodiversity and encourage sustainable communities in Canada's Columbia and southern Rocky Mountain region. This area is internationally recognized as a keystone to conservation in western North America.

Contact:

Heather Leschied, Wildsight Water Stewardship program manager
250.341.6898 • Heather@Wildsight.ca

Photo:

Kat Hartwig, Bob Sandford, Dr. David Schindler, and Heather Leschied at the conference in Montreal this spring.