

## Healthy Watersheds Initiative Launches Indigenous Graphic Novel “We Are of Water”

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### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**June 1, 2023 | VANCOUVER BC, x̣ṃəθkẉəỵəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliwətaʔ (Tseil-Waututh):** Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and youth share their relationships to water in the newly released graphic novel, “We Are of Water.” The Covid stimulus program, Healthy Watersheds Initiative (HWI), collected the voices and reflections of Indigenous peoples working to restore and heal lands and waterways throughout the two-year pilot project, culminating in this publication, now available for public download.

Fourteen personal stories, beautifully illustrated by Chenoa Gao, take readers across the province on an intimate journey to the territories of Indigenous HWI participants. The illustrated stories are intended to amplify Indigenous voices and experiences, embrace and advance inter-generational learning between youth and Elders, and foster future generations of water champions and stewards.

Illustrator Chenoa Gao is a member of the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation. Her mother was part of the Sixties Scoop; the removal of many Indigenous children from their families and communities, and the loss of identity they suffered, left a legacy of intergenerational trauma. Chenoa grew up not knowing how important water is to her people. Her work with the B.C. Wildlife Federation and HWI draws on the teachings of Indigenous leaders involved in watershed restoration – that water is central to their way of life, spirit, and culture.

“Turning the Elder and youth voices into comics has been a transformative experience, allowing me to see my role as an artist and environmentalist,” said Chenoa. “Sharing their stories and giving them life is so important, and I hope it inspires young people the way it has inspired me. I want to give back this feeling I have been given to the youth and those struggling with their own purpose and cultural identity.”

The HWI is a \$27-million program supported with funding from the Province of BC, to stimulate economic recovery through investments in community-driven watershed conservation and restoration projects. Through this program, the Real Estate Foundation of BC (REFBC), in partnership with Watersheds BC, administered grants for 61 projects. The completed graphic novel was inspired by an initial collection of Elder stories and illustrations created through the B.C. Wildlife Federation’s Wetlands Workforce project, one of the 61 HWI-funded projects.

HWI was guided by an Indigenous Leaders Advisory Circle (ILAC). ILAC’s Chair is Mavis Underwood, Tiwenomot, a Tsawout Community and WSANEC Nation member and a REFBC Governor. She said, “Indigenous law, in most cases, describes a relationship of gratitude, respect and responsibility for air, land and water, and species that are gifts through creation to help sustain all life.”

Tiwenomot champions creative ways to share stories that refresh the perspectives that have overtaken and dominated mainstream society. She said, “To see young people relating to science, environment and earth science, and geography is to see them awaken dreams of working in education, language revitalization, health, fisheries, governance, and land development.”

For more information and to view the graphic novel please visit [www.healthywatersheds.ca/news/we-are-of-water/](http://www.healthywatersheds.ca/news/we-are-of-water/)

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The **Healthy Watersheds Initiative** is administered by the Real Estate Foundation of BC in partnership with Watersheds BC to support the successful implementation of more than 60 watershed security projects in communities across the province.

Learn More: <https://healthywatersheds.ca/>

The **Real Estate Foundation of BC (REFBC)** is a philanthropic organization working to advance sustainable, equitable, and socially just land use and real estate practices across BC. Since 1988, REFBC has granted over \$100 million to organizations working to strengthen communities, protect our shared land and water, and advance sustainable real estate practices.

Learn More: <https://refbc.com>

**Watersheds BC** is a capacity-building initiative supporting local watershed governance and security. Watersheds BC provides training, resources, and peer-to-peer support to local government staff, First Nations, watershed boards and roundtables, regional and provincial staff, and other watershed professionals.

Learn More: <https://www.watershedsbc.ca>

The **B.C. Wildlife Federation** is a non-profit organization that strives to ensure the sound long-term management of B.C.'s fish, wildlife, and outdoor recreational resources in the best interests of all British Columbians. The B.C. Wildlife Federation led the Wetlands Workforce project, one of the 61 HWI-funded projects, which supported maintenance and monitoring work to hundreds of wetlands across the province.

Learn More: <https://bcwfb.bc.ca/> | <https://wetlandsworkforce.ca/>

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