

Waterlution's Water "un- conference" in Exshaw, Alberta- October 2010

Summary:

Attended by: Mike Low, Technical Advisor- Deh Cho AAROM program

Location- YMCA Rocky Mountains near Exshaw, Alberta. Approximately 40km East of Canmore

Waterlution is a water learning organization that brings together young leaders – interested or working on water-related topics – for peer-to-peer and inter-generational learning programs. Workshops and activities often take place over a weekend, or are customized to work with partners and groups at selected events. Waterlution often focuses its programs on geographical areas engaging local stakeholders. As of 2009, Waterlution has hosted learning programs in nine provinces and territories. The Waterlution organization recently chose 250 young professionals from across Canada to come together for four days on October 21 to discuss water issues and how water should be managed in the future.

The 250 individuals chosen represented a diverse group which included biologists, environmental economists, city planners, tar- sand representatives, pathologists, conservation officers and even performance artists. As well there were 48 facilitators present from all types of water related fields. These facilitators were crucial to developing dialogue and making the week a success.

I attended the "un- conference" as a Technical Advisor/ Biologist representing the Deh Cho First Nation AAROM program. This program is a federally funded program which allows First Nations to monitor and manage their aquatic resources, it also allows for training opportunities and scientific research. The AAROM program will help first nations develop programs to manage their aquatic resources after land claims have been settled.

The participants were brought in via various methods, some were flown using contributions from Waterlution, some drove their own vehicles and others caught the Waterlution sponsored "prairie bus" which started in Winnipeg and picked up participants along the way to Exshaw. One devoted participant believed this event to be so important that he biked through the mountains from Vancouver to attend!

The main reason for attending this "un- conference" was to take advantage of the opportunity to raise awareness of the issues we are facing in the north; this was also an ideal time to try and create some unique solutions by learning what has been done in other areas. Some of the important topics that were discussed included developing a system to keep up stream users from polluting or removing excess water, protecting first nation waters from decreasing water levels and airborne contaminants and most importantly to get the general publics attention on the Mackenzie River basin which drains most of western Canada's freshwater, yet so often seems to be forgotten. Many southern provinces have trans- boundary agreements with the provinces bordering however the NWT does not have such an agreement and we're losing a tremendous amount of water, this year saw record lows for the Great slave lake and Mackenzie River, yet local rain fall was at a high as seen by the water levels on the Hay River, Buffalo River and Kakisa.

The event was divided up into 3 main days, the first day had a narrow spectrum with participants being divided up into groups based on their backgrounds and interest and each group was taken on a field trip that was related to a specific topic. The field trips included visiting a relevant location and listening to local experts discuss specific topics. The topics were: glaciers and freshwater sources which included visiting a glacier at Lake Louise and discussions on watershed health and upstream and downstream sources of pollution; agriculture which had the participants visit a ranch to observe various ways in which water is managed in the agricultural industry; and energy which included visiting the Calgary water treatment facility and experiencing some of the most up to date technology in urban water treatment and management.

The next two days used this newly gained knowledge to spark dialogue among the 250 participants. The first day of discussions had people from the same regions get together in groups to discuss regional specific issues, such as trans- boundary water agreements, multi stake holder water boards and having the relevant people on such boards. These regional discussions made way for national discussion the next day, which saw all participants contributing. This was quite a task for all the facilitators, who did a terrific job of keeping everyone focused and on time.

The un- conference was a tremendous success in that healthy dialogue was produced regarding the current and future management of our most valuable resource, water. As well, relationships were produced that could lead to new developments in water monitoring and management. One of the biggest outcomes of this event was the media attention it gathered across Canada; this type of attention is crucial to bringing freshwater management to the forefront and educating the general population on the global shortage and other problems associated with water. Being a citizen of Canada a lot of us take water for granted and don't realize that in the next few years things may drastically change.

As an individual I was able to raise awareness of water issues that we are having in the north as well as learn how people are dealing with these issues elsewhere. I also met some individuals that will help build a water ecology module to teach students in the classroom and another individual that may be able to assist in monitoring the water for toxins that are being found in southern waters. As well, the founder of Waterlution has confirmed that a workshop will be held in the Deh Cho area next year to further raise awareness on northern issues and the Mackenzie River Watershed.

Photos

Fig 1. Scenery around Exshaw, location of Waterlution water un- conference

Fig 2. Group discussions in the evening

Fig 3. Accommodation for the participants

Fig 4. Evening entertainment

Fig 5. Evening entertainment

Fig 6. Evening exercises to produce dialogue and get know each other

Fig 7. Evening in the teepees

Fig 8. Topic day, group listening to a glaciologist speak at Lake Louise

Fig 9. Lake Louise with glacier in the background

Fig 10. Aboriginal participants at the Waterlution water un- conference

Fig 11. Waterlution participants and facilitators creating a modified Canadian flag with a water droplet in the middle

