



# OCTOBER 12TH SUMMARY REPORT

**“Coming together as a whole:  
Gathering in the Cowichan watershed  
to connect health, communities,  
lands, waters and climate”**

**UNCED QW'UTSUN TERRITORY  
COWICHAN BAY & WATERSHED**



Environment  
Community  
Health  
Observatory  
Network

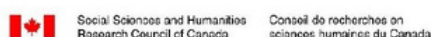
Réseau  
observatoire sur  
l'environnement  
les communautés  
et la santé

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On October 12th, 2022, Cowichan Tribes and the Environment, Community Health Observatory (ECHO) Network co-hosted a gathering in the Cowichan Watershed, on unceded Quw'utsun territory. This gathering brought together community, environmental, government, health authority and research colleagues to 'come together as a whole' to address critical connections among climate, land, water, community and health concerns. The gathering was centered around a key principle described in the **Cowichan Watershed Board governance manual** in relation to the ancient Cowichan Tribes principle "*Nutsamat kws syaay's tthu qa'*": "We come together as a whole to work together to be stronger as partners for the watershed".

Through a series of connecting conversations, the morning session began with a breakfast; profiled Indigenous-led environment and community health initiatives in the Cowichan region; discussed the alignments between the Drinking Water Protection Act (DWPA) legislative review and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA); promoted youth engagement in land-, water- and climate-based initiatives; and centered strengthening capacity for integrative approaches to complex issues relevant to the Cowichan region, BC, Canada and beyond. These discussions were expanded through place-based conversations around the Cowichan Watershed, starting at the Cowichan estuary, visiting the Cowichan River at Stoltz, and ending at Cowichan Lake. Moving together upstream, our conversations explored climate, land and water concerns, as well as community actions, and the connections and co-benefits that arise when upstream-downstream stories of cumulative effects are centered when addressing coastal-marine issues.

Suggested citation: Cowichan Tribes and the Environment, Community Health Observatory (ECHO) Network. (2023). "Coming together as a whole: Gathering in the Cowichan watershed to connect health, communities, lands, waters and climate": October 12, 2022 Summary Report.





## 02 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### 04 SESSION 1 **Welcome and Framing Remarks** (Chief Lydia Hwitsum)

### 05 SESSION 2 **Drinking Water Protection Act and Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act Connections** (Dr. Danièle Behn-Smith and Dr. Shannon Waters)

### 07 SESSION 3 **Glimpses from the ECHO Network** (Dr. Margot Parkes, Dr. Dawn Hoogeveen and Dr. Chris Buse)

### 08 SESSION 4 **Local Action/Connections Panel: Perspectives from Local Initiatives** (Jared Qwustenuxun Williams, Karen Larson, Rupert Koyote)

### 10 SESSION 5 **Next Steps on Strengthening Capacity for Integrative Approaches to Complex Issues Relevant to the Cowichan Region, BC, Canada, and Beyond**

### 12 AFTERNOON **Moving Upstream Through the Cowichan Watershed**

### 13 **APPENDIX A** Meeting Resources

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# Welcome & Framing Remarks



Chief Lydia Hwitsum

The day started with breakfast, a welcome to the Territory from Chief Lydia Hwitsum, and a drummed welcome song by Jared Qwustenuxun Williams. Chief Hwitsum, who is now back to serving as Chief of Cowichan Tribes and who had previously been elected in 1997, brought forward the principle of ‘*Nutsamat kws syaay's tthu qa*’, which means coming together to work as a whole for the sake of our people and for the health of the watershed.



Left: Jared Qwustenuxun Williams, Right: Chief Lydia Hwitsum

“*Nutsamat*” is our way of being, our way of moving forwards, working together, each person carries something that is worth being respected - it is a commitment to come together and recognize that each person coming to the table brings something of value to the “together place”.

“*kws syaay's*” is our commitment to each other. We recognize our authorities and responsibilities, we are committed to work.

With gratitude for the opportunity to see everyone coming together for the health of the watershed, Chief Hwitsum posed the question: ‘How can we create ‘nutsamat’ with the various organizations, groups, and authorities, in ways that value and bring Indigenous voices and strength to the table?’



Chief Hwitsum encouraged those in the room to think about how we can look at the various existing water sustainability acts and legislations, while also thinking about what other systems may work that uphold Indigenous ways of being. Chief Hwitsum emphasized the importance of relationships and connections to save the watershed.





# DWPA and DRIPA Connections

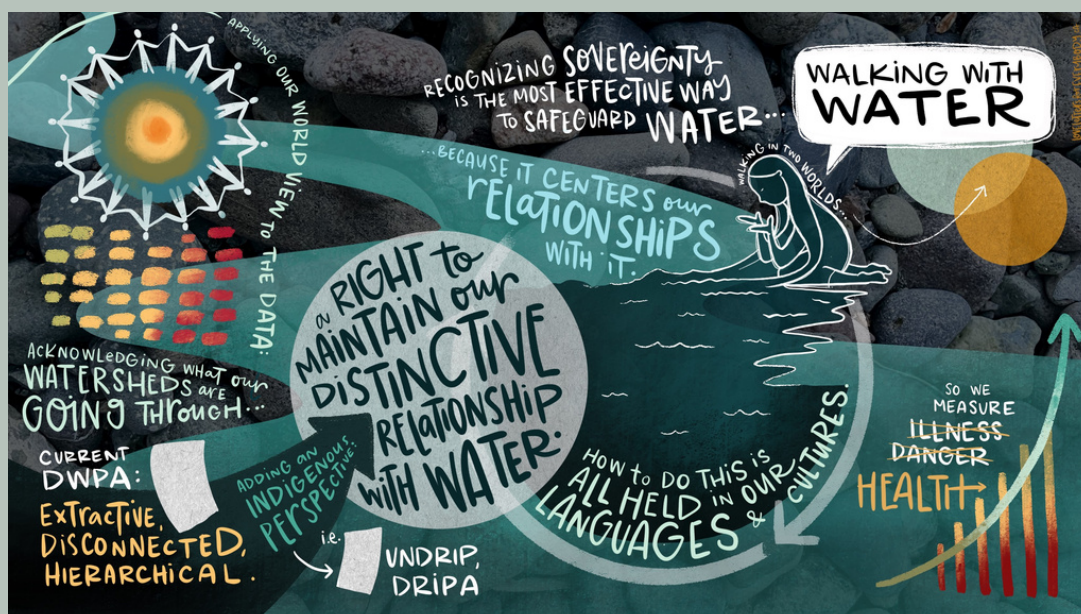
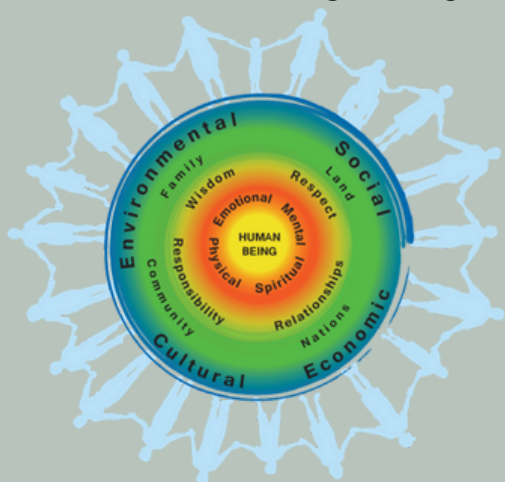
Dr. Shannon Waters, Dr. Danièle Behn-Smith & Dr. Bonnie Henry

Dr. Shannon Waters and Dr. Danièle Behn-Smith began the session with an acknowledgement of the mountains, water, everyone in the room, the morning drumming, and Chief Hwitsum for all of the work she has done for the watershed and for inspiring their continuing work. Shannon and Danièle emphasized that water is life giving, and that relationships with water is something that we all share. They identified that watersheds are a relationship between people and the land, and that Indigenous governance is crucial for safeguarding the future of the land, is critical to our health, and that of the other beings we share our homes with. At the time of the meeting in



October 2022, the Cowichan Watershed entered a Level 5 drought for the second time in the region's history, signifying the highest classification of drought in BC. This further illustrated the importance of coming together as a whole to protect the health of the watershed. Indigenous governance centers the relationships we have with land, water,

and the environment, and brings it to the center of our decision making. Shannon and Danièle shared the model for First Nations Perspective on Health and Wellness. Chief Hwitsum reflected on how when they were first creating the First Nations Health Authority, they first looked at how to reframe the health of Indigenous Peoples. Everything at the time was reporting measures of “sickness” and “overrepresentation”. This model was their approach to focus on wellness as a guiding principle and shifting narratives to “health”.



Existing definitions of water in various Acts (e.g., the Drinking Water Protection Act) frames water in terms of its utility to humans and/or as a hazard. With this anthropocentric framing, we are only able to address human-centered issues. Therefore, we must look at Indigenous ways of knowing for the wisdom to make these definitions a reciprocal relationship of giving and receiving. Shannon and Danièle called for those in the room to strengthen our spiritual relationship with the watersheds we call home. Shannon talked about the territory we are in and called it our health system.

*“When asking yourself, can we do this? Yes, do it, and show the rest of us that it can be done”*

-Dr. Shannon Waters

Chief Hwitsum invited Dr. Bonnie Henry to respond. The Office of the Public Health Officer (OPHO) has been focusing on how we measure strength and wellness in communities. The OPHO is working in partnership with the First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) to measure this with Indigenous communities. In response, they started the ‘We Walk Together’ project focused on working with community Elders and youth to look at how deeper understanding of place and history strengthens relationships, communities, and the watershed. Bonnie quoted the poem by Rita Joe about the loss of language, family, knowledge, medicine, ceremony, joy, hope, and tradition that Indigenous Peoples have experienced due to settler colonialism. She stated that her responsibility is to walk with Indigenous Peoples and to try to make up for some of these losses through working with a Two-Eyed Seeing lens. She pointed to having hope that good work will happen with the new Ministry of Land, Water, and Resource Stewardship led by James Mack, and with Minister Osborne’s mandate of caring for water from ‘source to tap’.



Chief Hwitsum gifted the room with insights about how the language of ‘loss’ invokes blame on Indigenous Peoples and clarified the importance of naming how these things were **stolen**. Chief Hwitsum challenged the room to flip the language we use to break down stereotypes about Indigenous Peoples, and to find ways to walk together. She reflected on how her mother used water as one of her conduits to understanding and connecting with the Spirit World, and that centering the importance of the whole and the strength of water is paramount.



# Glimpses from the ECHO Network

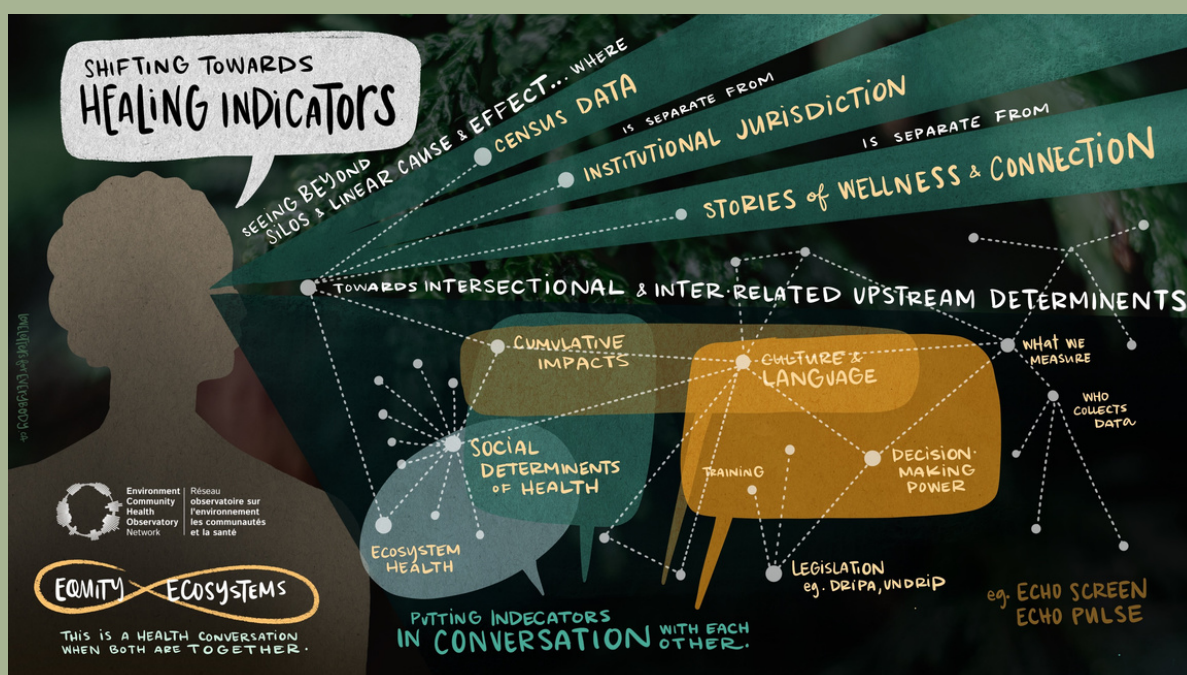
Dr. Margot Parkes, Dr. Dawn Hoogeveen and Dr. Chris Buse

Dr. Margot Parkes introduced this session with an acknowledgement of rivers as eco-social Elders. Margot summarized the work of the Environment, Community Health Observatory (ECHO) Network, which learns from knowledge exchange partnerships to connect previously disconnected sectoral conversations at the nexus of environment and community health in relation to resource extraction.



Margot shared that the ECHO Network has been learning about hope and imagining co-benefits that are emerging through Indigenous leadership. The ECHO Network is moving from a focus on resource extraction to co-benefits, and acknowledges that if we are prioritizing Indigenous wisdom, we must foreground ecological conversations and bring ecological systems to the center of our conversations.

Dr. Chris Buse discussed his work with the ECHO Network focused on a BC-relevant version of the CalEnviroScreen - a screening tool capable of merging environmental, socioeconomic and health data. He summarized the potential for this tool to combine data to create a story about how our environment affects our health. He identified this as a starting point for having conversations to discuss the upstream drivers, how to localize these models, and how to work in a holistic way with environment and community health data. Dr. Dawn Hoogeveen then discussed her Healing Indicators work with FNHA focused on identifying gaps in health impact assessment on a jurisdictional level and working to find out how Indigenous-led governance can better feed into health impact assessments.



## Local Action/Connections Panel: Perspectives from Local Initiatives

Jared Qwustenuxun Williams, Karen Larson, Rupert Coyote

Jared Qwustenuxun Williams shared a story about how he was raised on the edge of Cowichan River the majority of his life and grew up eating and using what was there. He later became a chef and noticed a huge absence of people using traditional foods. Jared was contracted to cook for an Elders gathering but was prohibited from preparing traditionally harvested foods given the existing food safety regulations that exist in colonial government structures. He has worked for years to change these regulations with the FNHA and the Ministry of Health, and has proven to these entities that traditional salmon preservation techniques are “healthy”. Jared is currently working to bring traditional foods to hospitals for Elders accessing medical care.

Jared shared that when he was young there were hundreds of smokehouses along the rivers in the Cowichan Valley and he could harvest about 200 salmon in one evening. At the time, Elders would comment about how when they were children, they used to harvest hundreds. Now there are about 20 smokehouses at the river and he gets two to three salmon in an evening.



Karen Larson reflected on her work with Jared in trying to change regulations to allow traditional foods to be served in health settings. She commented on the importance of food security and how this has been challenged immensely by increasing environmental events, such as the Herring Egg outbreak, cholera outbreak, shellfish dying in heat domes, and trees washing away in rain and wind events. Karen emphasized the importance of moving away from siloed work and towards working together instead.

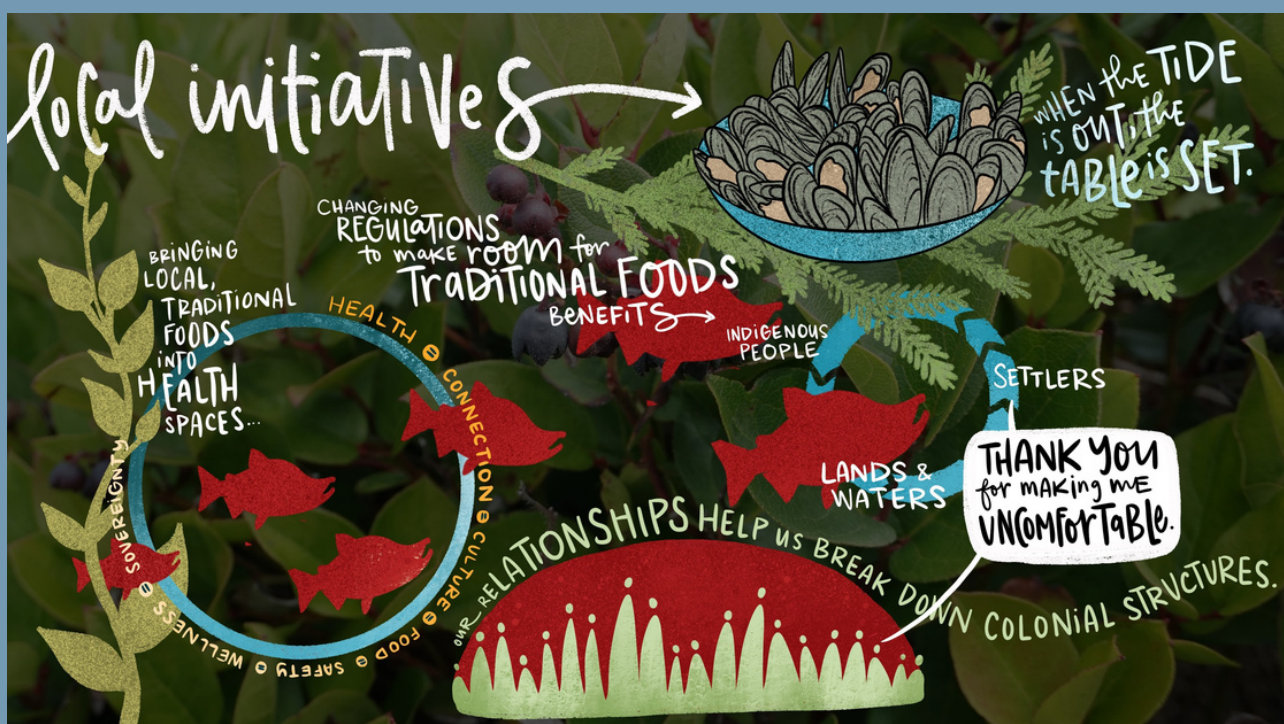




*"The more we work with our traditional, local foods, the more we work with the environment... reinvigorating our traditional food system reconnects us to the land and the water"*

*-Jared Qwustenuxun Williams*

Rupert Coyote spoke on behalf of the Quw'utswn Cultural Connections Society and discussed their work on ways to steward and restore cedar. Rupert's thesis project is focused on developing an Indigenous-led land trust with other governance mechanisms across the territory which may enable the 100% footprint the communities desire.





## Next Steps to Strengthening Capacity for Integrative Approaches to Complex Issues

Chief Hwitsum reflected on how the safety of eating crab in Cowichan Bay has changed since she was a child. When Chief Hwitsum first started to create the Cowichan Watershed Board, she came together with another woman for the first time to find points of connection and collaboration. Chief Hwitsum emphasized the need to change systems that are not working. She identified that when it comes to reconciliation, the first step is your personal commitment, which requires you to recognize your place and what you have to offer to the space. Chief Hwitsum shared a story about how her mother used to fill potholes with clam shells she had harvested to give back to the land.



Shannon shared the importance of nurturing and maintaining our relationships between water and land, governance of people and communities. Currently, the Drinking Water Protection Act is not written in a way that expresses relationship. As this session came to a close Shannon posed the following questions to the group:

- How can we come together with these systems that have kept us separate?
- How can we change the Drinking Water Protection Act so that it is more about 'relationship', and how can we support this conversation?
- What do you have to offer to these spaces, and what support do you need?

"When we do this work together, we become stronger and can progress the transformative change that is required"

-Dr. Shannon Waters



## Reflections on Coming Together as a Whole

Participants were invited to provide reflections from the morning, as well as responses to the questions about coming together as a whole. Reflections, observations and questions shared during this discussion included:

- Enthusiasm about being able to finally look at health on a watershed scale.
- "When you save the water, you save so many lives. By providing hope, you are changing the lives of future generations" - Tannis Reynolds
- How different would our decisions be if we made decisions that treated the water like our grandmother?
- The watershed does not stop at the river
- The land is important for intergenerational knowledge exchange
- Bringing forward Indigenous principles into the First Nations Health Authority model has changed how the system works.
- The First Nations Fisheries Council has entered into a MOU with 5 BC Ministries to work with the council and break down some of these silos.
- You can be 'nutsamat' with many things, as it can bring the "one spirit one mind" approach to laws/legislation/jurisdictions.
- Indigenous voice brings strength to all conversations.



## Now What: Looking ahead to areas of action and challenge

While offering reflections and responses to the questions posed, participants also identified areas of challenge and actions to inform future efforts:

- Encouragement to explore new synergies (e.g., the fact that the Drinking Water Protection Act needs to report to the Minister of Health and the Minister of Land, Water, and Resource Stewardship Ministry, may create a basis for new intersectoral conversations).
- Listen and center Indigenous Peoples and Elders when working on issues of water supply, sanitation and sewage – these are far more than technical issues.
- Act with urgency around overdose issues so that future generations are not failed, and see the connections between the opioid crisis and other issues (land, water, climate)
- Work with current generations of youth, and find ways to connect their voices with other generations.
- Ministries need to do a lot of listening and think about their responsibilities and close gaps where responsibilities are not clearly defined.
- Reciprocal accountability is important in our relationships. Ensure Indigenous Peoples are key partners in all decisions, and are not consulted in a tokenistic way.
- Support each other to convene conversations that can strengthen Indigenous-led work that is already making the connections between climate, land, water and health.

*"There are some things we need to do, urgently. And there are some things we need to wait for. We need to wait for the rains to come. What can we do while we're waiting? We can heal our relationship with water, and we can strengthen and maintain our relationships with each other. When it does eventually rain, I'll think of this room. We'll wait and work on the things we need to do right now. And what we talked about today will give me hope as we wait for the rains to come."*

*-Dr. Shannon Waters*





## Moving Upstream through the Cowichan Watershed

During the afternoon, we moved together to various points in the Cowichan Watershed, progressively **moving upstream**. At each stop, we engaged in conversations which expanded on what we discussed in the morning.



The first stop was at the Bay, where we engaged in conversation about the health of the river over generations, the We All Take Care of the Harvest (WATCH) Project, and the impact of colonialism on what is needed to maintain the health of the river, including clearing rocks from the riverbed annually due to colonial river impacts. We discussed how we are all connected to the water, and the importance of expressing our love and appreciation for the water.



The second stop was at Stoltz Campground, where we heard stories about the Cowichan Watershed Board and the importance of land and water management. The youth present shared sentiments of their excitement being involved in these processes and carrying these lessons forward to different watershed contexts. We talked about the differences and similarities between watersheds and the value of working together and establishing better communication across watersheds, and the various activities that can support holistic care for water. We also reflected on legal and policy interactions with these themes and how this work takes a long time.



Our final stop was upstream at Cowichan Lake, where we had a closing circle together reflecting on the day, and then shared a meal together.

Some of us spent the next few days together in an ECHO Network retreat, which was informed by the discussions on October 12th, which are outlined in this report. During this retreat, youth both led and participated in arts- and land-based activities, and the group engaged in intergenerational conversations about connections between climate, land, water, community, and health, and opportunities for continuing this work together.

## APPENDIX A

# MEETING RESOURCES



Environnement  
Community  
Health  
Observatory  
Network

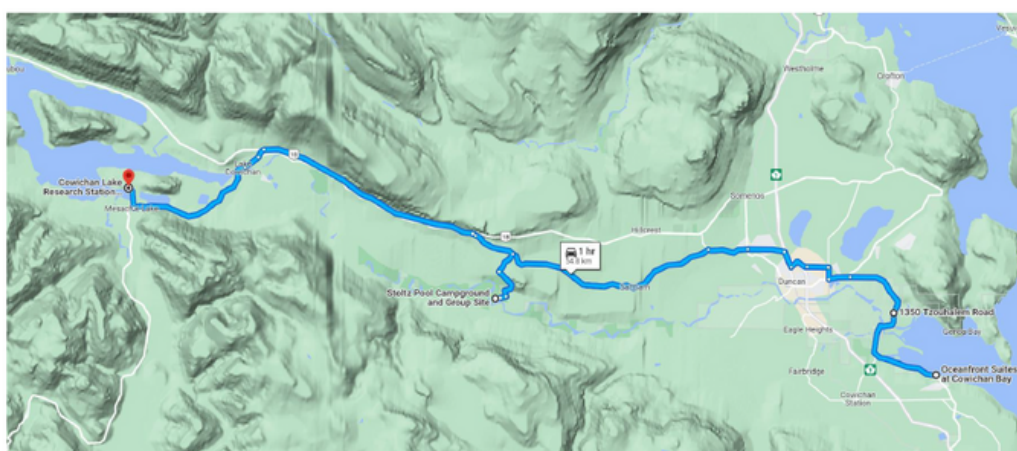
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**"Coming together as a whole: Gathering in the Cowichan watershed  
to connect health, communities, lands, waters and climate"**  
**Wednesday Oct 12, 2022, on unceded Quw'utsun territory, Cowichan Bay & Watershed**

**Locations for Place-based Conversations around the Cowichan Watershed**

1:00 – 5:00pm Place-based conversations around the Cowichan Watershed (Cowichan Bay, Stoltz, and Cowichan Lake)



~1pm Departing From: Oceanfront Suites, 1681 Cowichan Bay Rd, Cowichan Bay, BC V0R 1N0

~10min drive to **Stop 1:** 1350 Tzouhalem Rd, Duncan, BC V9L 5L5 (~45mins stop)

~30mins drive to **Stop 2:** Stoltz Pool Campground and Group Site, V0R 2G0 (~1hr stop)

~25mins drive **Final Stop, Closing Circle (~5pm), and Dinner (6:30pm):** Cowichan Lake Research Station and Conference Centre, 7060 Forestry Rd, Mesachie Lake, BC V0R 2N0

**Map of the Cowichan Watershed**



Source: <https://www.cvr.ca/2318/Cowichan-Basin>

**Explore other resources about the Cowichan:**

Cowichan Tribes: <https://cowichantribes.com/>

Cowichan Watershed Board: <https://cowichanwatershedboard.ca/>

Cowichan Watershed Board Governance Manual 2018 describing “Nutsamat kwsyaay’ustthqa’:  
<https://cowichanwatershedboard.ca/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/CWB-Gov-Manual-Version3-24Sep2018.pdf>

Reclaiming the River - by Cowichan Tribes: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXm7am5UBa8>



# PARTICIPANT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to extend heartfelt thanks to the many people who shared their insights, knowledge, passions, and hopes during this gathering, and the many who made this gathering possible but were unable to join us. Particularly (*but not limited to*):

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 Amber Louie, Anders Erikson, Andrew  
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 Carsen Wenger, Casey Neathway, Catherine Peirce, Celine  
 Surette, Chelan Zirul, Chris Buse, Cody Thomas, Coree Tull, Corrina  
 Keeling, Crystal Bowes, Danièle Behn-Smith, Darcie Yarrow, Darren Jacobs,  
 David Slade, Dawn Hoogeveen, Diana Kutzner, Dionne Sanderson, Dylan  
 Benedict, Emma Conlon, Erlene Woollard, Esther Parker, Geneen Russo,  
 Gesthemane Luttrell, Heather Castleden, Holly Clermont, Isaiah Reynolds, Jaclyn  
 Boyes, Jade Yehia, James Mack, Jared Qwustenuxun Williams, Jenn (The Cook and  
 Butcher), Jessi Smith, Joanne Edwards, Jonathan Doyon, Jordan Brubacher, Karen  
 Larson, Katie Bauder, Katie Hughes, Katie Zirul, Kiera Tsakonas, Lanie Parr, Lars  
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