

On World Water Day, 2,918 First Nations homes won't have clean water

by Craig and Marc Kielburger



When we think about the 2.1 billion people who live without safe drinking water worldwide, we tend to think of drought-stricken families in countries where lakes and rivers are scarce. Most Canadians don't consider the crisis closer to home, where vast freshwater resources help us forget that thousands of people within our borders are living with contaminated water.

Today, there are [2,918 First Nations homes under long-term drinking water advisories](#), meaning residents haven't been able to drink the water from their taps for at least a year—often much longer.

Neskantaga First Nation, in Ontario, has been under advisory for [almost 25 years](#), relying on a temporary water filtration system installed nearly a decade ago and since upgraded through ad hoc modifications. A new water treatment plant was supposed to be finished in May 2018, but progress has dragged and last month the community [declared a state of emergency](#).

As many as [90 percent of residents](#) in Grassy Narrows and Wabaseemoong First Nations, also in Ontario, are suffering ongoing effects of mercury poisoning, including loss of feeling in fingers and toes, due to industrial pollution

residue dating back to the 1960s and 70s. Local mercury levels were [still rising in 2015](#).

First Nations rank high on Canada's list of underserved communities, but water projects are an especially big blot on our already spotty record. A [2014 UN report](#) called the water situation on reserves "troubling."

Clean water access is normally the responsibility of provincial governments, but [reserves fall under federal jurisdiction](#). The shared responsibility of water treatment often [falls into the cracks](#) between Health Canada, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, and First Nations. To make matters worse, [there are no legally binding regulations](#) to hold the government accountable for water on reserves.

Another challenge is erratic funding. Government changeover and shifting political priorities mean projects get cut off before maintenance structures are put in place.

Fortunately, there's been some forward momentum. A recent push from Ottawa aims to restore clear water to all communities under long-term drinking water advisories by 2021. Since November 2015, [79 long-term advisories have been lifted and 61 remain](#).

With Canada's legacy of failed projects and funding cuts, it's a crucial time for Canadians to step up and call for continued progress.

Check out the [live map of water advisories](#) on the Indigenous Services Canada website, under the link "Water in First Nations Communities." If there's one in your province, write to your MP to ask for an update. If a ban was recently lifted in your area, note the progress and ask what will be done to sustain it. Training water operators in maintenance is key to the long-term success of these projects.

Come election time, look for Indigenous clean water issues in party platforms. Let your candidates know it's a priority. There's no reason anyone in a nation with Canada's freshwater resources should be drinking industrial run-off or risking a hospital visit over a sip of tap water.

We're encouraged by the progress that's been made. If we work together, we can ensure there's more in the future.

Craig and Marc Kielburger are the co-founders of the [WE movement](#), which includes [WE Charity](#), [ME to WE Social Enterprise](#) and [WE Day](#). For more dispatches from [WE](#), check out [WE Stories](#).

Global Voices is a weekly column written by Craig and Marc Kielburger examining current events, topics and issues affecting local and global communities. Each month, engaging classroom resources are created to accompany one column to help educators bring world issues into the classroom in a digestible manner. For more information on how to sign up please visit WE.org/global-voices-signup.

Fact Sheet

On World Water Day, 2,918 First Nations homes won't have clean water

Background Facts:

- Canada has the world's third-largest reserve of freshwater per capita, but more than half of water systems in First Nations communities pose a medium or high health risk. One of the longest-standing drinking water advisories in Canada is in Shoal Lake 40 First Nation, where the town of Winnipeg cut the community off from their traditional water source in the early 1900s to provide water to the city. The community spends \$100,000 every year to import bottled water to drink. ([BBC](#))
- Drinking water solutions on First Nations reserves are the joint responsibility of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, Health Canada, Environment Canada and First Nations governments, who are responsible for 20 percent of operation and maintenance costs for drinking and wastewater facilities. Sometimes First National Health Authority or local municipal governments may have a role as well. ([University of British Columbia](#))
- Drinking water advisories vary in severity. Under a boil water advisory, water is safe to drink, cook or wash with after it has been boiled for one minute. Under a do-not-consume advisory, water is not safe to consume or cook with even after boiling, but may be used for washing. Under a do-not-use advisory, the water is not safe to use under any circumstances. ([Government of Canada](#))
- The government promised Neskantaga First Nation, Ontario, that their new water plant that would be completed by May 2018, but it is not complete and construction has halted. When the Ojibway community was first placed under boil water advisory in 1995, residents commonly exhibited symptoms such as rashes and scabies. ([CBC](#))
- The first World Water Day was held on March 22, 1993, to celebrate the importance of freshwater and spread awareness about water-related issues like health, sanitation, and pollution. ([United Nations](#))
- The right to clean water and sanitation was officially recognized as a universal human right on July 28, 2010. According to the World Health Organization, every person needs between 50 and 100 litres of water per day to meet basic needs with minimal health risks. ([United Nations](#))

WE Learning Framework Skills



Critical Thinking



Action Planning



Reflection



Information Literacy



Research and Writing

These icons identify the most relevant skills students will develop using this resource. Learn more about the WE Learning Framework at WE.org/we-schools/program/learning-framework/.

Subject

Social Studies

Language

Materials

Sticky notes

Tablets/computer with Internet access/projector

Chart paper

Key Terms

- **Drinking Water Advisory**—An official notice not to drink tap water because it is either known to be unsafe, or it cannot be determined if the water is safe.
- **Mercury Poisoning**—The toxic effects of too much exposure to the metal mercury. Symptoms include weak muscles, loss of hand-eye coordination, numbness in hands and feet, rashes, anxiety, memory problems, and trouble speaking, hearing and seeing.
- **Jurisdiction**—The extent of a government organization's legal authority and responsibility within a certain area.
- **Water Operators**—Technicians trained in monitoring water filtration facilities to make sure all equipment is working properly and the water is safe for human consumption.

On World Water Day, 2918 First Nations homes won't have clean water – Elementary Resource

Essential Question:

- Why do communities in Canada not have access to clean water?

Learning Goals:

Students will:

- Develop an awareness about the water inequity in Canada
- Understand the impact of drinking water advisories on communities and reserves in Canada
- Raise awareness about access to clean water in communities around Canada

Discussion Questions

1. What is a water advisory? Who issues water advisories?
2. Why does a developed nation like Canada still have communities under water advisories?
3. Are these short-term or long-term advisories? Why are the issues not being rectified?
4. What impacts do a lack of access to safe and clean water sources have on the individuals and the communities?
5. Who is responsible for this issue? Why does the government hold themselves responsible for this issue?
6. Why is this issue not a priority?

Warm Up

Educator's Note: In this lesson students will be discussing issues that may have affected their communities. Ensure that all discussions are general and that students feel safe to share their experiences.

Ask the class, what is a drinking water or boil water advisory? Why are they issued in some communities or cities? In pairs, ask students to discuss if they have experienced a drinking water advisory? What was the impact of the advisory in their schools, homes and communities at the time? Many students may not have experienced water issues in their communities. Ask them to think about how would it affect them if this issue were to arise. Discuss student responses as a class.

Show students the video "What's a Boil Water Advisory?" www.youtube.com/watch?v=REiMJ5iLZR8 (1.46) In small groups, ask students to discuss the following questions:

- What causes a boil water advisory?
- What is a contaminant?
- How do boil water advisories impact your everyday life?
- What happens if you use or consume the water?
- How does a boil water advisory affect your everyday life?

As a class, create a list of the countries or cities that do not have access clean water. Is Canada on the list? Explain to students that a water-rich country like Canada also has many long-term drinking water advisories in communities and reserves, and many people are affected. Ask students, does this surprise them? Why?

Using the map and the list of locations on the webpage "End Long-Term Drinking Water Advisories," www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1506514143353/1533317130660, investigate which communities close to your school or community are currently under a long-term drinking water advisory (LT-DWAs). Explain to students that this indicates that a community or reserve has not had access to clean water for more than 12 months. Ask them, how does it make you feel to know that there are communities close to your home, or in your country, that do not have access to clean, safe water? Is this fair for the people living in those communities or reserves? Why do you think drinking water advisories are still in effect in 2019?

Investigate and Learn

As a class or in small groups, read the *Global Voices* article "On World Water Day, 2918 First Nations Homes Won't Have Clean Water." Divide students into small groups and assign each group two *Discussion Questions* to discuss and respond to. After students have responded to the questions, encourage them to consider the following questions:

- What does a good quality of life look like?
- What basic human rights do all people need to have?
- How do water advisories affect the quality of life of a community?

Show students the videos "Canada's Water Crisis: Indigenous Families at Risk," www.youtube.com/watch?v=Arnqpnm70Ng (4:29) and "Living Without Safe and Reliable Drinking Water on Manitoba First Nation," www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPnydar_ci4 (6:58). As a class, discuss the following questions:

- If Canada is considered one of the most water rich countries, why are many communities still under a water advisory?
- What is water inequity? Why is this an issue in communities and reserves across Canada?
- How does it impact the people in these communities?

On the front board, show students *Infographic 2*, "Progress on Lifting Long-Term Drinking Water Advisories on Public Water Systems on Reserves," found at: www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1506514143353/1533317. In small groups, ask students to discuss the following questions:

- In 2016, how many water advisories were affecting public systems on reserves? How many communities were these water advisories affecting?
- Has there been a reduction in the number of water advisories? How many advisories have been eliminated and how many communities have access to clean water?
- What is the government aiming to do by 2021?

On the same webpage, show students *Infographic 1* and as a class discuss what steps the Government of Canada has taken to reduce and eliminate water advisories in all communities and reserves across Canada to ensure that all people in Canada have access to clean water. Then show students the map of the reserves and communities that are still under a water advisory. What provinces have the most water advisories? Why do you think this is the case?

In small groups, ask students to investigate the impact of the drinking water advisory in the community or reserve near their home. Provide each group chart paper, markers and a tablet or computer with Internet access to research this community, to understand what the quality of life is like for the people who reside there. Encourage students to consider the following questions in their research:

- Where is the community or reserve located?
- How far is it from a town or city with good access to clean water?
- How long has there been a drinking water advisory?
- Who lives in the community?
- What steps have been taken to reduce or eliminate the water issues?
- What support has the local, provincial or federal governments provided to this community?
- How have these issues impacted the health, education and lives of people in these communities?

After the groups have conducted their research, invite students to present their case study to the class. As all small groups have conducted research on the same community, ask each group to discuss one or two questions from the list above. Place the questions in a bag or hat and have the groups select the question they will present to the class. Provide the groups with the opportunity to discuss their response as a group before they present.

Dive Deeper

Invite students to present their research to the school community to spread awareness about the water issues occurring in communities close to their school. Ask each group to select a class they would present their research to and discuss why it is important to ensure more people are aware of the drinking water advisories in Canada.

Groups can present their research using the following mediums:

- Create an infographic about drinking water advisories in communities and reserves. The infographic can be developed using paper, Bristol board or design, publishing or drawing software, like Microsoft Word or Publisher.
- Develop questions and responses for a news-style interview, and film students in the group presenting the interview. Students can portray the role of a member of the community, a member of the government or a news reporter.
- Write a blog post or a letter to a member of the government discussing the drinking water advisories. Encourage students to use their research about the communities to discuss the issues occurring in the community and suggest possible solutions.

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Subject

English, Canadian and World Studies

Materials

Sticky notes

Tablets/computer with Internet access/projector

Chart paper

Key Terms

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- **Water Operators**—Technicians trained in monitoring water filtration facilities to make sure all equipment is working properly and the water is safe for human consumption.

On World Water Day, 2918 First Nations homes won't have clean water – Secondary Resource

Essential Question:

• Why are there water inequity issues in Canadian communities?

Learning Goals:

Students will:

- Develop an awareness about the water inequity in their country
- Understand the impact of drinking water advisories on communities and reserves in Canada
- Raise awareness about access to clean water in Canada

Discussion Questions

1. What is a water advisory? Who issues water advisories?
2. Why does a developed nation, like Canada, still have communities under water advisories?
3. Are these short-term or long-term advisories?
Why are the issues not being rectified?
4. What are the impacts on the individuals and the communities due to a lack of access to safe and clean water sources?
5. Who is responsible for this issue? Why doesn't the government hold themselves responsible for this issue?
6. Why is this issue not a priority?

Warm Up

Educator's Note: In this lesson students will be discussing issues that may have affected their communities. Ensure that all discussions are general and that students feel safe to share their experiences.

Using the map and the list of locations on the webpage "End Long-Term Drinking Water Advisories," www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1506514143353/1533317130660, investigate which communities close to your school or community are currently under a long-term drinking water advisory (LT-DWAs). Explain to students that this indicates that the community or reserve has not had access to clean water for more than 12 months. Ask the students, how does it make you feel knowing that there are communities close to your home, or in your country, that do not have access to clean, safe water. Is this fair for the people living in those communities or reserves? Why do you think drinking water advisories are still in effect in 2019?

As a class, conduct a K-W-L to understand what your students understand and know about water advisories in Canada. What is a drinking water advisory? How does it impact the people in the communities and reserves that are under a LT DWA? What have they heard through the news, on social media and through various other sources about the "water crisis", and what do they want to know about this issue? On the front board or on chart paper, discuss and fill out the first two columns and leave the last column open for students to respond to as they understand more about water issues in Canada.

What do you know?

What do you want to know?

What did I learn?

Investigate and Learn

As a class or in small groups, read the *Global Voices* article "On World Water Day, 2918 First Nations Homes Won't Have Clean Water." Divide students into small groups and allocate each group two discussion questions to discuss and respond to. After students have responded to the questions, encourage them to consider the questions: what does a good quality of life look like? What basic human rights do all people need to have? How do water advisories affect the quality of life of a community?

Show students the videos "Canada's Water Crisis: Indigenous Families at Risk," www.youtube.com/watch?v=Arnqpnm70Ng (4:29) and "Living Without Safe and Reliable Drinking Water on Manitoba First Nation," www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPnydar_ci4 (6:58). As a class, discuss the following questions:

- If Canada is considered one of the most water rich countries, why are many communities still under a water advisory?
- Why is there water inequity in communities and reserves across Canada?
- How does it impact the people in these communities?

Ask students what they know about the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. On the front board, show them the image of the 17 goals and ask them which goal relates to clean water and sanitation, sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs. Explain to students that Goal 6 aims to “Ensure the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.” The target for this goal is to have universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water by 2030. How does Canada fare in achieving this goal? In pairs, ask students to consider, if you were to give Canada a rating out of 10, what would you give the country and why?

On the front board, show students *Infographic 2 “Progress on Lifting Long-Term Drinking Water Advisories on Public Water Systems on Reserves”* found at www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1506514143353/1533317. In small groups, ask students to discuss the following questions:

- In 2016, how many water advisories were affecting public systems on reserves? How many communities were these water advisories affecting?
- Has there been a reduction in the number of water advisories? How many advisories have been eliminated and how many communities now have access to clean water?
- What is the government aiming to do by 2021?

Show students *Infographic 1* on the same webpage and, as a class, discuss what steps the Government of Canada has taken to reduce and eliminate water advisories in all communities and reserves across Canada to ensure that all people have access to clean water. Then show students the map of the reserves and communities that are still under a water advisory. What provinces have the most water advisories? Why do you think this is the case?

In small groups, ask students to investigate the impact of the drinking water advisory on the community or reserve near their home. Provide each group chart paper, markers and a tablet or computer with Internet access to research this community, in order to understand what the quality of life is like for the people who reside there. Encourage students to consider the following questions in their research:

- Where is the community or reserve located?
- How far is it from a town or city with good access to clean water?
- How long has there been a drinking water advisory?
- What is the demographic of this community?
- What steps have been taken to reduce or eliminate the water issues? Has this progress been sustained?
- What support has the local, provincial or federal governments provided to this community?
- How have these issues impacted the health, education and livelihood of these communities?

After the groups have conducted their research, invite students to present their case study to the class. As all small groups have conducted research on the same community, ask each group to discuss one or two questions from the list above. Place the questions in a bag or hat and have the groups select the question they will present to the class. Provide the groups with the opportunity to discuss their response as a group before they present. Encourage groups to critically, but respectfully, respond to another group’s responses if they have found different or opposing information. Ask them to use their research to justify their opinion.



Extension: Invite students to present their research to the school community to spread awareness about the water issues occurring in communities close to their school. Ask each group to select a class they would present their research to and discuss why it is important to ensure more people are aware of the drinking water advisories in Canada. Additionally, encourage students to create a short message about the water issues to read as a school announcement.

Dive Deeper

Invite students to use their research to write a letter to their local Member of Parliament (MP) discussing the current drinking water advisories and what is being done at the provincial and federal level to reduce or eliminate these water issues in communities and reserves. In the letter, encourage students to outline the information they have accumulated through their research of the drinking water advisories in the community or reserve closest to their own community, and ask questions about the next steps that the government will take to improve or eliminate the water issues. Encourage students to also ask, what can they do as members of the community to support the effort to reduce and eliminate drinking water advisories to provide clean water for everyone in Canada.

After students have written their letters, post or email these to the local MP or government members and discuss what students believe some of the responses to their questions may be. As a class, discuss what actions students can take to create awareness about drinking water advisories in communities and reserves around Canada and why raising awareness about these issues is important.

As a class, return to the K-W-L chart. Provide each student with a sticky note and ask them to write down one thing they have learned about water issues in Canada. Invite students to share their responses with the class and place them under the “What I Learned” column.