

The Right to Clean Water in First Nations



The Photovoice Project 2nd Edition

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Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs
EMPOWERING OUR NATIONS

Centre for Human
Rights Research



University
of Manitoba



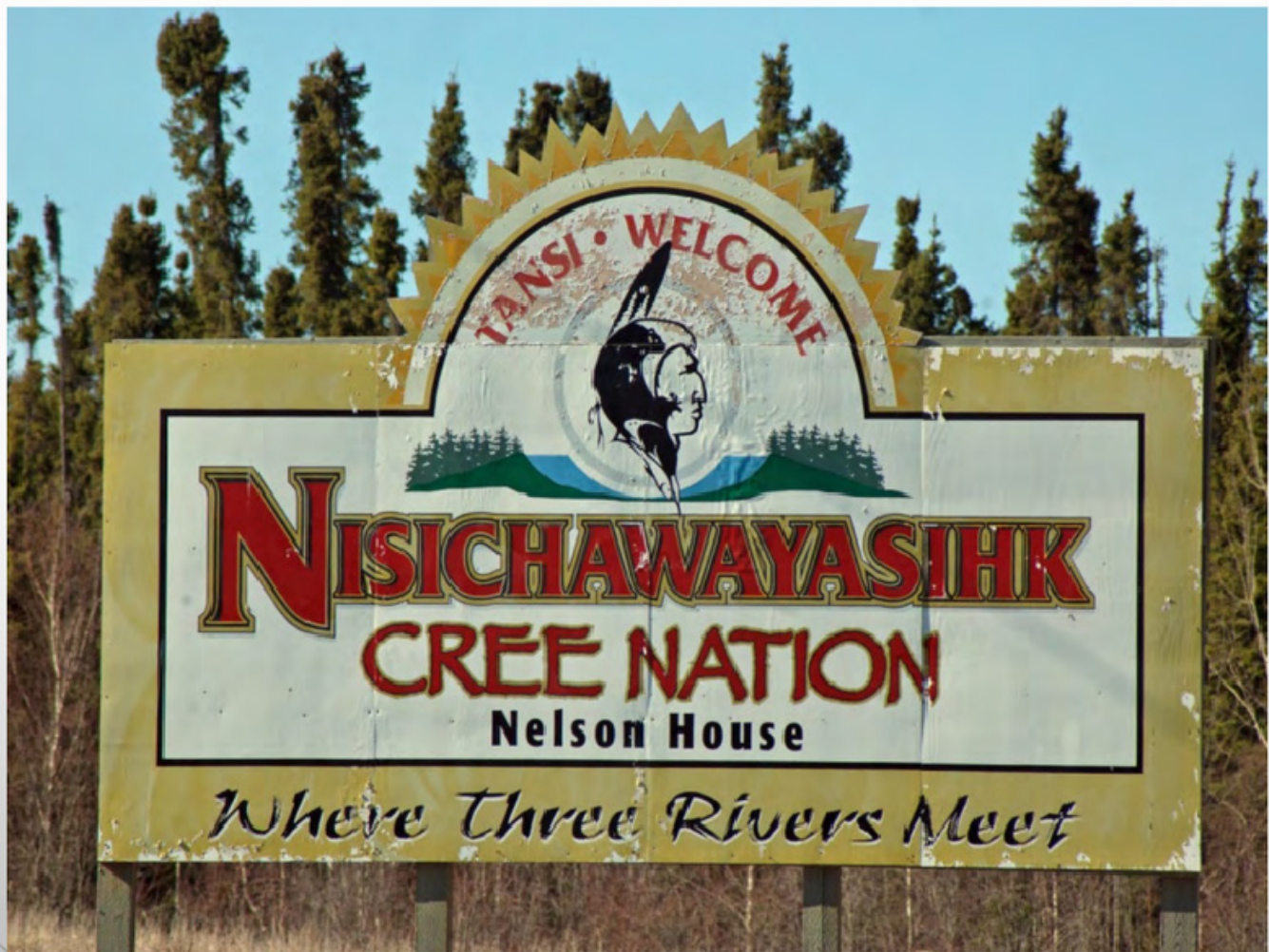
Social Sciences and Humanities
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sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

Acknowledgements

- NCN Chief & Council
- Students, faculty, and staff of the ATEC Centre



Bringing this Project to Present Day

The right to water and sanitation remains a key focus and modern day human rights issue in Canada. Indigenous communities in Canada are overrepresented with respect to poor water quality and water advisories. According to UNDRIP (United Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples) safe drinking water is recognized as a basic human right (UNDRIP, 2008). Due to environmental racism and the government's lack of accountability and neglect of Indigenous issues stemming from colonialism, water continues to be a serious issue for Indigenous communities in Canada. "Indigenous communities around the world, particularly those in rural and remote areas, represent a highly impacted, yet often overlooked and isolated, population. These communities are particularly vulnerable to water insecurities due to exposure to industrial and naturally occurring contaminants and toxins, and a chronic lack of resources and infrastructure to manage or maintain secure water systems" (White et al, 2012).

Protecting Indigenous rights to water and sanitation is best done by a community grassroots approach. Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation and the students and staff at Atoskiwin Training & Employment Centre of Excellence Centre (ATEC) created a Photovoice Project to bring awareness to the impacts of unsafe drinking water and sanitation practices in Indigenous communities.

- Carlie Kane, 2024

Introducing the Project

This Photovoice project is part of a SSHRC Partnership Development Grant led by Prof. Karen Busby (Principal Investigator) and Colin Bonnycastle (Co-Investigator). Before getting into the specifics of this project, it is important to highlight the overall focus of the grant.

Researchers from the University of Manitoba, University of Winnipeg, Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (AMC) and Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak (MKO) were brought together in early 2011 by the U of M's Centre for Human Rights Research (CHRR) to talk about drinking water and wastewater problems. We then went to Northern Manitoba to consult with leaders, water experts and community members. The broad consensus was that our research should use Indigenous and non-Indigenous methodologies to develop knowledge and build capacity to mobilize action on confronting government inertia and public apathy about clean water and wastewater. In fall 2011, we formed the Water Advocacy Group, with AMC and MKO as partners, to address the most important social sciences and humanities issues identified by First Nations participants. The group is part of a larger water research consortium that will also address related health and technical issues. The Water Advocacy Group will develop and evaluate potential advocacy strategies using a range of theoretical and methodological approaches. Three multidisciplinary clusters (public engagement, legal and economic) will explore complementary and inter-related projects. Our research group is committed to First Nations' OCAP Principles (Ownership, Control, Access and Possession) and Tri-Council guidelines (National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2007). This commitment involves full engagement of Indigenous scholars and consultation with First Nations members on all aspects of research, from question-setting to knowledge mobilization.

Project Beginnings

The "Right to Clean Water in First Nations: The Photovoice Project" was completed by Colin Bonnycastle of the Northern Social Work Program, University of Manitoba in 2014-2015. Using a participatory action approach the main purpose of this research was to explore the use of photovoice to engage First Nations' young people around the issue of clean water and wastewater. During 2014 - 2015, two groups of adult students at the Atoskiwin Training & Employment Centre of Excellence Centre (ATEC) in Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation in northern Manitoba participated in the photovoice project. In initiating this project, we believed that there would be a benefit to the young participants and the community. It offered the participants an opportunity to reflect on the issues related to clean water and wastewater in their community. It also encouraged them to learn new advocacy skills and get involved in a community project.



Canva Image by natrass

What is Photovoice?

Through the use of a photovoice - an arts-based research methodology, individuals can identify, represent, and improve their community through the process of photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice has three main goals: “(1) to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussion of photographs, and (3) to reach policymakers.” (Wang & Burris, 1997).

Photovoice is an approach that has been used to empower community members to work together to identify, represent and enhance their community. It equips individuals with cameras so they can create photographic evidence and symbolic representations to help others see the world through their eyes. Groups can share their stories and have their voices heard through both pictures and dialogues.

The main purpose of this research was to explore the use of photovoice to engage First Nations' young people around the issue of clean water and wastewater. The participants from ATEC in Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation were asked to identify and represent their community in pictures and provide an accompanying story. The photovoice project helped the participants reflect on the issue of clean water and wastewater in their community and act to change the contributing conditions. This research is supported by AMC and MKO.

Research Process

Members of the Water Rights Research Consortium were invited to and traveled to the community of Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation in March of 2014. The purpose of the visit was to meet with Band Council members and the CEO. At the meeting the issues of water and sewage on the reserve were discussed, the research projects presented and approval affirmed through a Band Council Resolution. A tour of the community and the water and sewage facilities was provided and a meeting set up with water treatment staff.

After the meeting, Colin Bonnycastle met with faculty of the ATEC to discuss whether he could come back to the centre to do a photovoice workshop with their students. The intent of this workshop was to explain the project to the students and gain their approval to participate. This was approved and one instructor, Hendrik Warnar, stated that he would be interested in being the ATEC of Excellence lead on the project. Research ethics was submitted for the project and approved by the Joint-Faculty Research Ethics Board of the University of Manitoba.



Canva Image by Murray R Grant

Research Process

The introductory workshop took place in April of 2014. It began with an explanation of the project, and completion of informed consent process with the students. Honorariums of \$30 per student were given out. Instructions in the photovoice process and the central role participants can play in it came next. In addition, we outlined time expectations, the protocol for use of the cameras in the community, potential risks to the participants and how these risks can be minimized. In total eight students initially signed up to participate in the project. Digital cameras were loaned to students through a sign out sheet handled by ATEC staff. Plans were made to return in a month to hold the second workshop with students. The plan was that in the meantime students would take approximately five photos each and write up the stories to go along with them.

At the next visit to the community in May, the students presented their pictures but did not have the stories that needed to go along with them completed. The student group also increased to 15 participants. The students chose specific pictures that best represented the issue and some analysis took place with students showing a strong interest in continuing with the project. A third workshop was therefore planned for June. Arrangements were made with faculty to try and provide some classroom time for participants to work on their stories. In addition the chosen photos would be developed and ready for mounting. At the June workshop, more pictures had been taken but there were few stories completed. Cameras were also returned to the co-investigator. As it was now the end of the academic year, there was some discussion of how the students might continue on during the summer to complete the project and present it to the community. Sadly, no activities took place over the summer months.

Research Process

In September of 2014, the co-investigator contacted the ATEC lead to discuss the project. It was decided that the introductory workshop could be held with the new students. If students were interested they could choose to write on the pictures already taken by the previous year students and/or take their own pictures to write about. This introductory workshop occurred in late September with 10 students attending. All agreed to participate in the project and signed consent forms. Cameras were provided in the same manner as the previous time. The next meeting was set up for November and at that visit, stories began to be submitted and interest given to present their findings at public forums such as a Band Council AGM or a display at the ATEC building. At a December meeting, the participants had compiled 34 pictures and their stories. New pictures were developed and with them the stories mounted to cardstock paper.

In January 2015, the mounted pictures were shown to the students for their review and further analysis to determine themes and the order in which the pictures should be displayed. In addition a set of recommendations were brainstormed and developed by the students.

The pictures were left with the students with the intent that they would approach the Band Council regarding a presentation at the next AGM and have the photovoice project displayed at the ATEC Centre. This was an important step in letting the participants take ownership of the project and build their voice in the community. In harmony with the participatory nature of these events, participants are encouraged to become involved in different community action activities.

The Photovoice Project

The following photos and stories represent the participants' views in the project. They are roughly structured into four theme areas:

1. Introduction to the community and the issue of water in Northern Manitoba.
2. The water treatment process
3. Water delivery and storage
4. Sewage treatment

The photos are followed by a set of seven recommendations. The capture the main areas of what the participants believe needs to change in their community in order for all to share the same quality of water and sewage services as other communities across Canada.

On behalf of myself and the members of the Water Advocacy Group, I would like to thank each and every one of the ATEC students who participated in this project. Most of the participants are captured in photos of the two research teams. All made this project possible. I would also like to acknowledge the support and efforts of their instructor, Henk Warnar in this project.

Colin Bonnycastle, Co-investigator

Introduction to the Community and the issue of Water in Northern Manitoba.



As in most northern reserves, Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation has fresh water surrounding it, but that doesn't mean it is easy to find a clean glass of it to drink.



Hydro development across Northern Manitoba has had major effects on the water quality in the river and lakes. One result of dams, such as this one, is that our resource areas have been flooded.

We've experienced erosion and exposure to increases in mercury, which is washed into the water. In many situations, it has made the water unsafe to drink without treatment.



The shorelines of the lakes and rivers around Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation have been dramatically affected by fluctuating water levels due to hydro development. This has forced the community to spend a tremendous amount of money on water treatment.

You can see the levels of silt and decaying trees that have left the water dirty, contaminated and unsafe to drink ... but one day these defects will no longer be in play.



There are differences between federal and provincial legislation and responsibilities around safe drinking water. This can result in side by side communities having very different levels of water treatment, as is the case here.

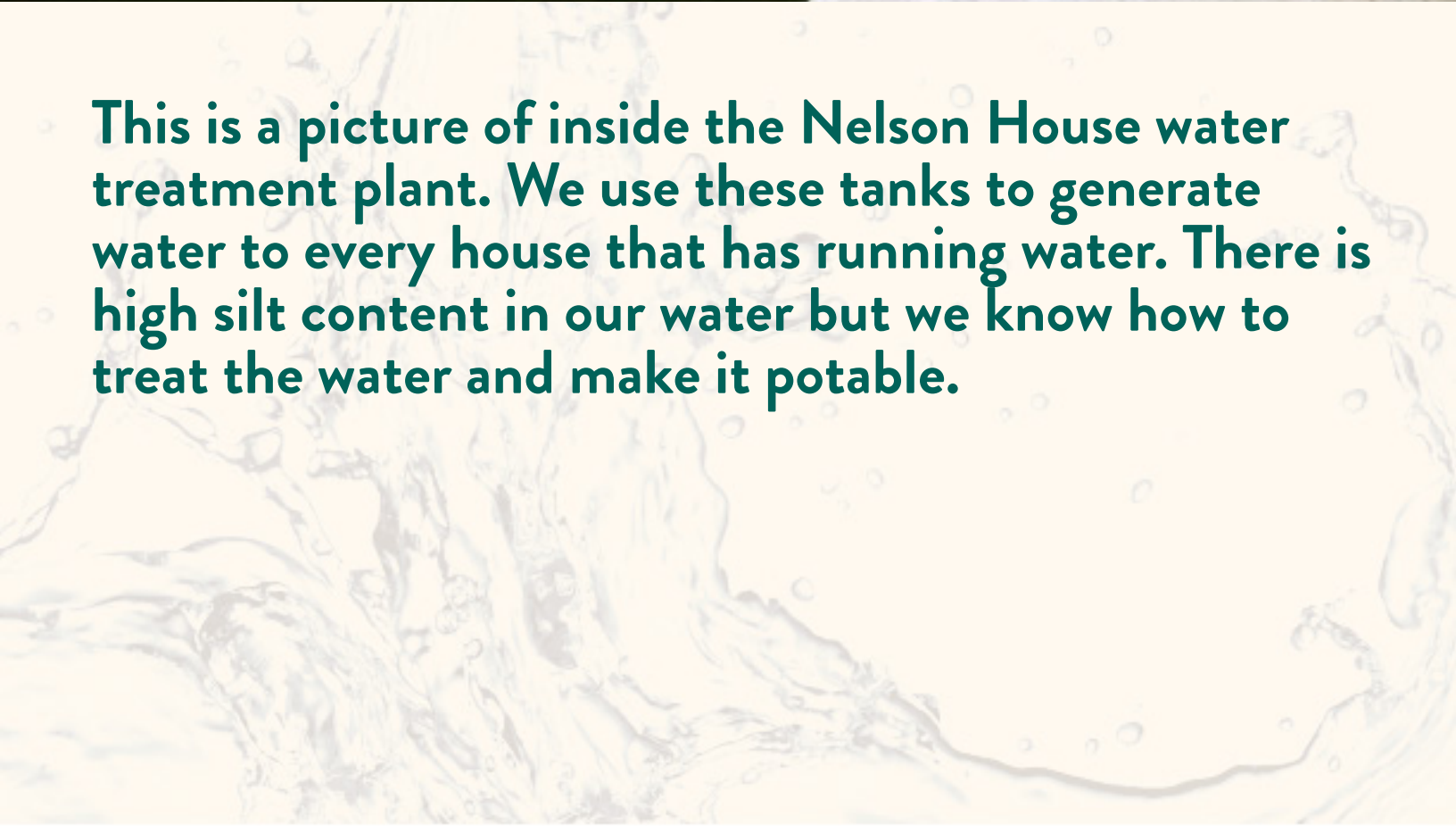
The Métis community, being under provincial jurisdiction is seen by many to have a higher quality of water treatment.



This is a picture of outside of the Water Treatment Complex. Though this complex has served the community well for a number of years, it is currently way too small for the demand being placed on it. This increases the risk of breakdowns and other water issues. In addition, its current size is holding back the needed construction of new houses and a school in the community.



This is a picture of inside the Nelson House water treatment plant. We use these tanks to generate water to every house that has running water. There is high silt content in our water but we know how to treat the water and make it potable.





In the water treatment plant we use chemicals to treat the water so it could be drinkable. The equipment, though old, does a good job of cleaning the water and making it safe to drink. The problem is that the system, being too small for the current population and demand, has to work way over capacity. This can lead to breaks and shut downs.



The water treatment plant needs many repairs and upgrades. It may be better to build a whole new plant than spend money repairing this one.

Water Delivery and Storage



The bay is by Gilbert McDonald Arena here in Nelson House. Just above the bay there is a water filling station located on the left side. From this view there is a culvert that drains into this bay. The drainage is from the ditches along the side of the roads that drains rain and snow. Going on for several years there has been a few too many water breaks that flowed into this drainage.



Water trucks provide water to the local houses that don't have water lines connected to their homes. There are three different areas Micelle Point, Dog Point and R.C. Point where the houses have water and sewage tanks. During the winter season some or many of the pipes tend to freeze up when the weather is 30-40 below. And that is when our neighbours tend to come get water and use the shower/bath, laundry, cooking etc... The trucks run on a schedule during the week and on weekends for emergency purposes. It is great that we have water trucks. Why you might ask. With only having one fire truck we could have water when the fire hydrants are not operational.



This is a glimpse of what the water filling station looks like on the inside. The workers fill the water trucks here and deliver it to about 50% of the community members that are dependent on water tanks and sewage tank systems. The other 50% have piped water to their homes.



Soil erosion in the community has caused much damage to the current water system. This adds to further risk of damage, personal injury and breakdown. Much needs to be done to get our system up to proper standards.



The picture is from a home we have in the community. Before this home was put here the previous home burnt down. The exposed pipe shown is a water pipe that is supposed to be underground to prevent the pipe from freezing during the winter season. The new residents of this home will now experience frozen pipes every winter season.



The Otetiskiwin Kiskinwamahtowekamil (O.K.) School and Nisichawayasihk Noyo Collegiate (N.N.O.C.) School were closed the week of September 8th-12, 2014. Around 900 students and teachers were affected due to plumbing problems underneath the building and could not attend class for a week. The plumber from Winnipeg said it was only a temporary fix because we don't have the right pipes. Will this keep happening to the students? Expectations are that it will, on a larger scale.



This is a photo of a building across from the Atoskiwin Training & Employment Centre of Excellence (ATEC) in Nelson House. You can see a pipe sticking out of the building leading to nowhere. For some reason there is always water running out of it in the summer. Can you see the hole in the ground where the water has landed and runs down forming a ditch? This flow has also damaged the foundation of the building and there is a power box nearby that increases the risk of injury. The O.K. School is also just down the road.



This is a picture of the entrance to a water tank shack. As you can see, there are some openings in the left corner where rain water and snow can get in. These holding tanks can become a huge problem. The inside of the tank needs to be cleaned on a regular basis, which is expensive and the Band often does not have enough money to do this. The tanks freeze over the winter and cause clogged and cracked pipes. When summer arrives the frozen tanks melt and flood the basements that cause mold. This is an unhealthy environment to live in.



In the last photo you saw the inside, now here is the outside view of the water tank shack where it was built to connect to the house. It shifted over the past couple of years and we had to put insulation in the cracks to try and keep the cold out.



This is the water pipe leading into the house. You can see that we had to find a way to keep the pipe from freezing in the winter. We wrapped it in cotton, foil, rope – whatever we could find at the time. It helps, but when it's really cold outside it still freezes over night and we have to detach the pipe and bring it in to thaw out. After it thaws and the ice is out, we then take it out to reattach it, which isn't easy. There is a heater in the shack attached to the wall, but it doesn't help much either. The plumbers would usually come to thaw the pipes out with a torch but they couldn't come thaw them out every day (because that's how often it would happen last year) so we had to find our own way of resolving this issue



Here is the pump that sucks the water from the tank. You can see that there has been some damage to the wall from trying to pull the pipe out, trying to put it back in, sometimes the pump would have to be repaired and once had to be replaced because when the pipes would freeze over-night the pump would still be running but with nothing going through. When that happens everyone is usually asleep. This pump is in a closet of one of the rooms and sometimes it would leak from taking it out and putting it back so there is a little damage to the floor.

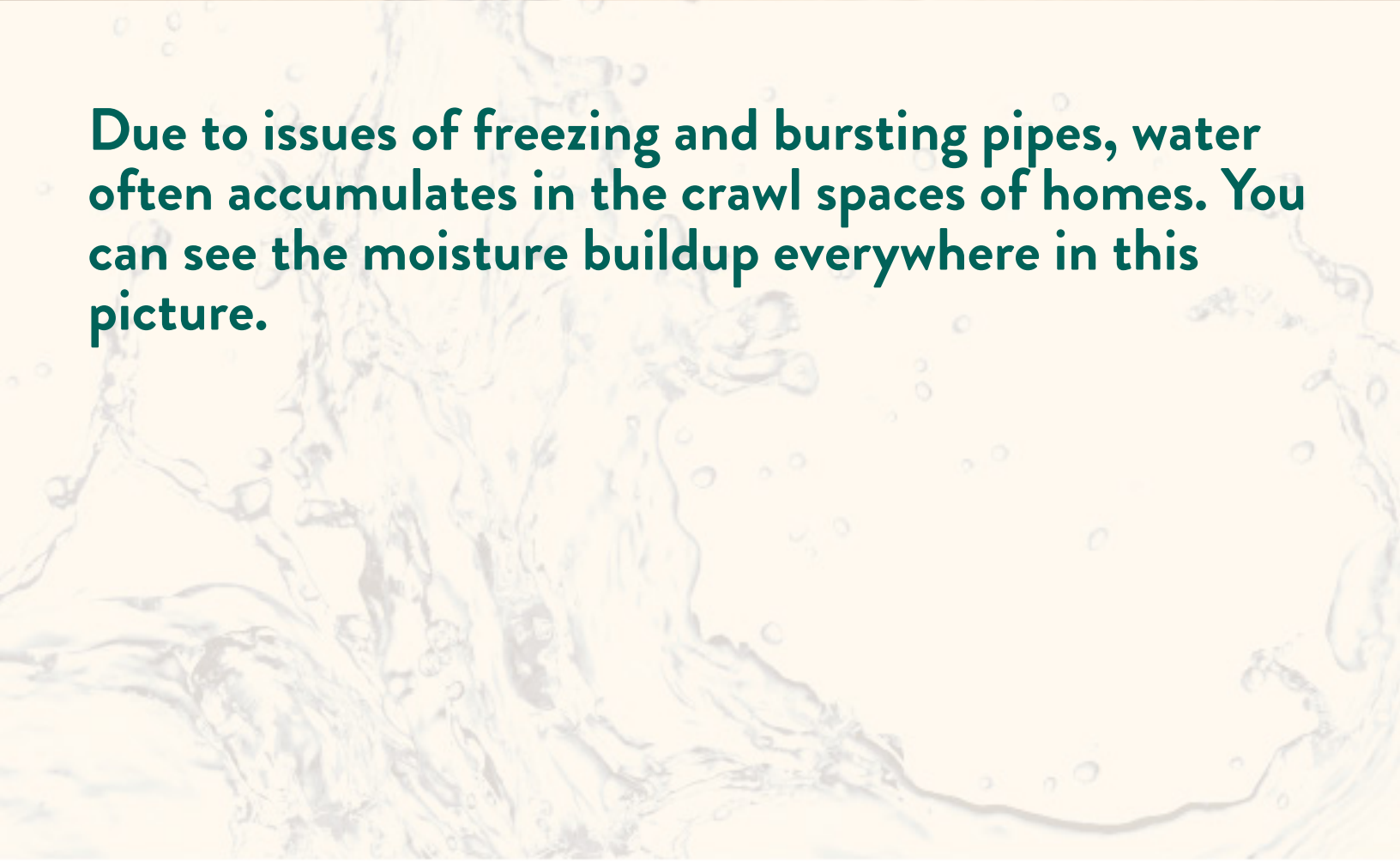


In the picture you can see a drainage pipe that has been broken, temporarily repaired with tape and plastic, but still leaking.

Notice that there is neither OSB on the side walls of the crawl space nor plastic on the ground with sand on top. Without these, there is a high risk of mold forming which can lead to serious health concerns.



Due to issues of freezing and bursting pipes, water often accumulates in the crawl spaces of homes. You can see the moisture buildup everywhere in this picture.

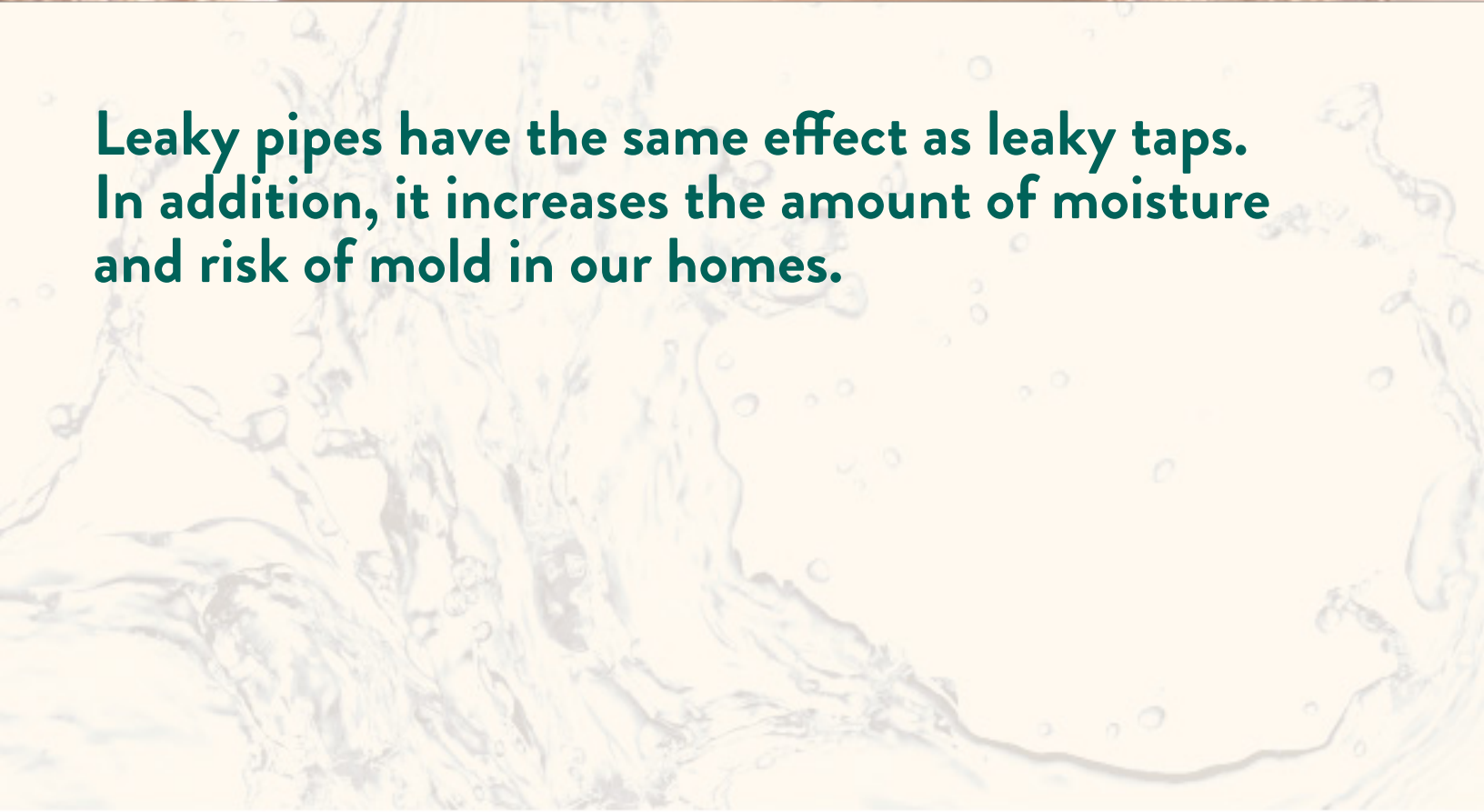




Leaking taps increase the demand for water. If many of the houses in the community have such issues, this condition increases the demand on an already overtaxed water treatment plant and the sewage lagoon.

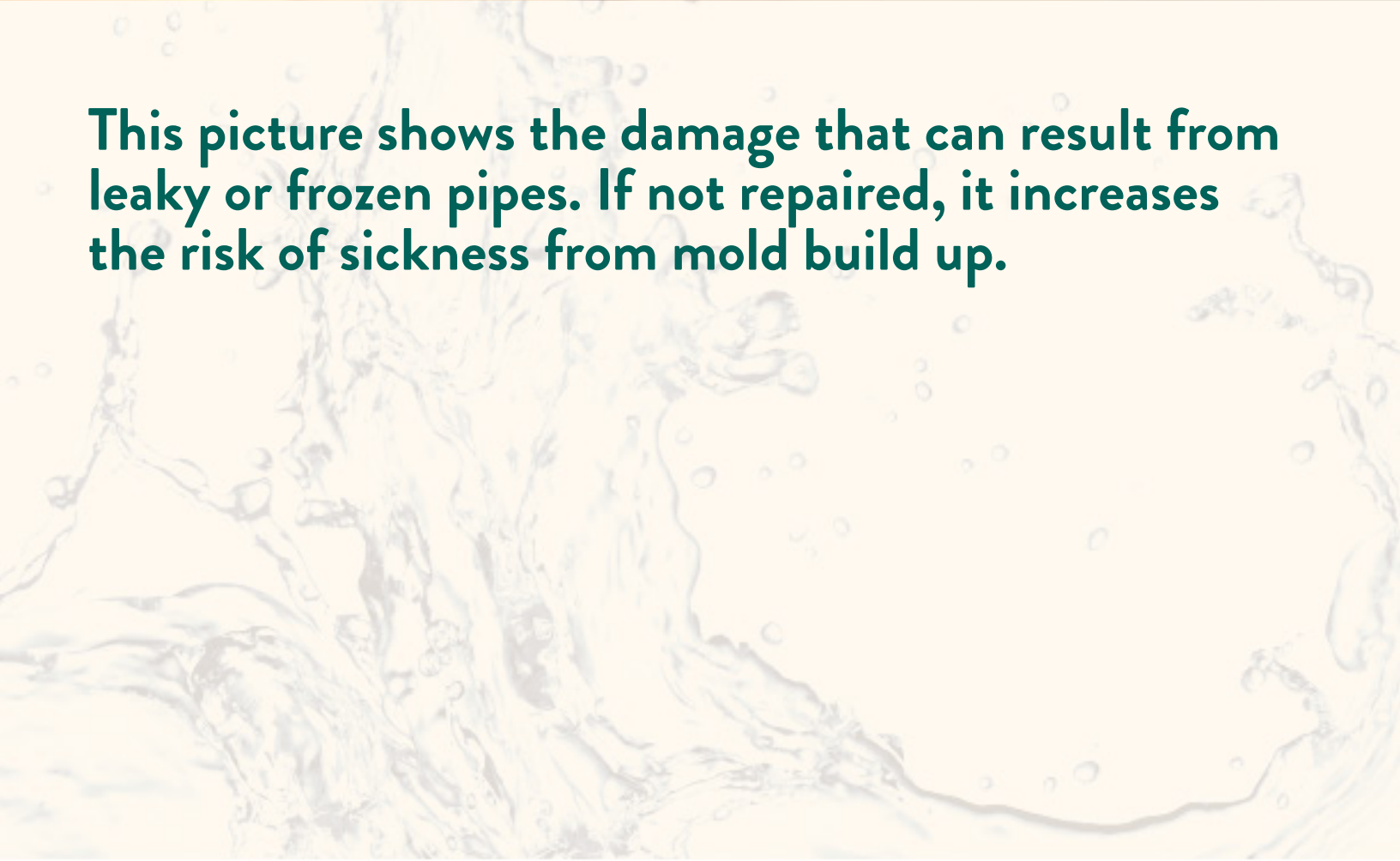


**Leaky pipes have the same effect as leaky taps.
In addition, it increases the amount of moisture
and risk of mold in our homes.**





This picture shows the damage that can result from leaky or frozen pipes. If not repaired, it increases the risk of sickness from mold build up.





With the many water breaks and issues of freezing pipes, some community members have resorted to storing water in large containers like this one in their homes. We used this water barrel all through the last winter season because our pipes froze. We are on the main line of the water system.



Bottled Water is not always the best to drink because when you leave bottled water in your vehicle, the heat cause a chemical to be released from the plastic bottle into the water which can be hazardous to your health. It is also very expensive to purchase and transport to the community. Anyway, how can we be sure the water in the bottle you purchased is any cleaner or safer than your tap water? Boiling your water is the best way to ensure it is suitable to drink. Filtering devices and chemical purification products are not as effective. Boiling your water kills all kinds of microorganisms such as bacteria, parasites and viruses.

Sewage Treatment



This picture is showing the sewage tank right outside the doorway of this house. Vehicles drive right by on the road with the pipes sticking out of the ground coming from the house.



This is the lagoon at Mitchell's Point. It is where waste and sewage from every home and organization in the community is disposed. There are three cells to the system.



This picture is of the lagoon's closet cell (Cell 3) and is made up of all sewage. The white raft-looking things are floating pumps. The lagoon has a filtering system that flows to Cell 2 than flows through to Cell 1. This system of cells makes the "water" almost clean enough to consume. Before freeze up and the winter months, Cell 1 is to be drained. In the past there was a mistake once where the sewage and waste water in Cell 3 was drained instead of Cell 1 and made its way into our lake where we draw our drinking water from.



The sewage trucks dump raw sewage into Cell 3 of the lagoon. What was once a swamp now looks nothing like a swamp. The community really needs a sewage treatment plant for the people of Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation.



Water is just a tap away for some people. For other families it is not so easy to access clean water and sometimes you have to go get it yourself.

The most importantly thing is we need safe drinking water for the children - giving our children a healthy future with clean water.

Recommendations

1. Build a new treatment plant. The current one is old and working at over capacity.
2. Ensure qualified water treatment operators. There is a need for northern training, regulation and licensing. ATEC could play a role in this for northern communities.
3. Extend piped water to entire reserve.
4. Reduce the risk of contaminations due to excess handling and storage of drinking water. This includes more cleaning/flushing of tanks on a regular schedule.
5. Reduce incidents of pipes freezing in winter. This includes well trained public works people able to fix ongoing problems and the better insulation of tanks.
6. Community education on what should (and should not) go in the toilet and sink. The purpose is to reduce contaminants and non-degradable material ending up in the sewage lagoon.
7. Build a new garbage dump. The current one is too close to the lake, placing our source of water at risk.



The ATEC Centre Student Research Team 2013-2014



The ATEC Centre Student Research Team 2014- 2015

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