



# Charter Toolkit

A COMPASS OF CARE:  
searching for water ethics

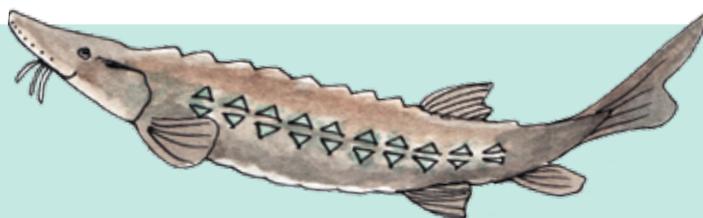
A CLASSROOM RESOURCE

This exercise on water ethics was originally developed for Grade 8 students attending a water conference in Ontario. Building on their existing knowledge of the water cycle, this workshop introduced a different kind of cycle – the one between what we get and what we say thanks for. We called this the 'water ethics cycle' and our goal was to make a 'compass of care' to help guide our way.

The Great Lakes Commons Charter states that the Great Lakes are a gift and a responsibility held in common by the peoples and communities of the Lakes and must be treated as such as to ensure their preservation for coming generations. To support and share the full Charter agreement visit: [www.GreatLakesCommons.org/charter-declaration](http://www.GreatLakesCommons.org/charter-declaration).

Knowing how to be grateful can be part of our commons water cycle.

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## THE SET UP

First we started with the phrase "what we do the water we do to ourselves". Students were asked what this meant to them and how this phrase is either respected or ignored in our society. We came to a solid agreement that water not only links us all together and with our surroundings, but to the complex systems of modern living (manufacturing, agriculture, energy production, transportation, and urbanization).

Then we asked "who owns the Great Lakes?" Most people see these waters as shared by Canadians, Americans, and their respective political sub-divisions (states, provinces, municipalities). Indigenous sovereignty in the region is absent from the student's awareness. So much to still teach (see our Toolkit resources on governance to learn more about Indigenous water rights and responsibilities). We talked about how the thousands of Great Lakes communities are only here because of the water. Water supports life, industry, and identity. So our ethics cycle must include that we really belong to the waters, they don't belong to us.

The final concepts we talked about to set up our 'compass of care' design were the words 'environment' and 'nature'. Learning about water lets us learn from water too. The lesson here is that all life is connected and all life needs water. Water is life. The hydrologic cycle circulates life and also erodes our fixed ideas of 'us' here and the 'environment' out there. We are 70% water. The Great Lakes are not just 'out there' but flowing through us -- just like the 'environment' and 'nature'. What if we dropped the role of 'environmentalist' and instead thought of ourselves as part of mother earth protecting herself?

## MOTIVES BEHIND THE ACTIONS

If our words and language can discount and devalue our connection with water, then they can also be used for nurturing reverence and reconnection.

Many water protection campaigns (and the public surveys they are often based on) talk about 'loving water' and 'caring about water'. But what do these feelings mean when it comes to action? What if we thought deeply about WHY people are protecting water, rather than just the problem they are trying to solve?

Two people could each donate money to a campaign but for different reasons. One person may join a shoreline clean up because they don't like the look of plastic on their beach. Another person may join the same clean up only because they don't want non-human life getting sick eating plastic. If two people boycott bottled water, one person may be doing it because of the ecological footprint of the purchase, while another person may be boycotting it because they don't want water to be a commodity. Sorting out the source of why people protect water can help us design a better guide for our personal and collective care.



## DESIGNING THE COMPASS

Our goal is to reverse engineer a 'compass of care'. If we look at a variety of water-care actions and think about the motives support the actions, then we can design a better guide for our water protection efforts and elevate our shared impact.

### EXAMPLE #1

We looked at a photograph from a recent Sacred Water Walk. I explained how Anishinaabe women lead a ceremony of care by praying and giving thanks to water -- all while walking the complete circumference of the water body. Depending on the size, this could take several hours, days, or even months. Sema (tobacco) is offered to the water and women withdraw and return a small sample of water, while carrying the water in a copper pot. Since water is a gift, we show our respect and thanks with deep gratitude.

### EXAMPLE #2

We looked a photo of two researchers in the water observing and learning about life in the water. There is a growing network of 'citizen scientists' working to learn about water quality and share this knowledge across the region. When we care about someone or something, we want to learn all that we can. Our curiosity is a form of care. Close observation and understanding brings us into a more intimate relationship with what or who we care about. The set up of this lesson helps us understand that we don't only need to learn about water, but from water. The non-human world offers a powerful source of knowledge for anyone willing to learn.





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## EXAMPLE #3

Students could see and be told about volunteers holding blue bags of garbage they had cleaned off shorelines. Shoreline clean-ups are organized across the Great Lakes and are just one more way we can keep the waters healthy. When we care about someone/something, you want them/it to thrive as fully as possible. All the products of modern consumer life impact water. How we grow our food, fuel our cars and homes, transport our goods, even how we wash our bodies and clothes impact the quality and quantity of water. We protect water when we keep it pure as a source of all life.

## EXAMPLE #4

We looked at activists filling up large water jugs to share tap water with people who had their home's water shut off. Water is being transformed from a commons into a commodity. Bottled water cashes in on both the distrust of tap water and the faith that corporate water is better. It impoverishes the value of our ancestral water gift and our collective investment in water access. It's human nature to want to pass on the benefits that we each have received. When we experience beauty in our lives we want to share that experience with others.

We mapped each of these examples onto our compass. By looking at the motives of people's actions, we looked deeper into people's values and ethics. When the media label people 'environmentalists' they strip away people's complexity. When we see ourselves as just a 'caring' person, we stunt the richness of where this caring comes from, what this caring does, and what it could do. After learning about these examples, we formed four broad categories: Giving Gratitude, Seeking Knowledge, Sharing the Gift, and Promoting Vitality.

Imagine if we were all taught to care for mother earth in such a reciprocal way. How do we honor every Grade 8 learner's care -- what they have come in with and what has been lost along the way? What would it take for every student to graduate with the skills, knowledge and experience of caring deeply for water?





## A COMPASS OF CARE



## STUDENTS GIVE IT A TRY

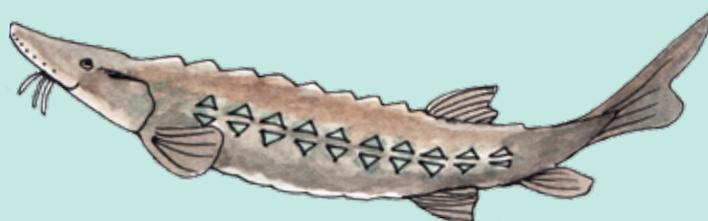
For the last part of the workshop, students got in groups of 2 or 3. They are given some construction paper and markers and asked to draw a large and simple version of the compass above with just the four main categories (or directions). Each group was given two more examples of people caring for water. It was now their task to pick which compass direction best matched the water protection example.

Each team was then given 2 cue cards with a short description on each. Including but not limited to:

- reducing the size of your water footprint
- a mobile app that helps you learn which beaches are safe to swim at
- a petition to ban the production of microbeads in personal-care products
- adding more drinking water fountains in public spaces
- eating fish from your local watershed
- banning bottled water in your school
- improving habitat by adding more wetland plants
- learning about the Two Row Wampum belt
- using less water in and around the home
- investing new money in a city's water system
- starting a festival that celebrates the role of water in our lives
- building a rain garden

After 15 minutes, each pair shares the highlights of their discussion and their compass choices. They state which of the 4 compass 'directions' does the example best illustrate and why. Having the same example in more than one group fosters wider interpretations. Some examples fit multiple directions and that's ok too.

Often a journey takes us in many directions. First we go this way and then we go that way. Hopefully the compass of care can help us find our way.





## RELATED RESOURCES

### CITIZEN SCIENCE:

[http://msue.anr.msu.edu/news/citizen\\_science\\_great\\_lakes\\_problems](http://msue.anr.msu.edu/news/citizen_science_great_lakes_problems)

### SHORELINE CLEAN—UPS:

<http://www.shorelinecleanup.ca/>

<https://greatlakes.org/get-involved/adopt-a-beach/>

### WATER SHUT OFFS:

<http://detroitwaterbrigade.org/>

## NOTES?

**Would this activity work well in your classroom?**

**What would you change?**

**If you feel like trying it out, let us know how it goes.**

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Original artwork and design by [Lena Maude Wilson](#)

