

*To foster reverence for water. To inform about threats that imperil water. To inspire citizen action to protect water.
Water ripples deeply in each of us. To stir that rippling is to awaken action.*

Greatness: The Great Lakes Water Walk & Celebration

A Canada 150 Celebration of the Great Lakes and Canada's First Peoples
Launching a *National Day of Walking for the Water*

Sacred Water Walking

For thousands of years, Canada's first peoples have held the Great Lakes as a sacred gift to be cherished and revered. They are not alone in this attitude. The roots of every culture that came to join the Canadian mosaic reveal a deep connection between water and the sacred, which should make honouring the Great Lakes obvious and essential. Sadly this is not so. Cut off from our lakes and rivers in frenetic urban enclaves and a culture of entitlement, we have forgotten. A remembering is badly needed.

In First Nations culture, women hold primary responsibility to protect the water. A modest Anishinabek Elder from Thunder Bay decided to demonstrate this responsibility in an extraordinary way. "Josephine Mandamin grew up on Manitoulin Island eating fresh fish and drinking straight from Georgian Bay. During her lifetime, she has seen the Great Lakes nearly ruined – the fish killed by invasive species, the harbours poisoned and the water evaporating into the clouds of global warming. So, in 2003, when she was 'moved by the spirits', she picked up her copper water pail and started walking, encircling Lake Superior and telling the people that 'the water is sick ... and people need to really fight for that water, to speak for that water, to love that water.'" [Toronto Star]. At every tributary Mandamin stopped and talked directly to the water, offering prayers, tobacco and thanks. In subsequent summers, the 17,000 km circling of all five Great Lakes was completed.

Since then, Indigenous women have led sacred water walks around many Canadian lakes and rivers. The bands of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who join them recognize this as far more than a walk on the beach. It is a potent ritual activity with power to change one's relationship to water, and thereby to nature itself.

Vision: An Annual National Event

Each of us has a body of water we belong to, that we love – an ocean, a lake, a river, a stream – so much so that it is virtually intrinsic to being Canadian. Imagine on the second weekend every year, in every nook and cranny of this nation, tens of thousands joining fellow citizens to walk beside, to honour, to bless the body of water they love. On September 10 2017, the match will be lit, the inaugural event will take place. Because the shimmering necklace of the Great Lakes is iconic at the heart of our country, and because urban Canadians are generally the most cut off from nature, the inaugural event, *Greatness: The Great Lakes Water Walk & Celebration*, will take place across the Lake Ontario waterfront of Canada's largest city. It will bring thousands into a grand celebration of the Great Lakes and the sixth of the world's accessible fresh water they embrace. Importantly, it will be a tangible expression of reconciliation and respect for those who have kept faith with the Great Lakes even when most had forgotten. It will be a demonstration of how Indigenous and non-Indigenous people will work together in common accomplishment and right relationship during the next 150 years of Canada's history.

The Inaugural Event – *Greatness: The Great Lakes Water Walk & Celebration*

Early morning on September 10 2017, large groups will gather at the mouths of the Credit and Rouge Rivers for a blessing of those historic Ontario watersheds. Their waters will then be carried on the first leg of the Water Walk to reach the Humber and Don Rivers respectively by mid-day. Some will join for stretches. Others will go the distance. Many will walk but others are invited to use any means that encourage them to participate – canoes, boats, bicycles, roller blades. Mid-day gatherings at the mouths of the Humber and Don Rivers will bless those two rivers, followed by a continuation of the Water Walk toward a meeting place on the central Toronto waterfront. Intense tracking of this extraordinary journey by social and conventional media will swell public attention and draw thousands to the central meeting place to join in a beautiful early evening celebration.

Grandmother Josephine Mandamin will lead these thousands in a blessing of the Great Lakes. She will be joined in this ceremony by leaders of the Roman Catholic, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, Baha'i, Buddhist, Confucian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Shinto, Sikh, Taoist, Unitarian, Zoroastrian faiths. Following the ceremony, each faith will offer a traditional presentation – song, dance, spoken word – that reflects its love and respect for water.

The Invitation Event – 25th Anniversary of *World Water Day*

What better occasion to broadcast an invitation to the public to participate in *Greatness: The Great Lakes Water Walk & Celebration* than a high-profile event on March 22, the 25th Anniversary of World Water Day and the Opening Night of the annual Water Docs Film Festival. The event, taking place in the Ontario Place Cinesphere, will commence with a water blessing ceremony led by Indigenous women and a celebration of the Indigenous relationship with water and the Great Lakes. The tradition of Sacred Water Walking and Josephine Mandamin will be honoured. All those present in person or by way of extensive media coverage will be invited and encouraged to participate in The Great Lakes Water Walk & Celebration the following summer.

World Water Day was instituted by the United Nations to raise global awareness and action to address serious water issues worldwide. The Invitation Event will honour the 25th Anniversary of World Water Day, giving this concrete expression through the City of Toronto declaring as a *Blue Community*, a designation with strong provisions to protect water.

The event will also kick off the 6th Water Docs Film Festival, a shining celebration of water in all its dimensions in our lives - five days of superb water-themed documentary films to evoke a sense of reverence for water, inform about threats that imperil water, and inspire citizen action to protect water. *North of Superior*, that amazing first-ever Imax production, will be featured followed by the winning film of the Ontario Waterways Documentary Films Challenge.

The Youth Program

A central objective of *Greatness: The Great Lakes Water Walk & Celebration* is to involve very large numbers of youth so they experience first-hand the power of this ritual activity and experience the Traditional Indigenous Knowledge that lies at its core.

1. The Great Lakes Student Rally

On May 25 2017, a wonderful Great Lakes Student Rally will draw 2000 Indigenous and non-indigenous grade 7 and 8 students into a powerful awareness and celebration of the Great Lakes. An opening water ceremony to bless the Great Lakes, led by an Indigenous Elder, will be followed by a celebration of the Indigenous understanding of the Great Lakes in song, dance and spoken word presented by a team of Indigenous and non-indigenous students. The tradition of sacred water walking will be honoured and the students encouraged to launch a social media campaign with a compelling invitation to their fellows to participate in the Great Lakes Water Walk the following summer.

An interactive presentation on 'The State of the Great Lakes' will provoke a lively discussion about actions students can take to protect them. Inspiring calls to action will be delivered by TVO's The Water Brothers and the amazing teenage Water Warrior, Robyn Hamlyn.

Finally, winning water-protection films created by grade 8 classes will be screened and awarded - the culmination of 100 classes completing Water Docs @ School Action Projects, an in-class, school-year-long program that combines in-depth study of the Great Lakes and each class's home watershed followed by a hands-on watershed-protection project followed by the class creating a documentary film that chronicles the story of its action project and the issues it addresses. In honour of Canada and Ontario 150, the student rally will kick off a campaign to recruit 150 classes to engage in Water Docs @ School Action Projects in the following school year beginning September 2017.

2. The Great Lakes Water Walk Youth Assembly

Vigorous networking, both on and off line, will attract a large contingent of youth to participate in *Greatness: The Great Lakes Water Walk & Celebration*. The hallmark of this networking campaign will be Indigenous and non-indigenous youth working together including a joint steering committee to engage youth organizations from both groups.

On the day following the water walk, a Great Lakes Water Walk Youth Assembly will take place. Emphasis will be on Indigenous and non-indigenous youth exploring practical ways to work together going forward. Specific projects will be defined (i) to generate future sacred water walks for youth, and (ii) to protect the Great Lakes and their watersheds. A closing ceremony will commission the youth to go forward in care and protection for the Great Lakes. Tangible expression will fortify commitment as four youth work parties gather the following day to clean up especially polluted sections on the Credit, Humber, Don and Rouge Rivers.

Waves Across The Nation

In 2018 the foregoing program will be repeated with local adaptations in five of Canada's provinces and territories, securing sufficient momentum to assure a ripple effect across Canada and thereby consolidating a *National Day of Walking for the Water* going forward.

The Organizing Partners

Greatness: The Great Lakes Water Walk & Celebration is a Signature Project of *Greatness – The Great Lakes Project* initiated by the Lt. Governor of Ontario. It is being implemented by Indigenous and non-indigenous partners including to date Nibi-Emosaawdamajig (Those Who Walk for the Water), Ecologos Water Docs, Waterlution and Trent University's Indigenous Studies and Indigenous Environmental Studies/Science Departments.

The coordinating partner is Ecologos, a registered environmental and arts charity best known for its Water Docs suite of programs aimed at fostering a sense of reverence for water, informing about threats that imperil water, and inspiring citizen action to protect water. Its Ontario-wide network of volunteers have been fulfilling this mandate through the popular *Water Docs Film Festival* in Toronto every March; *Water Docs @ School Action Projects and Filmmaking* for Ontario grade 8 classes; and *Water Docs Where-You-Live*, community-based film events in towns and neighbourhoods across Ontario. Ecologos has been learning by doing and evaluating for 18 years, building a strong capacity for designing and implementing programs with substantial impact.