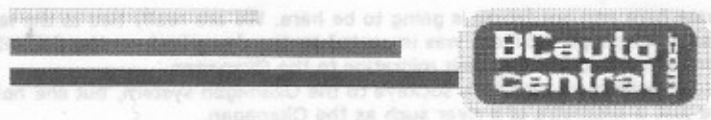


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BACK SEND TO A FRIEND FEEDBACK

Plea made to better respect nature

By Judie Steeves
Staff reporter
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Introduced by the dramatic thumping from a procession of water bottle drummers, Okanagan Nation elder Mary Louie admonished students and visitors to UBC Okanagan that we have to respect the water.

"If we continue as we do now, there won't be any water left," she warned. "We have to respect nature. When we monkey around with Mother Nature's blood, it's like messing around with our own."

"Although Mother Earth is really sick, she is trying her best to get you to wake up and understand."

While there was a disappointing turnout for the World Water Day celebrations organized by anthropology professor John Wagner and UBCO students Wednesday, it is the first year the internationally-recognized day has been observed in Kelowna.

A panel discussion on water challenges and solutions followed the opening ceremonies, with Dr. Jeff Curtis, earth and environmental sciences, UBCO; Neal Klassen, with Kelowna's WaterSmart program; Deanna Machin, Okanagan Nation Alliance fisheries biologist; and Greg Armour, from the Okanagan Basin Water Board. Gord Shandler from the B.C. Fruit Growers' Association was absent.

Armour told the audience, "What we want as a society is what gets us in trouble. We want to grow but we want to plan for it later."

The economic values of water overshadow the ecological values in the minds of politicians, he added. When the OBWB was formed 30 years ago, there was a \$2 million detailed plan done which recommended a single regional district be formed in the Okanagan basin to manage the water resource. Politicians failed to follow the plan and set it aside until recent years when drought sparked new discussion about water management in the valley.

"For the first time during the 2002-2003 drought we used more water than flowed in," noted Armour. The result, he said, was that boat owners found they couldn't tie up to their docks on Okanagan Lake. Rapid growth in the valley has led to a continuing concern about water shortages, so water quantity has become the issue rather than water quality, he continued.

Residents in the Okanagan are among the biggest water wasters in the world, he noted. However, there's a move to take action on that.

A new Okanagan Water Stewardship Council has been formed as an advisory body to the OBWB. It links experts from a variety of sectors to the politicians who sit on the OBWB, he said.

Its formation was driven by the Okanagan Partnership, which Curtis said reminded people that it's bad business to foul your own nest.

He explained that although the Okanagan Basin has big lakes, it has a small watershed and Okanagan Lake takes a lifetime to fill.

At the rapid rate of growth currently occurring the valley is likely to be short of water in 10 to 20 years. "With the region growing at such a high rate, the trick is to accelerate planning," Armour said.

Klassen said Kelowna's decision to take the option of demand management to reduce water use has been very successful, with a reduction of 20 per cent in the total peak demand in 10 years, despite a 16 per cent increase in the population.

Interestingly, he noted, most of the water is being used by people in particular areas of the city where there are larger properties, terrible soil for growing grass and residents with a love affair with grass. Worst of all, he said, they don't know how to use their automatic irrigation systems.

This summer, he said the WaterSmart program will do some demonstration plantings, such as with the use of a drought tolerant grass at the downtown library.

Responding to a question, he said it's not possible to talk about water conservation without talking about metering water use. "Even if you don't charge by the amount used, you need to know what you're using," he said.

Machin encouraged people to consider not just the use of water by people, but water as habitat for such creatures as fish.

In native culture, she said, "the land is in us; it's part of our DNA. We are connected to the land."



Sean Connor / Capital News

Performing Arts professor Neil Cadger leads a group of students in a water drum procession during the opening ceremonies of UBC Okanagan's recognition of World Water Day on Wednesday.



"Our ancestors were here and our future is going to be here. We are really tied to the land."
In the past, she said her people's culture was impacted by the dams built on the Columbia River, which prevented the salmon from continuing their migration to the Okanagan.
Now, efforts are underway to re-introduce sockeye to the Okanagan system, but she noted, it costs millions to restore just a kilometre of a river such as the Okanagan.
With new challenges coming of population growth and climate change, one audience member asked: "Why do we continue to let developers drive growth?"
Another suggested the number of building permits be limited to control growth.
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