Bridging the gap between interest and action: What does engagement in water activism look like in Canadian communities?

By: Rebecca Pacheco

water wins

Spring 2016

If you would like to learn more, visit us online:

Via the Wellington Water Watchers site:
http://wellingtonwaterwatchers.ca/campaigns/water-wins/

Via the WaterWealth Project site:
http://www.waterwealthproject.com/water_wins

Or email Robert Case at rob.case@uwaterloo.ca

Spring 2016

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Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada
Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada

The water wins Project

When a local environmental campaign is successful, do more people sign up?

That is the question Dr. Robert Case, a researcher at Renison University College at the University of Waterloo, is hoping to find the answer to.

In 2013, community activist groups including the Wellington Water Watchers challenged an appeal by Nestlé Waters Canada, to the Ontario Environmental Review Tribunal, to have certain conditions removed from a water-taking permit issued for water-bottling operations in the county. Unwilling to fight against the community pressure, Nestlé eventually withdrew its appeal.

In Hope, B.C., where Nestlé Waters Canada also has water bottling operations, social movement organizations including the WaterWealth Project organized themselves to take aim at Nestlé's operations there, drawing attention to the lack of regulation governing water use in that province. This advocacy work eventually contributed to the passing of the province's new Water Sustainability Act in early 2014.

In both cases, these policy wins were celebrated in the community and across Canada as a significant victory for water activists. However, important questions remain concerning the continuing impact of these 'wins' on public attitudes about and grassroots involvement in the social movement organizations involved. Specifically, does an organization's success encourage more people to become involved, or make them feel that their participation is no longer needed?

The Water Wins project aims to explore these questions. The project team has collected data through interviews with key informants, a survey of residents in the two communities, and a retrospective analysis of local and national news media, which we will delve into in a series of short reports.

This is the third in a series of three community reports that will aim to answer key questions, toward eventually answering the project's overarching question:

Report One: What are people concerned about when it comes to water?
Report Two: What do people know about the work of local activist groups?
Report Three: What does engagement in water activism look like at the community level?

If you are interested in reading the other reports in the series, you can find them here.

Thank you for your interest in our research. We hope you find this report to be interesting, informative and useful.

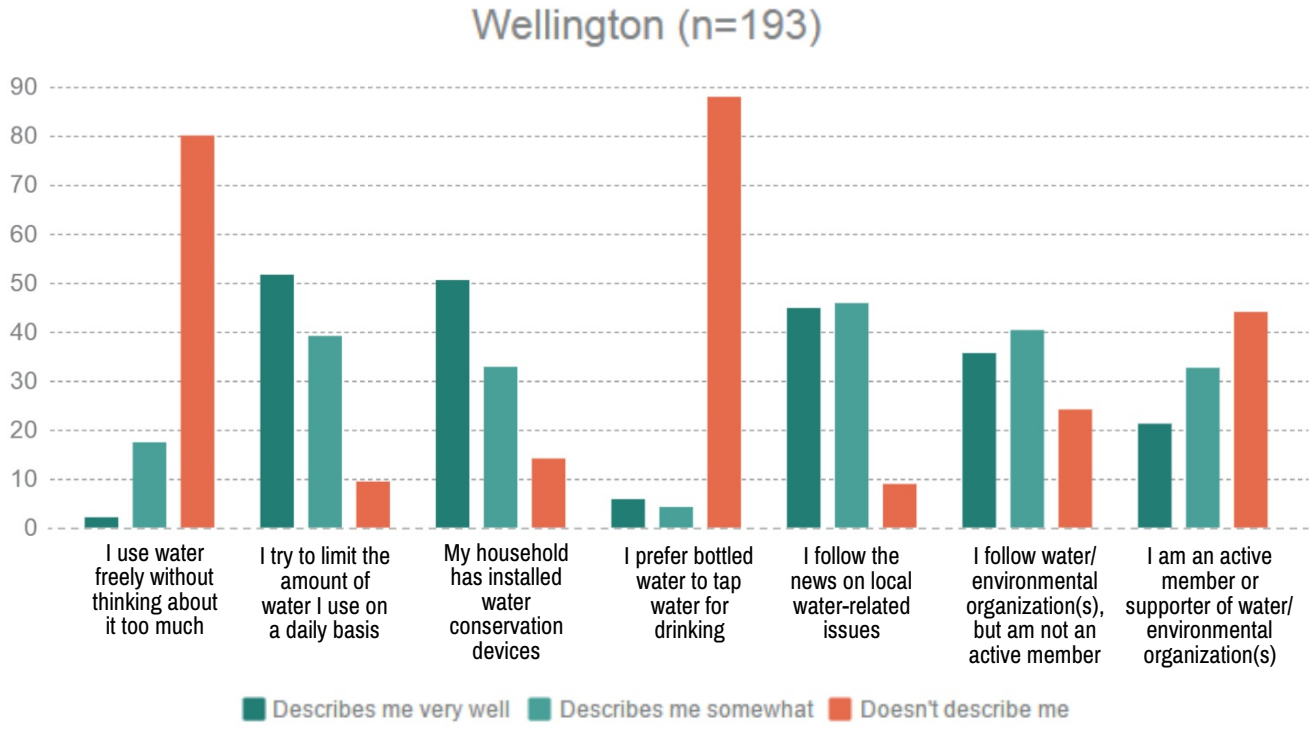
Sincerely,
The Water Wins Team

How would you describe your water use and conservation habits?

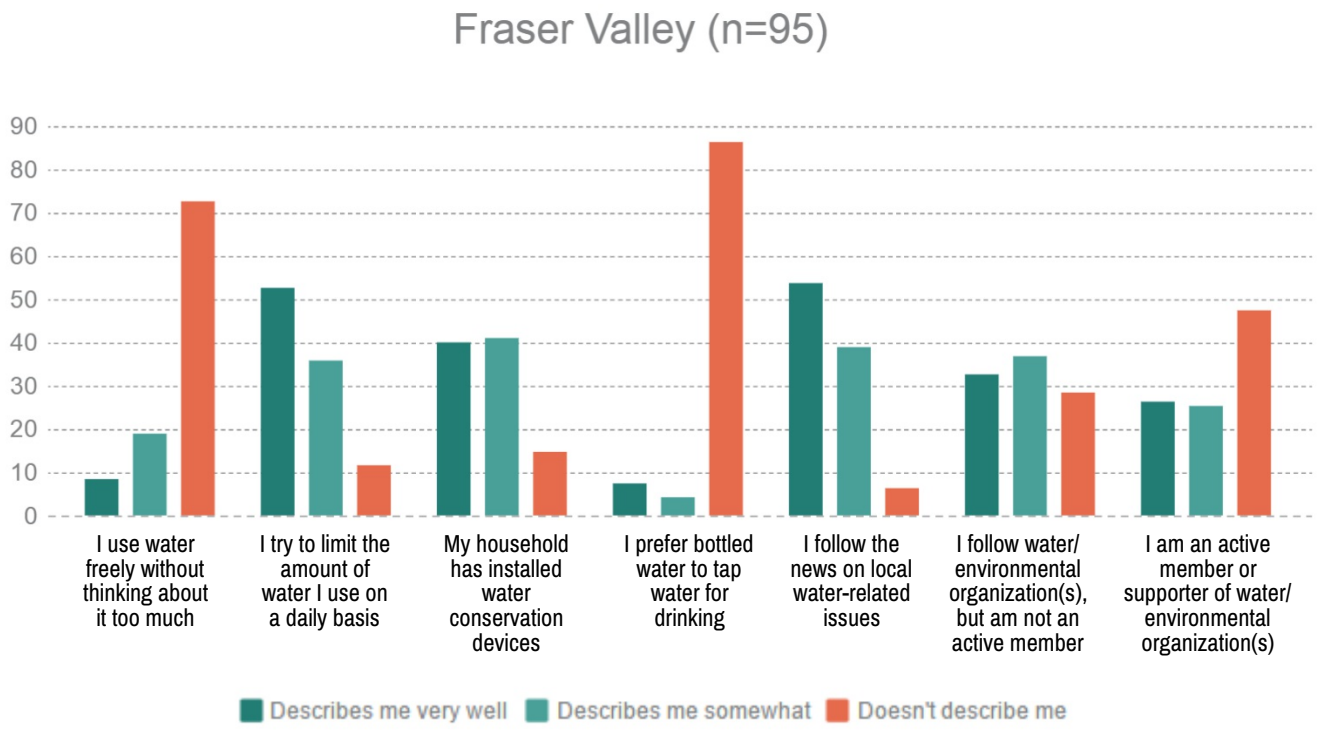
In our first report, we noted that there wasn't a single common issue that united people, but that overall people reported they were either "somewhat interested" or "very interested" in local water issues. Despite this finding, key informant water activists reported that engagement in water activism in their communities was generally low. We remarked how it is possible that many survey respondents may care about water issues without it necessarily translating into engagement or support for local water activism, or that perhaps this engagement is happening in ways that aren't always visible or easily recognizable. In this final report in the series, we explore the ways in which individuals demonstrate their interest for water issues through their actions (i.e. what engagement in water activism actually looks like), and what key informants in local water activist organizations have to say about what they think motivates and deters people from becoming engaged in water activism.

In the communities of Wellington County in Ontario, and the Fraser Valley in British Columbia, we reached out to community members to complete a survey on water issues. Participants completed one of two versions of the survey: a shortened version of the survey at community events or when we went canvassing door-to-door, or a longer survey online advertised via social media and in local newspapers. In this report, we draw from the respondents of the online version of the survey only. We expected that those who completed this version of the survey might have a greater interest in water issues and higher engagement in water-related activism than the general population, since they self-selected to complete the survey, so this should be kept in mind when considering the results.

We asked, "How well do the following statements reflect your own water use and water conservation habits?" These are their responses:



"NA/don't know" responses are not shown; hence, responses may not add up to 100%.



"NA/don't know" responses are not shown; hence, responses may not add up to 100%.

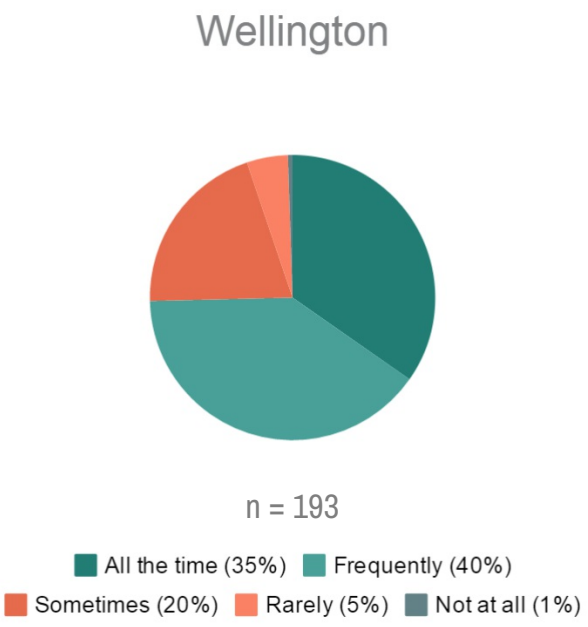
There appear to be similar patterns of responses across both communities. For example, in both Wellington and Fraser Valley, the large majority of respondents answered that using water freely without thinking about it does not describe them (80 percent and 72.6 percent, respectively), and a majority also said they strive to conserve their daily water usage and have water conservation devices installed in their homes.

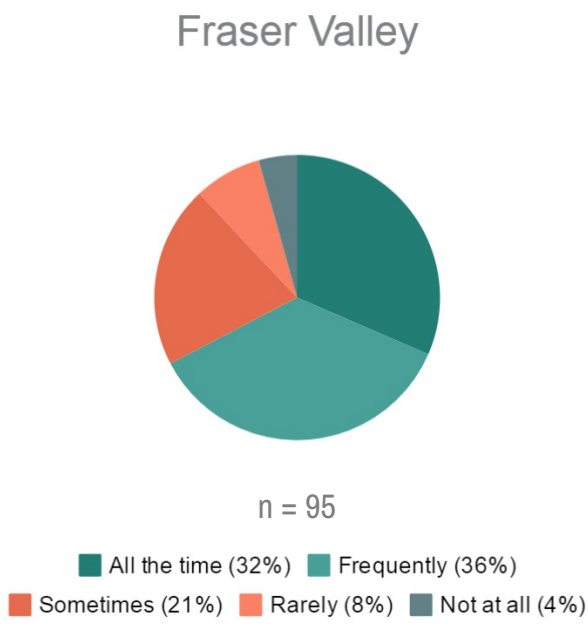
Additionally, a large majority of respondents in both communities (87.9 percent in Wellington County and 86.3 percent in the Fraser Valley) agreed that the statement "I prefer bottled water to tap water for drinking" did not describe them. This corresponds with the findings presented in the first report, where close to two thirds of respondents to the online survey in Wellington County expressed fear and anger related to Nestlé depleting local water for bottling and selling it for profit, and another one fifth also expressed concerns related to bottled water in general. While Fraser Valley survey respondents did not specifically tend to name bottled water as a major concern, it would appear they feel similarly to those in Wellington County when it comes to their drinking water preferences.

In both Wellington County and the Fraser Valley, a majority of respondents (90.6 percent and 92.6 percent, respectively) indicated that the statement "I follow the news on local water-related issues" described them somewhat or very well. This means that a large majority of the respondents are at least knowledgeable about water issues in their communities.This finding aligns well with the data from our first report, where a vast majority of respondents in both communities indicated that they were either somewhat or very interested in water issues.

Despite this, a majority of respondents in both communities still indicated that they follow the work of water/environmental organizations in their communities, but are not active members. While this reflects at least an interest in water issues, it indicates that most are not yet taking action at the level of involvement in an activist organization.

How often do you monitor your personal water usage?





Overall, a majority of respondents in both Wellington County and the Fraser Valley- 75 percent and 68 percent, respectively- reported that they monitor their water use all the time or frequently. Another fifth of respondents from each community reported that they monitor their water usage at least some of the time. Thus, there appears to be a general recognition that monitoring personal water consumption is an important way in which people can contribute to broader water conservation efforts. This aligns with findings from our first report, where respondents from both communities spoke frequently to their concerns related to water quality and availability, including concerns about pollution and water waste in agriculture, industry, and residential development, concerns about future availability of clean drinking water, and the role of individuals conserving water in their homes.

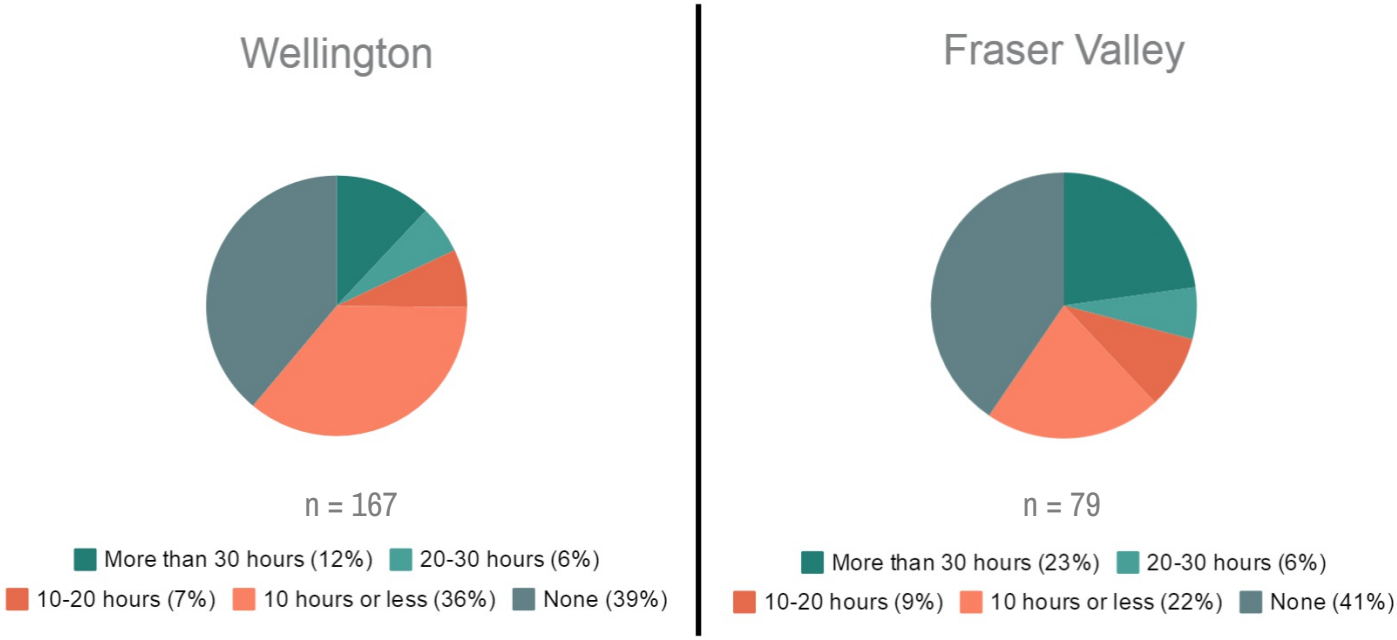
When asked about other ways in which their personal behaviours or choices reflected their attitudes/ beliefs about water issues, respondents gave some interesting responses related to conservation that went beyond amount of water drawn from the tap to consider water consumption more broadly:

"I plant drought-tolerant plants, and am slowly working to remove all the grass from our property and turn it into a more water-retaining garden; we are also planting more trees to encourage more water interception and transpiration. Water conservation is a big part of our lives." -Survey respondent from Wellington County

"I try to buy local and organic [because I am aware of] world water issues. I try to eat less meat and less packaged food." -Survey respondent from the Fraser Valley

Only a small portion of respondents- 6 percent in Wellington County and 12 percent in the Fraser Valley- reported that they rarely or never monitor their water usage. This finding is encouraging as a starting point for water conservation efforts, as a large majority of respondents are at least conscious of their own water usage. The question still remains about how to leverage this very positive conservation ethic into participation in collective action.

In the past 12 months, how much time you have you spent working, volunteering or otherwise participating in activities or events related to water issues?



In both communities, a large proportion of respondents- 39 percent in Wellington County, and 41 percent in the Fraser Valley- reported that in the past 12 months they had spent none of their time working, volunteering or participating in activities or events related to water issues.This suggests that although a majority of community members might be concerned about water issues and actively monitor their water use, this does not often translate to involvement in organized water activism. This corresponds with findings from the second report, where nearly a third of respondents of the online version of the survey had heard of local water activist organizations but had never been directly involved in the work of these organizations, and less than 10 percent were actively involved.

Overall, many respondents reported having spent 30 hours or more, or 10 hours or less, engaged in water activism, with relatively few spending between 10 and 30 hours per month. Thus, engagement in water activism may tend to be an "all or nothing" phenomenon, where people are likely to be either very engaged or very minimally engaged, with few falling in the space between.

When asked about other ways in which their personal behaviours or choices reflected their attitudes/ beliefs about water issues, respondents gave some interesting examples of engagement in water-related activities and events outside of formally established water activist organizations:

"I run an environment club at the school where I work and teach children about water issues. We have 3 rain barrels for watering outside. We planted drought tolerant grass that doesn't need watering." -Survey respondent from Wellington County

"I am a community support worker and info share with my group about thoughtful use and conservation." -Survey respondent from the Fraser Valley

What have been the most significant challenges in fostering and maintaining engagement in water activism?

In addition to surveys, we also interviewed a number of "key informants" (or "KI"s) from each of the two study communities. These KIs were either members or alumnae of the two water organizations at the centre of the study (i.e. the Wellington Water Watchers in Wellington County, Ontario, and the WaterWealth Project in the Fraser Valley, BC), or others who were involved in activism on water or environmental issues in these communities.

According to KIs in both Wellington County and in the Fraser Valley, there were several general categories of challenges for fostering and maintaining organizational engagement, and these did not appear to vary significantly across contexts. These challenges are listed below in rough order of how often they were mentioned by the KIs in interviews.

Challenges

1) Poor understanding and awareness of water issues

2) Activism being seen as a lower priority and/or less interesting compared to other completing life interests

3) Low sense of efficacy and intimidation of approaching existing groups

4) Fear of conflict, including personal and professional conflicts of interest

5) A negative perception of the organization or with activists in general, and not wanting to align themselves with this reputation

6) Activism being too tiring/ not rewarding enough for those involved, leading them to burn out and/or lose interest

The most oft-mentioned challenge to fostering engagement in water activism was that of poor understanding and awareness of water issues. Here, KIs stressed that rather than this being an issue of people not having enough information, it is actually a matter of people having a skewed understanding of water issues. KIs blamed this on "mass media spin doctors" presenting a particular slant on water issues that works to maintain the status quo (e.g. promoting water conservation at home rather than questioning water use by large corporations). This, combined with activist groups not having the same resources for public outreach as the media, may result in many people having a misinformed view of bigger picture water issues, thus affecting their sense of responsibility to engage as activists.

However, KIs in both contexts also spoke to a recognized gap between interest and action when it comes to engaging the community in the work of activist organizations. That is to say, there are many people for whom insufficient awareness and understanding is not the primary reason for lack of engagement. Many may well have a good understanding of the issues at hand, yet still fail to become actively engaged beyond individual efforts at home. So what leads to the gap between interest and action for these individuals?

Several KIs discussed the issue of activism being a low priority or of low interest for many people. This was attributed to the fact that many people are "too busy" in their everyday lives to think about non-urgent and/or bigger picture water issues beyond what they may already be tackling at home.

"You know, we lead busy lives, and your bandwidth for engaging on community issues is only so wide, so people pick and choose what issues or what they can engage in. I can tell you, if I didn't work full-time on these issues, I'm not sure I would engage. I have two young children, I'm in activities every week. When they go to bed, the last thing I want to do is sit up writing advocacy letters. We lead really busy lives with a lot of competing interests." -Key Informant from the Fraser Valley

Another factor impacting negatively on engagement was intimidation and a low sense of efficacy. KIs believed that many people don't engage with the work of their local activist organizations, or of other activist organizations, because they don't feel they have the expertise, they don't think there is a place for them, and/or they feel intimidated by the already-engaged group. In some cases, KIs also thought individuals might overestimate the size and strength of activist groups, leading to a perception of their involvement not being needed. This links to what was noted about how survey respondents tended to either be heavily involved or minimally/not involved, but less often do they fall somewhere in between.

"People see that we're making a lot of noise and are attracted to it, [but] I think in some cases--as I said, I think a lot of people are quite happy and comfortable being invisible in the world. They are not--not everybody wants to be on the front lines making a big deal about stuff, you know? So in some ways I think it might intimidate some people or make them feel like, oh, if I'm taking part in that, I have to be at least able or willing to do that, and I am neither so therefore I'm not going to get involved at all. So I think there's the intimidation factor." -Key Informant from the Fraser Valley

KIs in both contexts also discussed fear of conflict, as well as direct conflicts of interest, as deterrents to activist engagement. In the rural Fraser Valley, the primary conflict of interest was related to agriculture, whereby farmers' livelihood was perceived as being negatively impacted by the regulations being lobbied for by water activists. In Wellington County, this conflict of interest was mainly related to activism against bottled water, whereby speaking negatively about Nestlé can be seen as politically tricky given the company's national headquarters are based in the County itself.

With respect to negative perceptions of activists, this challenge appears to be much greater in the Fraser Valley than in Wellington County. KIs from the Fraser Valley felt that a negative perception of the WaterWealth Project and with activists in general was a major deterrent to people becoming engaged as activists, as they aimed to avoid being labelled as "radical". Furthermore, KIs from both communities spoke to the problem of entrenched conservative values in local rural communities, values that do not generally prioritize or encourage activism.

Finally, the barrier of activism being too tiring/not rewarding enough for those involved, leading them to burn out and/or lose interest, was also mentioned by KIs in both communities. This barrier is different from the rest, as it speaks to individuals who have managed to bridge the gap from interest to action. This barrier may be especially relevant in understanding the impact of a campaign win on activist engagement, as those most heavily involved in the fight bear the brunt of the fatigue.

"This is the burnout. You give everything you've got, and it costs you time and money,and then you just run out psychologically, emotionally, and whatever else. You quit. Because you're an activist. It's not your job. A job, you've got to pace yourself. You can burn out there too - sure, but I just think people get to the point of banging their heads against the walls, and I'm just thinking of all the different little things, because you are fighting the system and it's hard to make change." -Key Informant from Wellington County

What have been the most significant motivating factors in fostering and maintaining engagement in water activism?

As with the challenges to fostering and maintaining organizational engagement, there were no significant differences between the two communities in terms of what KIs had to say about motivating and support factors for activist engagement. These are listed below in rough order of how often they were mentioned by the KIs in interviews.

KIs spoke to the power of like-minded and motivated compatriots to inspire engagement. It was also believed that once people are engaged on an acute or tangible local issue as part of a group of peers, they may be more open to engaging in more abstract and bigger-picture water issues. Along similar lines, it was felt that involvement in one activist community often overlaps with and/or leads to involvement with others. Here, many KIs drew from their own personal experience of engagement in activism when giving their responses.

In recognizing these social roots of activism, some KIs also explored the notion of building community as a first step before even introducing concerns about water, as an important way to ease people into engagement as activists.

Motivating Factors

1) A sense of belonging to a supportive community of peers

2) Self-efficacy and power to effect change

3) Presence of a crisis or threat to one's current lifestyle

4) Presence of a "bad guy" or other injustice

5) A sense of fulfillment and fun

"Activism, it's interesting because it is a true lineage from my earliest days of activism at all, and probably I would say it starts sort of in and around a community and getting involved in a community, and then sort of being nurtured and that. And then those individuals that you bounce on and off through the ages and that grows, the circles overlap, et cetera, then you--you know, someone approaches you one day and says, hey, I worked with you on that, are you available or interested in working with me on this? And then you say yes, because you had a fun working relationship with them before, and why not?" - Key Informant from Wellington County

KIs also spoke to the importance of self-efficacy and ability to effect change. KIs believed that success is empowering and fuels engagement, and that to feel they are spending their time effectively, volunteers want to believe that the cause they are joining has a chance of being successful and resulting in change. KIs in both contexts agreed that people also want a meaningful way to contribute their efforts, and that they generally prefer being given specific, actionable tasks so that they can experience a sense of accomplishment.

In noting this, however, we must consider the results of our second report, whereby knowledge of an activist organization's campaign win had the effect on many survey respondents of reassuring them that someone else was taking care of the issues for them, rather than inspiring them to become involved. In this sense, one's self-perceived power to affect change may have a greater impact on engagement than the efficacy of the activist organization itself.

It was also widely agreed by KIs that a crisis or immediate threat reliably spurs individuals to action. This was also reflected in our first report, whereby survey respondents spoke to immediate crises/threats as their most prominent water issues of concern, as opposed to more distant or abstract threats such as climate change or corporate ownership of water. However, KIs also discussed that a problem with crises as a motivating factor is that they can tend to narrowly address immediate issues, and do not necessarily stimulate broader systems thinking in terms of water issues. They also have "diminishing returns" over time, and people need new crises to remain engaged at the same level.

"Basically as Water Wealth was announcing its launch in Chilliwack, the chlorination happened, so everybody assumed that we were a group that started up to fight the chlorination...That's all people could think about. That was the number one thing - people were like, oh, now I've got to buy bottled water. I'm even brushing my teeth with bottled water. It's like, what? The solution is that you go buy flats and flats of bottled water?" - Key Informant from the Fraser Valley

Related to the motivating factor of a crisis, KIs concurred that communities rally around the appearance of a "bad guy" or injustice. Similarly to the emotionally-driven motivating factor of belonging to a supportive community of peers, anger in the face of injustice is also a powerful motivator to action. As one KI explained about what motivated the widespread outcry against Nestlé's permit appeal in Wellington County:

"I think it was justice. I think they saw an injustice, people felt an injustice. On general across the population, when given the story, I think most people get it. They get the right from wrong equation, and they saw, that's wrong"- Key Informant from Wellington County

Finally, a sense of fulfillment and fun were considered by some KIs as integral to sustained engagement in water activism. KIs largely drew on their own personal experience in vouching that having fun, finding the work enjoyable, and reaping some inherent reward are major supports for continued engagement over time. This consideration was overlooked by many KIs- perhaps seen as frivolous, or obvious- but it may be a crucial component in strengthening individuals' engagement and willingness to contribute to the activist cause over time.

"It's a lot of fun for me. I only do it--most of the time I'm into it because it's enjoyable on one of a number of levels, right? Absolutely." - Key Informant from the Fraser Valley

Final Thoughts: Bringing the pieces together

Building on the findings from the first two reports, this report explores the gap between interest in water issues and engagement with organized water activism. It is important that interested community members become involved in the efforts of water activist organizations, as collective action has the potential to address larger systemic water issues that individual-level efforts cannot.

In Report 1, we found that those who were already more involved with or knowledgeable about local water issues were more likely to speak to concerns beyond their own immediate situation, such as privatization and corporate control of water, while those with less involvement were most likely to focus on concrete and personally tangible issues, such as their water bill and the safety/quality of what comes through their tap. As this relates to engagement in water activism, this would suggest that those focused on more concrete and immediate issues might be less likely to engage in water issues beyond a specific local crisis or threat, and may need encouragement and support to engage more broadly.

In Report 2, we found that overall, people's knowledge of activist work around water issues appears to be relatively low, perhaps particularly if they have not personally been involved in any of the campaigns. Furthermore, while many respondents said that knowledge of a campaign win inspires them to become more involved, a majority of people still felt reassured that someone else is taking care of the important issues for them. Hence, winning campaigns are far from sufficient in and of themselves to inspire activist engagement. We suggested that community-focused activities may be one way to encourage broader engagement, and this is an approach that local water activist organizations in both communities have already recognized and have been pursuing.

In this final report, which considers responses from those we expected already have a greater interest in water issues and higher engagement in water-related activism than the general population, we found that a majority still do not participate in the work of local water activist organizations. Key informants from both communities spoke to what they felt were the biggest challenges and motivators to activist engagement, and listed a number of interpersonal factors above and beyond a lack of awareness of water issues. It was these responses in which we were most interested, as a large majority of survey respondents were already conscious of water issues, and thus lack of awareness was not the reason for their lack of engagement as activists. These respondents demonstrated their care for water issues in a variety of ways other than involvement in local water activist organizations, including a broad range of water conservation efforts in their homes, and working to educate others about water issues through other channels besides activist organizations.

The key interpersonal barriers to engagement in water activism were believed to be activism being seen as a lower priority and/or less interesting compared to other completing life interests; low sense of efficacy and intimidation of approaching existing groups; fear of conflict, including personal and professional conflicts of interest; a negative perception of the organization or with activists in general, and not wanting to align themselves with this reputation; and activism being too tiring/ not rewarding enough for those involved, leading them to burn out and/or lose interest. The key motivating or support factors were believed to be a sense of belonging to a supportive community of peers; self-efficacy and power to effect change; the presence of a crisis or threat to one's current lifestyle; the presence of a "bad guy" or other injustice; and a sense of fulfillment and fun. For water activist organizations looking to increase engagement among those who already have an understanding and knowledge of water issues- that is, to help move people from interest in water issues, to action- addressing these interpersonal factors may be the most promising place to start.