



Water in First Nations Ceremonies

“Water has to live, it can hear, it can sense what we’re saying, it can really, really speak to us. Some songs come to us through the water. We have to understand that water is very precious.” – Josephine Mandamin, Water Walker, 1942-2019

Water Is Sacred

Water is very sacred for First Nations people. For them, it can symbolize purity and life. It is also one of the important elements on the medicine wheel.

Water has many uses and First Nations people believe that it should be treated with respect. Water provides life. First Nations people have fished throughout history and water makes it possible for fish to exist.

Water is the most life sustaining gift on Mother Earth. It is the interconnection among all living beings. Water sustains us, flows between us, within us, and replenishes us. Water is the blood of Mother Earth and, as such, cleanses not only herself, but all living things.



Water Walks

Recently, a new type of tradition has emerged and now Indigenous people go for walks around bodies of water, either holding buckets of water or just walking with others and with Elders.

The walks are to raise awareness about the poor water conditions and prayer is said for the water during the walks.



Before setting out on a 14-day water walk, the Wikwemikong water walkers set their staffs and canes in the water and prayed. The walk around the shorelines of one of Canada's largest First Nations is a tremendous challenge and one that a number of walkers have repeated for each of the past nine years. (Wikwemikong First Nation is a First Nation on Manitoulin Island in northern Ontario).

Watch a Video About Water Walks



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3eKPmTXusPw>

Water Ceremony



For four days in Manitoba's Whiteshell Provincial Park people gather together and pray.

Local Anishinaabe Elders participate in the event. In Anishinaabe spirituality, the fire and water elements play a significant role in ceremonies. Men are taught to be responsible and take care of the fire and they are fire keepers. Women are taught to be responsible for the water and they are raised to be water carriers.

“They say women are water carriers because we all have the 90 percent water in our body. For a woman, they carry life for nine months in their womb. And we are all born in the water. We come from the water. When you go and pray and take care of yourself and re-cleanse yourself, you go in that womb to pray in there. You're safe in there, just like you were safe in your mother's womb.” – Martina Fisher, an Anishinaabe grandmother from Bloodvein First Nation in Manitoba.

Watch a Video About a Water Ceremony



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MrpYtG92u6U>

Sweat Lodges

The sweat lodge ceremony purifies the body, mind, spirit, and heart. It also restores relationships with the self, others, and the creator.

Women are not allowed to participate in sweats when they are on their moon time (when they have their period).

Sometimes the leader smudges the inside and the outside of the sweat lodge.

The framework of the sweat lodge is covered by animal skins and blankets, and it is usually dome-shaped. The framework resembles a pregnant woman's womb.

Hot stones are brought to the centre of a small pit in the middle of the lodge.

Water is poured on the hot stones to create steam and prayers are said by an Elder. (Splashing water onto the hot stones is what creates the steam.)

Sweat Lodges (Continued)

A sweat can have multiple sessions and between those sessions are brief breaks.

As the sessions progress, more hot rocks and steam are added.

The people who are participating focus on the spirits that are invited to the ceremony. These spirits are brought in with the grandfathers, which are the stones that are heated on a fire.

All four elements are present as the earth is below, air is around the fire in the grandfathers, and the water is in the steam.

Different First Nations groups conduct sweats differently.

Watch a Video About a Sweat Lodge



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDLUQIQR_nI

Cleansing Fasts and Vision Quests

Cleansing fasts are usually undertaken by men regularly because they do not have the gift of a woman's ability to cleanse herself monthly. The cleansing fast allows the body to rid itself of any impurities. The man concentrates on prayer as well as meditation to aid in spiritual cleansing.

Vision quests can be done by men or women. A vision quest fast allows people to seek guidance from the spirits in the form of visions or dreams. Those seeking guidance focus on prayer and meditation as well as using their own pipe (if they have one). They ask the spirits to provide them with any guidance they need. These types of fasts are usually longer than cleansing fasts.

Watch a Video About a Vision Quest



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FySH1pFIUs>

Fasting for Ceremonies

Men and women will sometimes fast to honour certain ceremonies. For example, before the spring or fall bear feast, those who have the bear as their spirit guide (an animal totem that provides teaching and/or protection – a spiritual guardian with which some people connect) or who are a part of the bear clan can fast in honour of the bear and his long winter fast. This type of fast usually only lasts one or two days.

What do we mean by bear clan?

Like most Algonquian-speaking groups in North America, the Anishinaabe base their system of kinship on clans and these clans are based mainly on animals. The clans were instrumental in traditional occupations, intertribal relations, and marriages. The bear clan was always the most numerous of the Anishinaabeg. Members of the bear clan were traditionally the warriors and police, as well as the healers. Many members of the clan continue in these roles today.

Other Purposes

Sometimes there are different reasons for fasting and they can differ from one First Nation to another as instruction for fasting from the spirits can be different.

