



# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## Mní Wičhóni - Water is Life

### We Are Here to Protect Our Rivers

The purpose of this discussion guide is to facilitate thoughtful discussion around the topics introduced in this Indigenous Forum presentation video. The discussion guide can be adapted for use in the classroom as well as salon-style gatherings.

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This video is a presentation of the 2018 Indigenous Forum, organized by the Bioneers Indigeneity Program and featured annually at the Bioneers Conference. Indigeneity is a Native-led Program within Bioneers/Collective Heritage Institute that promotes indigenous knowledge and approaches to solve the earth's most pressing environmental and social issues through respectful dialogue. Since 1990, Bioneers has acted as a fertile hub of social and scientific innovators with practical and visionary solutions for the world's most pressing environmental and social challenges.



## INFORMATION PAGE

### Mní Wičhóni - Water is Life We Are Here to Protect Our Rivers

#### DESCRIPTION OF VIDEO

The Lakota phrase “Mní wičhóni,” or “Water is life,” was the protest anthem from Standing Rock heard around the world, but it also has a spiritual meaning rooted in indigenous worldviews and our connection to nature. For Native Americans, water does not only sustain life –

it is sacred. As grassroots collectives fight all over the world to protect our rivers and watersheds, we must always remember to honor the spiritual foundations underlying these battles. Water is life.



Watch video: [bioneers.org/waterislife](https://bioneers.org/waterislife)

#### Featuring:

**Clayton Thomas Muller** (Mathias Colomb Cree): Activist, Writer and Public speaker

**Caleen Sisk** (Winnemem Wintu): Spiritual Leaders and Tribal Chief

**Carrie “CC” Curley** (San Carlos Apache), Apache Stronghold - Save Oak Flat Protector

**Carletta Tilousi** (Havasupai): Activist and Tribal Council Member

## KEYWORDS

**ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM** – Systemic policies, regulations and actions upheld by governments, corporations and people in power that disproportionately affect communities of color with pollution, toxic waste, and other forms of environmental destruction.

**MNÍ WIČHÓNI** – Translates to “water is life” in the Lakota language.

**OAK FLAT/CHÍ’CHIL’BA’GOTEEL** – Sacred site for Apache people 45 miles from the San Carlos Reservation in Arizona with significant cultural, and archaeological importance.

**HAVASUPAI** – A Native American Tribe whose territory includes the Grand Canyon.

**SAN CARLOS APACHE** – A Native American Tribe whose reservation was established in 1871 in Southwest Arizona.

**SHASTA DAM** – Built between 1938-1945 across the Sacramento River nine miles Northwest of Redding California, resulting in Shasta Lake, which damaged sacred sites and a salmon-based ecosystem

**WINNEMUM WINTU** – A Native American Tribe whose territory is along the lower McCloud River above the Shasta Dam near Redding, California.

## LINKS

[winnememwintu.us/caleen-sisk](https://winnememwintu.us/caleen-sisk) | [apache-stronghold.com](https://apache-stronghold.com)  
[grandcanyontrust.org/info/havasupai](https://grandcanyontrust.org/info/havasupai) | [bioneers.org/indigeneity](https://bioneers.org/indigeneity)



# INTRODUCTION AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## WHAT IS MNÍ WIČHÓNI?

Mní Wičhóni means “water is life” in the Lakota language. The phrase was the rallying cry behind the 2016 standoff between over 10,000 water protectors and law enforcement at the edge of the Standing Rock Reservation, North Dakota. At issue was the construction of the Dakota Access pipeline to be installed under Lake Oahe, a human-made lake at the confluence of the Missouri and Cannonball rivers. More broadly, #NoDAPL was a fight against irreparable environmental damage caused by the fossil fuel industry. Since then, the concept of “water is life” has been adopted by water protectors from around the world, to signify that access to clean water should be a basic right for humans, animals, plants, and ecosystems.

## WATER AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

In the Western world, water is seen as a resource or a commodity, but to Indigenous Peoples, water is seen as not only life-sustaining, it is sacred. Over thousands of years of observation and experience, Indigenous Peoples learned how to manage water supplies within the ecosystems of the places they lived, whether a rainforest, a desert or in-between. The period of colonization – or when people from other places settled on Indigenous lands often through warfare and genocide – resulted in many Indigenous Peoples losing access to water supplies. Watersheds have been depleted and redirected for drinking, irrigation, power generation, industry, and natural resource extraction. Through these processes, Indigenous Peoples living in their ancestral territories have been disproportionately affected by pollution and lack of basic access to water rights through a process called environmental racism. Examples of this shared in this video include: building a dam that prevents salmon from swimming upstream; threatening sacred springs with mining; and diverting water to power cities hundreds of miles away.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What led the speakers in this panel to become water protectors? Why are Indigenous Peoples’ disproportionately affected by water contaminants?
2. What does “water is life” mean to you?
3. Chief Caleen Sisk said, “water is unifying.” What are the ways that all people connect through water?
4. What is your responsibility towards water?
5. What can you do to protect water?



## VIDEO GUIDE

This guide provides a roadmap to various ideas, keywords and concepts to support video navigation.

### Mní Wičhóni - Water is Life We Are Here to Protect Our Rivers

Idea, Keyword or Concept	Time Stamp
How Standing Rock brought "water is life" to the world's attention	00:45
Caleen Sisk on women chiefs of the Winnemum Wintu	1:50 - 3:55
We are Salmon People: About Salmon	4:35 - 5:19
Salmon in New Zealand	5:20 - 7:05
Call to action for Shasta Dam removal	7:14- 7:28
Havasupai introduction to water	7:30 - 11:00
Havasupai declare water rights	11:00 - 13:05
"Water is Life" from an Apache perspective	13:08 - 16:00





# TRANSCRIPT

## Mní Wičhóni - Water is Life

### We Are Here to Protect Our Rivers

Featuring: Cara Romero, Caleen Sisk, Carletta Tilousi, Carrie “CC” Curley, Clayton Thomas-Muller

**CLAYTON:** Standing Rock touched so many of us in so many ways. You know, the world really looked at that moment, and it was a global teaching moment.

That message – water is life—and in our culture back home, the thunder beings, they’re the ones that bring the rain in the spring, right, in our cosmology. And so, what I was told in that moment of Standing Rock, when the whole world learned about mní wičhóni, they learned about connection to the sacred elements, the connection to the sacredness of place, and it moved people because they got connected, and they got understanding in their most simplistic form. And so that teaching that water is life moved people to actually give a dang and to put their bodies on the life, Native and non-Native alike.

**CALEEN:** And so...I’m the fifth chief of my tribe. And we don’t really call ourselves chiefs, but we borrowed that word. We borrowed that word because more of you guys knows what that means. Because if I said, I’m a [INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE SPOKEN]. I’m a [INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE SPOKEN], a Winnemen Wintu [INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE SPOKEN], would you know what I was talking about? No, you wouldn’t. And so I’m following a line of only five leaders who have been in charge since the taking of California. And the last leader before me, my grams, was a woman chief too, and then myself. And we’re not elected. But we’re born into it. We are trained. We grow up with our constituents...that they already know. We already know who the next chief is.

And I think about that as like my grams brought us through that Shasta Dam when she took leadership. Her dad who was the chief before, died in 1938, and I think he died because of his heart. He had a heart-ache about the Shasta Dam. Nobody could believe they were going to put all those mountains under water, all of those sacred things are going underwater. And he couldn’t do a thing about it. And so she took over in the 1938 as the chief, taking that position. And she brought us through that time of heartache and post-traumatic stress, all of the—from the killings to the flooding of our land, to trying to hang onto everything that we have.

And so then I come along, right, and I take over in 2000. She’s with me for three more years, but—And I think the next chief is also a woman. And I think there’s a reason for that. There’s a reason that we are all women chiefs right now in a row, because we have to get through this water system. We have to get through the water problems of the world, and of our state, and of our home villages. We have to do that.

And so it’s not an easy thing to do, and we’re calling on everybody. You know? As the chief, I have a lot of things to do. And now I’m reaching out to the world, asking, and finding out and saying, Are there other Indigenous People and leaders around the world who are working on the same thing? Are you singing to the water? Are you going and walking around the lakes? And what are we doing all together for the water around the world?

We are salmon people. Most of California Indians are salmon people. And we’re Pacific Coast salmon people, meaning that these fish are so miracley[?] sound in connection with the Creator that they only do things one time. And when they swim back upriver and they lay their eggs, they all die. They all die before the eggs are hatched. And then it’s repeated. The little ones swim out and they swim down to this estuary, and they change into saltwater fish. They don’t say, I’m a freshwater fish; I made a mistake; here I am down here in the salt water, I better swim right back up there where I come from. But they stay, and they change.





So we did a war dance on Shasta Dam to oppose the building of the Shasta Dam higher. And New Zealand responded. Our effort was to tell the world what's happening here to this small tribe, to this water system, tell the world about that. And 87 papers around the world picked up the story, and New Zealand was one of them. And they asked us, Do you want your salmon back? It's like, What? You have our salmon? It's like, Okay, where is New Zealand? [LAUGHTER] And we had to go there and we had to dance for those salmon.

But when we got there, the Maori people were so family like, and they made it totally possible for us to do this atonement, do this dance for our salmon, with them. And there's a film out there called Dancing Salmon Home, if you haven't seen it yet, that's the whole story about it.

And when I looked at New Zealand, I thought, Oh, that's an island. But even on that island, they have a mountain, Mt. Aoraki, Mt. Cook, the destroyer of the island named that mountain, but Mt. Aoraki has ice waterfalls, only place in the world that our salmon survived. Everywhere they were sent, they died, except for New Zealand.

And now New Zealand has one of the biggest economies based on salmon. That should be California. We should have the economy based on salmon, because if we did, our waterways would be beautiful. Our waterways would be clean. We wouldn't be struggling and fighting over these kinds of things that we are right now.

You can join us in doing these kinds of things, because what they're proposing is not going to make more water. It's not going to make any difference in the way that they use it.

**CARLETTA:** The Havasupai people, we're about 776 people left in Northern Arizona in the bottom of the canyon. We were also pushed in there. We were originally on the Colorado Plateaus. We roamed that whole area from the San Francisco peaks to Bill Williams mountain, to the Seligman area. We had a lot of territory. And at one point in time, we have a really bad history, really bad, sad history that was told to me when I was a child. And I think that's when it really began in my mind that I cannot just live this life without speaking up about what happened to my people.

And as I learned more from my family, my parents, and my community, my elders about what was really going on, it just got me really, really angry, and angry.

And so, back to the water, the Havasupai people are called Havsuw' Baaja, means supai. Havsuw' Baaja means people of the blue-green water. That's why I'm dressed like this today in a big blue outfit. And I was teasing one of my friends. I said, you can't miss me walking across, I'm really blue today. [LAUGHTER] So...

You know, I—My elders really taught me if you're going to go out there and speak, you have to dress it, you have to walk it, you have to talk it, you have to sacrifice some of your life and your family, and that's what we've been doing, sacrificing our time for the water.

But you also have to listen. You have to listen to your surroundings. You have to listen to the water. Go sit over there, see if you'll hear something, feel something. So we have songs for these waters that flow through, and sometimes it could sing to you and you could feel it. If you don't hear it, you'll feel it, and that's what we feel, and that's what we're carrying here today as a message to all of you that are here today, caring. You're asking about what should we do, what can I do.

But then there's a whole deeper purpose in why we're here. And I think the whole connection that we have today, right here, is the water, right here. We cannot go without a couple of hours without drinking water.

And I think that's what really brings us together, is the saying, No More. No more contamination of the fish. No more contamination of our springs for our Apache people. No more contamination of the Havasupai waters from the international mining companies coming onto federal lands. We're allowing that to happen as United States citizens, as you citizens. You're allowing that to happen. Your Congress people need to hear your voice.





But as far as the uranium mines, the international funded uranium mines live right above one of the largest groundwater aquifers in Northern Arizona, called the Redwall [INAUDIBLE] Aquifer, and it's a huge lake underneath the earth that drains—A lot of the springs drain right into the Colorado River, and so these international mining companies that come onto federal lands, our aboriginal territories, and staking uranium claims, and the United States is allowing that to happen, there goes your water. It just gets drained out.

Mining, you all know how much water is used for any type of mining. They're just going to strip that place apart. And so for the Havasupai, we're not just thinking about our 700 people, we're thinking about the future, and then we're thinking about all the people that are downstream that are going to be consuming all this water.

But as Havasupai, we're one of the last tribes in Arizona to declare our water rights. For many reasons is that we don't want to be given by the federal government – this is how much money/water that you're going to get. And we didn't want to be a part of that. The Havasupai Tribe is a very close closed kind of a community. But in this 2018, this is the first time we're taking steps to claim our water, and it's going to be—it's going to be a long legal process. And I don't know how long that's going to take. Some tribes have taken 30, 40 years just to declare their rights to water in Arizona.

There's 21 tribes in Arizona that are actively been—claimed their legal rights to water, which affects the Havasupai because we're at the headwaters of all the water that goes down the Colorado River. So the Havasu springs drains into the Colorado, and the Colorado goes down, services Nevada, California, all the way down to Southern Arizona, even into Mexico. Well, it used to go into Mexico, now it's dry there.

And then the developments that are happening in the Phoenix Valley and the Las Vegas area, they're just sucking up the water like no tomorrow. Like they don't even think about conserving or anything. So that's pretty scary when you really think about it. What are they leaving? At least leave a little bit behind for somebody or something, but they don't think about it that way.

I see that most of the folks in America now just live in the moment. We don't look at 50 years or 100 years from now.

**CC CARRIE:** For us, mni wiconi [INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE SPOKEN] – water is life. And I tell people, young people, older people, if you don't understand that, just that basic concept – [INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE SPOKEN] – water is life – I don't know what to tell you. Every day we use water. Give thanks for it, for every drop.

Mni wiconi and part of the Apache stronghold, we went up to Standing Rock as well with our leader, Wendler Nosie, former chairman and councilman in San Carlos. We went up there with gifts. And when you're on this right path of sacrificing yourself, and feeding your spirit, and you're away from home in your own community, because Oak Flat [INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE SPOKEN] is 44 miles off our reservation, which they put us on. And it's hard, the battle, to wake up your own community, to tell people [INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE SPOKEN], water is life.

And when you fight for the water, and you find that you're on the right path, the water will always bring you back to that circle, and it will always make an impact on you. So with the mni wiconi, it was an awful thing to see what was happening to brothers and sisters out there. It was awful to see what was going on media. It could break your heart. It was awful to see. And I know the sacrifice of it too in my own community.

But the greatest thing that I know as Oak Flat spiritual fight is I can pray. Because right now our springs, our aquifers, they are at—they are at risk. A copper mine, for just a little bit amount of copper, they want to get that, when water is so valuable that you can never replace that damage back. And just like my sister was saying here, it's the—your veins. [INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE SPOKEN], sounds like: Nuh-ghost-uh] and Mother Earth. You have to look at it like that, what you put in your own bodies and what we're doing to Negosta[ph] and the Earth. If you understand that too, you'll see the damage that we're doing to the Mother Earth. You



put something in your body that's not meant to be, it will destroy that vein, and it's the same for the rivers and the streams and the oceans and the lakes here.

And when you find that yourself, to step out of being selfish, you'll realize that there's just so much to pray for, so much, and so much to be grateful for, and to continue to pray.

**CLAYTON:** Let's continue to support each other in a good way, and let's continue to build that reverence collectively about our sacred elements that keep all life going. We've got to protect water. Yeah. Thank you. Enjoy the rest of the conference.